

He was only 29 when he died. The cause was heart failure brought on by alcohol and drug abuse. In his short life and career as a musician, he managed to score 11 No. 1 hits on the Billboard charts and another 24 that made the top 10. And he even managed this remarkable feat without ever learning how to read music. When Nashville's Country Music Hall of Fame was established in 1961, he was one of the first two inductees.

Despite his success, he was in many ways a broken man. But American country music fans didn't much care. There was earthy truth in the simple, gritty songs of Hank Williams Sr. Somehow that truth made up for all his rough edges. Among Williams' best-known hits is a little cry-into-your-beer ditty. The first two stanzas go like this:

Your cheatin' heart, Will make you weep.

You'll cry and cry, And try to sleep.

But sleep won't come, The whole night through.

Your cheatin' heart, Will tell on you.

The cheatin' heart in question, of course, belongs to a woman who has done her fella wrong. But that's not the only sort of cheatin' heart there is. Just ask the prophet Jeremiah. In our first lesson this morning he thinks everyone has a cheatin' heart when he declares, "The heart is devious above all else, it is perverse — who can understand it?"

I would imagine that the Scottish reformer John Knox would probably have agreed with the famous Old Testament prophet. When he and a small committee of fellow pastors penned a confession of faith for the newly formed Church of Scotland, he made sure to say — referring to original sin — "The image of God was utterly defaced in man, and he and his children became by nature hostile to God, slaves to Satan and servants to sin." Your cheatin' heart, indeed.

Lots of people today think old John Knox laid it on a little thick. And if you pressed them, they'd probably say the same thing, or something similar, about Jeremiah — even though his words come straight from the Bible. **Devious above all else? Perverse?** I'm sure we can all agree that we probably won't ever see such words written down on a lacy

homemade valentine's day card or printed on the candy found in a box of conversation hearts.

In fact, we don't generally like to think about the human heart in such terms. Calling the human heart devious, and perverse, runs counter to the spirit of our age, because we would rather hold onto a commonly held belief that deep down, people are basically good for the most part! And yet, in order for us to understand Jeremiah's lament about the cheating heart, and not write him off as some kind misanthrope or pessimist, we should consider that he was a prophet living through some extremely hard times. You might even say that all hell was fixing to break loose around him!

After a brief and encouraging reform by the good king, Josiah, the people of Judah were backsliding under their present king, Jehoiakim. They were worshiping foreign gods (at altars and sacred poles) and falling into all manners of immorality. A Babylonian invasion was looming on the horizon — surely a sign of the Lord's imminent judgment — while Judah's corrupt monarch did nothing; but enjoy the self-indulgent pleasures of his palace.

By contrast, at that time a few remained faithful, however. In a couple of verses reminiscent of Psalm 1 — our Psalm for today — that faithful remnant was “like a tree planted by water, sending out its roots by the stream.” The prophet Jeremiah draws a sharp distinction between those who trust in “mere mortals,” and those who trust in the Lord. The first group is like a transient desert plant that wilts and dies under the blazing sun. The second has its' spiritual roots sunk deep in well-watered soil, and it flourishes.

When Jeremiah blasts the human heart as devious and perverse, he's got ample evidence from his own experience. But it is important for us to note that in Hebrew thought, the human heart is the seat of reason, not emotion. Emotion is thought to reside in the abdomen: the source of what we in our culture call a “gut feeling.” In other words, the cheating or deceitful heart of verse 9, therefore, is actually a corrupted mind. Jeremiah displays here a deep psychological understanding, an awareness of the endless capacity of

the human mind to deceive itself. In the next verse, the prophet warns us that the Lord will “test the mind and search the heart.”

Now it may seem, at first, that Jeremiah’s prophecy — especially his quirky, anatomical understanding of the human heart and mind — has little to say to people today. Our optimistic, can-do, achievement-oriented culture is less inclined than generations past to regard sin as an inescapable condition. We have little trouble believing in individual sins. Bad behavior is out there for all to see, screaming at us from Twitter and Facebook headlines. Most are inclined to think others commit more sins than they do, and that — in especially horrific circumstances — that they actually deserve to be punished for their sins!

Our culture’s understanding of individualism encourages us to claim all credit for our individual achievements, even as we blame forces beyond our control for our failures. The highest goal of many parents is to instill in their children a strong ambition to go out and “make something of themselves.” They are to go out and “seek their fortune,” so to speak.

