

Sermon – Love in Truth and Action
Scripture: Jeremiah 32:1-3a, 6-15, Luke 16:19-31
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Our first scripture, Jeremiah 32:1-3a, 6-15, is the most detailed business transaction recorded in the Scriptures. The prophet Jeremiah is asked by his younger cousin Hanamel to purchase a plot of land just beyond Jerusalem's northeast wall, which has become worthless since the occupation of the Babylonian army. The prophet understands that the land has no monetary value, however, he values the ancient "law of redemption," which he is fulfilling by buying the land. The law states that if a member of a family falls into jeopardy, it is the duty of the patriarch (the senior male member in the family) to provide for that person. In this act of love, Jeremiah buys a field that symbolizes the hope, not only for his cousin, but for all the children of Yahweh in captivity. Hear now God's timeless message in ancient scripture.

The word that came to Jeremiah from the Lord in the tenth year of King Zedekiah of Judah, which was the eighteenth year of Nebuchadnezzar. At that time the army of the king of Babylon was besieging Jerusalem, and the prophet Jeremiah was confined in the court of the guard that was in the palace of the king of Judah, where King Zedekiah of Judah had confined him. Zedekiah had said, "Why do you prophesy and say: Thus says the Lord: I am going to give this city into the hand of the king of Babylon, and he shall take it..."

Jeremiah said, "The word of the Lord came to me: Hanamel son of your uncle Shallum is going to come to you and say, 'Buy my field that is at Anathoth, for the right of redemption by purchase is yours.'" Then my cousin Hanamel came to me in the court of the guard, in accordance with the word of the Lord, and said to me, "Buy my field that is at Anathoth in the land of Benjamin, for the right of possession and redemption is yours; buy it for yourself." Then I knew that this was the word of the Lord. And I bought the field at Anathoth from my cousin Hanamel and weighed out the silver to him, seventeen shekels of silver. I signed the deed, sealed it, got witnesses, and weighed the silver on scales. Then I took the sealed deed of purchase containing the terms and conditions and the open copy, and I gave the deed of purchase to Baruch son of Neriah son of Mahseiah, in the presence of my cousin Hanamel, in the presence of the witnesses who signed the deed of purchase, and in the presence of all the Judeans who were sitting in the court of the guard. In their presence I charged Baruch, saying, "Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: Take these deeds, both this sealed deed of purchase and this open deed, and put them in an earthenware jar, in order that they may last for a long time. For thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: Houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land." Amen.

Time and time again throughout history, we witness men and women, who like Jeremiah, do their part to care for family and neighbors in need, being faithful to both ancient Hebrew law and the teachings of Christ. In today's gospel reading, Luke 16:19-31, Jesus shares a parable about a man who lost sight of his responsibility to the poor and whose hope was that his five brothers do not make the same mistake. Hear now God's Holy word.

"There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man's table; even the dogs would come and lick his sores. The poor man died and was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham. The rich man also died and was buried. In Hades, where he was being tormented, he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham far away with Lazarus by his side. He called out, 'Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, for I am in agony in these flames.' But Abraham said, 'Child,

remember that during your lifetime you received your good things and Lazarus in like manner evil things, but now he is comforted here, and you are in agony. Besides all this, between you and us a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who might want to pass from here to you cannot do so, and no one can cross from there to us.’ He said, ‘Then I beg you, father, to send him to my father’s house—for I have five brothers—that he may warn them, so that they will not also come into this place of torment.’ Abraham replied, ‘They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them.’ He said, ‘No, father Abraham, but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent.’ Abraham said to him, ‘If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.’ Amen.

The title of the sermon: "Love in Truth and Action"

Text: For thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: “Houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land.” Jeremiah 32:15

Let us pray: Generous God, thank you for the many opportunities you give us to build, to plant, and to love in truth and action. As we reflect together on Holy scripture, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of each of our hearts be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

Thirty-four dollars! This is the value of seventeen shekels of silver in today’s currency according to an internet search I did this past May when Session approved Westminster’s purchase of the abandoned property with no intrinsic value at 626 S. Glenwood. The idea was first mentioned during our initial 2020 Steadfast Neighbor Service week while in the heart of the pandemic. Two years later, this dream became a reality as we persisted and circumstances unfolded in timely, sometimes tedious, providential, and serendipitous ways.

