

Year C 19th Sunday after Pentecost
Jeremiah 31:27-34
Psalm 121
2 Timothy 3:14-4:5
Luke 18:1-8
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We are living in a time where our country is being torn apart by division, hatred, violence, distrust and animosity toward “the other”- which is often anyone who thinks differently than we do or has a different point of view. It’s a divisiveness that is tearing through communities and even through families. We are seeing unprecedented levels of anxiety among our children and youth that manifests in everything from physical and mental illnesses to drug and alcohol use and even violence toward others and suicide. It cuts across socioeconomic, political, racial, and cultural divides and is rampant among adults as well.

This hasn’t happened overnight. It has been building for decades, even for generations. As our reading from Jeremiah says which is repeated in many places throughout the Old Testament, “The parents have eaten sour grapes and the children’s teeth have been set on edge.” This does not mean that the parents are to blame for the suffering of their children, but rather that what we do now will have an impact for generations to come and the situation we are dealing with now is the result of things that have been building for generations. The problems that exist in our country and among our people, young and not so young, have touched all of our lives and will touch the lives of our children, our grandchildren, and our great grandchildren.

In Macon too we are seeing a rise in violence, drug use, gang violence, domestic violence, and psychological illnesses such as depression and anxiety that have dangerously escalated. While the pandemic has certainly exacerbated this, the trend has been building for decades. As much as we are working as a community to address the issues that contribute to the problem, we have only scratched the surface. The source of the problem persists at a much deeper level. There is a spiritual malaise that has infected the whole of our country and it’s time for the church to rise up and respond.

When we face problems that are beyond our ability and resources to change, Jesus says to pray and keep on praying. He says to pray as if everything depended on it (because it does) and not to lose heart. The Greek text has an unusual verb that means “ever tapping”. It’s essentially saying we are to keep on knocking on the doors of heaven until we receive what we came for. Many of us have been praying. It’s probably safe to say all of us have been praying about the problems we are facing in our time and the impact it is having on our young people especially. We have been praying that the Lord would do something about it—that God would send his Holy Spirit upon His people for healing and restoration.

When the Lord sends an outpouring of the Holy Spirit to respond to the prayers of His people; that results in the Spirit working

in the hearts of God's people for the Lord to empower and direct change. We prayed in our collect this morning, that "the Church throughout the world would persevere with steadfast faith in the confession of His Name, through Jesus Christ our Lord." We start to live into the answer to that prayer as we respond to God's call on our lives to be agents of the Holy Spirit- to be ambassadors of Christ. When the Spirit starts to move in response to our prayers calling us forth to action, we need to be ready to say to the Lord, "Here I am. Send me," knowing He will go before us and be our rear guard as we move forward in faithfulness.

A couple of weeks ago I received a packet from Jake Farrow at Loaves and Fishes about an effort that has been embraced by a number of church leaders in Macon who have also been praying about the very situation I have been talking about this morning. They are calling together the Church in Macon as a whole to put aside their differences and work together in a united effort to bring the gospel to those who do not yet know the Lord, and to provide the love and support they need to turn their lives around. The kickoff event for this effort was last Thursday night. I went to find out what it was all about. I confess to feeling like an outsider at first. I didn't know the first couple of songs and the worship style was different from our usual Sunday worship. But as I listened to the vision for this project it became clear that the Holy Spirit is on the move in Macon to respond to the prayers of God's people. One of the speakers was Georgia Supreme Court Justice Verda Colvin. She acknowledged that the various churches in Macon have differences on many different level: theological, worship style, cultural and racial; but to effectively respond with the

message of the gospel to a broken and hurting world, we need to set aside those differences to be the Church as a united front against the enemy. She said her children look at the church that is divided by so many things and claim that their friend groups with all their diversity look more like what the church is meant to be than the church. She challenged us to be the church and come together to change the broken narrative that is wreaking havoc among our children and young people today.

Two young adults told their stories of turning away from those things that were tearing their lives apart and coming to faith in Christ. One was a young man who had grown up in the Pleasant Hill area. He had fallen in with the gangs and began doing drugs as a young teenager. He was arrested on several counts of theft and kidnapping and sentenced with 60-70 years in prison. He spent the first several years in the juvenile program and at 18 was sent to prison. This young man was not "just a bad egg". He was created for good and to live in relationship with God who loves him. But he had become a product of his environment and pulled into a broken, hurting world that was lashing out in pain and anger. His was an environment that hadn't become that way overnight. That area is right in our backyard. He is our neighbor.

