



How truly wonderful and delightful to see brothers and sisters living together in sweet unity!
—Psalm 133:1 (TPT)

This morning we begin a 4-part series of messages title *Living In A Divided World*. These messages have proven to be the most difficult I have ever written. I was initially excited about this series, but in recent days I have thought it might be better to consign them to the *it seemed like a good idea at the time* file, and I seriously considered dropping the series altogether. Obviously, if I had a “magic bullet” type of answer to the difficulty of living in our divided world I would be writing bestselling books and speaking at conferences around the world. As it is quite evident I am doing neither of those things, maybe I don’t have any helpful answers. Or, perhaps, the answers are overlooked, even though they are right in front of us. Sometimes, even when the truth is directly in front of us, we are unable to perceive it or comprehend it.

It is an oft-repeated phrase that *Americans are more divided than ever*, but is it true? Are we more divided than at any other time in our national history? I don’t suppose there is any objective way to test the truth of that statement, but I am a bit of a skeptic when it comes to believing that we are at our highest-ever level of division. Certainly, we have not surpassed the level of contentiousness that gave us the Civil War, so we can say that, however divided we might be, it has not come to the point of taking up arms against one another.

While I am rather hesitant to claim those divisions are deeper and greater than ever before, I would say there are several social forces unique to our day and time that give us the sense that they are greater than at any previous point in our history. I believe, for one, that the rise of social media and other digital platforms have made us much more aware of the existence of the vast number of viewpoints in our society, and the digital world has provided those many viewpoints with a platform and a voice that heretofore did not exist. In previous generations we were spoon-fed information from the gatekeepers of traditional media, the members of which decided what news we would receive and what information would come our way. Any alternative forms of media were so small, and faced such great obstacles to sharing their message with the masses, that it was next to impossible to receive much in the way of news and information beyond what we were offered by the three major television networks and major newspapers. With the arrival of the digital era, however – especially the advent of social media – we have witnessed a radical reshaping of our world. Could, for instance, the #metoo movement have existed

without social media? It is hard to imagine that it could have, and likewise so many other social movements that have either started because of – or benefitted from – the power of social media. In a relatively brief time we have witnessed the lessening of the influence – or outright demise – of many traditional media outlets while new media voices have exploded in both number and influence. There are, of course, downsides to social media and the rise of the information age – such as the ability to customize your news to the point that one can live inside of a giant echo chamber, the frightening disappearance of privacy, and the anonymity of social media that breeds a disturbing level of ugliness – but it is now possible for anyone with a phone or other digital device to gain a worldwide platform.

There is, secondly, a rise in the social influence and power of groups who have long held a minority status in our culture, a rise that has corresponded with the dawning of the digital age. For much of our history there has been one dominant social group that held sway over all others, and that group determined the direction of our country's culture, politics, and just about every other facet of what was then a seemingly united America. I say *seemingly* because underneath the appearance of unity – which was not so much unity as it was the power of one group to possess an almost absolute sense of cultural hegemony – was a collection of many disparate subcultures that were mostly unnoticed or, perhaps more accurately, ignored. The digital age has allowed those minority groups – groups based on ethnicity, economics, beliefs, politics, sexuality, and other points of commonality – to not only increase their visibility, but also their power and influence, as digital connectivity meant their voices could no longer be ignored.

We have, thirdly, settled into our divisions in a way that seems to be much more intractable than in the past. Whereas in previous eras we seemed to have possessed a greater tolerance for points of view that were different from our own, we have now arrived at a point where we allow little or no room for differences. We more often tend to associate with people who believe and vote as we do, and we seem to have less patience or interest in those who think, vote, believe, or live differently from ourselves. There is even research which has revealed people are more and more likely to move into communities of like-minded people, and away from people with whom they disagree. Increasingly, it seems as though we are required to correctly check every box of orthodoxy before we find acceptance by other groups or individuals. Do you support the right political candidate? What political party do you belong to? Are you a Republican? What kind of Republican? A Republican more in the mold of Donald Trump or one who longs for the era of Ronald Reagan? Are you a Democrat? Are you a Democrat who supported Hillary Clinton or Bernie Sanders (even though Bernie Sanders is not a Democrat)? What are your specific political positions? Are you prolife? If so, do you accept any instances in which abortion is acceptable? Are you prochoice? If so, do you accept any limits on abortion? Are you religious? Well, that's an entirely other set of orthodoxies to manage.

