

Sermon - "Gratitude and Contentment"

Sunday, October 13, 2019

Scripture: Jeremiah 29:1,4-7, Luke 17:11-19

Blythe Denham Kieffer, D.Min.

Westminster Presbyterian Church

Springfield, Illinois

In our first scripture reading, Jeremiah 29:1, 4-7, we peruse a letter from Jeremiah to the exiled Israelites following their deportation in 597 BCE. Jeremiah's message to them is to build a life for themselves in this foreign land...even pray for the Babylonian's welfare. Rather than resist, they are advised to accept their current circumstance and find contentment in a difficult situation. Hear what the Spirit is saying.

1 These are the words of the letter that the prophet Jeremiah sent from Jerusalem to the remaining elders among the exiles, and to the priests, the prophets, and all the people, whom Nebuchadnezzar had taken into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon. 4 Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: 5 Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. 6 Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. 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. Amen.

The survival of the Israelites during the 70 year Babylonian exile is a testament to the resiliency of the human spirit. The faith of Judaism was not lost during a time of testing, rather through perseverance and prayers, (yes, we heard correctly - prayers for the enemy), their faith was refined and reshaped. On a journey to a strange land, they learned the importance of treating the outsider with respect.

In our second scripture reading, Luke 17:11-19, Jesus is approached by a group of persons who cry out for mercy and receive it. When one of them returns, giving thanks, we learn that the outsider is the one whose faith is characterized by gratitude. This is the word of God.

11 On the way to Jerusalem Jesus was going through the region between Samaria and Galilee. 12 As he entered a village, ten lepers approached him. Keeping their distance, 13 they called out, saying, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!" 14 When he saw them, he said to them, "Go and show yourselves to the priests." And as they went, they were made clean. 15 Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice. 16 He prostrated himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him. And he was a Samaritan. 17 Then Jesus asked, "Were not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they? 18 Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?" 19 Then he said to him, "Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well." Amen.

This is the Word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

The title of the sermon: "Gratitude and Contentment"

The text: 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 29:7

Let us pray: Loving and Gracious God, may we have the faith to accept where we are planted in life and the grace to live with gratitude and contentment. As we reflect together on your holy word, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of each of our hearts be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

This Fall marks the 40th anniversary of the unexpected onset of painful Shingles on my scalp leading to Ramsey Hunt Syndrome which fully paralyzed half of my face for several months and from which my facial nerve would only partially recover. I was beginning my second year at Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, CA and serving as a youth intern for LaCanada Presbyterian Church. This illness forced me to drop out for one semester and return home for rest, recovery, and medical attention.

I commemorated this anniversary by reading my 1979 journal to recall what sustained me during this crisis of health and faith. I was reminded that this was a time of exile and lament for me personally. Decisions within the Reformed Church of America to which I belonged made ordination more difficult for women and there were those who insisted that my defiant pursuit of ordination was disobedient to God's will. This illness was a confirmation for some that God was punishing me for not accepting my role and they did not hesitate to share their insights with me.

What sustained me during this exilic time was the outpouring of love and support from those who believed in my ministry and Paul's letter to the Philippian Christians. Paul, imprisoned for his faith and embattled by the "thorn in the side" writes in Philippians four that he has learned to be content in whatever circumstance he finds himself because of the strength of Christ in his life. *"for I have learned to be content with whatever I have, Paul writes, I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances I have learned... 13 I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.*

This sense of contentment is grounded in a deep gratitude for God's steadfast and reliable presence and Christ's mercy in the midst of exile and illness.

We sometimes forget how much of a faith crisis the exile was for the Hebrew people. They believed the temple contained the Spirit of God, Yahweh lived within the walls which were therefore indestructible. When the temple was destroyed, the very foundation of their faith was in danger. In exile, they learned that the fullness of God can never be contained in a religious institution and they found their faith renewed in new circumstances beyond their control. Through the encouragement of Jeremiah, they learned that God's steadfast love and presence followed them wherever life and circumstances took them.

As the ancient Hebrew affirms in Psalm 139:

*Where can I go from your spirit?
Where can I flee from your presence?
If I ascent to heaven, you are there.*

If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.

*If I take the wings of the morning and settle in the furthest limits of the sea,
even there your hand shall lead me and your right hand shall hold me fast.*

Like Jeremiah, Fuller Seminary Theology Professor, The Reverend Dr. Jack Rogers encouraged me to continue to build my life in the midst of exile 40 years ago. I had the privilege of taking his life-changing course on the authority of scripture during my first year of seminary. His warmth, openness, vast knowledge, and sincere faith made a lasting impression on me. His kindness astonished me during those sad days in exile at home when he wrote a letter, a personal note in which he shared that he missed my smile and offered prayers of support.

Over the years, Dr. Rogers and I stayed in touch. Peter and I had the privilege of welcoming Jack into our home in Clayton and serving him a meal, an honor for which we are grateful. He wrote a letter of recommendation for me when I applied to be the 18th pastor and first female head of staff for Westminster.

Jack was the Moderator of the 213th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) from 2001-2002 during a contentious time in our denomination over an amendment to remove ordination restrictions for persons within same gender relationships. Jack absorbed incredible hostility, once again as an advocate for the exiled pursuing ordination, this time for our gay and lesbian brothers and sisters. His book, Jesus, the Bible, and Homosexuality continues to frame sacred texts, to explode the myths and to heal the church. His book outlines the pattern of the Church's misuse of scripture for the enslavement of Africans, the subjugation of women, and the exclusion of homosexuals. Peter and I look forward to reviewing Dr. Rogers' book in our Adult Education Forum beginning in two weeks.

Jack's legacy also includes writing words of reconciliation and inclusivity in the Brief Statement of Faith following the reunification of the northern and southern branches of our denomination. securing the inclusion in our Book of Confessions the Belhar Confession (written in South Africa in response to apartheid), and receiving the "Excellence in Theological Education Award" for his lifetime achievements. He received this award in 2014 at the same assembly that marked the full inclusion of gays and lesbians in marriage as well as ordination. This was the last time I had the privilege of being in Jack's presence. His 2015 Christmas letter and final correspondence before he died concluded with a personal message: "Blythe, your note has given me great encouragement and filled me with gratitude for the way you are carrying out your gracious ministry. Jack"

Thank God for the Jacks and the Jeremiahs in our lives who encourage us when we find ourselves in times and places of exile beyond our control. During these times, may we continue to build our lives and pray for the welfare of our neighbors. When we cry out for mercy and on our way discover we are healed unexpectedly, may we have the good sense to return, to bow down, and to give thanks.

May Christ give us the strength to believe in ourselves when others doubt us and to find contentment in times of plenty and in times of little. May we never forget the God, whose steadfast love, reliable presence and abundant mercy, is larger than any religious institution and by the sustenance of the Holy Spirit, may we live each day with gratitude and contentment! Amen.