

Sermon – Live Courageously  
Scripture: Jeremiah 32:1-3a, 6-15, Luke 16:19-31  
Sunday, September 29, 2019  
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Springfield, Illinois

Our first scripture reading, Jeremiah 32:1-3a, 6-15, is the most detailed business transaction in Scripture. The prophet Jeremiah is asked to purchase a plot of land which is worthless because of the occupation of the Babylonian army. The prophet values the ancient “law of redemption,” which he is fulfilling by buying the land. The law states that if a family member falls into jeopardy, it is the duty of the patriarch to provide for that person. In this act, Jeremiah lives courageously and reflects his hope in the God who gives us a future. Listen to what the Spirit is saying.

*<sup>1</sup>The word that came to Jeremiah from the LORD in the tenth year of King Zedekiah of Judah, which was the eighteenth year of Nebuchadrezzar. <sup>2</sup>At that time the army of the king of Babylon was besieging Jerusalem, and the prophet Jeremiah was confined in the court of the guard that was in the palace of the king of Judah, <sup>3</sup>where King Zedekiah of Judah had confined him. ...<sup>6</sup>Jeremiah said, The word of the LORD came to me: <sup>7</sup>Hanamel son of your uncle Shallum is going to come to you and say, "Buy my field that is at Anathoth, for the right of redemption by purchase is yours." <sup>8</sup>Then my cousin Hanamel came to me in the court of the guard, in accordance with the word of the LORD, and said to me, "Buy my field that is at Anathoth in the land of Benjamin, for the right of possession and redemption is yours; buy it for yourself." Then I knew that this was the word of the LORD. <sup>9</sup>And I bought the field at Anathoth from my cousin Hanamel, and weighed out the money to him, seventeen shekels of silver. <sup>10</sup>I signed the deed, sealed it, got witnesses, and weighed the money on scales. <sup>11</sup>Then I took the sealed deed of purchase, containing the terms and conditions, and the open copy; <sup>12</sup>and I gave the deed of purchase to Baruch son of Neriah son of Mahseiah, in the presence of my cousin Hanamel, in the presence of the witnesses who signed the deed of purchase, and in the presence of all the Judeans who were sitting in the court of the guard. <sup>13</sup>In their presence I charged Baruch, saying, <sup>14</sup>Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: Take these deeds, both this sealed deed of purchase and this open deed, and put them in an earthenware jar, in order that they may last for a long time. <sup>15</sup>For thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: Houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land. Amen.*

Time and time again, throughout history, we have witnessed resilient men and women, who like Jeremiah, do their part in taking care of the least of those among us, being faithful to both ancient Hebrew law and the teachings of Christ. In today’s gospel lesson, Luke 16:19-31, Jesus shares a parable about a man who lost sight of his responsibility to the poor and whose hope was that his five brothers will not make the same mistake he did. This is the word of God

*<sup>19</sup>"There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. <sup>20</sup>And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, <sup>21</sup>who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man's table; even the dogs would come and lick his sores. <sup>22</sup>The poor man died and was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham. The rich man also died and was buried. <sup>23</sup>In Hades, where he was being tormented, he looked up and saw Abraham far away with Lazarus by his side. <sup>24</sup>He called out, 'Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am in agony in these flames.' <sup>25</sup>But Abraham said, 'Child, remember that during your lifetime you received your good things and Lazarus in like manner evil things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in agony. <sup>26</sup>Besides all this, between you and us a great chasm has been fixed,*

*so that those who might want to pass from here to you cannot do so, and no one can cross from there to us.'*<sup>27</sup>He said, 'Then, father, I beg you to send him to my father's house<sup>28</sup>for I have five brothers-that he may warn them, so that they will not also come into this place of torment.'<sup>29</sup>Abraham replied, 'They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them.'<sup>30</sup>He said, 'No, father Abraham; but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.'<sup>31</sup>He said to him, 'If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.'" Amen.

The title of the sermon: "Live Courageously"

*The Text: For thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: Houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land. Jeremiah 32:15*

Let us pray: Holy and Loving God, thank you for the stories of our faith, which give us hope and for those who live courageously. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each of our hearts be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

Most of the significant, amazing things that have happened in the world have been accomplished by people who had the courage to keep trying when other people thought there was no hope. It is hope within people's lives that empowers them to live courageously.

What does it mean to be people of hope? According to Dr. Joretta Marshall, Dean of Pastoral Care at Brite Divinity School, hope is not naïve optimism...thinking everything is possible when it is not. This "Pollyanna perspective" trivializes hope with an unrealistic view of the world and life.

Genuine hope acknowledges a complicated world that is often unfair and sometimes cruel, and at the same time, affirms that we belong to a loving God who is totally for us. This perspective allows us to not only accept the challenges and struggles that are a part of life, but also to receive strength through them...to become resilient because of them.

