

In Exile

October 9, 2016 Jeremiah

Rev. Lesley Weir

So where to begin today? It's the first true Sunday of our Stewardship Season; that time when all I do is talk about money from the pulpit. And you may be thinking 'isn't that ALL we've been talking about for the last many weeks?' Because yes, we have been hearing one Lukan parable after the next about the affect affluence and wealth can have on our lives. One week after the next with warnings from Jesus about what accumulation, possessions, mammon can do to our hearts and souls. And in some ways, all those stories and all that preaching leads so perfectly into stewardship.

We tend to think of stewardship as just about money. But that is not really accurate. Stewardship is a way of living. Stewardship reflects our understanding of our place in the cosmos, of our relationship with God. A steward is one who has been given responsibility to care for another's possessions. A steward of an estate is charged with maintaining the health and well being of the estate; but the estate is not theirs, it does not belong to the steward. The same is true of our entire lives. We would be nothing without the creative power of the Divine. We could not exist, we would not be, without God's directing command. What that really means is that we are creatures. God is the creator; we are the created, the creature. And every single thing in our lives is the result of God the creator. Sure, we may say I worked my tail off to earn those masters degrees. I saved and scrimped to buy that house. And those statements are true. But without God's initial creation of us, we would not be who we are, we would not have the gifts and talents that enable us to plow our way through difficult educations or to have a goal and see it through.

And so yes, everything we are, everything we have, belongs to God as creator. BUT, we are the stewards of those creations....stewards of our own lives if you will. What we tend to forget is that we do not own those lives, we are merely taking care of them for the true owner, the creator, God. We tend to get mixed up and think we are the creator, that all we have is ours by our own doing. That kind of stinkin' thinkin' as my friend would say, gets us into all sorts of trouble. That kind of thinking is what leads to competition and comparison. That kind of thinking is what leads to greed.

BUT, if we remember that we are the creature, AND that we are entrusted with that creation, our lives, meaning everything including our wealth, things take on a different hue. When we allow ourselves the truth of our created-ness, then all that we have, all that we are suddenly looks like what it really is....an amazing gift. Given to us by the creator....just because. Because the one who creates gets to make the rules, because the one who creates loves us so much, us the creatures. As well, this viewpoint bring such freedom. Since everything really isn't ours, but is God's we can relax. We are free to merely rejoice in the gifts that we have been given .

And when we take this viewpoint, when we begin to see that everything, and I mean everything, is indeed gift, our hearts begin to overflow with awe as well as gratitude. And in that gratitude, what happens next is the desire to say thank you to the One who has gifted us so abundantly. How would we do that? How would we say thank you to a Divine Love that we cannot see or hear or truly understand? Well, we would give up, surrender, share some of the gifts that have been shared with us. But because we see all that we have as gift, then this surrender and sharing is done with joy....it is gift-giving back. And gifts are given in joy and celebration.

Now, if you've been here before in October, you have heard my ideas about how to best do this. We prayerfully consider all that has been showered upon us and we set our sights on an appropriate amount to give to the church that tries to express some of the joy and gratitude in our hearts. At St. Luke we encourage percentage giving. Aim for a percentage of your income to give to the church. The beauty here is that if your income changes, your percentage stays the same. So if your income goes up, so do the actual dollar amounts. BUT, if your income goes down, then down goes the actual dollar amount.

Once you have settled on percentage giving, then aim every year to grow that percentage. Maybe even just a tad each year....half a percent, or even a quarter percent. The idea is to grow each year...not just your pledge amount but your spiritual health as well. The ultimate aim is the tithe, or 10%. However, for some folks 10% may never be reachable, and for others it should only be the starting point. Remember that Luke also tells us that to those whom much has been given, much is expected! My husband and I are titters and the joy it brings to us is immense. But we are now shooting to move past that 10%. Why? Because we continue to be showered with so many gifts, tangible and intangible and we have learned the joy that comes from giving.

SO....what does all that have to do with our readings today and a sermon titled In Exile? Well, as givers to St. Luke, you entrust US to be the stewards with YOUR gifts. You expect us to use those gifts for the work of the Kingdom through this place and in this time. Our offerings to St. Luke allow us to keep this wonderful facility open, heated, air conditioned, and well lit so that God can be worshipped here, so that the homeless can find a safe haven here, so that the next generations can hear the stories and learn the faith here. As well, your generosity allows us to be a tithing church, meaning on top of all of those things I just listed, we also send 10% or our own income out the doors to needs that are both local and international.

But some of you have noticed that things are changing in the church. Sunday morning doesn't look the same as it did 20 let alone 10 years ago. Strangers don't walk in the door every Sunday looking for a new church. Social events that used to be the glue of congregations are fewer and farther apart, and less well attended. Yes, the church doesn't look like it did before. This can be disheartening, especially if this is pretty much the only place we know as church. We may incorrectly conclude that this is about US that it has something to do with US as St. Luke.

