

Sermon – A Field of Hope

Scripture: Jeremiah 32:1-3a, 6-15, Luke 16:19-31

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Our first lesson, Jeremiah 32:1-3a, 6-15, is the most detailed business transaction recorded in the Scriptures. The prophet Jeremiah is asked by his nephew 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. We are most familiar with this ancient Hebrew practice in the story of Ruth and Boaz. This is another example. In this act, Jeremiah buys a field that symbolizes the hope, not only for his nephew, but for all the children of Yahweh in captivity. This is the Word of God.

Time and time again, throughout history, we have witnessed resilient men and women, who like Jeremiah, do their part in taking care of the least of those among us, being faithful to both ancient Hebrew law and the teachings of Christ. In today's gospel lesson, 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 will not make the same mistake he did. This is the word of God

The title of the sermon: "A Field of Hope"

The 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: Holy and Loving God, thank you for the stories of our faith, which give us hope and for the hope of the faithful. May the words of my mouth and the meditations and thoughts of each of our hearts and minds be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

It's an old tradition of hospitality with roots in Russia, Judaism, Christianity, and many Eastern European cultures. It's a tradition that many of us know from Frank Capra's film "It's a Wonderful Life." When strangers who are new neighbors move in down the street, Mary and George Bailey welcome the Marini's bearing symbolic gifts.

A loaf of bread that their house may never know hunger, a box of salt that life may always have flavor and a bottle of wine that joy and prosperity may reign in their home forever."

Bread, salt and wine...symbolic gifts...gifts of communion and life, gifts of preservation and seasoning...gifts for a future and a hope. In the book of Jeremiah, the people of Israel are offered this kind of hope. *"I know the plans I have for you," says the Lord, "plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future and a hope."*

What does it mean to be people of hope? According to Dr. Joretta Marshall, Dean of Pastoral Care at Brite Divinity School, hope is not naïve optimism...thinking everything is possible when it is not. This "Pollyanna perspective" trivializes hope with an unrealistic view of the world and life.

Biblical hope acknowledges a complicated world that is often unfair and sometimes cruel, and at the same time, affirms that we belong to a loving God who is totally for us. This perspective allows us to not only accept the challenges and struggles that are a part of life, but also to receive strength through them...to become resilient because of them.

Hope recognizes the finiteness that is a part of being human and trusts in the Infinite God with whom all things are possible. Time and time again, God's infinite possibilities are realized through the finite lives of ordinary people who are faithful in their responsibilities to family, community and society.

Hope comes from the people in our lives that get us through the next day. Hope comes from the continuity of those who love us, and who teach us how to love. Hope comes from our faith community, from our brothers and sisters in Christ with whom we serve and worship at Westminster Presbyterian Church.

Jeremiah's purchase of property that has no intrinsic value 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 nephew, yes, it is doing the right and responsible thing within the Judaic law, yes, but 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 against the tides in human affairs.

We have a God who forgives, who builds up, who plants fields, 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 whatever circumstance we find ourselves today, whether we are facing economic and employment challenges, whether we are weary from the struggles of health and aging, whether we are dealing with the growing responsibilities of parenthood, the demands of school and friends or grieving 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 has specific plans to give us a future and a hope.

Ironically, the field of hope that Jeremiah purchased for seventeen silver shekels almost 600 years before Christ, became a resting place for the sojourner during the time of Christ. Jeremiah's "field of hope" is associated with the Potter's Field outside Jerusalem. Land that according to Matthew, was purchased 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, the stranger within their gates who died away from home.

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 lives and dreams of America's ordinary citizens, who tried their best to do the right thing by themselves and their neighbors.

The hero, George Bailey, had dreams of traveling to far-off lands, but his responsibility to the family savings and loan association keeps him in Bedford Falls, where he finds himself at odds with Mr. Potter, the rich local banker who is driven by greed.

Through honest loans, George helps half the poor folk in town buy homes, their own "field of hope" where they can raise their families. Then, when George's absentminded uncle misplaces some bank funds during the Christmas season, it looks as if Mr. Potter's greed will win and the homes will be foreclosed. George loses hope. He despairs, and is standing on a bridge ready to take his own life when a 2nd Class Angel named Clarence steps in and shows

him what life in Bedford Falls would have been like had he taken his life. The field of hope, in the neighborhood of homes he helped create, doesn't exist. Instead it became a cemetery called "Potter's Field," owned by Mr. Potter.

By the end of this classic, George and all of us who have shared his adventure understand that his hope and dream was realized through the kindness and generosity he has shown to others. George is among the many, ordinary "Jeremiahs" over the years who have literally and figuratively invested in "fields of hope" and enriched the lives of God's children.

Unlike the rich man in Luke's parable or Mr. Potter, ordinary Jeremiahs like George Bailey understand that the hoarding of wealth is in violation with the law of Moses, which specifically required that the harvest be shared with the poor, the sojourner and the stranger within their gates.

And they understand the teachings of Christ, which give us specific responsibilities to the poor. *Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food? ...or we saw you a stranger and welcomed you? And the king will answer them, Truly, I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.*

One of the details in the Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus which is particularly striking is that all those years Lazarus sat right outside his gate and the rich man never even saw him. There is a reason Lazarus is the only character in the parable given a name. Luke wants us to see the one who has become invisible in our society as a child of God.

One can only imagine what would have happened if the rich man had seen Lazarus and invited him 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.

How will we share a meal or welcome a stranger? How will we build up and plant? How will we invest in a field of hope?

Today we culminate the 2014 Stewardship Campaign and we dedicate our pledges, the gifts of ordinary Westminster Presbyterians, who like Jeremiah and Mary and George Bailey, are faithful in our responsibilities to family, community and society. We give because we are people of hope who belong to a loving God who invests in our lives and who calls us to invest in the lives of one another and the stranger. We give because we believe by doing so and by the grace and mighty power of God, together we can make a difference in our world. May it be so. May we live into hope. Amen.