

Sermon - "A Spacious Place"

Sunday, October 9, 2022

Scripture: Jeremiah 29:1,4-7, Luke 17:11-19

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In our first scripture reading, Jeremiah 29:1, 4-7, we peruse a letter from Jeremiah to the exiled Israelites following their deportation in 597 BCE. Jeremiah's message to his fellow exiled Judeans is to build a life for themselves in this strange land, to pray for the Babylonian's welfare, to accept their current circumstance, and to make the best of a difficult situation. Hear what the Spirit is saying.

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. Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Take 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. But 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. Amen.

The fact that the people of Judah survived the 70-year Babylonian exile is a testament to the resiliency of the human spirit and had a major impact on the history of the world as we know it today. The faith of Judaism was not lost during this time of defeat and testing, rather through building and planting, through tears, perseverance, and prayers (even for their enemies) their faith was refined and reshaped. On a journey to a strange land, they learned the importance of treating the outsider with respect.

In our gospel reading, Luke 17:11-19, Jesus, who is also on a journey home to Jerusalem, is approached by a group of persons with leprosy who cry out for mercy and receive it. When one of them returns, giving thanks, we learn this disease is so cruel, Jews and Gentiles who have leprosy live together and are equal outsiders. We also learn that those who give thanks are whole. *Whole* is a more accurate translation than *well* in Jesus' affirmation of the Samaritan's faith, which is characterized by joy, reverence, and gratitude. This is the Word of God.

On the way to Jerusalem Jesus was going through the region between Samaria and Galilee. As he entered a village, ten lepers approached him. Keeping their distance, they called out, saying, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!" When he saw them, he said to them, "Go and show yourselves to the priests." And as they went, they were made clean. Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice. He prostrated himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him. And he was a Samaritan. Then Jesus asked, "Were not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they? Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?" Then he said to him, "Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you whole." Amen.

This is the Word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

The title of the sermon: "A Spacious Place" ...

comes from the verses of today's psalm, Psalm 66, which inspired our Call to Worship.

The text: ... we went through fire and through water; yet you have brought us out to a spacious place. Psalm 66:12b

Let us pray: Holy and loving God, when our journeys take us to unfamiliar places, give us the courage and strength to persevere that we, too, may be brought to a spacious place. As we reflect together on your Holy word, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of each of our hearts be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

October, for me, is a month of beginnings and endings. It was October 1, 1982, forty years ago, that my ministry began as a young, single woman with my first call in Belleville, Illinois. My parents helped me move into the townhouse I rented, and my mom sewed the curtains that hung on the windows overlooking the spacious front lawn, lovely trees, and changing leaves. Twelve years later in 1994, again on October first, I began my ministry at Webster Groves Presbyterian Church. By now I was married to Peter and pregnant with our son, Paul, another beginning. Our Clayton home was surrounded by six huge oak trees, each over 100 years old which greeted us each October with autumn's beauty. Many Octobers later as Paul began his first year of college, I was graciously invited by Westminster to serve in this spacious place.

Some of you may remember that my dad died that October shortly after our journey together began. As I approach the first anniversary of my mom's death, who died last October, I have been reminiscing about both of their lives with gratitude and joy. Humor was a big part of our life together. The first sermon I preached in this pulpit a few days before my dad died, I shared a story which illustrated that sense of humor.

During a cruise celebrating their 65th wedding anniversary, our family joined guests in an auditorium for entertainment and my parents were invited to be a part of the Newlywed Game. Each couple was asked: "If you could describe marriage in three words, what would they be." My parents were the final couple to respond, Betty was the first given the microphone. The room became quiet with anticipation. What would this woman of experience have to say? Betty spoke succinctly and clearly, with a confidence that became her "Hills and Valleys!" she said, "Hills and Valleys!" That's it! Nothing more needed to be said. There was an immediate camaraderie and understanding among all gathered.

Then it was my father's turn. What would Bill say? True to form, my father did not disappoint and was delightfully honest, paralleling his wife's response with yet another point of view: "Love and sex!" he said, "Love and sex!"

Following the uproar of laughter, I felt a deep sense of gratitude for the gift of my parents, their "love and sex" which brought me into the world; and for the "hills and valleys" they traveled together, not always gracefully but with honesty, humor, and vulnerability ... a willingness to make the most out of their circumstances.

Isn't this true for all of us? Whether we are ancient Israelites forging a new life in Babylon or whether we are traversing our own hills and valleys in this time and place; we do so not always gracefully, but with honesty, humor, and vulnerability...with faith and hopeful confidence.

In our Scripture reading for today, Jeremiah encourages those who find themselves in a strange land to continue to build their lives and to pray for the welfare of this unfamiliar place which is now their home. I think we sometimes forget how much of a faith crisis the exile was for the Hebrew people.

They believed the temple contained the Spirit of their YHWH God, YHWH lived within the walls which were therefore indestructible. When the temple was destroyed, the very foundation of their faith was in danger. In exile, they learned that the fullness of God can never be contained in a religious institution, (an important truth for us today) and they found their faith renewed in new circumstances beyond their control. Their world opened in this spacious place, this strange land where YHWH brought them, unexpectedly.

A time of captivity...of breaking down, paradoxically, brought new freedom, a new world view and a spacious place. A paradigm shift occurred as they began to recognize YHWH as larger than life, certainly larger than a localized, territorial deity with only their interests in mind. Any sense of entitlement they had in Jerusalem before the exile was no longer a part of who they were. They were grateful for the simple pleasures of life and the gift of every new day.

Jeremiah's invitation to pray for their enemies is part of that paradigm shift, of their new understanding of who God is. Centuries before Jesus spoke the revolutionary words, *love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you*, Jeremiah invited the people of Israel to pray for their Babylonian captors...to recognize the God who loves each of us and all of us.

When we find ourselves in unfamiliar places beyond our control, may we have the faith and resilience to rise to the occasion, to continue to build our lives, to pray for our enemies, and to be open to the mystery and wonder of the surprising, spacious place to which God has brought us.

And when we cry out for mercy and on our way, discover we have been healed, unexpectedly, may we have the good sense to return, to bow down, and to give thanks. The God who has tested us and tried us, time and time again, faithfully brings us to a spacious place and opens our hearts and minds to the wideness of God's mercy, grace, and love for all people,

Then Jesus said to the Samaritan, "Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you whole." Amen.