

WGUMC Sept 21, 2014 "The Soul of Health"
Jeremiah 8:18-22 and Matthew 4:23-25

I confess that I'm a bit of dinosaur when it comes to technology. I am just contemplating getting my first smart phone. But I don't need a constant connection to the Internet to teach me that everything is connected.

Thirty-five years ago, we had an energy crisis. It was 1979. The Shah of Iran was taken down and gasoline prices shot up. The American public was in a panic, so the President decided to give a speech on the importance of energy conservation. The problem is that no one wanted to hear what he had to say, especially when he made the connection between our acute economic pain and a deeper, more chronic spiritual problem. Hear the words of the Baptist Sunday School teacher from Plains:

In a nation that was proud of hard work, strong families, close-knit communities, and our faith in God, too many of us now tend to worship self-indulgence and consumption. Human identity is no longer defined by what one does, but by what one owns. But we've discovered that owning

things and consuming things does not satisfy our longing for meaning. We've learned that piling up material goods cannot fill the emptiness of lives which have no confidence or purpose.

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/primary-resources/carter-crisis/>

The Prophet Jeremiah couldn't have said it better. In fact, by trying to convince Americans to turn down their thermostats, Jimmy Carter was accused of being a gloomy prophet like Jeremiah, and he had the poll numbers to prove it. As you know, none of the prophets in the Bible were very popular with the people, but they were appointed by God and didn't have to worry about getting reelected.

Fortunately, Jeremiah wasn't trying to win an election when he started making the connection between his nation's political predicament and its spiritual problems. The people of Judah were in a panic, and Jeremiah told them that the reason the Babylonians were breathing down their necks was because they were seriously backsliding. They were being wicked, dishonest, rejecting the word of the Lord and going after false

gods. And "from the least to the greatest, everyone is greedy for unjust gain." [Jeremiah 8:10]

Jeremiah had some strong medicine for his people. And for their political pain, he wrote them a spiritual prescription. He didn't tell them to turn down their thermostats but to turn back to God. It sounds trite, but it's true. Jeremiah mines a deep vein of Biblical wisdom, one that Jimmy Carter tapped into: that all of our problems, from the geopolitical down to the very personal, are directly connected to and shaped by our spiritual condition.

No matter how much we don't like it, this idea is all over the Bible. Remember the story of Noah and the Ark and how human sinfulness almost wiped out life on earth once before. But it's not just a story anymore. For we now realize that if we don't turn back to God and start taking care of God's Creation, we could do it all over again, for real this time. And so we are

rediscovering a profound biblical truth: that the health of our entire planet depends on the health of the human soul.

As you will see in the next few weeks, everything depends on the health of the soul, so if we want healthy bodies, healthy minds, healthy communities, let alone a healthy planet, we are going to have to start off with nurturing healthy souls. But so far this morning, I've been political. And now it's time to get personal.

Have you ever been sitting in the examination room at the doctor's office, trying to describe a physical problem, and already your doctor is pulling out his pad to write a prescription for yet another pill? You would get angry, but you know she doesn't really have the time to listen to what's going on with you. Nevertheless, just once, you wish a medical professional would look at you, the real you, the whole you, and realize that you are a soul and not just a symptom.

Well, you aren't the only one who's been longing for a more holistic approach to your health. This is from the journal of John Wesley in the 18th century:

Reflecting today on the case of a poor woman who had a continual pain in her stomach, I could not but remark the inexcusable negligence of most physicians in cases of this nature. They prescribe drug upon drug, without knowing a jot of the matter concerning the root of the disorder. And without knowing this they cannot cure, though they can murder the patient. Whence came this woman's pain? (Which she would never have told, had she never been questioned about it.) From fretting from the death of her son. And what availed medicines while that fretting continued? Why then do not all physicians consider how far bodily disorders are caused or influenced by the mind? And in those cases which are utterly out of their sphere, call in the assistance of a minister—as ministers, when they find the mind disordered by the body, call in the assistance of a physician? (*Journal*, May 12, 1759)

You'd think that John Wesley had read Deepak Chopra. Instead, he read the Bible, and it taught him all about the connections between mind, body and spirit. Our Gospel passage today indicates that Jesus performed his ministry at the very intersections of those connections. In a brief summary, Matthew tells us that Jesus went throughout Galilee, doing two

things: 1) teaching and preaching the good news of the kingdom and 2) curing diseases. So Jesus had a two-pronged mission: to save our souls and also our bodies. As the song says: there is a balm in Gilead to make the wounded whole and to save the sinsick soul.

The question is: why don't we believe it? Why do so many followers of Jesus Christ act as if there were no cure, as if there were no good doctor, as if our situation were hopeless and our God, helpless? I suspect it's partly because we don't want to confront the fact that there is a connection between the crisis in our lives and the condition of our souls. While we may not always be the cause of all our problems, we are sometimes pretty good at getting in the way of the cure.

We are like the people of Judah who had the Babylonians breathing down their necks, because there's always a crisis breathing down ours! We get a pink slip at the office, an eviction notice stuck on the door. We get a call from the

school principal. We have a meeting with the marriage counselor and an appointment with the doctor. We get the diagnosis. We schedule the surgery. We have a deadline. And what we need is a lifeline. Sometimes we can hear ourselves crying, "My joy is gone, grief is upon me, my heart is sick...."

[Jeremiah 8:18]

Now no ordinary doctor can properly diagnose this despair. As Wesley would say, it's time to call in the assistance of a minister. So after you've turned to doctors, lawyers, financial advisors, social workers, why not turn to God?

The balm in Gilead is the grace of God. And while Jesus came preaching the kingdom—where there will be no death, no mourning, no crying, and no pain anymore [Rev. 21:4]—we are still waiting for it. But if we can't yet have healing for our bodies, at least we can have healing for our souls.

So hold on, because the healing Jesus can work in our souls will make it so much easier to deal with all the other

diseases that are in us and all around us. All we have to do is turn back to God.

But in order to do that, we have to turn away from ourselves. And we have to be willing to give away our problems. For we have a tendency to let our problems have too much power over us. They become almost like false gods for us, because we end up sacrificing everything, including our spiritual health, to them. Dear God, don't let this happen to us! Don't let the pain in our bodies press down too hard on our souls!

Thank God that the more spiritual strength we can build up, the less our own body or any other body can beat us down. So do whatever you can do to boost your spiritual immunity. Instead of Facebook, read The Book. Instead of complaining about your problems, say a prayer of thanks. Even if it doesn't seem genuine, say it anyway.

If you've gotten all you can from your doctors, call a minister. Ministers are generally more available than doctors.

And cheaper! They may well be able to point out the possibility for some healing that you can't get from a health care provider.

But a minister is by no means the only one who can strengthen your spirit. Just be with the people who want to be with God. Time spent with one of the living saints in this church—that is kingdom time. Make the time.

And if your time is almost done, don't listen to those demons telling you that you're no use to anyone anymore. As long as you are in this life, there is someone who needs your love. Whether you know it or not, you still have something to give and, therefore, a reason to live. Besides, I assure you that there is someone in your life who needs to love you. You should let them.

By doing these things, your problems may not go away, the disease may not be cured, but your spiritual health will vastly improve, and that will have an immense positive impact on everything else. But don't take my word for it. Listen to

Jeremiah and Jesus (and don't forget, John and Jimmy). And remember, you don't need the new iPhone 6 to tell you what you already know: everything's connected.

"[Christ] himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together."
[Col 1:17]