Hope recognizes the finiteness that is a part of being human and trusts in the Infinite God with whom all things are possible. Time and time again, God's infinite possibilities are realized through the finite lives of ordinary people who are faithful in their responsibilities to family, community and society.

Hope comes from the courageous people in our lives that get us through the next day. Hope comes from the continuity of those who love us, and who teach us how to love. Hope comes from our faith community, from our brothers and sisters in Christ with whom we serve and worship at Westminster Presbyterian Church.

Jeremiah's purchase of property that has no intrinsic value is an act of courage and integrity. The land becomes a field of hope, a down payment on tomorrow for the captive people of Israel. The purchase of this unworkable land is an act of charity toward his nephew, yes, it is doing the right and responsible thing within the Judaic law, yes, but it is even more than this. It is a symbolic act of faith that the future of Israel is held in the palm of God's hand. In this detailed business transaction, an ancient prophet reveals the character of God who invests time and time again in our lives, even when it doesn't make sense, when it is counterintuitive and against the tides in human affairs.

We have a God who forgives, who builds up, who plants fields, who brings good out of evil and life out of death. This is who God is and this is what our hope as God's children is built upon. We can live courageously because our Creator God who formed us on the Potter's Wheel also invests in our Potter's field.

In whatever circumstance we find ourselves today, whether we are facing economic and employment challenges, whether we are facing challenges of health and aging, whether we are anxious about social and political conflict, whether we are dealing with the growing responsibilities of parenthood, the demands of school and friends or grieving the loss of a loved one, a marriage or a way of life, we have a God who is for us, who invests in each one of us, who has specific plans to give us a future and a hope.

Ironically, the field of hope that Jeremiah purchased for seventeen silver shekels almost 600 years before Christ, became a resting place for the sojourner during the time of Christ. Jeremiah's "field of hope" is associated with the Potter's Field outside Jerusalem. Land that according to Matthew, was purchased with the silver Judas returned after his betrayal of Christ. The Potter's Field became a burial place for foreigners. It was a way for Judaism to take care of the sojourner, the immigrant, the stranger within their gates.

Director Frank Capra referenced the "Potter's Field" in his 1946 film "It's a Wonderful Life," starring Jimmy Stewart and Donna Reed. Following the depression and World War II, he wanted this film to be a celebration of the lives and dreams of America's ordinary citizens, who tried their best to do the right thing for themselves and their neighbors.

The family of George Bailey owned the savings and loan association in Bedford Falls. Through honest loans, George helps half the poor folk in town buy homes, their own "field of hope" where they can raise their families. Then, when George's absentminded uncle misplaces some bank funds during the Christmas season, it looks as if Mr. Potter, a greedy man who is at odds with George will win and the homes will be foreclosed. Because of collaboration and generosity, the disaster is averted.

By the end of this classic, George and all of us who have shared his adventure understand that his hope was realized through courage. George is among the many, ordinary "Jeremiahs" over the years who have literally and figuratively invested in "fields of hope" and enriched the lives of God's children.

Yesterday, I officiated at the memorial service honoring the life of a man with whom I served on the Presbyterian Board of Pensions. Mike Neal spent his life overseeing pension and 401K investment programs securing a future and a hope for ordinary, hardworking people. The Adult Education Forum this month tells the story of Julius Rosenwald, a Jewish philanthropist from Springfield who gave away the equivalent of \$1 billion. Mr. Rosenwald invested in the lives of African Americans by building schools across the south during the Jim Crow era.

Today a graduate of one of his schools and member of the Springfield community, Carolyn Blackwell, will share the difference Mr. Rosenwald made in her life. The investments by families of Westminster ranging from \$10 to \$2.9 million in our endowment is making the Steadfast Neighbor Endeavor possible, which includes a Site and Landscape Plan and mission component for our neighborhood. The courageous decision this congregation made 20 years ago to remain in this field and to invest in our church building reflected a hope and confidence in God's plan for our future.

Unlike the rich man in Luke's parable or Mr. Potter, ordinary Jeremiahs like George Bailey, Julius Rosenwald and members of this congregation, understand that the hoarding of wealth is in violation with the law of Moses, which specifically required that the harvest be shared with the poor, the sojourner, the immigrant, and the stranger within their gates.

One of the details in the Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus which is particularly striking is all those years Lazarus sat right outside his gate the rich man never even saw him. There is a reason Lazarus is the only character in the parable given a name. Luke wants us to see the one who has become invisible in our society as a child of God. One can only imagine what would have happened if the rich man had seen Lazarus and invited him to share a meal.

Today we begin the 2020 Stewardship Campaign "Live Courageously," and we invite the gifts of ordinary Westminster Presbyterian who are faithful in the responsibilities to family, community and society. We give because we are people of hope who belong to a loving God who invests in our lives. We give because we believe, when we live courageously, we can make a difference by investing in the lives of God's children. Amen.