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Jeremiah 29:1, 4-7

MOVING BACK INTO THE NEIGHBORHOOD

Do you remember that old song on Sesame Street – I think that's what it was, or was it Mr. Rogers? Anyway it went like this – “Who are the people in your neighborhood, in your neighborhood, in your neighborhood—ood...who are the people in your neighborhood...the people that you meet each day?” That song would go on to select members of a “typical” neighborhood – the garbage collector, the mail carrier, the police officer or firefighter – and teach kids about their jobs and the function they played in the neighborhood life. It was part of a collection of music that Sesame Street used to capture kids’ attention under the theory that if you can keep kids’ attention, you can teach them something, like the importance of knowing who lives in your neighborhood.

But the larger – some might say subversive – message was that getting to know people is a good thing. That's what makes a neighborhood – people who are not strangers to one another, but whose stories are known, at least a little bit. They become people to whom we at least give the BOD – the benefit of the doubt. People have lost this skill probably because in large part it is no longer asked of us. We live in a compartmentalized culture where you can easily come in contact only with those you work with and live with – and sometimes even those are the same people. So we gradually lose our ability to make conversation, to engage with someone we have never met and then, most tragic of all, we erode our ability to identify with or to have empathy for other people.

Now I grew up the son of a salesman and a family systems therapist, so interpersonal skills were kind of emphasized for me. Still, I believe that we live in a different era. We live in an era where “friend” is a verb, not a noun. And “friending” is nothing more than the click of a button. I had a conversation the other day where I said that I knew someone who knew someone but only as a Facebook friend...and

the response was, well, that doesn't really mean anything, does it? No...no, it doesn't.

Once you involve earbuds, gated neighborhoods, DVR-driven entertainment at our fingertips, schools segregated by economics, and an almost non-existent mass transit system that leaves everyone driving alone in their car everyday you have the ingredients for a individualized and completely self-serving society. Even church does this – the fastest growing churches appeal to the consumer mentality, offering all the bells and whistles that one could possibly need to be entertained on Sunday morning, just like you were Saturday night at the club or the concert or the movies. Can you really feel connection at the mall?

Ron Buford, the man who was the primary force behind the UCC's "God is still speaking" campaign, spoke at our conference annual meeting last weekend and he had some fascinating words for the church. He didn't advise us to be consumer driven, but to listen to the fact that people aren't buying the standard message. But, he said, that doesn't mean they're not interested. If Henry Ford had decided that because people weren't buying Model-Ts anymore that they didn't like cars he would have missed the target by a mile. And one of the ways that I think we must appeal to people is not by making church easier, but by making it harder. Church should be about teaching people, especially now, what it means to live in community. It takes work and dedication and commitment. You serve on boards and you offer your time, talent and substance to the work of church. Church should, through the action of questioning and reflecting, take us more deeply inside ourselves that we might conversely move outside ourselves.

Jeremiah writes to a group in exile. He writes to people at the end of their theological and emotional rope. Having been cast out of Israel by the Babylonians who destroyed the temple, the literal place where God dwelt, and then dragged them back to Babylon as captives, they are dealing with the anxiety of being forever separated from the land of Israel and the God of Israel – castaways in a godless, forsaken place. As depressing as that may sound it is, in fact, the starting point for many of our biblical stories. The Bible is largely the account of people living either in exile or under occupation. It is rife with that sense of feeling lost, incomplete, like a fish out of water. That anxiety fuels much of the theological progress in our scriptures. There's nothing like anxiety to help you reach for God.

In the chapter prior to this, the prophet Hananiah tells the exiled people that Babylon is about to collapse and that the whole nightmare will be over in as little as two years. And apparently the people eat this news up. After all, who can blame folks for hungering for a piece of good news? Two years is a pretty light sentence, let's just hunker down, stay true to our old values and weather the storm. Let's just count the days and prepare for quick deliverance as we conveniently forget our own role in bringing us to our misery.

Jeremiah, the prophet of God, however, throws cold water on that kind of false optimism. He calls the people to a deeper kind of hope, a deeper faith, and takes the much longer view of things. This isn't going to be over in two years, he says, but will take seventy years. Biblical scholar Christine Pilkington writes about these false prophets "whose religion is root-bound in Jerusalem and its temple. Fanatics are always in a hurry." Whether the term "seventy years" is literal or just a way of saying "a long haul," she writes, Jeremiah is telling the people that "God is to be found in all this upheaval, and he is still the same God seeking all that is best, shalom, for his people".

