

## Sermon - "Giving Thanks"

Sunday, October 9, 2016

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. Last week we reflected together on how they wept by the waters of Babylon. Jeremiah's message to them is to build a life for themselves in this foreign land...even pray for the Babylonian's welfare. Rather than resist, they are advised to accept their current circumstance, learn from it, and make the best of a difficult situation. Hear what the Spirit is saying.

*1 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. 4 Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: 5 Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. 6 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. 7 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.*

The survival of the Israelites during the 70 year Babylonian exile is a testament to the resiliency of the human spirit. The faith of Judaism was not lost during a time of testing, rather through perseverance and prayers, (yes, we heard correctly - prayers for the enemy), 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 second scripture reading, Luke 17:11-19, Jesus is approached by a group of persons who cry out for mercy and receive it. When one of them returns, giving thanks, we learn that the outsider is the one whose faith is characterized by joy, reverence and gratitude. This is the word of God.

*11 On the way to Jerusalem Jesus was going through the region between Samaria and Galilee. 12 As he entered a village, ten lepers approached him. Keeping their distance, 13 they called out, saying, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!" 14 When he saw them, he said to them, "Go and show yourselves to the priests." And as they went, they were made clean. 15 Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice. 16 He prostrated himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him. And he was a Samaritan. 17 Then Jesus asked, "Were not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they? 18 Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?" 19 Then he said to him, "Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well."*

The title of the sermon: "Giving Thanks"

*The text: Thus says the Lord of hosts: Build houses ...plant gardens...take wives...seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf." Jeremiah 29:4-7*

Let us pray: Loving and Gracious God, may we have the faith that makes the best of a difficult situation, accepts where we are planted in life and 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.

Louie Armstrong, Ella Fitzgerald and Billie Holiday are three of the Kieffers' favorite classical jazz musicians. We resonate with the feeling and expression that are part of this genre and often find our spirits nourished by the lament, by the lady who sings the blues, and by the rich mixture of joy and sorrow that is conveyed within the music.

The timeless song *They Can't Take that Away from Me* brings a powerful message of hope in the midst of loss and separation. This classic was written in 1937 by George and Ira Gershwin and introduced by Fred Astaire in the film *Shall We Dance*. Although written as a love song, its meaning has implications for the role of memory in our lives and for the strength memory offers on our journeys which sometimes take us to strange lands in unknown and unfamiliar places. Even when physically separated, the memories and experience we share with loved ones cannot be taken away and will always be a part of who we are.

*The way you wear your hat, the way you sip your tea, the memory of all that-*  
No, no they can't take that away from me  
*The way you hold your knife, the way we danced till three, the way you changed my life-*  
No, no they can't take that away from me

Today, as we welcome new members into the life of Westminster, men and women, young and old, from different walks of life, ranging from age 6 to 102, we respect the memories, the dance and the dreams that are a part of each of their faith journeys. We receive them with joy, reverence and gratitude and we celebrate the privilege of walking together into the future.

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 the unfamiliar place which is now their home.

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, Yahweh 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. 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. They learned to pray for their enemies.

When we find ourselves in unfamiliar places beyond our control, may we have the hope and resilience to continue to build our lives and find our faith renewed in surprising 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.

“Take Away” is the name of another timeless song written by David Bailey, elder, composer and son of Dr. Kenneth Bailey, Presbyterian pastor, prolific author and respected theologian.

In the summer of 1996 David was diagnosed with a deadly form of brain cancer and given fewer than two years to live. Because it was such an aggressive cancer, it was difficult for David to find a

doctor who offered him any hope or treatment following the removal of the tumor. He made calls around the country. Then he spoke with Dr. Henry Friedman at Duke University and together they journeyed down a road of hope with a combination of traditional and experimental treatments which brought unexpected results and the gift of remission for 14 years.

David's story is told by Dr. Sanjay Gupta, Neurosurgeon and Chief Medical Correspondent for CNN in his book Cheating Death. David's story is in the chapter entitled "What is a Miracle?"

Eager to have his life make a difference at the time of his diagnosis, David gave up his career in the software industry, and, with a great leap of faith, launched a career as a performing songwriter. For the next 12 years he crisscrossed America and Europe singing in coffee houses and churches, for cancer conferences and cancer survivor groups. He invited people to share his journey to a place beyond his control and to a place he never intended to go. He gave us words of hope and faith for our own journeys, reminding us of what can't be taken away.

Take Away

*You can take away all of my possessions  
You can take away fortune and fame  
You can take away all of my ambition -  
You can even take away my name  
You can take away the country where I'm living  
You can take away my house and my land -  
You can take away the thoughts that I am thinking  
You can take away my feet and my hands  
Take away the dreams that I am dreaming:  
Take away the visions that I have caught  
Nothing you can take away can change the truth:  
I'm a child of God.*

*Take away the anger and the hatred;  
Take away the bitterness and fear  
Take away the madness and mystery;  
Take away the sorrow and the tear  
Take away the music and the colors;  
Take away the people I adore  
Take away the work that keeps me busy;  
Take away all of this and more  
No matter when, no matter where;  
No matter what burdens you can bear  
I know what I say is true:  
I'm a child of God - and so are you!*

May we never forget each one of us is a child of God, which can never be taken away and may we live each day, with joy and reverence and gratitude...giving thanks! Amen.