

October 13, 2013 / Season after Pentecost / David L. Edwards

### Some Surprising Words from Jeremiah and Jesus

Jeremiah 29:1,4-7,10-11     *...seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile.*

Luke 17:5-10     *...when you have done all that you were ordered to do, say,  
"We are worthless slaves; we have done only what we ought to have done!"*

Our scriptures are full of surprises, stories, and teachings that open up deeper understanding and often turn our popular understandings on their heads. When we work seriously with scripture, listening carefully, we are always in for a challenging and growth-producing time!

Last week, referring to Psalm 137, I talked about how we can sing God's songs in a foreign land. The exile of Israel in Babylon leads us to reflect on times when we feel in exile. We live in a cultural climate that feels strange, if not offensive, to us who as we follow Jesus, taking his spirit and teachings seriously. Violence. Greed. Power-grabbing. Hate toward those whose difference from us makes us insecure and afraid. Diminishing compassion for those who are poor or otherwise on the margins of society. Popular religion that is captive to the culture of nationalism, militarism, and affluence. If we don't feel as though we are in exile, we probably need to look at that.

We respond with the life of faith to which we commit ourselves. We give ourselves to the spiritual life as we inwardly ground our lives in our relationship with God, whose sacred presence pervades all reality, and as we outwardly express that relationship in actions and ministries of God's love. Our response to exile is what we are about as a community. We are about living an exemplary life. I do not mean exemplary in the sense of being superior or perfect. I mean, we are working with embodying the Gospel, the good news of God's love in Jesus. It is about living the life God created us to live, in a community of love and service and prayer. And it is about living as true human beings who are part of the creation. For that we are blessed richly with these forty acres that remind us and teach us and inspire in us a spirituality that embraces God's good creation and our place in it.

So, the people of Israel and their leaders are exiled in Babylon. Jeremiah has stayed behind, for the time being, in Jerusalem, which is pretty much destroyed. Some prophets are telling people that this thing isn't going to last long, that Babylon's days are numbered, and that they should practice non-cooperation, if not outright resistance. This prompts Jeremiah to write his letter to the exiles. He tells them how they, as people of faith, are to live in exile. Build houses and dwell in them. Start families. Have lots of children. Plant gardens and grow your own food. This is a call to BE where we are, even when it feels like exile, and to continue to live in ways that enhance life. Instead of remaining stuck in grief or anger or upset because of the circumstances that have come upon us, we can find ways of living that make for life, beauty, goodness, joy, compassion. As a faith community, we are called to manifest the kind of life God created all human beings to live. It is a life of inward openness to God, which we call prayer, meditation, quiet inner listening. It is a life of compassion toward others, and engaging in work that serves life. It is a life of overcoming ego-centered ways of living and embracing our larger, God-created self, which embraces others and the creation itself. It is the life of being a community where healing and wholeness are possible, where we can grow in the ways of peace, compassion, joy, and generosity. In language from the 1960s, we are to be a counter-cultural community.

Jeremiah then says something very radical for his time, and for ours. He tells the exiles to pray for and seek the well being, literally the *shalom*, of their captors, those who are causing their suffering. In part, this is self-serving. The stability of Babylon means that the exiles can have a relatively peaceful and safe life. This, however, is a more profound application of seeking the life-giving, life-enhancing way. It is the same spiritual principle that Jesus taught as loving one's enemies and praying for those who persecute you (Matt. 5:43ff). It is easy for us these days to bear ill will toward our political leaders, for instance. Their failures in responsible, compassionate, and just leadership are obvious and extreme. Yet, what might it mean for us to hold them in prayer, to seek their well being, not material or physical as much as spiritual? While, at the same time, we seek positive changes in the directions we need to go as a society, a nation.