See there's something deeper going on here...something beyond just dealing with some angst about losing a war or some hard suffering as POWs...there is a profound theological shift occurring. Israel believed, as almost every other tribe did then, that God was centralized...located...bound to the land in which they resided. It is how they determined in a pluralistic world whose God was the "best". If you lost the war, your God was weaker than the winner's God. So the foundational source of anxiety to the Israelites in exile was that they were now separated from God (God lived in the temple...the one that was destroyed) and besides that, God was apparently not as strong as Marduk, the Babylonian God. That's why Hananiah's message is a lot easier to swallow than Jeremiah's. We can be out of this mess soon...with little effort and, this is the most important detail, without changing anything.

Listen to the way that we talk about the financial crisis here in this country. It's not the same as exile or oppression by a foreign power, but having a home in foreclosure and not being sure where you will live or how you will pay for even the most basic necessities is a pretty oppressive force. But our language about this is all wrapped up in a sense of the crisis being visited upon us, as if our own greed, our own sense of entitlement, our own warped version of the "American Dream" in 2 easy steps didn't walk us straight down the path of ruin. There is no Babylonian army here...we have exiled ourselves. And yet the rhetoric all focuses on who is to blame, and it ain't us. And now, we begin the same questioning that the Israelites did in Babylon – how long will this go on? Do we have two more years of a recession or seventy?

The radical theological revelation that Jeremiah gives to the exiles in Babylon is not that they will get to go back to the land in which God resides quickly, not that they don't have some serious soul-searching transformation to do, but that God is, in fact, right there with them...not bound by their previous concepts of God. God is still speaking, beyond the confines in which they once believed God to be contained.

New Testament scholar Audrey West once said, "The news doesn't have to be good in order for us to live out the good news." This is perhaps how Jeremiah speaks to us today. We're not being called out of actual exile, but a spiritual and

metaphorical exile in which we think that we must return to something or recover a nostalgic aura in order to feel released. Yet the call is still there. God's call is the same for us that it was for Israel banished to Babylon...live your lives. Do not give them away to a hopeless surrender but live out the good news that hope is stronger than fear and love more powerful than hate.

I have had people tell me in conversations that they are quite worried. Perhaps as much as when we faced the spectre of imminent nuclear destruction people fear for the future...and fear is a terrible way to live. It is not just a metaphorical oppression, the oppression of fear is quite real indeed. But when you hear from college professors that their students talk to them about not getting married or ever having kids, when you see that the stats indicate that people are committing to less and thinking very short term, you begin to wonder. What do we think is just over the horizon and what do these words of Jeremiah mean to us now? Can we hear this message – the one about doing things that take time, building homes, raising crops, forming families – can we hear that call for us today?

See, here's the real extension of the theological insight that Israel is coming to. God is not far away and will someday come swooping in like Superman to save the day. God is right here with you, in everything and everyone and our salvation depends, in no small part, on us. We have to change, not doing the same thing until God comes to fix us. We have to participate in our own transformation. We cannot sit idly by but must find our salvation in our own lives...the way we live, the things we do, the choices we make. Something has to change...which is why I think that in this little sample of his longer letter, Jeremiah (speaking with God's voice) reminds Israel that their task is not only to live their lives, but also to do what must have been unthinkable to them – they must work and pray for their enemy...to make their enemy's well-being their own.

That line just hangs there like an unopened Christmas present. We can do other stuff, have breakfast, look at our other gifts, but that one present just keeps pulling our attention. I'm not sure what we think is in that package, but we sure don't think of it as a gift. Loving your enemies? Praying for them? That call really is swimming against the stream because, after all, like the ancient Jewish people, we are being told to change our attitude, to live in a whole new way, and that's just kind of...I don't know...un-American. Scholar Patrick Miller says, "It is a different mode of existence from the permanent hatred of the enemy that is our instinct and even sometimes the word we hear from the Bible (e.g., Exod. 17:16). Jesus suggested that praying for those who persecute us is a part of the way the kingdom of God is established on earth. For Israel, such praying began in Babylon."

