

“Grow Where You Are Planted”

The Rev Drew Willard
UCC@The Villages, FL
October 10, 2010

Jeremiah 29:1, 4-14

Luke 17:11-19

[Jeremiah said,]

‘... 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.’ Jer. 29:7

Let us pray... O God,

Teach us to recognize *where we are at* – as individuals and as a church
and help us grow where we are planted. Amen

We had a Come & Consider Class this week

and it was refreshing to hear some of our new members say
they felt they have been led to this church.

This should say to us that there is a vitality to our congregation
calling out to people who are spiritually searching –
just as our congregation itself is searching,
yearning, and becoming.

As I have said, the kind of ministry that is happening here
is the kind I want to be a part of and I thank God for this.

I know what it is like to be in communities that don’t embrace
the challenges of the present or the creativity needed in response.
And it is tough to be in that ‘in-between time’ of yearning & becoming
but also exciting.

John O’Donoghue was a Catholic philosopher and writer who
spoke of the tension within each of us

between ‘being’ who we are and ‘longing’ to belong.
Essentially, as human beings we have this imperative to belong –
we are always in-between, we are always caught between
longing and belonging.

That ‘in-between time’ is a sense of
where you want to be – or feel you should be,
and where you are at.

In the meantime,

‘Life is what happens to you
while you're busy making other plans’.

Willard, p.2

That's a quote from John Lennon and something a friend said to me
when I was in such an 'in-between time'.
And it follows that we should "grow where we're planted."

Such wise sayings are warnings about the dangers of being stuck
between living in the past longing for the good, ol' days
whether or not they were happy or good – just familiar;
Or we can get stuck in that limbo of wishing our time away
for some future goal to finally be accomplished.
But we would be just avoiding our responsibility
to live right now, because 'life is what happens' in the meantime.

Jeremiah sent a letter to those who had been deported to Babylon –
and as usual he didn't sugarcoat his message,
but it was a hopeful one just the same.
He advised them not to expect a swift return to their homeland
and not to listen to those who said otherwise.
Jeremiah warned them that it wouldn't be until 70 years had passed,
that they would be liberated – a lifetime for most, if not all.
In the meantime, they were to "grow where they were planted".

The first deportation of the southern kingdom of Judah
occurred in 597 BCE (Before the Christian Era);
This was after the Babylonians' decisive victory
against the Egyptians 8 years before at Carchemesh
in what is now in the vicinity of southern Turkey.
The Babylonians came back two more times in the next 16 years
to carry off more people from Judah into exile.
Finally, Cyrus the King of Persia conquered Babylon
and freed the people by then who were called the Jews –
just under 70 years since the battle of Carchemesh.
Now, the northern kingdom of Israel had been conquered
and its people deported and dispersed 170 years before.
And the remnant of those left behind in that northern region
had been mixed with war captives to become the Samaritans.

The people of Judah had a strong connection with the Temple,
but ironically, when they were uprooted from Jerusalem
this became a good thing in the long run.
They could only take with them what they could carry –
the songs and stories of their faith.

Willard, p.3

God went with them just the same –
and their understanding of God was transformed
from a tribal guardian who lived in a temple,
to the God of Creation at work in the Universe.

Something revolutionary was accomplished in those 70 years,
but a generation had to pass before that would take root.
And something revolutionary had begun with Jeremiah's letter
to the first exiles, literally challenging them
to "love their enemies".

God's people were to be patient no matter who was in charge
and to be good citizens – to grow where they were planted
and demonstrate goodwill and promote goodwill.
And that would be how the early Christian church
would survive in the Roman Empire, even despite persecution.
That would also be what Mahatma Gandhi urged
in India's struggle for freedom from England –
to transform enemies into friends.

That 'in-between time' can seem beyond
even imagining getting through it –
even beyond our lifespan here.

Yet we are called to be part of a plan that is bigger than our own,
we are involved with that Kingdom that is
beyond our direct influence, yet is somehow already here.
And in your wildest dreams, could you have imagined the Berlin Wall
crumbling down as it did and the Soviet Union along with it –
and that was 20 years ago.

For those exiles who became the Jewish people,
their perception of God that had changed –
for God will always be God,
the same yesterday, today, & forever.

It was their uprooting and replanting that allowed them to grow
into a community that would bear the fruit of a new way of
thinking and believing about God and God's Kingdom.
We may not understand what we're going through at a particular time,
and it seems trite to say you are where you are supposed to be,
but more to the point is to embrace your present situation.

Willard, p.4

Jesus was a little impatient with those Galilean lepers
he had just healed.

They did what they were told and went off to show themselves
to the priest – they just missed the fact they were already healed!

Maybe they were conditioned by their status of rejection
even among their own people to just do what they were told –
stuck in the mental prison that society had made for them
and of their own patterns of thinking.

Only one, a Samaritan – whom Jesus called a ‘foreigner’,
was living in the present moment to come back
to praise God for his healing and to thank Jesus.

There are some situations we feel we may never get out of –
I expect no matter which way things go in November,
there will be someone feeling politically estranged.

I think of kids bullied at school feeling like there is no way out
and I think of people in general who are persecuted
because of who they are.

I think of people faced with some challenge of body, mind, or spirit
and how alone they feel.

And I think of how hard it was at West Point
and the inspiration I took from just seeing the great trees
that lined Thayer Road, defiant of the grey stone walls.

The challenge for God’s people is always to be a good citizen
but that also means working for justice & peace.

The challenge for God’s people
is not to be trapped in longing for either the past or the future,
but recognizing that life happens in between
and we are to grow where we are planted.

The words of Jeremiah still ring true for us all:

‘For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord,
plans for your welfare and not for harm,
to give you a future with hope.’

Jer. 29:11

We just have to trust God and grow where we are planted.

Amen

Jeremiah 29:1.4-14

- 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:
- 5Build houses and live in them;
plant gardens and eat what they produce.
- 6Take 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.
- 7But 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.
- 8For thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel:
Do not let the prophets and the diviners who are among you deceive you,
and do not listen to the dreams that they dream,
- 9for it is a lie that they are prophesying to you in my name;
I did not send them, says the Lord.
- 10 For thus says the Lord:
Only when Babylon's seventy years are completed
will I visit you, and I will fulfil to you my promise
and bring you back to this place.
- 11For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord,
plans for your welfare and not for harm,
to give you a future with hope.
- 12Then when you call upon me and come and pray to me,
I will hear you.
- 13When you search for me, you will find me;
if you seek me with all your heart,
- 14I will let you find me, says the Lord,
and I will restore your fortunes
and gather you from all the nations and all the places
where I have driven you, says the Lord,
and I will bring you back to the place
from which I sent you into exile.'

Luke 17:11-19 (Jesus Cleanses Ten Lepers)

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.'