

“A Harsh Reality and Assurance” based on Jeremiah 23:23-32 and Luke 12:49-56

Delivered by Pastor Drew Mangione on August 17, 2025, at Shelby Presbyterian Church

Here’s something about us as human beings, we really like to go along to get along. We like to fit in. It’s a good feeling. Sometimes we might do this by doing what’s popular, being part of the majority culture and finding our way to fit in with it.

Sometimes we try this and still become ostracized by the majority culture, and so, we become rebellious. We then find our fellow outcasts of whatever stripe, and we build our own community apart from the majority culture. We cling to something that connects us with other outcasts.

Throughout history, we have tied our self-worth and value, to the opinions of others. We tie ourselves to the opinion of the group to which we belong. Sociologists and other scientists have studied this phenomenon at length, in many ways.

In one study, people were shown an image on the screen and were asked simple questions. The researchers wanted people to name basic facts, like an object’s color. When given an opportunity to answer anonymously, nearly all were correct in their answer. These people were then put in groups to answer similar questions again, and this time, in these groups, the researchers had planted some actors. The actors confidently answered first – wrongly. The people who were the subjects of the research doubted themselves and now answered incorrectly. They followed the lead of the actors.

In another study, people were shown the results of some fake scientific studies. The control group was asked about a skin cream and its effectiveness. They were given a graph which showed them that 223 people used the skin cream, and the rash went away. At the same time, for 75 people who used the skin cream, it got worse. Meanwhile, 107 people who did not use the skin cream got better, and just 21 people who did not use the cream got worse. Then they were asked if the skin cream was effective.

The question is tricky. If you’re numerically literate, you may know the answer right away, but most of us aren’t. In fact just 59 percent of respondents got the answer right. You see, while it seems impressive at first that twice as many skin cream users got positive results, the different sample sizes mean the ratio matters. More than 25 percent of the people who used the skin cream saw their condition worsen. While only about 16 percent of those who used nothing got worse. Using the cream meant 1 in 3 users would get worse. Less than 1 out of every 5 who did nothing got worse. The skin cream, based on these numbers, is ineffective.

When the same numbers were attached to controversial political issues, the results were very different. It seems the ability to do math can be set aside when the math we do threatens our place within our ingroup. Before being shown the study, people were asked about their political party and how they understood these very numbers changed. The percentage of people who got it right went up when it aligned with their politics, while the percentage of people who got it wrong went up, if it didn’t align with their politics.

In still another study, people were asked to lie about something they didn’t like and endorse it. They told hundreds of people how much they liked this particular thing they didn’t like. Then they

were brought back a while later, they were asked about their opinion about the thing they were lying about. As it turns out, after lying so much, they suddenly liked it. They had changed their opinions. Many of the people paid to lie, began to believe their own lie.

These studies are just a tiny sliver of the research out there and the conclusion is simple: As a general rule, human beings struggle with the fear of not fitting in somewhere. We will be fiercely loyal to the places we think we do fit in. We can even convince ourselves of something we know is not true. What's more: When we consider this trait in our opponents, we are quick to call them stupid, but rarely do we question ourselves.

Both of our readings today deal with this tendency in our human condition. For Jeremiah, he is speaking for the Lord, warning the people about what is to come. Our reading comes from Chapter 23. This is near the end of the book's first section of 24 chapters containing Jeremiah's warnings before the exile. In these warnings, he tells the leaders of Judah that all their wealth and prosperity and military success is meaningless. The fact is that their treatment of the poor – the widows and orphans – and immigrants, along with the practices of the people openly worshiping other gods and even practicing child-sacrifice to gain these gods favor, will all lead to the destruction of the Jerusalem temple. It will lead to a military defeat by an enemy from the north. He's talking, of course, about the Babylonian Empire.

Because of all his warnings, Jeremiah was not a popular guy. They didn't like him. What happens is rival prophets rise up. These prophets tell the leaders and the people that their prosperity is good and that they're wealthy and powerful. They point to this as a sign of good things. There is peace. So the Lord is speaking through Jeremiah, comforting this prophet of lament.

In our reading God reminds him, and has him proclaim to the people that these false prophets who keep prophesying in the Lord's name have deceit in their hearts to make the people forget the Lord. Sure, they use the Lord's name but these dreams they speak of go against who the Lord is. For it was the Lord who claimed the people of Israel, not because of their wealth or power, but as it says in Deuteronomy, they were chosen because they were small so they might be an example to bless all nations.

Indeed, in misrepresenting the Lord, it's no different than their ancestors turning to Baal, the Lord declares through Jeremiah. But God does not tell Jeremiah to stop the other prophets. He just tells him to keep speaking the truth. After all, the chaff, or waste, does not matter to the wheat, the kernel of food that nourishes. The truth of God's word is a fire, a hammer that breaks rocks.

This truth will purify not destroy, and it will break away the calcifications around hearts, so that we might have hearts of flesh and not of stone. These false prophets may say, "He declares," claiming to speak for the Lord, but they do not. The Lord assures Jeremiah that the Lord will handle them, and that their words are of no benefit, or no profit to the people.

