

Sermon - "A Time to Build Up"
Sunday, October 13, 2013
Scripture: Jeremiah 29:1,4-7, Luke 17:11-19
Blythe Denham Kieffer, D.Min.
Westminster Presbyterian Church
Springfield, Illinois

Our next three weeks together we will be exploring the prophet Jeremiah and the gospel of Luke as a part our lectionary readings. In our first lesson, found in Jeremiah 29:1, 4-7, we read how the exiles are encouraged by Jeremiah through a letter sent following their deportation in 597 BCE. Jeremiah's message to his fellow exiled Judeans is to build a new life in this strange land, even pray for the Babylonian's welfare, to accept their current circumstance and make the best of a difficult situation. (Read Jeremiah 29:1, 4-7.)

The fact that the people of Judah survived the 70 year Babylonian exile is an incredible 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. The importance of treating the outsider with respect was embedded in their beings out of their own journey to a strange land.

In our gospel lesson, found in Luke 17:11-19, Jesus, whose faith roots are in Judaism, also finds himself on a journey home to Jerusalem. On his way, he 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 equally 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. (Read Luke 17:11-19.)

The title of the sermon: "A Time to Build Up"

The text: Thus says the Lord of hosts: Build houses...plant gardens...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. Jeremiah 29:4a, 5a, 7

Let us pray: Loving and Gracious God, may our faith be characterized by joy, reverence and gratitude. May we have the faith that builds up and makes the best of a difficult situation, that accepts where we are planted in life and that never forgets to give thanks. As we reflect together on your holy word, 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 is difficult to say who is more ready for this new chapter in our life together, to this time to build up as we forge a partnership in ministry: Is it Westminster or is it I! It is an honor to serve as the eighteenth pastor in Westminster's 178 year history and I am grateful to the 30 founding members who laid the cornerstone on May 26, 1835.

In the Story of Westminster, written by Frances Fowler Allen, (a gift of Jeanne and Glen Pitman shortly after my call) I learn that these men and women were New Englander abolitionists, many of whom risked participation in the Underground Railroad, providing refuge to those captive in a strange land, and who embraced a more progressive theology. Willing to "agree to disagree" with

the members of what is now First Presbyterian Church, they stepped out in faith and hopeful confidence.

During the last 50 plus years as Westminster was building on this rich history of social justice and progressive theology, I was born into the Reformed Church of America, in South Holland, a suburb of Chicago, and welcomed into the world as the unexpected third child of my Dutch mother and Italian and English father, Betty and Bill Denham. I was born the year the first woman pastor was ordained in the Northern Presbyterian Church.

In many ways, our journeys are parallel as I traveled from a more conservative perspective and stepped out in faith "agreeing to disagree" and finding my home in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). It was Fourth Presbyterian Church in Chicago that sponsored my ordination thirty years ago. Westminster and Fourth share the same well-known architect, Ralph Adams Cram, who designed and built Westminster a decade before Fourth. As Todd Knox described over dinner on Friday, "Fourth is Westminster on steroids!"

At the time of my ordination, women were beginning to break ground as assistant and associate pastors and working diligently to build the trust of congregations in providing pastoral leadership. I am honored to have been a part of that building from the ground up and I am grateful that Westminster Presbyterian Church, true to who you are, has once again stepped out in faith and hopeful confidence, breaking through that stained glass ceiling by extending a call to me.

Together we will build up this strong and lovely faith community through healthy collaboration, open hearts and minds, and attending to the details of ministry. As we begin our work together, one of the unexpected turns of events in my personal life was having my father hospitalized for congestive heart failure the last week of September and the first week of October. This past Monday he began physical therapy to "build up" his strength so my mom can welcome him home. I'd like to share a story about my parents who are a big part of who I am.

They celebrated their 65th wedding anniversary in December of 2011 by hosting the entire family on a five-day cruise off the coast of Florida. On one of the evenings, we joined 1000 cruise guests in an auditorium for entertainment and my parents were invited to be a part of the Newlywed Game. Once on stage with the other two couples, one of whom was married earlier in the week, I felt a little nervous for my mom and dad. I think it's fair to say they won the hearts of the crowd with their answers to the first question.

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 will this woman of experience have to say? Betty spoke succinctly and clearly, with a confidence that becomes 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 was delightfully honest and his response reflected yet another point of view, equally valid. "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 have 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 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 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 up 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 time to build up. 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. Perhaps the words of Abraham Lincoln during a time of strange lands in our country may have rung true for them...*My concern is not whether God is on our side, my greatest concern is to be on God's side.*

Jeremiah's invitation to pray for their enemies is part of that paradigm shift, of the 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 continue to build our lives, to pray for our enemies and to be open to the mystery and wonder of God's surprising and loving ways.

And when we cry out for mercy and on our way, discover we are healed, unexpectedly, may we have the good sense to return, to bow down and to give thanks.

In this new time to build up the body of Christ of Westminster Presbyterian Church, may we never forget each one of us is a child of God, whose compassion is beyond our comprehension; may we always seek to be on God's side; and may we live each day, with joy, reverence and gratitude. So be it. Amen.