

Westminster Presbyterian Church + 533 S. Walnut St. + Springfield, IL 62704

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“EXILES ON MAIN STREET”

Luke 17:11-19

Jeremiah 29: 1, 4-7

We are a nation of immigrants. All immigrants are exiles from their home country either by choice or by necessity. It is not easy for immigrant exiles to start over in a new, yet foreign land. They leave behind their families, most possessions, and their homeland. The skills and experience they possess may not always guarantee a similar job in a new country. Rather often, many must take whatever job they can get in starting a new life. Some may not know the language at all; others may know the language, but struggle with how fast people talk plus understanding regional accents and cultural expressions.

All immigrant exiles experience disorientation in an unfamiliar culture. After Riitta and I were married in The Netherlands, we moved back to the U.S. and settled in Santa Barbara, California. One day, Riitta made her first trip to the grocery store to buy a few food items. However, she came back empty-handed. “What happened?” I asked. Riitta said: “I was in the grocery store looking for spaghetti and spaghetti sauce. There were so many varieties and brands in that aisle to choose. I just did not know what to buy, so I left the store and returned home.” It takes time for Exiles on Main Street to feel at home in a foreign country. For exiles who flee or who are taken against their will, their struggle to survive is often accompanied by homesickness. Exiles yearn to go home as soon as they get the opportunity.

Following a failed revolt by King Jehoiakim of Judah against Babylon in 597 B.C.E., King Nebuchadnezzar proceeded to round up the “cream of the crop” of the country. It included the assassinated king’s son, the new King Jehoiakin, the Queen mother, the elders, priests, prophets, leading citizens, and skilled laborers who were taken captive as exiles to Babylon. Four years later, the prophet Jeremiah penned a letter to the exiles that was delivered by a peace delegation sent by King Zedekiah to make peace with King Nebuchadnezzar. Word had gotten back to Jeremiah that the Jewish prophets in Babylon had urged the exiles to rebel against Babylon. They predicted that by their actions, God would open the way for their immediate return home to Judah. In fact, factions of the army along with some of the exiles did revolt against King Nebuchadnezzar who crushed the rebellion by executing all the instigators.

Jeremiah’s letter arrived at a critical time. He urged the exiles not to believe the lies uttered by these prophets. Given the recent uprising, the Jewish exiles were now in danger of being viewed with suspicion as terrorists. Although the exiles had been removed against their will, Jeremiah told them that God sent this elite group of people into exile to Babylon for a purpose. He urged his people to convince King Nebuchadnezzar by their behavior that the political rebellion involving some Jewish exiles did not reflect the character of the majority of exiles.

Does this sound similar to the Muslims living in our country who fear being cast together in the same net with Islamic militants who commit terrorist acts? Jeremiah told his people that they should not expect to return home anytime soon. He assured them that God would bring God’s people back home, but after 70 years, i.e. the next generation. In the meantime, he said that they should become

Exiles on Main Street by settling down in this foreign country and make it their home away from home. He urged them to demonstrate their peaceful intentions by building houses, planting gardens, getting married, raising children, and welcoming grandchildren. Above all else, Jeremiah commanded the exiles to fulfill God's major purpose for them in Babylon (29:7): "*But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.*"

Jeremiah's proclamation to the Jewish exiles long ago remains relevant today. God's word to us, I believe, is a question addressed to Westminster Presbyterian Church: What is our purpose as a church? In our mission, are we seeking the welfare of our city? Are we praying for the welfare of all people in the city of Springfield? People who are faring well in our city feel at home. But there are others who are not faring well. They are the Exiles on Main Street whom we do not know well. Who are they? They are similar to the lepers in Jesus' day in the gospel lesson. Leprosy refers to various skin diseases people had that made them unclean according to Jewish Law because there was no known cure. They lived as exiles, but not on a main street. Rather, they lived an isolated existence outside the city because of fear that they would spread disease to others. Yet, ten lepers approached Jesus at a distance and called to him (17:13) "*Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!*" Jesus told them to show themselves to the priest and on the way their skin diseases were healed. The Exiles on Main Street today are the people who live on the margins of society in our community from whom most of us are isolated: A large number of the exiles are homeless veterans, people released from prison who feel ostracized by society, and people living in poverty. The welfare of our city of Springfield and Sangamon County is eroding from increased poverty over the past ten years. Recent reports indicate the federal poverty level is \$22,050 for a family of four. In Sangamon County, 13.5% of the population of 26,000 people lives below the 2009 poverty income. Single-women households with children in poverty make up a crushing 51% of this number. In Springfield alone, 27,340 children are living in poverty which is 26.5% of the population. This represents about 63% of black children and 11% of white children.

If God's purpose for the Church is to "*seek the welfare of the city,*" then truly we are called to be in mission to Exiles on Main Street who are not faring well, just as Jesus responded to the lepers. The aim is not to gain new members. Remember, only one healed leper, a Samaritan who was treated as an outcast by the Jewish people, returned praising God and to thank Jesus.

To "*seek the welfare of the city*" requires works of charity and social justice advocacy to change the conditions among the poor who are the Exiles on Main Street in Springfield. Mother Theresa learned of a Hindu family who had not eaten for days and took them some rice. The mother divided the rice and took half to a Muslim neighbor. Mother Theresa asked the woman, "How much will all of you have to share? There are ten of you with that bit of rice." The mother replied, "They have not eaten either." This is greatness." (Mother Theresa, *A Gift for God*) It is a city that is a caring community: "*For in its welfare you will find your welfare.*"