We love to stereotype and categorize others, and perhaps we do so because stereotypes and categories are much easier to deal with than the real-world nuances and complexities of individuals. If we label our neighbor as that crazy, left-wing socialist who voted for Bernie Sanders, then we have placed them in a convenient category, allowing us to write them off as some kook who lives down the street and with whom we can never associate because of their objectionable politics. If we label our coworker as a right-wing religious zealot because they have a *Make America Great Again* bumper sticker on their truck, we can then ignore the fuller picture of who they are as a person.

The larger question becomes, then, not one of how divided we are, but can we – or will we – reach across those divisions in order to better understand one another?

This morning, we will look at the larger picture of division – on a worldwide scale and on a national scale. We will work backwards from there to the divisions in and among churches, to the divisions in a family, and the division in individual relationships. In the process, I hope I have some helpful things to say to you.

As I considered different Scripture passages for this week's message I was drawn to the prophet

Jeremiah, who was one of the major prophets of the Old Testament and who lived and prophesied in a very difficult time in the history of God's people. Jeremiah saw answers and truths that were right in front of the people, but they were unable – or unwilling – to hear or accept those truths because they were not what they wanted to hear.

Jeremiah was a prophet who bore testimony to the coming of an event we now call the Babylonian Exile. Taking place in 597 BC, the Exile was arguably the most traumatic event in the history of God's people. By this time in history, the nation of Israel had split into two kingdoms – Israel in the north and Judah in the south. Judah was home to Jerusalem and the Temple, the holiest place in the history of God's people. Because of a series of events that is too long to recount here, the people of Judah were defeated by the kingdom of Babylon and most were taken there into exile, where they lived for 70 years before being allowed to return to their homeland. Not all the people were taken into captivity into Babylon, but most of the political, religious, and business leaders were taken. Besides the loss of their leaders, those who remained in Judah had to contend with the destruction of the Temple and much of their civilization. It was a very dark and difficult time for the people.

And yet, in spite of the difficulties of the time, there were some lessons that came from that era as well, lessons that strengthened and gave hope to the people.

Jeremiah 29:1-2, 4-12 –

1 This is the text of the letter that the prophet Jeremiah sent from Jerusalem to the surviving elders among the exiles and to the priests, the prophets and all the other people Nebuchadnezzar had carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon.

2 (This was after King Jehoiachin and the queen mother, the court officials and the leaders of Judah and Jerusalem, the skilled workers and the artisans had gone into exile from Jerusalem.)

4 This is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says to all those I carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon:

5 “Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce.

6 Marry and have sons and daughters; find wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage, so that they too may have sons and daughters. Increase in number there; do not decrease.

7 Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper.”

8 Yes, this is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says: “Do not let the prophets and diviners among you deceive you. Do not listen to the dreams you encourage them to have.

9 They are prophesying lies to you in my name. I have not sent them,” declares the Lord.

10 This is what the Lord says: “When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will come to you and fulfill my good promise to bring you back to this place.

11 For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.

12 Then you will call on me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you.

What I found in the process of working on these messages is the massive scale of this topic. Each week could become its own series of messages or even a book, so I will do my best to condense down to the core truths of what I have to say. I will also say that the written version of this message is a good deal longer than what I am presenting to you this morning, as I do not have the time available to drop all that information on you.

