

Stepping Out in Faith

The Lord of heavenly forces, the God of Israel, proclaims to all the exiles I have carried off from Jerusalem to Babylon: Build houses and settle down; cultivate gardens and eat what they produce. Get married and have children; then help your sons find wives and your daughters find husbands in order that they too may have children. Increase in number there so that you don't dwindle away. Promote the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because your future depends on its welfare.

I know the plans I have in mind for you, declares the Lord; they are plans for peace, not disaster, to give you a future filled with hope.

Jer. 29:4-7, 11 (C.E.B.)

For the Children:

(Bring a houseplant with me.) Do you know what this is? It's a house plant!

Do you have plants like this at your house? Some people grow gardens outside and some grow plants inside their house. *(Asking adults: How many of you have plants that you take care of?)*

Sometimes I wonder why people have to take care of their plants. I mean, God makes them to grow, why not just let them grow? Do you know why people have to take care of their plants?

They care for their plants by watering them and making sure they have the right amount of sunshine and giving them special food, called fertilizer. The plants might not get enough of something – or too much of something – unless someone takes care of it.

I know some people who have plants that grow outside all summer long, but when winter comes, they bring them inside. Do you know why? It's because some plants die when it gets too cold. And if they want to take care of their plants, they bring them inside.

I guess, in some ways, that's the way it is with pets, too. Do any of you have pets? And how do you take care of your pets?

In our scripture today, Jeremiah says we need to take care of the places we live. I've been thinking about how to do that. Do you have any ideas?

I thought of a few things: I could take care of the place I live by not wasting water or food and by walking more and driving less. I could be more polite to strangers by offering a smile or holding a door open for them.

It doesn't have to be hard, but it does mean I have to pay attention and take care of what I can. So can you!

Let's pray:

Thank you God for plants and pets and places to live. Help us take care of them. Amen.

For the Adults:

“I know the plans I have in mind for you, declares the LORD; they are plans for peace, not disaster, to give you a future filled with hope” (Jer. 29:11).

Maybe you’ve heard it in a different translation, but I suspect we all know that verse. I can’t tell you how many times I’ve seen it on wall hangings and plaques. I’ve also seen it used in weddings and at graduation celebrations. It offers a beautiful reminder that God has a larger picture in mind, and that God desires our well-being.

But it’s easy to forget – or perhaps ignore – the larger context for Jeremiah’s words. (And we probably didn’t help by skipping some of the longer passage when we read it this morning.)

Israel has been devastated. The temple has been destroyed. The people were taken to foreign lands. It seems as though all hope is gone. It is anything but a pleasant place to be. And as awful as their situation is, it is an all-too-familiar refrain.

- It is the plight of many Ukrainians who are living in exile while war ravages their cities.
- It is the story of Palestinians who are barred from living on their ancestral lands.
- It is the experience of Native Americans who were driven from the familiarity of one place and sent to another.
- It is being repeated again in the recent skirmish in Armenia.

The experience of Jeremiah is a sad and repeated story of a national crisis, of forced migration resulting in the loss of hope and a loss of a place to call home.

As bad as it sounds, though, the story of Israel is also worse than that. You see, for many Israelites, the symbolic presence of God was in the temple and with its destruction, there was no place for God to dwell. It was not only a national crisis; it was also a theological crisis. They wanted to know if it was true God had abandoned them. They also wanted to know if God could hear them when they pray in a foreign land (Ps. 137:4)?

It is not dissimilar to the angst Native Americans felt when their sacred rock was put on display in Lawrence, Kansas. Fortunately for them, there has been some recent attempts to right the wrong, but Israel is in the midst of their anguish when Jeremiah speaks.¹

I always thought that was a curious context for a scripture to be read at a wedding. 😊 I mean really? In the midst of anguish?

The people of Israel turned to their religious leaders for guidance. The priests said it is only temporary, that God will restore their fortunes in short order (Jer. 28:11). Jeremiah counters with the accusation that they are false prophets who are catering to their longings without hearing and responding to the voice of God (Jer. 29:8-9).

Jeremiah doesn’t deny the tragedy, nor does he blame God for the loss.

Instead, Jeremiah encourages them to make the best of it. To make a life in their new home. To pray to the God of the universe who will hear them, no matter where they find themselves. For even in this foreign land, even while living among Gentiles, God has a plan for them (Jer. 29:11). And a part of that plan requires

¹ <https://lawrencekstimes.com/2023/08/30/sacred-red-rock-departs/>

them to care for the city where they live, to care for the environment and the economy and the welfare of the people around them.

In his commentary on Jeremiah, Elmer Marten suggests that Jeremiah is offering a precursor to the words of Jesus when he says to love our neighbors as ourselves.² “Promote the welfare of the city where I have sent you” (Jer. 19:7).

