

Sermon - "A Time to Plant"

Scripture - Jeremiah 31:27-34, Luke 18:1-8

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In our first reading from the book of Jeremiah, chapter 31, verses 27-34, the prophet again speaks words of encouragement to the Israelites during their exile in Babylon...in this time to build up and to plant. This is the only Old Testament text that refers to a "new covenant." The new covenant is linked to the covenant at Mount Sinai where Moses presented the Ten Commandments; however what is new about Jeremiah's words is the unconditional nature of the promise, which is rooted in the forgiveness of God. The law is a point of continuity between the old and the new covenant, however it will no longer be an external code. The law will be written on each heart, (from the least to the greatest), it will be dynamic, (reformed and always reforming) to new times and places and it will expect a new accountability.

Our second reading from Luke, chapter 18, verses 1-8 presents a parable unique to this gospel. As a part of Jesus' teaching on prayer, this story reminds us of the importance of persevering and not losing heart in our prayers. More importantly, however, the parable teaches us about who God is. Let us not miss the contrast Luke makes between the character of "the unjust judge" and the character of "the God of mercy and loving kindness." The integrity of the One to whom we pray is at the heart of why we pray at all. This is the Word of God.

The title of the sermon: "A Time to Plant"

*Text: ...so I will watch over them to build and to plant, says the Lord." Jeremiah 31:28b*

Let us pray: Holy and Loving God, we are grateful for the times and seasons of our lives and for your word which you have planted in each of our hearts. As we reflect together on scripture, may the words of my mouth and the meditations and thoughts of each of our hearts and minds be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

*For everything there is a season and a time for every matter under heaven: a time to be born... a time to plant... a time to build up... and a time to die....* So writes the preacher in Ecclesiastes.

As many of you know, my father, Bill Denham, whom I spoke about in my first sermon died in his sleep this past Wednesday morning. Last Sunday I talked about his hospitalization for congestive heart failure and his time in rehabilitation "to build up" his strength so my mother could welcome him home. I was mistaken. He was preparing his heart for a different homecoming and was welcomed home by the Holy and Loving God to whom we belong in life and in death. My father had a big heart, however it could no longer sustain his tall body and young spirit. This is a tremendous loss for me in the midst of so many changes and I am grateful for your prayers during this time.

On Thursday I drove to St. Louis to officiate at a wedding for a dear friend's daughter who was in the first confirmation class Peter and I taught at Webster Groves Presbyterian Church. I also had the privilege of baptizing Amy. The seed of faith planted in her heart so long ago has blossomed into a caring and thoughtful young woman who is healing young lives as a therapist and Director of Training at UMSL's Child Advocacy Center.

It was good for Peter and me to be together in our home for one of the last times before our final transition to Springfield and to be surrounded by the trinity of old oak trees in our yard, who have become friends over the years. One, in particular, is bent over almost touching the ground, as if bowing to the Creator that gave it life in a random planting of an acorn over a hundred years ago.

We have added to the variety of trees in our yard by planting hollies, maples, dogwoods and redbuds, even a few "Kieffers," which means pine tree in German. I can still see in my mind's eye Peter planting the white oak on his first Father's Day to honor the birth of our son Paul.

In our reading from Jeremiah, the people of Israel are encourage to plant the seeds of a new life so they may grow tall with strong, nourishing roots of faith. Jeremiah speaks of a new covenant, a new relationship between YHWH and the people. The old was an external standard to which one much adhere. The new covenant will be 'within,' 'written" on the heart. It will be intrinsic to a relationship one lives into, not a standard one lives up to because God will give a new heart and a new spirit. "I will be their God and they shall be my people.'

Out of a barren, empty time in the life of the captive Israelites, a new branch sprouts. God writes the law upon their hearts and they begin to write the Books of the Torah, which will nourish people's faith for centuries to come. The majority of Biblical scholars believe that the written books of the Torah were a product of the Babylonian exile period.

