

A minister and a priest from neighboring churches are standing on the side of the road, pounding a sign into the ground that reads: “*The End is Near---Turn Around Now---Before it’s Too Late!*” As a car speeds past them the driver yells out the window, “Leave us alone you religious nuts!” From the curve in the road ahead they hear screeching tires, gravel flying, and then a huge splash. The priest turns to the minister and asks, “Do you think we should have just made a sign that says, “*Bridge Out?*”

What kind of road are we heading down today? What street are we living on? In America, the concept of the street is developing in new directions. A recent report described a new marketing fad— outdoor malls. Only the malls are not called “malls,” but “lifestyle centers.” If you’ve never been to the South Side Works, you may not know that the creation of old-fashioned, street-level stores with a matching outdoor square has become the “in” thing. And most newer retirement communities have streets that resemble the opening scenes from the TV series *Leave It to Beaver*.

Jeremiah defines street smarts a little differently. This Old Testament prophet asks us to consider and refine what street smarts are on the streets where we live. I think I know, as do many of us, what Jeremiah is talking about when he laments, “*Since my people are crushed; I am crushed; I mourn, and horror grips me*” (v. 21). Judging by what I read about Main Street it feels like horror grips us as we struggle to keep up with rising crime, rising cost of groceries, and rising anxiety. Maintaining material standards that we have set for ourselves and our children continues to get harder. Our hearts are sick as one national or international crisis comes along, giving us a roller coaster ride through mounting fears and uncertainty about what is around the corner. That’s how it feels today on Main Street and on many back streets too.

The cry from many around us is like Jeremiah’s: “*Listen to the cry of my people from a land far away: ‘Is the LORD not in Zion? Is her King no longer there?’*” (v. 19). If we have good intentions, won’t God take care of us? If we are nice people, won’t God provide for us? If we are ready to get going on the right road, won’t God go before us?

The Lord says, “*Why have they aroused my anger with their images, with their worthless foreign idols?*” Look around. The people of Judah say, “*The harvest is past, the summer has ended, and we are not saved*” (v. 20). The summer has ended, and we are not saved from the horrors of war, or from the shattering of our children’s innocence, are we? We have reaped what we have sown. Today there is no balm in Gilead, as the prophet calls it,

from health care that sometimes leaves people uninsured or underinsured to shoulder crushing medical debt. How can the health of not only individuals but our whole nation be restored? Do we even care that things like this are happening?

Jeremiah's starting point is the ache in his heart, the pain in his gut, that will not let go of him. Listen again: "*Since my people are crushed, I am crushed; I mourn, and horror grips me*" (v. 21). This doesn't sound healthy, but nor is it healthy *not* to feel the pain on Main Street. Is it healthy to discount our gut feelings? What pushes us to action is oftentimes a broken heart, an exhilarating or painful experience, and our gut feelings. Weren't feelings part of our decisions about where to work, where to live, or who to marry?

The word on the street is that despite the claims of Madison Avenue or Wall Street there is serious pain on Main Street and in the back streets. Zion will not protect us from the consequences of the choices that we have made. There will be no balm in Gilead unless we come to terms with the outcome of our actions. Releasing our tears might be a good strategy to keep us from living in denial.

At a community hospital in a Chicago suburb, an eight-year-old girl asks, "May I cry, or should I be brave?" It's a question she posed moments before being taken to surgery for a leg amputation. We express conflicting feelings about crying. On the one hand, shedding tears can show deep concern. On the other hand, might our tears convey a lack of courage? At one time or another, everybody cries. The Old Testament tells us that King David wept on several occasions. And the New Testament reports that Jesus wept when he learned that his good friend Lazarus had died. With great compassion, Christ also wept over the city of Jerusalem and its inhabitants. And recent statistics show that we're a lot like Jesus in this respect: A majority of adult men and women say they cry. Yet there is perhaps no other element of living that carries so much confusion with it as a human tear.

Poets and novelists for years have known intuitively that crying is somehow good for us. William Shakespeare, for example, wrote, "To weep is to make less the depth of grief." And poet Alfred Lord Tennyson once wrote about a woman who learned her husband had been killed. "She must weep," the writer said, "or she will die." Researchers are beginning to confirm the accuracy of such statements. Why is crying good for us? Tears, it seems, reduce tensions, remove toxins, and increase the body's ability to heal itself. The point is that scientists are concluding that people who cry may enjoy better health.