I want to suggest that Jesus is telling us to do the same where we live. It’s why I’ve been encouraging you to use the neighborhood map to identify and get to know the neighbors where you live. Using the front cover of the bulletin as a template for your own map to identify the eight closest front doors to your own front door and to learn three things about them:

- a. Their names (and their phone numbers)
- b. Something about them that you can’t know by observing them
- c. Enough about them to know what their hopes and dreams are

It doesn’t take too long to create the map. Filling in the three pieces of information about each neighbor, on the other hand, requires a focus of effort to have conversations with your neighbors and to pay attention as you do so. It will also take time. Sometimes it takes lots of time.

The people don’t know it yet, but Israel’s exile in Babylon will last 70 years (Jer. 29:10). That seems like a long time, but earlier in their history, they lived in Egypt for four centuries!

And in both places, they made it a better place to live. They could only do that by engaging in the activities of their communities:

- by attending fairs and celebrations
- by inviting neighbors to their home for meals and conversations
- by supporting school events and participating in civic organizations

What they learned in the process is that God loves the Babylonians, too. They are reminded that God called them to be a light to the Gentiles, not just an enclave of descendants of Abraham (Is. 42:6).

I don’t mean to suggest this is easy or even natural. We are fighting social trends as well as our own resistance to change. For some of us who are introverts, it is also working against our very nature. For some of us who already know enough about our neighbors to know we don’t like them, it is really hard to do.

But Jesus doesn’t say to love the people we like. He says, “love your neighbors” and “love your enemies,” too (Lk. 10:27; Lk. 6:27).

It takes a certain amount of bravery to begin this process, and even more to continue the process. That’s why I’ve suggested trying simple things, small things as a beginning point.

- Start a conversation as you see your neighbor walking their dog, for example
- Or offering a small holiday open house
- Or maybe use the upcoming Halloween holiday as a means of meeting people who come to your door

There are as many ways as there are neighbors and neighborhoods. But in the end, it is living into the call of Jeremiah to seek the welfare of our neighbors that includes cultivating gardens and sharing the fruit it produces (Jer. 29:5).

² Marten, p. 177

It would have been easy for the people of Israel to focus on their past, to continue the lament of their losses, to mourn the temple and all that is familiar. It would have been easy to play the role of the victim and wait to be rescued.

In a similar way, it's easy for us to long for the days of yore, harkening to a time when we all left the doors to our homes unlocked and keys in our cars. It's tempting to look at empty pews in our churches and remember the days when this place was bustling. It is also tempting to dream about a future that is rosy and filled with possibilities.

But Jeremiah says live in the present. Focus on what is here-and-now and make it a good place to be. Invest in the now so that God can create a future that is filled with hope (Jer. 29:11).

Some of you have heard me tell the story of a clergy group I was a part of in the early days of my ministry. We met weekly, ostensibly to study the lectionary texts. But it became clear that our primary purpose was mutual support. Eventually we stopped looking at the texts and focused on each other. We cared for each other and about each other.

To get to that meeting, I had to drive an hour, each direction; but I enjoyed being with my friends and made it a priority to be with them every week. That is, until I moved across state, to a place six hours away. But a decade later I was back, this time I lived in the same town, so it was only ten minutes across town to get there. I began meeting with the group again. Only one person was the same, but it was the same group with the same purpose.

That first year back, the church I was serving made my life miserable. I don't need to go into details, but I am convinced, and this is not an exaggeration, that clergy support group saved my life.

After moving to Kansas some time later, I made it my mission to create support groups for clergy wherever I was serving. I always told that same story and said, "I may not need the group again, but someone might. And if there is no group, we can't help."

I tell you that story today as a reminder that Jeremiah is saying we need to invest in the structures of our neighborhoods so that the neighborhood can serve our needs as well as those of our neighbors. But it cannot happen without an investment of our time and focused energies. We do that because we take seriously the admonition of Jeremiah to promote the well being of our city and the call of Jesus to love our neighbor as ourselves.

And, as I've said before, I believe we can't fully love our neighbors until we know our neighbors. It is what Jesus chose to do when he "moved into the neighborhood" with us, as Gene Peterson says it in *The Message* (Jn. 1:14).

Participating in a neighboring process involves stepping out in faith; it is investing in the neighborhood, in the social fabric of life that makes the places we live better places to live – for us and for our neighbors.

I spoke to one of the members of our church this week who is stepping out in faith in response to these sermons about neighboring. Early on, she realized several people in the neighborhood had moved in recently, and there had been no concerted effort to get to know each other.

So, Ruthie has invited her neighbors to join her for a come and go receptions this afternoon. It felt like taking a huge risk, but now that the plans are made to get together, it feels like an exciting adventure.

Another way to invest in our neighborhoods, to make our community a better place to live, is to address the systems of injustice. Typically that can't be done very effectively without a concerted, group effort.

Fortunately for us, there is a new movement developing right here in Sedgwick County. A coalition of some 40 different faith communities are organizing around social justice issues. We have Team Leaders from our congregation who are helping this fledgling movement get off the ground. We have no idea where it will lead us or our community. It is clearly an example of stepping out in faith.

I am convinced that is part of the plan God has for us, plans for our welfare, to give us a future with hope (Jer. 29:11).

Thanks be to God.

Amen.

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