Jeremiah calls Israel as a people, not as a nation. He calls to them "Israel!" when they are in Babylon. And he calls on them to live...not to wait for Superman or to hold out until the promise is delivered, but to make their lives now, where they

are..."Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Marry...have children, let them marry...for in the welfare of where you are now you will find your own welfare." Our welfare will be found where we are and with whom we are living. It is as simple as that. We cannot find our welfare, or any goodness, or the Kingdom of Heaven, in the segregation of one another...or in our passive isolation.

God calls us out of that, despite our sin. Look it's not a popular topic from this pulpit, mostly because of the theological baggage that has been produced by the term, but when I see the increasing news reports of suicides of bullied youth and vicious attacks on gay people, when I hear the accounts of what war does to everyone involved, when I read about the crushing poverty being visited upon people with few or no options, that's the only word I have - sin. We have truly "missed the mark", which is the literal translation of that Greek term. And then I can feel that sense I talked about last week - metaphorically - of our sin having caused God to abandon us. It's just a feeling, not a theology mind you...not a description of how I think God works, but I do feel it and I can understand how the writers of some of our biblical texts must have felt. But then I hear Jeremiah. God is calling to us...doing something new, at least in our experience. And we, like Israel have the chance to realize that God is much larger than we had ever imagined...

What this letter from Jeremiah represents is a major theological shift...God is no longer contained in the temple in Jerusalem, inaccessible to the people in Babylon, but God is, in fact, everywhere. We may not have ever thought of God as living in a building in Jerusalem, but this theological revelation has yet to play itself out. We're still trying to "get it". Because if the idea is that God is everywhere you may pretty soon get to the idea that God is for everyone. And if you get to that, then you have some pretty serious cognitive dissonance about border wars, blood feuds and the bitter practice of xenophobia, homophobia, racism, sexism, etc., etc. Suddenly, love your neighbor gets really, really clear.

This call from Jeremiah needs to be heard again. Settle down. Build neighborhoods and lives together. Work for the good of even your enemies, for that is the only way. You cannot win enough battles, depose enough dictators or impose democracy on enough nations to achieve the kingdom of heaven...for that path is not God's path, and until we change our hearts we have changed nothing. You cannot genuinely pray for someone and hate them also. It just doesn't work. So praying for our enemies is a strategy to change our hearts. Pray for your enemies well-being...how different would Columbus' journey have been if he had a heart like that? How different could our world be if we only moved towards "love your neighbor"? I don't mean a full embrace, just a slight recognition of that command from the teacher we claim to follow.

I see glimpses of this. As LGBT communities share their stories, often a

painful and even humiliating process, I am hearing more and more people shifting. Oh, we're not talking about changing a position on homosexuality, but at least we are talking about people opening their hearts...seeing a neighborhood instead of individual houses grouped together.

Recently Alan Chambers, the President of Exodus International – which promotes "freedom from homosexuality through the power of Jesus Christ," and engages in the cruel aversion therapy designed to "un-gay" people...someone I might have on an enemy list...recently he commented on the recent reports of bullying and the subsequent suicides. "All the recent attention to bullying helped us realize that we need to equip kids to live out biblical tolerance and grace while treating their neighbors as they'd like to be treated, whether they agree with them or not..."

Exodus International typically sponsors an event called the Day of Truth, an annual event that has been pushed by influential conservative Christian groups as a way to counter to the annual Day of Silence, an event promoted by gay rights advocates to highlight threats against lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender students. It typically involves pretty harsh treatment of the LGBT community. Chambers recently announced that Exodus will not be involved this year. He said that Exodus International has not changed its position on homosexuality but has reevaluated how best to communicate its message. That's a really small thing. But it is a step towards our recognition of each other. It is at least a shift towards love your neighbor as yourself, which says nothing about agreeing with your neighbor...it isn't belief, it is practice. And it can transform the world.

So we are called by this "everywhere" God to live. We are called not to lives of passive isolation, but to practice engagement with the world around us, regardless of where and who that involves. We are called to build neighborhoods...to live our lives trying to break free of the fear that keeps us from one another and keeps our future seeming bleak, sometimes doing that well, sometimes poorly, often tepidly. It's odd, but the only way to save that future, to make it something we want to build for instead of hide from, the only way is to not be fearful...to live with hope and trust...as foolish and reckless as that may seem at times. For in doing so we are doing more than planting gardens...we are planting life.

AMEN