

## Build

A Sermon Preached by Christopher A. Joiner  
First Presbyterian Church, Franklin, Tennessee  
September 25, 2016  
*26<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time – Year C*  
Jeremiah 32:1-3a, 6-15



Last Wednesday we had our first class studying Brene Brown's latest book. As preparation for the book, we watched her popular TED Talk from 2010. In that talk, many of you will remember, she talked about interviewing hundreds of people and collecting from them thousands of pieces of data as preparation for an earlier book. As she pored over the data, she noticed one thing: there were two clearly-identified groups. One group had a really strong sense of worthiness, of "love and belonging." The other group struggled for a sense of worthiness, they "always wondered if they are good enough." The conclusion she drew from the research was that "people who *have* a strong sense of love and belonging *believe* they are worthy of love and belonging."

She spent a long time looking at the group that believed themselves worthy of love and belonging and saw three characteristics that were true of them all – courage, compassion, and connection. And underlying all those things for each of them, the pathway to being courageous, compassionate, and meaningfully connected with others, was the willingness to be vulnerable, the willingness to risk vulnerability and failure for the sake of these things.

One example will suffice here, I think. She said, "These are the kinds of people who say, 'I love you' first, not knowing if the feeling will be returned.

I suppose if I have any issue with Brown, it is her fairly heavy emphasis on the personal achievement of feelings of love and belonging, of worthiness. I'm not so sure, left to my own devices, even with the assistance of the whole self-help section at Barnes and Noble or Amazon, that I have within me the ability to conjure feelings of worthiness. I don't know, maybe it's just me, but I sometimes find myself struggling with a sense that I'm not living up to expectations, that I'm not good enough, that I don't look good enough, that the sermon is never quite done, that my parenting could have been better...I could go on. I decided to get a Doctor of Ministry at my advanced age partly because I wanted to learn, yes, but if I'm being honest, partly as a way of having some external affirmation of my worth.

Maybe I'm the only one, but here's my sense. In the darkness, right before sleep descends, I have this strong sense that worthiness is not achieved, it is discovered; that it is not self-created, but bestowed; not by a degree or another person or an institution, but by the God who created us all and called us good.

Jeremiah sits in a cell because he has preached one too many sermons aimed at the government. His reputation as a doomsday prophet is not without warrant. We even have a word for the kind of lengthy, condemnatory words that so characterized his prophecy – we call it a jeremiad. You preach enough of those, and sooner or later you could end up in trouble, and Jeremiah is indeed in a spot. He sits in a cell while the Babylonian army is not far from the gates of the city. At night, the Israelites could hear the hooves of the horses, the muffled conversations of the Babylonian soldiers carried over the desert wind; the residents of Jerusalem could look out and see, just beneath the flickering stars, another set of lights, the campfires of the enemy.

In 588 B.C.E., the armies of Nebuchadnezzar surrounded the city of Jerusalem. He intended to annihilate it. For the second time in a decade a Judean king had revolted against Babylonian authority. As his brother had done a decade earlier, Zedekiah anticipated that help would soon arrive from Babylon's perennial foe, Egypt, liberating Judah from Babylon once and for all. It was a false hope, as it turned out, and the same army that had forced the submission of Jerusalem in 597 had ringed the city once again.

This time, there was blood in their eyes. They had most likely by the time of our narrative already overcome the outskirts of Jerusalem, including a little spot called Anathoth, from whence Jeremiah hailed.

It is at this less than opportune moment that Jeremiah's destitute cousin Hanamel comes calling in the prison cell. Hanamel is unable to work the land he owns in Anathoth, and he's come to Jeremiah invoking the law of redemption, asking Jeremiah to buy the plot of land from him. Briefly, the law of redemption states that if a thing or a person that belongs to a family should "fall into jeopardy of being lost, it is the duty of the most senior male family member to do what is necessary to claim for the family that person or thing."

It seems obvious what Jeremiah should do, law or no law. This property will bring no benefit to him. He can no more work the land than his cousin, even if he wasn't in prison. And with the Babylonians already overrunning it and threatening to enter Jerusalem, he will not be able to find anyone to buy it from him. The property is worthless.

Imagine sitting in bomb-scarred Damascus in 2016, caught between battling forces, filled with terror, and your brother stopping buy to ask if you want in on a real estate deal.

Or imagine your cousin asking you to buy his home on the outskirts of Baghdad in 2003? Or Berlin in 1945? Or Boston in 1776? Or Jerusalem in 588 B.C.E.? Worthless property all.

But Jeremiah, this doomsayer prophet, has a surprise up his sleeve. Hanamel believes he is seeking redemption from his relative; but Jeremiah senses a larger redemption at work. He sets up a very public and elaborate transaction, a kind of theater. “He gives good money for worthless land.” And what does he intend? To show that this is not just a transaction, but a Word from the Lord.

Who chooses hope when all around is hopelessness? Those who know that present circumstances do not dictate possibility. Jeremiah buys the field as a radical act of generosity and hope. Jeremiah dares believe that what the world sees as worthless is in fact of infinite worth, that God intends to redeem and restore. “Houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land,” becomes a promise for all the world.

Someone will ask you – perhaps they have already – what you, what we, think we are doing, Muslims, Christians, and Jews coming together to work on building one house in Antioch. What good, some may ask, do you think you are doing, slapping a little paint on some walls, in the face of all that is happening? They will ask, “Have you been to Damascus, the Sudan, Jerusalem, the Gaza Strip, the West Bank? Have you heard about the tensions between police and people, and bloodshed in our streets? Have you been paying attention to the political rhetoric, the ways we are shouting at each other? Do you really think a little paint can make a dent in that? Look around. The enemy is at the gate.

We can only answer to any who make those claims. Come to Nashville, come to Franklin, come to Murfreesboro. Come and see what can happen, what has happened, when people refuse to see anyone as anything less than worthy – worthy in the eyes of God, worthy in the eyes of one another – worthy of love and belonging. Come and see what happens when we make ourselves vulnerable. Come see the way courage happens, come see the ways compassion blossoms, come see the connections that build bridges and houses and relationships of peace. Come and see in the paint-stained hands joined together a sign, as real as the field Jeremiah bought, of what God intends.

We can look at the global picture and become overwhelmed and cynical. But change, real and lasting, will only come when we take responsibility for ourselves and for

one another, seek the welfare of the city and all within it, when we see ourselves and one another as worthy of love and belonging. I have a sense that we will not achieve this under our own power, but will discover it deep within, where it has been all along, a gift from God.

That is something, by God's grace, on which we can build...together. Amen.