Jeremiah’s prophecy, on the other hand, is the polar opposite. After all, what happens to those whose minds are deceived into thinking they can make it out there on their own, relying on the shallow roots they put down in the desert sand? They wither and they die! Only those who live a life close to the Lord — like a tree growing next to a river or stream — will survive and flourish.

There’s a telling phrase coined by a Christian philosopher named Dallas Willard. In his book *The Divine Conspiracy* Willard speaks out against a distorted form of the Christian message he calls “the gospel of sin management.” The gospel of sin management, he proposes, teaches us that Christian discipleship begins and ends with managing our sinful behaviors. But how do we do that, when sin is such a relentless opponent and adversary in our lives?

Well, one of the most obvious answers we might come up with, is that we can pass that responsibility on to Jesus. After all, isn’t it true that he offers us salvation if we just accept him into our hearts, allowing him to justify us by grace through faith? If we take him

up on that offer, if we effectively hire him as our personal assistant, then we can count on him to clean up our messy desks can't we?

This morning the prophet Jeremiah reminds us that the manifestation of the cheatin' heart — is the self-deceived mind. Try as we might, we cannot make ourselves holy. There is only one who is holy. And the only way to imbibe some of that holiness is by planting our roots deep in the well-watered riverbank beside God's ever-flowing stream. By drinking from the living water that Jesus offers us we experience the spring of water that wells up to eternal life, and we learn that we never need to be spiritually thirsty again.

The gospel of sin management, as it manifests itself within Christianity, is a hard ideal to live up to. Cutting out all sinful behaviors is practically impossible. "Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there?" the despairing Jeremiah asks in an earlier part of his book. Is there no doctor in the house — the house of Judah — to apply a holistic treatment, so that sin might be banished and spiritual health and wholeness be restored?

When Jeremiah asks, "Is there no balm in Gilead?" he's referring to a famous resin, harvested from the trunks of pine trees that grew in the Gilead region. A fragrant ointment, refined from the sap of those trees, was good for all kinds of ailments. You could say it was the Vicks VapoRub of the day — that oily goo your mother used to spread on your chest when you had a cold. Remember the pungent smell of that stuff — the menthol aroma that worked its way up into your nostrils and made you feel like you could breathe again? The balm of Gilead was probably something like that.

So, Jeremiah regards the corruption of his people — their hopelessness, their lack of a future — and he cries out: "Is there no balm, no medicine that can help? Is there no doctor in the house, no one who can bring true healing to this wayward and ailing people?" The ailment, of course, is sin. It's not a behavior that can be managed, but it is an ailment that can be healed. And thankfully Jeremiah informs us that there is, in fact, a cure. We know of it in the Christian tradition as the grace of God in Jesus Christ. "Those who are well," says Jesus, "have no need of a physician, but those who are sick do."

The African slaves of the American South knew of this cure, perhaps better than we do. Held captive and oppressed all their days, laboring under the lash of the overseer, they were, at the very least, allowed to sing some spiritual songs as they worked. One of them is the beloved hymn based on Jeremiah 8:22, “There Is a Balm in Gilead.” “There Is a Balm in Gilead” is the answer to Jeremiah’s plaintive cry. It’s no aromatic ointment. It’s the only reliable cure that exists for the deadly malady we know as sin. And the spiritual itself provides us with a hint.

*Sometimes I feel discouraged, And think my work’s in vain,
But then the Holy Spirit, Revives my soul again.
If you can’t preach like Peter, If you can’t pray like Paul,
Just tell the love of Jesus, And say He died for all.*

Today, here in this place, Jeremiah asks us a very thoughtful and relevant question, “The heart is devious above all else; it is perverse — who can understand it?” And from the Word of God, and with the help of the Holy Spirit we discover the answer, “I the Lord test the mind and search the heart, to give to all according to their ways, according to the fruit of their doings.”

So no more cryin’ and weeping into the night. No more cheatin’ heart that’s going to “tell on you....” So, let’s take our cheatin’ hearts to the Lord and ask the Lord to “Search us, O God, and know our hearts; test us and know our thoughts, see if there is any wicked way in us...and let us trust him to lead us in the way of everlasting peace.” And that is definitely a song worth singing about. Thanks be to God. Amen.