This seems like good, sound advice that anyone living on the mean streets of this world would recognize as a wise move. So like Jeremiah, why don't we have a good cry from time to time? Going a step further, let's also remember the sound advice that Paul offers

Timothy for those who live under oppression and constantly feel like crying. He says to pray for kings and emperors and all those in positions of authority and power.

Pray for people in high positions even if it is going to be nothing more than a survival tactic—the survival of our own spiritual lives. In a democracy we have some responsibility to offer those whom we place in leadership positions something more than our cutting, cynical criticism. On the streets it can be all too easy to become cynical. On the streets it is easy to get caught up in seeking rights while forgetting responsibilities when those in high positions become an object of our frustrations rather than our prayers. Sometimes we allow our cynicism to enter our prayer life and we say things like: “Oh Lord, please redeem these politicians from their pig-headed-ignorance so they stop with their stupidity.” Jesus says his yoke is easy and his burden is light in Matthew 11:30. Well then, why don’t we take up the “light burden” of praying for our leaders, *“that we may live peaceful and quiet lives, in all godliness and holiness,”* as Paul urged Timothy?

Paul’s prayerful guidance for his young co-worker forces us to put ourselves in the shoes of those who patrol our streets to keep us safe. It puts us in a place of praying for their families who bear the burdens of their occupations. The heart of the gospel is putting ourselves in other people’s place. It’s *not* trying to “put people in their place.” As Paul further instructs Timothy he says, *“This is good, and pleases God our Savior, who wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth”* (1 Timothy 2:3-4).

I remember the high regard in which teachers were held when I was growing up, even though their pay did not reflect it. I am also aware of how difficult it is for teachers to be caught between students and parents and administrators and politicians who think that the classroom should be the place where their personal agendas take priority. Kids take priority, not agendas!! Nearly all authority figures have experienced a loss of respect as they carry out their responsibilities in today’s world. Shifting standards and expectations have made it very difficult for anyone who works in the public eye. Even so, when we feel like crying, we should instead consider praying.

No one is immune to the kind of dismay and discouragement that Jeremiah expresses—not even Mother Teresa. Archbishop of Calcutta, Henry D’Souza, once revealed in an interview that Mother Teresa had her moments of sorrow and despair when she was searching for a place to house her ministry to the dying people in Calcutta. She of course eventually found a place for her work. The main message from Mother Teresa’s low point may be that even in the midst of sorrow and dismay, God is at work.

Although American Indians had no written language before Europeans arrived, they had great language skills and a large vocabulary. They had a gift of catching the feeling of a word, of being able to combine words to paint dramatic word pictures. For example, instead of one word that we use—friend—their word for friend was: “one-who-carries-my-sorrows-on-his-back.”

What a marvelous linguistic reminder of Jesus Christ. He is our friend and the One who carries in the form of the cross, our burdens on his back. He identifies so completely with his people and with their sorrows, as did the prophet Jeremiah in his day, that he experiences what they experience. As Jeremiah writes that he is heartsick and grief stricken over his people, is it any wonder that Jeremiah was brought to tears? And doesn't the stress and strain of living, at times, simply make us want to cry? Yet God will not leave us in our tears. A hopeful reminder is found in Psalm 30:5 which says, “*Weeping may stay for the night but rejoicing comes in the morning.*”

A number of years ago at a Passion Play (where I've noticed many people tend to cry) an incident took place during the scene where Jesus was carrying the cross. A man in the audience was heckling the character playing Jesus, heaping on him jeers and taunts. Finally, the actor could no longer tolerate the heckler. He dropped the cross and went over and punched the man in the nose. The director was aghast, and after the play pulled the actor aside and told him in no uncertain terms that he could never do that again. But the next night the same heckler was back and did the same thing again. This time, “Jesus” had to be restrained. The director called the actor in and gave him an ultimatum to either keep his composure or quit. The young actor assured the director he would control himself. The third night came and the heckler was present again and taunted Jesus even more than the two previous nights. The man playing Jesus moved toward him, gritted his teeth and said to the heckler, “*I'll see you after the resurrection!*”

We are a wounded people and crying can be good for us; there is no doubt. Tears reduce tensions, remove toxins, and increase the body's ability to heal itself. But another way of responding to our woundedness is to pray and to grit our teeth like that young actor. Then, whenever we experience all the heckling, evil, death, violence and destruction of this world, we too can say, “*I'll see you after the resurrection!*”

Glory to God! Amen.