These are harsh words, but they are a comfort, too. In fact, all of Jeremiah is a mix of harsh and comfort. After all, the Lord calls Jeremiah as a prophet to both Israel and to the nations. God commissions him both uproot and tear down as a way to accuse and warn Israel. Yet also, God commissions Jeremiah to plant and build up, providing hope for a faithful who remain.

After all, God is near, and not distant – the Lord is with the people. We talk about “God with us” all the time here at SPC and this is the belief we hold in the Holy Spirit in and among us. What is significant is that it works on two levels. We have God with us to see everything we do, good and bad, and we have God with us to be in and among us, pouring the love of God in our hearts. God with us means God is always near to us as a comfort.

So yes, our readings today present a harsh reality because doing what is right is often difficult. It’s not always the easiest thing to do. In our reading from Luke’s gospel, Jesus is not saying he has come to actively cause division. Rather, he is saying that like Jeremiah, the result of being faithful is division – a splitting up.

After all, there are some who will think that as long as there is wealth and prosperity with many people doing well, it doesn’t matter if people are exploited, because eventually it will all be ok. Surely if we are doing well, they think, then God is blessing their actions and their ideology. But being faithful to God means lifting up others and serving, just as Christ came to serve, and to give his life as a ransom.

Likewise, there are those who will tell of their dreams and their accomplishments, and they may even seek to save the world in so many great ways. Yet, they remove God’s name, exalting humanity alone in doing so. They will extract God from the equation or say that God is too distant to care about our individual lives.

Beloved, being faithful to the Lord our God is being open to the idea that we can see God at work in the world around us. We can lay aside the need for self-aggrandizement and promotion and look for the presence of humble self-giving love in ourselves and in the world around us. We can recognize God at work in and through this.

This faithfulness is what we see in Jesus, who is the image of the invisible God. As the firstborn – the only begotten – he is over all of creation, and he came down to us. Fully God and yet he became a human being, born of Mary, humbling himself. In Jesus, the fullness of God dwelled in our limits, and through him, by his life, death, resurrection, and ascension, he is reconciling all things to God, both on earth and in heaven. This is because his peace did not come by a big victory defeating enemies, but through the blood of the cross.

If this is the God we love and serve, then this is the challenge and the comfort for all of us. It is a challenge, because, as I’ve said many times, if you read through scripture, and all you find is that you agree with everything perfectly to line up with what you already think, then, quite frankly, you are not reading it correctly. God loves us too much to let you stay the person you are right now. God seeks to transform you and help you grow. Every Christian should be on a journey of transformation to remove the idols in our life we suffer under and become servants to one another in Christ.

Indeed, if we claim special providence for ourselves, our family, our nation, our ideology, even our denomination, and we fail to see that God is at work in other people, other families, other nations, other ideologies and other churches. Indeed, if this is so, we are at risk of making an idol out of ourselves, our families, our nation, our ideology, or our church. Good things can go wrong very quickly.

Likewise, if we go the other way, and get down on ourselves to condemn ourselves for our sin, we make a mistake. If we fail to see the love that God has for each and every one of us, then we miss out on one core part of our faith, which is that our God is love. God loves you. These words of Jesus about splitting things up are hard, but they are a comfort, because our faithfulness does not earn God's love. It is a response to that love God has for you.

So, in the midst of this division, our calling is as hard as it can be. Our calling is to love our enemy, and love the people we disagree with. It is to love our opponents. This is so that in the midst of all the division we see around us, we will be different. We're not going to convince others to think like we do, no matter how good your argument is. But you can love that other person. You can be faithful to God yourself, and in your interaction with that other person.

God will work in and through us in any relationship. It's not about winning people over to "our side," whatever side that is. It's about participating in the love of God so our hearts can first be transformed and we can share the love God has for us. This way the person who receives it will also be transformed by God.

Jesus says that he has a baptism into which he is going to be baptized. This foreshadows the cross here. We know that when we are baptized we are baptized into the death of Jesus. As Paul says, if we are baptized into his death, we will be resurrected with him to new life. This is not a life in some distant heaven by which we escape this world and say, "see you later." No, this is a new creation, in which what we do here and now will be preserved, refined, and a part of what God is doing. This is because we are working together to build for the Kingdom of God.

Beloved, let us read the signs of the times, not as a pretense for the end of the world. No, let's read them as the motivation to do what is right, even if it is more and more difficult. Yes, it is our human tendency to ignore our senses in order to fit in. Yes, it is our human tendency to justify what we already believe, even if it means ignoring the facts in front of us. Yes, it is our human tendency even to lie to ourselves.

However, the good news is that God is with us, and we can be faithful, regardless. We can be faithful and live lives of loving God and loving neighbor even when that's not the easiest thing to do. We can do this because we can live holding onto the assurance of God's love for us. This is the assurance that in Christ, by the Spirit, we are loved by God our Father who will never let us go. Amen.