The first truth I want to share is –

1. In our divided world, pray and work for the prosperity, blessing, and good of all people.

This was a very hard truth for Jeremiah's audience to hear, as they had been taken by their enemies into exile in a foreign land. They were ridiculed and reminded that they had been defeated, that they had been taken away as captives, and that their God could not help them in Babylon. And then Jeremiah had the audacity to tell the people to *seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper.* Can you imagine the response Jeremiah must have received. *Are you kidding me? Jeremiah, are you crazy? You know what these people have done to us! They have destroyed our Temple, they have destroyed the city of Jerusalem, they have destroyed much of our land, and they have carried us into exile in this strange land. And you want us to do what? Pray for and seek the peace and prosperity of this land and these people? No, no way. Not after what they have done to us!* Jeremiah was telling the people to patronize the businesses of the Babylonians and to treat them well when they came into the businesses that they would eventually build in their new land. Be nice to them. Help them to be successful. Do good to them. Call one of their contractors when you are building a house or business. Shop in their clothes and shoe shops. Bake a cake for them if they ask for one. Jeremiah said it was not a violation of their faith to do good for others and to work and pray for their prosperity; in fact it was an affirmation of their faith to do so. Jeremiah absolutely does away with any supposed justification to separate people, to treat them inhospitably, or to not serve them because of religious reasons. He reminded the people, in words that we very much need to hear today, that we are not to pray and work only for our own prosperity and blessing, but to pray and work for the prosperity and blessing of everyone.

Sounds to me like a message that is very much needed today, especially when there are so many in the religious and political realm that would tell us different. One of the reasons why I think that message is so needed today is because there is so much cynicism, especially cynicism that is directed at institutions. We live in a time when institutions have used and abused the trust of people, and it is every institution – government, colleges and universities, the military, business, and, as we have so painfully seen again in recent weeks, the church. It is time, as people, that we rise up and say *enough! Enough of the use and abuse of people! Enough of the manipulation of the divisions among us!* We have seen movements – such as the #metoo movement – rise up from among us to say *enough!* It is my hope that in churches – in particular the Catholic Church – that people will rise up and say *enough!* to the terrible scourge of abuse that has taken place. We must work to restore the trust in our institutions – including the church – and by doing so, it will be a much-needed step in working for the prosperity, blessing, and good of all people.

2. *We live in a political kingdom, but our allegiance is ultimately with God's kingdom.*

We are all familiar with the story in which Jesus is asked if it is lawful to pay tax to Caesar (Matthew 22:15-21 – **15** *Then the Pharisees went out and laid plans to trap him in his words. 16* *They sent their disciples to him along with the Herodians. "Teacher," they said, "we know that you are a man of integrity and that you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth. You aren't swayed by others, because you pay no attention to who they are. 17* *Tell us then, what is your opinion? Is it right to pay the imperial tax to Caesar or not?" 18* *But Jesus, knowing their evil intent, said, "You hypocrites, why are you trying to trap me? 19* *Show me the coin used for paying the tax." They brought him a denarius, 20* *and he asked them, "Whose image is this? And whose inscription?" 21* *"Caesar's," they replied. Then he said to them, "So give back to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's."").* When we read that passage, however, we often misinterpret what Jesus has to say. When Jesus says we are to give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's, we often hear his words to indicate there is a nice, neat, easy division between the two kingdoms that seek our allegiance. This is not at all, however, what Jesus is saying. Caesar would not accept the fact that a person would offer their allegiance or resources to anyone else, and certainly not God. Caesar, after all, portrayed himself as God, so Caesar, in his view, owned everything and was due everything. But Jesus tells us we are

citizens also of a heavenly kingdom and God – the true God, not a false god such as Caesar – also claims our allegiance and does not want to share that allegiance with any other. What Jesus is presenting then, is a very difficult dilemma – *choose the kingdom to which you will give your ultimate allegiance; it cannot be both.*

As citizens of two kingdoms, those kingdoms are often in conflict with one another as they both seek our ultimate allegiance. I find an example of this conflict every time I drive to Frankfort, where, just before the first Frankfort exit from I64, are two large flags, on the right, just off the interstate. The top one is a very large American flag and beneath it, subjugated to it I would say, is a smaller Christian flag. Every time I see those flags I am bothered by the symbolism of what their placement represents. To me, when I see those flags, it seems as though someone is telling me my allegiance ought ultimately belong to an earthly kingdom, but I give my ultimate allegiance to God's kingdom. Now, that does not mean I am not grateful to live in this country, and after listening to Pastor Pau (Bow) two weeks ago, as he told of being imprisoned simply because of preaching, I am very grateful for the freedom we have as American citizens. I believe, however, that my ultimate allegiance is not to a nation or government or political ideology, but to God and his kingdom.