As with the details of the business transaction outlined in Jeremiah 32, pieces of the puzzle needed to fit strategically into place to make this purchase possible. We are thrilled to partner with the City of Springfield in the demolition of the dilapidated home and carriage house on this property and with Habitat for Humanity in the construction of a new home next year as we draw the circle wider and work side by side with one another, fellow Presbyterians, neighbors, and the family of seven who are excited to make our Historic Westside Neighborhood their home.

Make no mistake, my friends, the symbolic thirty-four dollars Westminster invested in 626 S. Glenwood to honor the covenant of community within our neighborhood is a tribute to Jeremiah who honored the law of redemption and covenant within his family. Jeremiah understood his responsibility as patriarch and was willing to love in truth and action and to invest with both risk and hope. The property Jeremiah purchases becomes a field of hope, a down payment on tomorrow for the captive people of Israel. The purchase of this unworkable land is an act of charity toward his cousin; yes, it is doing the right and responsible thing within the Judaic law; yes, however, it is even more than this. It is a symbolic act of faith that the future of Israel is held in the palm of God’s hand.

In this detailed business transaction, an ancient prophet reveals the character of God who invests time and time again in our lives, even when it doesn't make sense, when it is counterintuitive, and when it is against the tides in human affairs. We have a God who forgives, who rebuilds, who plants fields, who recovers, who brings good out of evil and life out of death. This is who God is and this is what our hope as God's children is built upon. In a complicated and unfair world, we have a God who is totally for us.

In whatever circumstance we find ourselves today, whether we are encountering challenges of the economic downturn, vicissitudes of health and aging, responsibilities of parenthood, demands of school, or the loss of a loved one, a marriage, or a way of life, we have a God who is for us, who invests in each one of us, who risks on our behalf, and who has specific plans to give us a future and a hope. (pause)

Ironically, the field of hope that Jeremiah purchased for seventeen silver shekels or \$34 in 587 BCE became a cemetery for sojourners during the time of Christ. Jeremiah's "field of hope" became the Potter's Field outside Jerusalem, land that according to Matthew, was purchased again, this time with the silver Judas returned after his betrayal of Christ. The Potter's Field became a burial place for foreigners. It was a way for Judaism to take care of the sojourner and the stranger within their gates.

Frank Capra referenced the "Potter's Field" in his 1946 film "It's a Wonderful Life." Following the depression and World War II, he wanted this film to be a celebration of the dreams and lives of America's ordinary citizens, who tried their best to do the right thing by themselves and their neighbors. rebuilding their lives and investing in "fields of hope" both literally and figuratively. The hero, George Bailey, works at his family's savings and loan association where he finds himself at odds with Mr. Potter, the rich local banker who is driven by greed.

Mr. Potter personifies the rich man in Luke's parable, as he hoards wealth for himself with no regard for others. One of the details in the Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus is that all those years Lazarus sat right outside his gate, the rich man never saw him. The tragic irony is that even when the rich man sees Lazarus, for the first time in the bosom of Abraham, he still sees him only as someone to serve his needs. "Send Lazarus to ease my thirst." Later in the story when the rich man thinks about someone other than himself for the first time and wants to help his brothers, Lazarus again is his errand boy. There is a reason Lazarus is the only character given a name in the parable. Luke wants us to see the one who has become invisible in our society or neighborhood as a child of God.

One can only imagine what would have happened if the rich man had seen Lazarus and invited him in to share a meal. Perhaps he would have had an experience like the two friends on the road to Emmaus and recognized in Lazarus, the Risen Lord.

Our symbolic "Field of Hope" at 626 S. Glenwood is one of the many ways Westminster is investing in our neighbors, some of whom were previously invisible to us. It is one of the ways we "Love in Truth and Action," the theme of our 2023 Stewardship Campaign. Today we invite the time, talent, and treasure of ordinary Presbyterians who are faithful in the responsibilities to family, community, and society. We treasure those who have given regularly through the years, steadfastly walking beside and supporting the ministry of our Risen Lord, those who have recently joined Westminster on our journey, and those who are considering a first-time pledge: one could begin with an annual per capita gift of \$36.25, just a bit more than the seven shekels of silver Jeremiah invested in his field of hope.

We give because we are people of hope, we give because we belong to a loving God who risks and invests in our lives, and we give because together we can make a difference and draw the circle wide. Amen.