

“The Cry of my People’s Daughter”

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Jeremiah 8:18-9:1 | Luke 16:1-13

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“My heart is gone; grief is upon me;

my heart is sick.

Listen! The cry of the daughter of my people

from far and wide in the land:

‘Is [God] not in Zion?

Is [Love] not [within] her?’”

These powerful and heart-wrenching verses come from the Prophet Jeremiah. He begins his service to God as an Israelite priest in Jerusalem. God, then, calls Jeremiah to “warn Israel of the severe consequences of breaking their covenant with God through idolatry and injustice” (The Bible Project 2025). In the first half of Jeremiah’s book, he sees that God’s people are turning away from God and worshipping false idols: representations of greed and power contrary to the message of God’s love and faith. He, too, sees his people’s rampant oppression and neglect of widows, orphans, and immigrants, who God seeks to protect and claim throughout the entirety of our Scripture. He recognizes the apathy of the priests and leaders in Jerusalem, and he fears that their ego will lead the people into ruin. In chapters eight and nine of his book, Jeremiah pleads with his people to return to God. He underscores the severity that will fall upon Jerusalem, corrupting even the Temple on Mount Zion, where God’s presence dwells. While these words were written thousands of years ago, one of our roles as people of faith and as caretakers of the Word of God is to try our best, with the help of God, to understand what these words may mean to us in our current context. To do so, I invite you to join me as we apply these verses from Jeremiah to an everyday, almost hidden, ethical dilemma that affects most of us, as well as our neighbors—in four parts

Part 1: “My heart is gone; grief is upon me; my heart is sick.

A few days ago, I decided to scroll on my phone and catch up on what I had missed earlier in the day. A short video, only a couple of minutes long, appeared in my feed. Its title read: “You Need to Know About [This Company’s] Deals.” I’m very confident that you will recognize this “company” without me even needing to name names. It’s a massive, online retailer. It sells almost everything you can imagine from around the world. It has lightning-fast, sometimes even same-day, delivery. I’m seeing some nods, so it seems that most of us, if not all of us, in this room are familiar with “The Company.” And, how many of us here have ever purchased from “The Company,” even just one item? [Raise hands] How many of us here have purchased from “The Company” in the past year? [Raise hands] What about in the last few weeks? [Raise hands]

So, I’m intrigued when this video comes up on my feed. Before I watch, I look at the account who posted this video: “More Perfect Union.” Its YouTube description reads, “More Perfect Union is an Emmy-winning, nonprofit newsroom whose mission is to build power for working people.” I already know: this video, “You Need to Know About [This Company’s] Deals,” will not be about how to score the biggest sale or how to snatch the latest viral trend. If you aren’t already aware, allegations have been made about “The Company” for some time. In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic increased our need for online shopping and no-contact deliveries, a trend that has remained fairly consistent over the past five years. Former and current employees, environmental and human rights watch groups, and investigators have accused “The Company” of playing with the bounds of labor laws to keep up with the high demand of purchases—our purchases, our consumption, as a society. Here’s what the video alleges: the slashed prices, on-demand delivery, and plastic-wrapped convenience we expect come at a cost.

Part 2: “Listen! The cry of the daughter of my people from far and wide in the land....”

In the video, a current employee speaks out against the high volume of labor and turnout expected of “The Company’s” warehouse workers, particularly during mega-sale seasons. Her name is Joelle. She appears close to the age of retirement, sporting a baseball cap, a neon-yellow safety vest, and long, silver earrings—adding a touch of personality. She speaks calmly and confidently. You can see, just from the few seconds on screen, her inner strength and determination. Joelle alleges, “On the outside, to you, [“The Company”] is maybe getting your product the same day, getting a good deal. But, to us, it means injuries...Lifting, pushing, pulling, bending, reaching high.... You do it for long hours. It means you can’t even go to the restroom because you have to meet your rate.” Employees Connor and Tristin, also raise their voices alongside Joelle. They take turns speaking to crowds on megaphones and 1:1 with the camera crew. Tristin alleges unsafe working environments lead to injuries, which skyrocket during certain seasons. He says, “I have gone to the hospital twice now....I’m tired of there being an ambulance at my job site almost every night.” The video cuts to Connor, who points out the economic injustice within “The Company.” He says, “We live paycheck to paycheck.... A lot of [“The Company’s”] workers are homeless.” As if in response to Connor’s statement, the camera cuts back to Tristin, who says, “If [“The Company” is] making record-breaking profits because of our work...we should see something of that. Or, even some consideration for us as human beings.” What do the employees ask of “The Company?” It’s simple, really: safety, enough compensation to get by, a recognition that they are human beings. Why is this, for some people in “The Company,” just too much to ask for?

Part 3: “Is [God] not in Zion? Is [Love] not [within] her?”

There are a million excuses to ignore these hard questions and keep on the path that our economic structure has already tread for us. I know this to be true because I, too, make excuses for what I buy and what I demand as a consumer. I can justify my complicity in economic injustice all day.

- “It’s not my fault that the system is like this.”