After a year or so in prison he heard someone who had come to preach to the prisoners about Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who died on the cross to pay the price for our sins. He died so that we might be redeemed and given another chance at life. His words spoke to his heart and he wanted to know more. It was in prison that he came to the Lord and was discipled in the Christian faith. He gave his life to Christ and

is now living with a new understanding of himself and the Lord's purpose for his life. That young man was eventually released from prison early and is now working in the juvenile correction system to change the lives of other young people who have lost their way. He is living a transformed life and is serving the Lord for good.

At Christ Church we do so much good work to address the very real and often crushing needs of people in the city of Macon and in two international ministries. This is very important work. But it isn't the whole picture. Without sharing the Good News of Jesus Christ with those who are struggling, we are offering very short term, temporary assistance. Changing lives is something only God can do. We need to be working to bring people into a relationship with the one who can give them the strength and the grace to overcome, to have hope for another day, and even to turn their lives around. We need to be leading people to know the one who is greater than the crushing things so many of us face- the one who is our healer, our redeemer, and our fortress in the storms of life.

Our own Weekend Lunch ministry has already been responding to much of what I have been discussing. They have identified the need to address the spiritual needs of our guests who come to be fed a meal. They are just in the process of implementing a prayer ministry to have a team available at every meal to pray with anyone who would like prayer after their belly has been filled, recognizing the importance of meeting the need of their spiritual hunger as well. They have also demonstrated the efficacy of functioning as a part of the whole Church in Macon by inviting teams from other churches and synagogues to partner in that effort of feeding the homeless and the food

insecure. This vision has strengthened the ministry mightily and has given them the ability to expand their ministry to responding to food insecurity in other ways. It has also strengthened the spiritual community of Macon as we join hands together in recognition that we are not an island church but are part of the Church as a whole in this community. What unites us is far greater than what divides us.

Just before the pandemic, the Diocese of Atlanta held an evangelistic outreach event much like the one being planned in Macon for next March. They brought in the presiding bishop, Michael Curry, as the evangelistic speaker and had people telling their stories of the redeeming work of Jesus Christ in their lives. A handful of us went up to Atlanta to attend this event. But we didn't bring with us those who didn't already know the Lord. The gathering was primarily a gathering of Christians celebrating a faith in Christ that we already had. Certainly it was encouraging and uplifting but we hadn't done the advance work of asking the Lord to lead us to those who don't yet know Christ and to invite them to come along. For these events to really have a transforming and lasting impact in a community, there is a great deal of work that needs to be done before and after the event itself. Church members need to be prepared to participate in meaningful ways, teaching them to pray with those who are in need of prayer (if they don't already know), and to counsel those who want to come to know Jesus Christ. We need to be praying for the Lord to lead us to those we need to be able to bring with us who don't know the Lord and who are in need of His saving grace in their lives. It's also important to teach the members of the church to follow up with those who want to know more, to disciple

them in the faith as they are welcomed into the local church. Developing these ministries in the church strengthens us as the church not only for this event but in our life and ministry going forward. It teaches us to not only welcome those who come in our doors but to go out into the community to welcome others in and to raise people up in their knowledge and understanding of the faith. As you and I know, making a decision to believe in Jesus Christ must be followed by the daily commitment to walk with him, and the love and support of a community of faith to disciple you on that journey for a life to truly be changed for good. If we, the people of Christ Church, partner in this effort in Macon that is building to that March event, we will be strengthened in the process, we will strengthen the impact on our community as we reach out to those we know or that the Lord leads us to who do not know the Lord, and we will provide an additional loving welcoming community for those who come to faith at this event to consider calling home. The beauty of the diversity of the church that is involved in this response is that it recognizes and honors the diversity of the community to which we are reaching out to with the good news of Jesus Christ.

So let us not shrink back from the call to bear witness to the hope that is within us knowing that God will equip us for the good work He has called us to. It is only when we respond in faithfulness that we will see the fulfillment of God's promise. As he said, "I will put my laws within them, and I will write them on their hearts, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, "Know the Lord," for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord, for I will forgive

their iniquity, and remember their sin no more."

Amen