

Shandon Presbyterian Church Sermons

The Latitude and Longitude of Justice

Jeremiah 29:1-7

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One of the best pieces of advice I've ever received, at least in terms of ministry, didn't come from a seminary classroom, or a church sanctuary, or a hospital lobby. It came from a baseball game. A Royals baseball game, shortly after I had moved to Kansas City. The church staff was taking the afternoon out of the office and at the ballpark in the name of staff development and team building. Earlier in the day, when I was getting ready, I had made sure I was wearing a blue t-shirt, since that was the team color, and I grabbed the only baseball hat I could find. It happened to have a Detroit Tigers logo on it, but the Royals weren't playing the Tigers, so I figured it was fine, and in any case, I really needed to keep the sun off my face. Sometime in the middle of the fifth inning, my friend Tom got up to get more food, or another drink, or something. When he came back, he tossed a Royals hat in my lap. "Swap it out," he said. And then he said, "Always root for the hometown team. Always."

That advice is something like the advice Jeremiah offers the people of Jerusalem back in the sixth century BCE. Jerusalem, the holy city, had been overtaken by the Babylonians. After the city was leveled, its people were taken captive and carried back to Babylon, forced to live in exile, far away from home and everything familiar. How were they supposed to carry on? How were they to live as God's faithful people in a foreign land, in an alien culture? Conventional wisdom would have you stay apart. Remain as isolated as possible. Cloister yourselves away from the rest of the city and its inhabitants. Keep to yourselves and practice your rituals and your religion away from the eyes of your captors. Tell the old stories and

maintain the old routines. Resist any attempt to acclimate. Hang on to that old heritage no matter what the cost.

But when Jeremiah sends a letter full of instruction, he says nothing of the sort. His advice is to build houses and live in them. Plant gardens and eat what they produce. Get married and have children. In other words, settle in. Establish yourselves. Integrate yourselves into the larger community. Commit the place you find yourselves. And then he says, "Seek the welfare of the city, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare."

Seek the welfare of the city. One of the most frequent questions I'm asked, when people learn I used to live in New York City, is, "What was it like to move from *there* to *here*?" I'm honestly never quite sure how to answer that. I mean, no one is ever going to confuse the two places. For one thing, there is nowhere in Columbia where you can experience *Come From Away*, *Chicago*, *Wicked*, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *the Lion King*, *the Waitress*, *Dear Evan Hansen*, and *Harry Potter* all within two city blocks. I miss that. At the same time, there is nowhere in Columbia where you can experience the overwhelming onslaught of four dozen aggressively cheerful, partially intoxicated, larger than life, furry, red, Elmo characters all coming at you at the same time. I don't miss that.

New York and Columbia are dramatically different places, both delightful in their own ways. But Jeremiah and his contemporaries never dreamt of anything even close to a city with 8-and-a-half million residents. When Jeremiah says seek the welfare of the city, he

simply means something like this: Seek the welfare of wherever it is you live. Seek the welfare of the community around you.

In other words, always root for the hometown team. Always. My friend was talking about baseball, but he was also talking about more than baseball. Because any ministry that is truly predicated on the gospel message is incarnational at its core. The doctrine of incarnation promises us that while the love of God extends to all people, in all places, at all times, Jesus Christ was born at a particular time, in a particular place, to a particular family, among a particular people. Meaning that God's care and concern for us is both entirely universal and incredibly specific. This wild, theological claim is driven home by the Gospel of Matthew's assertion not only was Jesus born at a particular time, in a particular place, to a particular family, among a particular people, but he was given a particular name — Emmanuel, which means "God with us."

It's right there in scripture, but time and time again, we resist it or forget it or deny it. Almost as soon as the Christian faith was born, it was threatened by a heresy called Docetism. Docetism proclaims that Jesus was divine, but denies that he was really human.

He seemed human, like us, but he was actually only ever God in disguise, concealing his true, divine self. Jesus was never a human being, Docetism claims, only a spiritual being, meaning he was never truly subject to all the limitations and problems of earthly human existence. God was only pretending to be with us in the midst of our sinful, suffering lives. God's purpose was not to help us *in* the world, but to help us escape *from* the world.¹

Strict Docetism may have faded away, but whispers of it still linger. There continues to be within some expressions of our Christian

tradition some suspicion that this world is fallen, corrupt, and sinful, and that the goal of faith is to be delivered from this world in order to be delivered to another world when we die. "Set yourself apart," that tradition tells us: Keep yourself neat and clean and undefiled by the dirt and grime and mess of real human life. As much as you can, forget about your body or anyone else's, pay no attention to what those bodies need; focus only on the soul. Listen to conventional wisdom and cloister yourself off from the most broken parts of the world.