When the people were taken into exile in Babylon there was a common belief that they were beyond the reach of God. The belief ran strong that God was contained within the borders of their political kingdom, and that was a reason why they were in such despair, as they wondered *how can we survive here, apart from God? We are now under the domination of not only another kingdom but also that kingdom's gods.* But the kingdom of God supersedes all boundaries that humanity erects, and that is certainly true when it comes to national boundaries. The borders and boundaries that exist are ones that are created and delineated by humanity, and just because we bump into a border or boundary does not mean that our love, our ministry, our care, and our concern ends at that point. Borders are too often a defining mark of where and whether we will do ministry and love. It is easy to say, based on borders, that *that is a Simpsonville problem, not a Shelbyville problem. That is an Anderson County, or Oldham County, or Jefferson County problem, not a Shelby County problem. That is an Ohio problem or Tennessee problem, not a Kentucky problem. That is a Mexico or Canada problem, not a United States problem.* It is tempting to say that our responsibilities end at the borders of our community, or county, or our southern or northern border, or at the east coast or west coast, but we must remember those borders are human creations that are not recognized by God, certainly not when it comes to the responsibility of loving and ministering to others.

God was with the people as they settled into a strange, new land. God was with the people for the seven decades that they lived in Babylon and they learned that there was no place on this earth where they could go and be away from God. No border or boundary would stop the love and care of God. Whatever actions were taken by earthly kingdoms, God was with the people, and God would do what God planned to do, and nothing could change that reality and nothing could change God's promise.

They also learned, I believe, that among the many differences between God's kingdom and earthly kingdoms is this – earthly kingdoms enforce an outward morality and behavior while God's kingdom seeks a change of heart. Earthly kingdoms can use force if they deem it necessary to get what they want but God does not. The change of heart that God brings will always rise above the use of force. I will certainly affirm the need for an earthly kingdom to bring order, but I will recognize in a greater way that the real measure of change and working for the good comes from the change of heart that comes from God's spirit.

3. Know that God has a plan, and know this when times are at their most difficult.

One of the most powerful lessons learned by the people comes from verse 11. You might have this verse on a plaque, a bookmark, a poster, or a shirt. It is a beautiful verse that has for years encouraged many of us – *“For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not to*

harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.” While many people are familiar with that beloved verse, the context of it is not commonly known, but the context, I believe, brings even more power to the verse. It was a difficult time for the people of God, but God was still with the people, and God still had a plan. Yes, it would be seventy years before they would return to their homeland, which meant that very few of them would ever again see their homes. Some would be born in Babylon, live in Babylon all their days, and die in Babylon, never setting foot in or seeing their homeland. The generation that would return to the homeland would be a generation that had only heard stories of their homeland, and upon setting foot in that land would find it to be a strange, unknown land. Seventy years is a long time, but it is a very small moment in the span of God’s plan. It can be easy to forget, in the midst of difficulty, that God’s plan is always at work. We can be overwhelmed by difficulty to the point that we cannot see beyond our difficulty, and that must certainly have been true during the time of captivity. God was, however, faithful to the people, and even as they were in captivity there were important lessons they learned and blessings they received.

When the late Fred Craddock was the acting dean for a brief time at Phillips Theological Seminary, a woman from the community came to see him. She asked him to come out to the parking lot, which made him a bit nervous, but he went. She opened the back door of her automobile, and slumped in the back seat was her brother. He had been a senior at the University of Oklahoma, but a tragic car accident had left him in a coma for eight months. She had quit her job as a school teacher to take care of him.

At this point almost all of their resources were exhausted. She said to Dr. Craddock, *I would like for you to heal him.* Can you imagine? What would you say? Dr. Craddock responded, *Well, I can pray for him. And I can pray with you. But I do not have the gift of healing.* The woman got behind the wheel and said, before driving off, *then what in the world do you do?*

(<https://baptistnews.com/article/what-can-we-learn-from-being-offended/#.W4n1vFci4ks>)

I share that story because of the question the woman asked Dr. Craddock – *what in the world do you do?* I want to put a different emphasis, however, on those words. *What will we do, in this world?* Whether or not we have the gift of physical healing, we have the gift of spiritual healing we can bring to the world. *What in the world do we do? What, in this world, will we do in relation to the divisions?* Will we help to heal them? God does indeed have a plan, and however much it might seem that everything is falling apart, however bad things might appear, God is the one who is not only the creator of this world but also the one who will decide its ultimate destiny and asks us to be part of the process of healing those divisions.