

*Does the Church Speak for God Anymore?*  
*Jeremiah 8: 18 – 9:1*  
*September 23, 2007*

We've been looking at the book of Jeremiah for the past four weeks asking the question, "Does the Church Speak for God Anymore?" Today's text has been called the greatest poem of mourning in all the Bible. In it Jeremiah, almost with one voice with God mourns the plight of God's people. The tone of God's voice has turned from burning anger to inconsolable grief. All joy is gone; God weeps a fountain of tears. We learn that the church speaks powerfully for God (like Jeremiah) when the church speaks out of the voice of compassion. I believe even more that God calls us, the wounded healers of Bering, to be people of healing and compassion, in word and deed.

Jeremiah calls out for what appears to be an absent God. Foreign armies have crushed all of Israel and the nation cries out with one wailing voice. The spring harvest has yielded no crops; the barns are empty of fruit; a long famine awaits. Gilead was a town in the northern hills famous for the export of fragrant resin or balm, a medicine used to treat various sickness. This resin was not manufactured in Gilead, but was distributed from Gilead throughout the middle east as a healing agent to many great nations. So what stands out in this emotional passage is the rhetorical question, "Is there no balm in Gilead?" This would be like asking the question, "is there no oil in Houston?" We are the oil capital of the United States, particularly for manufacture of oil products which fuels much of our economy. No one today, at \$81 per barrel, "is there no oil in Houston?"

Similarly, for the people of Bering Memorial UMC, I don't think anyone would ask the question, "is there no compassion at Bering?" For almost 159 years we have been

all about caring compassion. We thank God for that mission that has united us for so long. We can celebrate all the lives that have been saved through the ministries of Bering Omega, a ministry started by this church. In the early days of AIDS, when AIDS was a death sentence, all the lives that were held holy in their final days at the Omega House. Think of the lives today of those living with AIDS that are enriched and given hope through the ministries of BSN, of the Dental Clinic, of the Care Center, and through residential assistance. Almost 2000 lives per year are enriched through its services. Last Sunday at *Sing for Hope* over \$200,000 were raised to continue this work, the best event ever. Many of you attended or volunteered in its efforts.

Just a few months ago, you responded in compassionate care for the youth of our community at the margins. *Open Gate*, as we have called it, is gathering momentum. Our church council has already reviewed and approved plans for a weekly fellowship meal at the Care Center, welcoming at-risk youth on the weekend. We are preparing to launch it early in 2008. Very soon we will complete plans also for a “holding hands” ministry to provide referral services for youth. The final part of this vision is a drop-in center that will provide a safe place for youth. The latest good news is that, partnering with *The Center for Success and Independence* (TCSI), we’ll be receiving federal funding of approximately \$70,000 over the next three years in working on building infrastructure for Open Gate. We have much to celebrate. There is indeed balm at Bering Memorial UMC.

But friends, I want to tell you of another amazing story of God using people as healing agents in the world. Do you know what are the three most deadly communicable diseases? HIV/AIDs....tuberculosis...malaria. Malaria kills over one million people a

year in Africa. Three quarters of those killed are children. Someone dies of malaria every thirty seconds. In fact by the end of this service 120 people will have died, more/as many as are in the Sanctuary today. And those who survive will be cursed by the disease for the rest of their lives through neurological damage. But there is a solution – a way to eliminate the disease in these poorer countries. The solution is called “nothing but nets.” A bed net treated with environmentally safe insecticide placed over a child or family can prevent mosquitoes from biting and spreading this deadly disease. And the cost of making, distributing, and training families to use the bed net is \$10. So our Bishop in conjunction with the National Basketball Association, the United Nations, and the interfaith community have committed to raising \$1,000,000 (or to saving 100,000 lives) this year. We are about half way there. When we get there the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation will match what we raise dollar for dollar. I would like to invite Bering Memorial UMC to participate as well. I challenge us to raise \$10,000 to save 1000 lives from this terrible disease. Now I know what you’re thinking. Andy, we are already focused on Habitat for Humanity in November. We are getting committed to pay our apportionments. We are doing a lot already and we are. But maybe what God is calling us to do is to walk our neighborhood to share the good news of this life-saving mission. If every one of us when coming to the altar gave \$10 for the next two weeks when receiving communion we’d be halfway there. And if we walked the Montrose neighborhood or told our co-workers we’d get there before we knew it. I know there is a leader here today who will lead this. I know there is an Oskar Schindler among us.

Oskar Schindler (who inspired the movie *Schindler’s List*) was a German living during World War II with an amazing mission. Herr Schindler was a munitions

manufacturer, producing bullets and other heavy artillery firearms. But he never produced a single bullet that could be fired. They were all duds or just enough out of specification that they would misfire. Herr Schindler also had a very unusual workforce. He employed about 1000 Jews that he had recruited from the Auschwitz death camp. Little by little, Schindler added to his list of plant employees, recruiting entire families when he could. Herr Schindler had a secret mission of love. His mission was to save the lives of these Jews who were destined to be murdered in the Auschwitz death camp. After a couple of years, Herr Schindler succeeded in his mighty mission, as his employees were freed in the Allied victory over Germany. As he said farewell to those who he saved, fleeing ironically from capture as a war criminal, they presented him with a letter, signed by all 1100 laborers, testifying to his mission of liberation. They also gave him a new wedding ring (he had sold his own to keep the failing plant solvent) with the following inscription from the Talmud: “Whoever saves one life saves the world entire (repeat..).” As he moved slowly toward his car to leave, he began to say the following: I could have saved more you know...I wasted so much money. This car...I should have sold it...It would have brought ten more persons... Taking off his Nazi lapel pin, he said, “This pin... it’s solid gold...it could have brought two more persons...I know I could have saved at least one more person...” Herr collapsed at that moment, sobbing into a catatonic position. But do you know the impact of his actions? This bold mission? Those 1100 who were saved this day have multiplied across two more generations into over 6000 souls. Compare that to the fact that there are only about 4000 Jews alive in all of Poland. Is there no balm in Gilead? I am convinced Bering has been placed here at this time at the intersection of Mulberry and Harold so that God’s

compassionate care can continually pass through us. Whoever saves one life saves the world entire.