

October 10, 2010/Season after Pentecost/David L. Edwards

Jeremiah's Letter to the Exiles

Jeremiah 29:1, 4-7

Build houses and live in them, plant gardens and eat what they produce...

Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf...

The lectionary has been taking us through Jeremiah the past few weeks. The story they tell is dramatic, and can give us insight into what it means to live fully and faithfully through the most dislocating experiences of life, remaining open to God's presence and purposes.

Early on, Jeremiah warns of the consequences that will come if the leaders and people continue to live in ways contrary to God's purposes and ignoring their relationship with God. Jeremiah sees a gathering storm, brought on by failed leadership and the faithlessness of the people. The kind of life for which they were brought Israel out of Egypt, led through the desert and into their own land has been abandoned--compassion, justice, mercy, the harmony of life and worship, not only speaking words of faith but living the life of faith.

Kevin Ring shared with me two sermons by Lucretia Mott, a nineteenth century Quaker who was an outspoken advocate for the ending of slavery and for women's rights. In one of her sermons, she speaks of the discrepancy between what Christians say and how they live, a common and recurring problem. Lucretia Mott writes: "Instead of engaging in the exercise of peace, justice and mercy, how many of the professors[of Christ]are arrayed against him in opposition to those great principles even as were his opposers in his day."["Likeness to Christ", Cherry Street Meeting, Philadelphia, 9/30/1849] Not ideas, not doctrines, not words, but practice, life, the embodying of the spirit, the teachings, the truth that lived in Jesus. That's the kind of thing Jeremiah was saying. To not live as God made us to live, in justice, compassion, mercy, love, is to precipitate our own demise.

The consequences come. Jeremiah sees the invasion and conquest by Babylon as God's judgment on Israel. I don't object to this idea as much as in earlier years. Jeremiah wasn't saying that God arbitrarily sent Babylon's armies as a punishment. He doesn't believe in a God "up there" who has fits of rage and pours out suffering on the creation. He is saying that Israel created its own mess and that the consequences can be understood as God's judgment, a huge, painful wake-up call. Jeremiah was trying to help his people face what was happening and find a spiritual framework for understanding it, getting through it, and living toward a different future.

Jerusalem falls. People and their leaders are carried off into exile in Babylon. Jeremiah chooses to stay in Jerusalem with those who are left there. Now there is profound grief, which Jeremiah expresses fully and eloquently. A prophet's role is not one thing; it is many things. At one time, to denounce conditions. At another, to express grief. At one time, to afflict. At another, to comfort. But always to share in the suffering of the leaders and people, not standing apart in self-righteousness. In Lamentations 1, probably not written by Jeremiah but in this time period, we read these words about the fallen city of Jerusalem: "How lonely sits the city that once was full of people! How like a widow she has become, she that was great among the nations!...She weeps bitterly in the night, with tears on her cheeks...." The prophet himself says: "My joy is gone, grief is upon me, my heart is sick. Hark, the cry of my poor people from far and wide in the land..." (8:18, 19, 21) Psalm 137 cries out: "By the rivers of Babylon--there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion...How can we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?" Grief and the expressing of grief is an important part of our lives. It is part of facing painful realities, the losses of our personal and corporate lives as human beings. Grief is also a gateway opening to the next step, the next unfolding of life.

In today's reading, Jeremiah writes a letter to the exiles. He challenges some prophets who are telling people that the exile will be short-lived, and that they should rebel against their captors and hasten their return home. No, says Jeremiah. God has a different plan. This thing will last for seventy years. It is much bigger than we can understand or grasp. Rising up and rebelling will only make things worse and will not change the situation. Life works itself out over long spans of time. We are in it for the long haul, writes Jeremiah, and yet there are important things we must learn and do.

Jeremiah reminds the people that their situation has to do with their relationship with God. This is why

he can say that God sent them into exile. They are in exile due to long-standing failed patterns of living. A quick fix does not get to the root problem. We want to change the situation, relieve our suffering without changing ourselves, without looking deeply at what in us continues to cause suffering. Jeremiah knows that he and his people and their leaders need to look at themselves and at their lives in God. What are they to learn from this situation? How is God present and active in their exile? How can they live now, in this situation, so that there might be a different future?

Then Jeremiah writes: Built houses and live in them. Plant crops and eat the harvests. Marry and have children. And work for the welfare of the city you are in. Your welfare depends on its welfare. Get back to the things that make for life. We can hear an echo of Genesis 1, where God tells the human creatures to be fruitful and multiply, and to care for the earth. The people are to begin again, right there in the midst of their exile, to live as God made them to live.