It has always been the temptation of Christian churches and individuals alike in every age to do exactly this. But a genuinely Christian faith does not avoid the problems and responsibilities of living in the world. Theologian Shirley Guthrie reminds us of what we read in scripture: "The communion of saints is not a purely religious community diverged from and uninterested in secular affairs," he writes. "After all, Jesus prays to his father on his disciples' behalf, and says, 'I am not asking you to take them out of the world. As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world.'"² To be faithful, then, to live our lives the way Jesus teaches means we live life in the world. With the world. And if we take incarnation seriously, if we believe that Jesus Christ is God with us in an enormous and universal sort of way, but also in a very particular way, then we are called to be with the world as a whole, yes, but also with the very particular world right around us. To root for the hometown team, always. Seek the welfare of the city and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.

Jeremiah did not call people away from the city. He called them to embrace it. Because Jesus not only lived thoroughly and completely in the world, he apparently loved the world

¹ This explanation of Docetism comes from Shirley Guthrie in *Christian Doctrine*.

² Again, Guthrie in *Christian Doctrine*.

tremendously. He spent much, if not most, of his time with people whose needs were urgent and very much of this world: sick people, poor people, hungry people, outcast people. He treated Roman centurions, Samaritan lepers, Canaanite women and hostile Judeans, the same as he did his own Galilean disciples. He did the same with slaves and rulers, 12 year old girls and powerful men, people who could be useful to him and people who could not. No one was dismissed from his circle of concern, because no one made in God's image could ever be disposable.

Unlike Jeremiah's people, we do not live in a literal exile. But there are plenty of people in our own city, in Columbia, that live in a different kind of exile. In 2019, the most recent year statistics are available, Richland County had the highest number of homeless citizens than any other city in the state: 851. The living wage calculated for South Carolina is \$14.58 an hour. Minimum wage remains at \$7.25. It has not been raised since 2009. Twenty-three percent of Columbia residents live under the poverty line. The national average is 13 percent. In our county, Black drivers are 63 percent more likely to be stopped by police, even though they drive 16 percent less than white drivers. Taking in account less time on the road, black drivers are 95 percent more likely to be stopped. They are 115 percent more likely to be searched after they have stopped. But Black drivers are less likely to be issued a ticket, meaning a significant amount of the time, they are stopped only on the pretext of having done something wrong, not actually doing something wrong.

When Jeremiah challenges his people to seek the welfare of the city, he is inviting them into the larger, public process of the empire, of the established order. That engagement prevented them from withdrawing into their own safe, sectarian existence, and gave them

work to do within the larger community around them.

J. Herbert Nelson, the Stated Clerk of our denomination, says there is a difference between mission and justice. To illustrate his point, he uses the image of people drowning in a rushing river. Mission, he says, pulls people out of the water, while justice addresses whatever system threw them overboard in the first place.³ His imagery works because both mission and justice are essential in it. To pursue one without the other is like trying to make your way upstream in a canoe without a paddle. That's why we partner with Transitions and Family Promise. That's why we serve meals at Washington Street United Methodist. That's why we show up at rallies to prevent gun violence. That's why we've become a covenant congregation with MORE Justice. Because Jeremiah instructs us to seek the welfare of the city.

Jim Wallis, the editor of Sojourners Magazine, tells about a soup kitchen in Washington DC. Every evening, Mary Glover, a volunteer, a 70 year old woman who knows what it is to be poor, prays for the meal before the guests arrive. Mary knows how to pray, Wallis says. "She thanks God for the gift of another day. Then she prays, 'Lord, we know that you'll be coming through the line today, so help us treat you well.'"

That right there is the basic Christian message, the proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ: God is coming through the line. That's why we are called to serve our city, to pray for it and seek its welfare. Because God will meet us in every person who is assisted, encouraged, comforted, or served.

And one last thing. That same Gospel assures us that God comes to each one of us, whoever we are, wherever we are, whatever we are doing — in our serving and our praying, but also in our working, our playing, our parenting,

³ In a sermon at the NEXT Church National Gathering in Minneapolis, Minnesota.

our loving, our laughing, our hoping and dreaming, our suffering and our dying. God is coming through the line. God is in the midst of the city. God comes, in Jesus Christ, to you and me, to guide and uphold, to prod and inspire, to strengthen, comfort, and hold, forever.⁴

Because while we're rooting for the hometown team, God is rooting for us. Always.

⁴ This story and the general direction of the sermon's ending comes from John Buchanan, pastor emeritus at Fourth Presbyterian Church in Chicago, and his sermon "God Comes Through the Line."