

“LOVE GOD AND LOVE NEIGHBOR”

Psalms 66:1-12 Jeremiah 29:1, 4-77 October 13, 2019

In today’s text we find the people of Israel in exile in a foreign land called Babylon. They felt unhappy, discouraged, and restless. So they constantly fantasized about returning to Israel. If only we could go home again, they thought, then they would be happy. If only we could leave Babylon and return to Israel, then life would be good. In that context God sent them some advice through a letter written by the prophet Jeremiah.

God’s message to these restless exiles is clear. God said to the people, “Quit fantasizing about returning to Israel. Instead, make the best of what you have. Put down roots. Build homes. Plant crops. Have children and grandchildren. Enjoy life in Babylon and seek its welfare.” “It’s an interesting advice. The people of Israel want to go somewhere else, but God says to live life fully where you are. In short, God is saying, “Redeem the circumstances you find yourself in.”

God knows that external circumstances such as geographical location play a very small role in our overall contentment. Contentment isn’t about having the perfect job, a perfect spouse, belonging to a perfect church, living in the perfect house or attending a perfect school. Such things don’t exist. They never have, and they never will. In one way or another, we always live in Babylon.

External circumstances are never perfect. Therefore, one of the secrets of a good life is learning to make the best out of the circumstances we have.

Some of you have heard me bemoaning the state of our home in Lakewood. We have had a plumbing company working at our home from the first of July and it still isn’t done! We couldn’t shower in our home or use the toilets or the sinks. The project has gone on and on and it has been such a nightmare! The plumbers would do some work and then have to come back the next time to repair what they had done the previous time and then try to move ahead on what still needed to be done! It has seemed never ending and it has been very upsetting.

Thank goodness for our lovely home here in Pine where we are comfortable and content!! Last night I woke up thinking about some of the issues remaining and had trouble falling asleep. So my solution was to start praying my daily prayer list and I prayed myself to sleep!! It works for me and I’m sure it has worked many times for you!!

We would do well to listen to God’s advice to these restless exiles in Babylon. Perhaps a few of us need to make a change—get a new job, move to a new city. That’s not necessarily a bad thing. But very few of us need those kinds of changes in order to be happy. Most of us need to follow God’s advice and flourish in Babylon. We need to make the best of our job, make the best of our marriage and family, make the best of our church, and make the best of our life, not just tolerating the imperfect but investing ourselves in it. In other words, most of us need to quit fantasizing about living a perfect life somewhere else and start living fully right where we are—in spite of the imperfections. Only then will we overcome our restlessness and find contentment.

You may have seen the classic old movie *City Slickers*. It tells the story of a restless middle-aged man who is considering changing jobs. Near the end of the film his wife says to him, “Honey, if you really want to change jobs, it’s OK with me.” With great insight he replies, “I don’t need a new job. I just need to do my current job better.” Sometimes all that needs to change is our perspective. Disciples make the best of “Babylon.”

Jeremiah had a message sent to community leaders in the midst of captivity of the People of Judah in Babylon. He advises them how to live and of

course, we can pick up some pointers, too, from his advice!

Jeremiah's history as a prophet was long-lived. His prophecy spans from the religious reformation of Josiah to the Babylonian destruction of Jerusalem as well as the years the people were exiled in Babylon. His reflections directly engaged the difficult questions the people were asking in exile: "Has God abandoned us? What does God require of us?"

Let's hear again the advice given to the people:

"Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. 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. 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 29:5-7).

Jeremiah expects that the people will live in Babylon for at least two generations. There they are to build a community in the midst of their captors.

They are to live life in this strange world. And then, we hear shocking, and probably disturbing advice, "seek the welfare of the city." Normally, the people would pray for the welfare of Jerusalem; yet, this prophecy tells them to seek the welfare of their captors' city.

"What?" is all the people could say. Jeremiah's answer to the Egypt (Ps 66:6) covenant daily, over and over. Or simply put, God expects them to live the expectations requested in the daily prayer recited by Jewish believers, the *Shema Yisrael*: Love God and Love neighbor. In fact, for Jeremiah, the people had not been seeking the welfare of their home in Judah. They had not been loving God or neighbor. Instead, they were creating social barriers, oppressing their own people, seeking solace in military power, and ignoring the love God expected of them. For Jeremiah, that is why they got in trouble!! That is why they were defeated, broken, and captive!! God expected them to love and to do all they could to build up the community's vitality, yet they did not.

The God Jeremiah understood, though, was a forgiving God. God restores community. While God had not lost love for them, God expected them to be faithful and fruitful. What they had not been doing in Judah, they were now called to do in Babylon: "Seek the welfare of the city."

Love God and love neighbor are not prayer requests to be taken lightly, to engage when convenient. They are expectations. They are the hope of all of life. In fact, when one lives a life of community building and seeks the welfare of the stranger, one is witnessing to the power of love that God has injected in creation. As the Psalmist proclaims: "Make a joyful noise to God, all the earth" (Psalm 66:1). God acted for the Hebrew people, freeing them from captivity in Egypt (Ps 66:6), but God's vision is all encompassing. God keeps "watch on the nations" (Ps. 66:7).

Yes, there was a surprising answer from Jeremiah to the question of whose welfare we are called to seek. The advice to the exiles is amazing. In last week's texts, we saw the pain and anger of the exiles. They were quite lost. They even prayed for extreme punishment of their captors (Ps 137:9). Yet, the answer to their prayers and pain comes in a shocking way—with advice to settle down, live life, and see the welfare of Babylon.

The Jewish daily *Shema* prayer is so simple, yet so difficult. Its powers are amazing, but we ignore it again and again. Jesus would have prayed it daily. Jesus reminded all who asked about the greatest commandments: "Love God and love neighbor." Honestly, that is the same as the advice of Jeremiah to the captives in Babylon. Healing comes as we work to restore community. Life is enriched as we build community, as we love God and neighbor.

"Shout joyfully to God, all the earth! Sing praises to the glory of God's name!" (Ps 66:1-2). We indeed make God's name "glorious" when our lives and actions witness. Jeremiah is clear: "Seek the welfare of the city." Jesus expected his followers to engage in healing, feeding, forgiving, and rebuilding

community. They were signs of the “realm of God.”

John Denver, who was most popular in the 1960s and early 1970s, was known for his love songs and ballads. He transcended the typical the “boy meets girl, girl meets boy” formula to express the complexity of relationships, both as a blessing and as a source of sadness. The lyrics of Denver’s song “Follow Me” captured the complexity of human engagement as one life seeks to impact another. Prior to performing this song on he Tonight Show in 1974, Denver said he wrote it for his wife Annie, whom he had to leave behind when he was touring at the beginning of his career because he couldn’t afford to take her with him. This song has often been applied to what it means to be a follower of Jesus.

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