Nothing could be farther from the truth. In fact, what has happened is that everything around us, outside our doors has changed. The culture has undergone seismic shifts never before seen in history. In record years, society has been upended and turned inside out, without time to adjust or take in all the transformation. And the church....well the church has been left in exile. Exiled if you will, within its own surroundings. In exile from the local lives that surround us. We have not been able to keep up with society and so now we look around and shake our heads and frown and ask 'what is going on?'

Being in exile isn't fun. It's confusing and upsetting. It fills us with all sort of questions, questions like 'what should we do?' 'will things be this way forever?' But the good news is that this is not the first time the faithful have been in exile. Our first reading from Jeremiah today comes right smack dab in the middle of an exile. In 597 BCE, Babylon invaded Judah and Jerusalem, dragging into captivity the high and mighty, the powerful and the wealthy of Israel. It was the end

of life as the Jewish people knew it, it was the end of what was left of David's monarchy. It was a dark and dismal time.

Into this darkness speaks Jeremiah. "That this pronouncement came from him is a sign of how bad things really were. He was a small town boy trying to make it big in the big city, but by all measures he was a failure."¹ He was such a failure in fact, that the Babylonians had left him behind. He wasn't even deemed worth dragging off to Babylon. For all intents and purposes, Jeremiah was an outsider of his own people. The priests and religious establishment were over in Babylon. But here he was, called to serve and proclaim amidst the ruins of the faith, amidst the destruction of every part of the religion that he had known. Does that resonate at all with any of you? Do you feel at times that the religion, the church you grew up with has long gone? Do you wonder where the people are that used to fill the pews? Do you long for the good old days of church? Do you wonder how long things will go on like this? This was the same situation Jeremiah found himself in.

Unfortunately the news Jeremiah had for the people was not what any of them hoped for. Basically, the Word of God given through Jeremiah said, fasten your seat belts, folks, we are going to be in this holding pattern for quite a while. In fact, this situation is going to go on long enough that you might as well settle in over there in Babylon. Marry off your children, tell them to have children. Build houses and business. Create community over there, because the past is past and there's no turning back in the near future. Jeremiah speaks to a new reality for the people. And he encourages them to accept their new role in this foreign land while still maintaining the practices of their faith.

Hmmm....and so I wonder. I wonder if this is our situation as well. Exiled, but in our own communities. Foreigners with our neighbors who don't understand or think they need the church. And so I turn to the end of Jeremiah's speech today to find the word of wisdom, the word of hope for us. And this is what I find: 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.

In its welfare you will find your welfare. In our atheistic agnostic culture, we will find our welfare? That is really something to think about. But I read that right there in Jeremiah. And I know that Jeremiah's people had generations in exile. But I also know that eventually they did go home, that eventually they did find their way back. But life was forever changed. The ways the people practiced their faith were forever changed. In captivity, the people no longer had the temple. Without the temple they could no longer offer their sacrifices, a keystone of their faith practices. And so they had to restructure the whole thing. Out of this destruction came new practices; the reading and study of the sacred scriptures, the beginning of the rabbinic tradition, the gathered writings and reflections of the Talmud.

The point is that while in exile, the ways to practice Judaism had to change. The situation demanded such. But the change in practices didn't change the focus or the relationship. These were still God's people. God was still their God. They remained the chosen people. Life was hard, it was devoid of the places and traditions they had grown up with, that they loved. But life was also still a gift, a gift to be lived in community with God even while in exile.

¹ Wil Gafney, commentary on Working Preacher, workingpreacher.org/preachthisweek/, accessed 20161007

This is our story, folks. This is where we are. We may not have been dragged off physically to live in a foreign land. But we live in foreign surroundings none the less. Our old practices and traditions are no longer able to support the needs of those around us. But within that acknowledgment is the understanding that we are people in the line of Jeremiah, that we are Easter people. We know that new life comes out of death. We know that even if we must change our practices, our relationship with God remains the constant. As well, we know that we have been given immeasurable gifts here at St. Luke. We are a congregation of radical hospitality. We are a community of mercy that cares deeply about each other, especially in times of need and distress. We are the wealthy who turn our eyes and hearts to the homeless and hungry who go unnoticed in so much of our county. Our generosity reaches into the inner city of Chicago and across the oceans to Guatemala and the southern hemisphere. Our hope is shared with an unknown family waiting to find refuge in the United States this winter. Indeed, we have been greatly gifted here at St. Luke.

And so what does all this have to do with Stewardship? Well, there has never been a greater need for our faith community to be a presence in Downers Grove. Who are the foreigners who surround us and what are their needs? How do we meet our neighbors and welcome them into God's grace and care? We may be in exile, but our welfare, our future, rests in the welfare of those who surround us. There has never been a better time to think about the ways you support St. Luke's many ministries and missions. There has never been a better time to say 'thank you, God...what else can we do in your name?' Amen.