Have you followed the story of the 16 year-old Pakistani girl Malala Yousafzai, who was shot in the head in an assassination attempt by the Taliban a year ago? She is dedicated to the education of girls, and all children, and to non-violence. In a speech before the World Bank and in a recent interview with John Stewart, she said that if she had had the opportunity to

Speak to the one who shot her, she would have said: “You can shoot me, but listen to me first. I want education for your sons and daughters. Now I have spoken, so do whatever you want.” Within the exile conditions of ignorance, violence, and extremism, we can sow seeds of education, understanding, and non-violent ways of thinking and living. This is living in exile in ways that sow the seeds for a different future.

Jeremiah sees that God has sent the people into exile. This is not about a God who causes us to suffer or brings harmful things into our lives. Rather, it is the deep conviction that whatever circumstance we are in, God is there with us, and there is a reason, a meaning, for our being there. There is something for us to learn, something that transforms difficulties into experiences of spiritual growth and deepening. In every circumstance we find something to help us grow in love. It has to do with faith, and what we mean by faith.

Here is where Jesus' parable of the mustard seed comes in. Over the years, I have had many conversations with people going through painful experiences. There seem to be two basic responses. One is anger and denial. We don't want to be where we are. I can't believe this is happening to me! What did I do to deserve this? How could God let such things happen? These are all understandable questions that arise from our pain. Yet there is a deeper response I have seen--a profound acceptance of what has happened and an openness to what can be learned and gained in the experience. I remember one older member of a congregation who held herself apart from people, never quite entering into the community of the church, distancing herself and keeping a critical view of others. The day came when she entered the hospital with a severe illness. After a few days there, she changed dramatically. I and others from the church visited her daily. There were gifts of flowers, and she received lovely cards. She shared with me that she had not known how much people could care, and felt deeply moved by the love she was being shown. From that experience, she herself became more open and loving, more alive.

I call this faith. It is not a matter of how much you have, but what kind. Faith is not a matter of beliefs in your head. It is not even a kind of spiritual fortitude. It is an attitude, a disposition, of the heart and mind and spirit. It is an openness to life, to God, to experiencing the reality of God as love. It is being open to possibilities we cannot predict or project, a profound acceptance of what is so that we are open to what can be. This woman had moved from living life according to the way she wanted it to be, to opening to life as it really is. To

me, that is faith. And it only takes a drop the size of a tiny seed. A little goes a long way. It can transplant trees, move mountains, and change our lives.

Finally, Jesus' parable of the servants coming in from their work. Do they expect to be sat down and served a meal? No. The master sits at the table, and the servants continue to serve. We must not get caught in the issue of slavery. In no way are Jesus' teachings about servanthood, or the use of the word slave (*doulos*), meant to justify the practice of slavery. Jesus was drawing from life around him to teach about the ways of true life. Do you thank the servant for doing what was ordered or expected? No. And when all is said and done, the faithful servant says, with deep humility, I was only doing what I was expected to do. I was only doing what was needed.

This parable gets down to our deepest motivations for living and doing. Do we do the things we do in order to gain recognition or appreciation? For Jesus, the motives we have are very important to our quality of living and working. When we are free from motives of gaining something or earning something or being noticed, we experience pure joy. It is the joy of simply living the way we are supposed to live as human beings, the way we are created to live. It is the joy of being liberated from the need to be affirmed or to receive attention. This teaching is kin to the one in the Sermon on the Mount about giving alms (Matt. 6:2-4). When you give, says Jesus, don't let one hand know what the other is doing. Do it without self-consciousness. Do it because it is the right and good thing to do. And in doing so, we will be relieved of so much suffering we bring on ourselves because of our expectations of reward or affirmation or needing people to respond the way we think they should. We live for the sake of living. We serve for the sake of serving. We love for the sake of loving. Nothing else.

These readings today can help us reflect on and grow in these things:

- ✧ Ways of living fruitfully and lovingly even in the exile experiences and circumstances of life.
- ✧ Faith as a trustful, open, and receptive way of living, which is not a matter of how much but of what kind of faith we have.
- ✧ And, the freedom and joy that come as we live more and more without expecting anything in return, but simply for the sake of living in the service of life.