

***On September 15, 2019, Pastor Joel delivered this message to our congregation. It is based on Jeremiah 4:11-12, 22-28 and Luke 15:1-10. It is entitled "Finding Our Sanity."***

The beginning of the book of Jeremiah is filled with the judgment and pleading of God for God's people. Judgment for their turning away from God, to false gods made of stone and wood. Judgment for abandoning the ways of God and their faith. Judgment for the evil they do and their blatant disregard to care for the land upon which they dwell and the poor within their midst.

And pleading, the pleading of God to the people of Israel and of Judah and Jerusalem, to return, to change their ways, to repent of their faithlessness, or as Jeremiah calls it, their "harlotry" (3:9), for they have forsaken the one who truly loves and cares for them.

In our passage today, God speaks: ***For my people are foolish, they do not know me; they are stupid children, they have no understanding. They are skilled in doing evil, but do not know how to be good.***

Do these words not ring with truth even in our own time? Do you ever wonder how the human race has survived as long as it has? I sit in front of the TV and watch the news reports and wonder about the ways of humanity. Kate will attest that it is not infrequent when I proclaim out loud, *"How stupid can we be?!"* And I include myself in such statements. I wonder at how we can so recklessly destroy the earth or of how the human heart can possess such an evil that allows us to kill and torture others, with no remorse or shame or regret. Do you not wonder at times, what kind of creatures we are? What was God thinking when humanity was created? Or to put it another way, how did the earth and evolution allow a creature such as us to survive all these years? Because we certainly have the propensity to both destroy ourselves as well as the world upon which we live. We are indeed *"stupid"* and *"foolish"* creatures!

When I think of the way we have treated the earth, how we have been so careless and so mindless about the environment in which we live, I can scarcely believe it. Isn't it amazing that the European settlers who came to these lands some 400 years ago, saw it their right to cut down each and every tree they could? They had already erased the vast majority of forests in Britain and western Europe and apparently no one seemed to think anything of it.

The destruction of forests, made up of an amazing variety and diversity of species across New England and the mid-west, to make way for mono-cultural farming, is mindboggling. Sure, we can make the excuse that they saw all these trees and figured it was an endless resource, or that the trees would grow back eventually. But did no one consider keeping some areas of old-growth forest intact? Simply out of respect for creatures that were hundreds if not thousands of years old?

The idea that we could dump raw sewage and factory wastes into our waterways without any consequence seems so dumb-minded to me. And of sending the smoky byproducts of burning coal and other pollutants into the air through tall smoke stacks that allow those pollutants to be carried away, to who knows where? Did we think the atmosphere would just make it all disappear? Or did we just not want to think that those good mid-western factories couldn't be responsible for the acidification and mercury that ended up in New England's lakes and streams, making us what some have called the "tailpipe of the nation"?

And today, the U.S. military has sonar systems that disrupt the navigation and communication of sea mammals and is considered one of the greatest polluters of our earth's oceans. In fact, a number of sources place the U.S. Department of Defense as one of

the world's greatest polluters. And I wonder about things like microwaves and our cell phones and all that stuff that travels invisibly through the air, that allows us to communicate with each other in such remarkable ways. Has anyone tried to figure out how that affects the rest of creation? Or what about the move to more electric vehicles - a great idea that I support - but has anyone thought how the creation of electricity by millions of vehicles might impact the earth in some unknown way? Are we losing our connection with the rest of creation, that healthy, sane connection that sees us as one part of God's created order? Have we lost our sanity? Or maybe the better question is, have we ever really had it?

In Jeremiah, God makes it clear that there is a connection between how people act, what we do, and what will happen to the land upon which we live. There are consequences to our actions. And when we go astray, when we veer off from living God's ways, the ways we were created to live, when we become lost from the ways of love and compassion and wisdom, we will undoubtedly experience repercussions. And yet, Jeremiah proclaims, God's desire for us will never die and there is always an opportunity to be found again.

In our gospel reading today, Jesus is found welcoming and eating with those the Pharisees refer to as "*sinners.*" These are the outcasts of their society. The ones the Pharisees have disconnected themselves from. But Jesus seeks to re-connect with people like these, seeks to find those that have been lost. And after telling the parable of the shepherd who leaves the flock to go and find one lost sheep and then celebrates with his friends when he finds it, he tells the Pharisees, "*there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.*"

Likewise, the second parable of the woman who finds the coin that she has lost, and celebrates with her friends, suggests God's

penchant for finding the lost, for re-connecting those who have fallen away. And the lesson the Pharisees might have picked up, if they were listening, might have been, that they, like their God, should be about re-connecting with those they see as "lost", rather than separating themselves from them.

And perhaps that is the lesson for us as well. That we need to be about seeking and finding the lost, reaching out with the arms and hands of Christ, in our world, being like the shepherd or the woman, who seek with such diligence, with such perseverance, that when that which was lost, is found, when we are re-connected, we should gather all together and rejoice, party, and celebrate!

It makes me think of our Social Justice Team that has been working to reconnect us with our environment and with those seeking a new home in Maine. It makes me think of our church supper folks who invite everyone, so much like Jesus did, to come and dine together. It reminds me of Larry Jones, down in the Bahamas, risking his own personal safety to reach out to those who have lost so much and who may themselves feel lost, in the wake of the hurricane and all that destruction around them.

But we must do more. What we need is a *radical shift* in the way we live, the way we behave as human beings on this earth. In a time when global temperatures are increasing and sea levels rising, we need a *sea change*, a literal sea change, in the way we interact with creation. We need to commit, each of us, and all of us together, to some changes. We can each commit to the Paris Pledge that says **I pledge to reduce my carbon pollution 50% by 2030 and to become carbon neutral by 2050.** We can do this as a church and as a community and ask our state and national representatives to make this commitment as well. But we need to do more than stop the full scale destruction of the Amazon forests and the burning of fossil fuels. We need to change the way we think about ourselves in creation. We need to stop being *stupid and foolish*

*people* who think only of themselves and believe we become great when we separate ourselves from one another and the created order. The time of nation states thinking only of their own welfare is long past. We must begin to think and do everything we do with the entire world in mind. We are a global village and we need to begin to grow up and act responsibly, knowing that what we do effects everyone else around the globe.

We must recognize how lost we have been. How disconnected we have been from the world in which we live, how we have separated ourselves from this beautiful and wonderful world of God's creation that we are blessed to live on. We need, as we say in church language, to *repent, turn, and change our ways*. We need to re-connect with and take our rightful place in repairing and restoring this earth, so that when we begin to depart from

this little blue gem that we live on, we don't go out and do the same *stupid and foolish* things to other planets that we have done here. We must seek a wisdom born of love and compassion for all things.

There is one other lesson that Jesus teaches here. It is that no matter how lost we become, how far from God's ways and God's presence we try to place ourselves, we are never alone, *never fully separated* from our God. For we worship a God who is forever, endlessly *searching* for us. A God who is a *love* so deep and unending that we cannot fall out of that love. So, in the spirit of Jesus, let's gather together, let's begin the radical changes that we must all make and let's rejoice, let's party, let's celebrate the love that connects us, one and all and with all of God's good creation! Amen.