- “I can’t help that this is the way the world is moving now.”
- “Life is hard enough. Sometimes, I just need to do the easy thing.”
- “I don’t have time to think. I just have to act now and get what I need.

If it is wrapped in non-biodegradable plastic and styrofoam / if it is single-use and bound to sit for centuries in a landfill / if it was made, exported, or delivered under unfair and exploitative labor conditions / if I don’t have time to do my research / if I’m not the problem, *they* are the problem / then, what can I do? We can read all of the statistics. We can look at all the pictures. We can see, even feel, the evidence of how dangerously and disastrously wrong our hunger for overconsumption has gone. We know the truth, yet, we do not change our behavior.

Where do we find an opening into our hearts? What tools do we have to let go of the constant swirling and churning of our modern world? When can we let go of the “shoulds,” the individualism, the constant comparison of ourselves to others, and the anxiety of having enough, at the cost of neglecting our place within the vastness of interconnected and sacred Creation? We have worshipful times together, where we can meditate and pray with neighbor and God. We have moments of fellowship, where we have a chance to reflect upon what truly brings us life and meaning. We have the two Sacraments in our tradition: Communion and Baptism. Communion reminds us of the ministry of Christ and the blessings he gave his disciples at the Last Supper. Baptism welcomes members into the Body of Christ and asks us, as the church community, to nurture and embrace life in Christ. And, we have the basis of our faith tradition: the Written Word, a sacred and holy account of our prophets and church ancestors that truly demonstrates the fullness of God’s interconnection with all beings across time and space.

Part 4: “No [one] can serve two masters.”

If we put Prophet Jeremiah’s message in conversation with the Gospel of Luke, we hear Jesus’s fairly straightforward response to the woes of Jerusalem. It is not too late to recognize where we have strayed from God’s path. Indeed, we have the tools to consciously and

intentionally return to God, despite the enticing ease and ego of convenient idolatry. Jesus provides a parable of greed and dishonesty involving a rich man and his shrewd manager. Knowing that he will be out of a home soon, the manager makes deals behind the rich man's back. Jesus, the Redeemer of our faith, states,

“Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much, and whoever is dishonest in a very little is dishonest also in much.... If you have not been faithful with what belongs to another, who will give you what is your own? No [one] can serve two masters, for [one] will either hate the one and love the other or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.”

Wealth, in and of itself, is not bad. Wealth, in and of itself, is not the problem. Money is, actually, neutral. However, how we use these resources and how we invest them can quickly become problematic, if we do not let God guide us and help us deliberately give in support of the values the prophets preach in Scripture: shelter, welcome, and nourishment for all people, especially for those on the margins / community over ego / hard truths over easy lies / service and abundant generosity.

Christ's words, especially in context with the Prophet Jeremiah and the cries of the laborers who bravely and boldly confront “The Company,” beg these questions:

- When will our demand for convenience-at-any-cost subside?
- When will we stop collectively lining the pockets of the ultra-rich at the expense and neglect of the poor?
- When will we see the photos of hundreds of billions—yes, billions—of pounds of plastic-lined, cheaply-produced consumer “goods” in our water, in our deserts, on our land, and in the backyards of our global neighbors and feel compelled to finally stop ourselves?

- When will we hear the cries of the worker, the laborer, the oppressed, who lament, in the words of the Prophet Jeremiah, “The harvest is past, the summer is ended, and we are not saved” (8:20)?

The answers to these questions, with the grace of God, lie in Jesus Christ’s succinct, powerful words: *No [one] can serve two masters... You cannot serve God and wealth. We cannot serve two masters. We cannot serve God and wealth.* Hear, people of God, the cry of the daughter, Jerusalem. Hear the cries of victims under siege and under the threat of human-made weapons and machines. Hear the cry of the laborers, the workers. Hear the cry of Creation groaning under the weight of waste, pollution, greed, power, and ego. Hear the cry of our conscience buried under excuses and willful ignorance. Hear the words of Scripture: the riches of the world are nothing compared to the true meaning of life—the true riches of love, fellowship, and interconnected care. Hear Jeremiah and Jesus. Be Jeremiah and follow Jesus—witnesses to destruction and carelessness, but prophets to hope and new life.

This is the good news, friends, children of God, and siblings in Christ: there is still time, and God is still with us. God has the ultimate say over how and when we use our gifts, talents, and resources. God is the Creator of all things, and all life deserves to access the fullness and goodness of Creation. God seeks justice among all beings, including all people—the “luck” of the privileged in our current socio-economic system means nothing to God, for all people are made in the image of God. We can change our hearts and behaviors, and what a blessing, an act of mercy, this is. Go forth and spread this good news. Be the prophet that recognizes the everyday, commonplace cracks of economic injustice. Change your habits, divert your life from agents and enterprises of harm, invest your resources of life-giving, sustaining, and community-based projects, and consciously err from easy convenience. Do not pass by suffering. Do not become immune to this beautiful and brutal web of interconnection. Do not forget our teachings. Do not forget our prophets and our Redeemer. Do not forget God. Amen.