These words in Jeremiah reflect Jesus' teaching that the kingdom of God is within. We must nourish the seed of faith planted in each of our hearts. In the parable of the widow and the unjust judge, Jesus reminds us that a seemingly powerless person is strengthened from within to persist in seeking justice, and then, by contrasting God and the unjust judge, Jesus highlights the integrity of the One to whom we pray. When we nourish the kingdom of God within, "the mustard seed of faith," our lives become a small reflection of that integrity. We can stand tall in all times and seasons.

I'd like to share a traditional Chinese story which was retold in the children's book, "The Empty Pot" by Charlotte Hunt. It's about a boy named Ping who lived a long time ago in China. Ping loved flowers. Anything he planted burst into bloom as if by magic. Everyone in the kingdom loved flowers as did the Emperor, who was aging and needing to choose a successor to the throne. Who would his successor be? How would the Emperor choose? Because the Emperor loved flowers he decided to let the flowers choose. The next day a proclamation was issued. All the children in the land would be given special flower seeds. Whoever can show their best in a year's time will succeed the Emperor. The news created great excitement in the land.

When Ping received his seed, he was delighted. He was sure he could grow the most beautiful flower. Ping filled a flower pot with rich soil. He planted the seed very carefully. He couldn't wait to see it sprout. Day after day passed, but nothing grew in his pot. Ping was very worried so he put new soil into a bigger pot and transferred the seed into the rich black soil. He waited another two months. Still nothing happened. By and by the whole year passed.

Spring came and all the children put on their best clothes to greet the Emperor. They rushed to the palace with their beautiful flowers, eagerly hoping to be chosen. Ping was ashamed of his empty pot. He thought the other children would laugh at him. His clever friend ran by,

holding a great big plant. 'Ping,' he said, 'You're not really going to the Emperor with an empty pot, are you?' Ping's father overheard this and said, 'You did your best and your best is good enough to present to the emperor!' Holding his empty pot, Ping went to the palace.

The Emperor was looking at the flowers, slowly, one by one. How beautiful the flowers were but the Emperor was frowning and did not say a word. Finally he came to Ping. Ping hung his head in shame, expecting to be punished. The Emperor asked him, 'Why did you bring an empty pot?'

'I planted the seed you gave me and I watered it every day but it would not sprout. I put it in a better pot with richer soil but still it wouldn't grow. I bring an empty pot because this is the best I can do.'

When the Emperor heard these words a smile spread across his face and he put his arm around Ping. 'I have found him the one worthy of being emperor,' he said. 'Where you got your seed,' he said to the rest, 'I do not know for all the seeds I gave out had been cooked. It was impossible for them to grow. I admire Ping's great courage to appear before me with the empty truth and now I reward him with my kingdom.'

What made Ping exceptional to the Emperor was his integrity, his willingness to embrace the empty pot knowing he had given his best. Because the Emperor was more concerned with what was within than outward appearances, in the empty pot he saw the fullness of Ping's heart.

This is also God's perspective. God is more concerned with what is written on our hearts. As the children of God, it really is not about whether we win or lose but how we play the game. We are called to give our best, to accept our limitations, to bow to the circumstances within our lives and to seek justice with persistence.

Jesus invites us to follow our heart, however he wants us to know that if we are faithful to God's call to do our best and to who we are, there will be loss, disappointment and suffering along the way. Rather than try to run from it, Jesus calls us to embrace the empty pots life sometimes offers because this is where the seeds of healing and hope and the kingdom of God are found.

Ping found his integrity in an empty pot. Jesus Christ offers us an empty cross. It is part of the divine wisdom, that if we have the courage to persist and accept our own suffering and emptiness, we will find ourselves...and if we are willing to enter into the emptiness and suffering of our brothers and sisters, we will find our God. This is the paradox at the heart of the Christian faith.

We plant the seeds of faith in our children and youth as they grow up in this congregation and we pray with persistence that God's word will be written on their hearts, however it is in the stages of their own personal faith journey that they learn to accept the empty truth life sometimes offers and embrace the empty cross where the fullness of life and the love of God is found. Amen.