The message of Jeremiah is that God is at work in the depths of things, beyond our comprehension, and always working toward new life. Yes, there will be a return home from exile, but not in your time. Things must work themselves out in the big scheme of things. But you have a part. And that is to be about the things that have to do with life. Get back to work, to being productive, to family life, and to working for the welfare of the place where you live. I think it is worth noting here that, though the period of grieving is important, there comes a time to leave our grief behind and get back to living. It is not easy to do. Yet Jeremiah calls the people from their grief, so that their grief will not stagnate in self-pity or a victim mentality. He calls the people back into life.

Exile in Babylon was not as grim as we might imagine. The people were allowed to maintain a modest way of life. The word from God now is that the people need to make the most of the situation they are in. Jeremiah calls them to take up life-nurturing activities. We might say that instead of “bloom where you are planted,” the message here is “plant and build where you are exiled.”

When Jeremiah instructs the people to seek the good of the city where they are exiled because their own welfare depends on its welfare, this might like self-centered survival. And maybe it is. Maybe it is also a realistic appraisal of their situation. Exile was no picnic, but if Babylon fell apart, things could get even worse. Yet there may be more to this than self-preservation. The moral idea of seeking the good of Gentiles, even one's oppressors, has been present in scripture all along here and there. It comes to fullest expression in Jesus' teachings to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us. It is overcoming evil with good. It is being God's people regardless of our circumstances.

I find Jeremiah's letter comforting for two reasons. First, he does not candy-coat things or put a pleasant spin on a bad situation. There is nothing harder to bear than someone trying to make us feel better by suggesting things are not as bad as they seem! The exile was real and it was to last beyond the lifetimes of those who would read Jeremiah's letter. The people would need something deep and real to anchor their lives, their hopes. Facing and accepting the reality of our situation is the most empowering thing that can happen. It can open up all the spiritual resources within us.

The second comforting thing about the letter is that it offers a word of real encouragement and hope. The situation IS bad. However, there is something you can do. You can keep living and doing the things that sustain your life and sow the seeds of the future. Build. Plant. Eat. Tend to your families. Pray and work for the welfare of others. Jeremiah's words call us out of grief and self-pity and discouragement, and into life. For our community here, this points to the outward journey of doing the things we feel called by God to do, the things that contribute to life around us, the things that heal, bring justice and mercy, express compassion, and nourish beauty and goodness.

The first church I served out of seminary was located halfway between Lexington and Paris, Kentucky, in the midst of large horse farms. The main cash crop was burley tobacco. Down the road from the church lived an elderly couple, Ethel and Clay Cravens. They had been tenant farmers their whole lives, living in a small and weathered house that they did not own. When I got to know them, they were in their eighties, their bodies showing the wear of a lifetime of hard physical labor. One day when I was visiting them in their small living room, they told me a story from early in their marriage. They had planted four acres of tobacco by hand, which was the only way it could be done. Ethel said she did the work while carrying their infant daughter on her hip. No sooner had they finished than a hard rainstorm washed away all of their work. What did you do? I asked. There was a brief pause, then they said matter-of-factly, Well, we planted it all over again. I have always remembered this. It reminds me of the situations we face in life that plunge us into a kind of exile, when

everything seems dislocated and lost. And it reminds me of how we can respond, experiencing the grief, but then doing what we have to do. Even with broken hearts, we begin to do again the things that make for life.

When we are faced with experiences and events that feel overwhelming and inescapable, on a personal or societal level, these are exile situations. Things can never be the same. We can't go home again, as it were. We grieve for the losses. We can begin to take the longer view; we are in it for the long haul. Then we begin to look for the things that we are called to do, things that build up and nurture life.

All of this points us to the importance of being on an inward journey, of paying attention to our spiritual lives, to our lives within this world as persons of faith. Being aware of our own feelings of doubt or powerlessness. Accepting those times when we, like the exiles in Babylon, just don't feel like singing Zion songs. However, we become aware that we are more than our doubts or despair or discouragement. We do not have to collapse into those feelings. We can hear another word, a call to build, plant, do those things that sow the seeds of goodness and recovery and a different future. The spiritual life is about touching our deeper self, the true self that can hear God's call to faithfulness and faithful living, even in the midst of the most difficult of experiences.