

An Emerging Vision: What Matters?

From the series: The Heart of the Matter

Text: Psalm 78:6-7; Jeremiah 29:11; James 4:14

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

Psalm 78, from which I just read, continues as a recitation of the history of Israel because the Psalmist did as he instructed people to do, that is, to tell the stories, to tell the stories in order that the children might know them, even the generation yet unborn, and come into the same experience of the grace of God.

I'm going to tell you a story this morning. It is a story that some of you have lived and others of you know, and for some of you, it may be new. But it is not so bad when you are trying to figure out the future to look at the way you have come. The story centers around that wonderful text in Jeremiah 29, the 11th verse. Israel is in exile. There are those voices that are saying, "Don't settle down. Get ready to get out of here. You can never be blessed here." And then the voice of Jeremiah is heard in a letter, and Jeremiah says, "Settle down. Seek the welfare of this place." And then this wonderful promise, "I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans of good and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope."

It is a wonderful image - to give you a future and a hope. There are times when we all need images to sustain us, to inspire us, and to keep us going, and the 11th verse of Jeremiah 29 was that for me in a very personal way at a time that was very dark in my own life and I had to cling to that promise, a future and a hope.

How would you have written to your parents that your ministry was probably over if on the day of your ordination you got a letter from your father who said that while you were in the womb you were prayed over and dedicated to God? And having been thus warped from the womb and entering obediently into the paths of service, now to find myself in a situation where, through the breakup of my family, I figured that there would be no more ministry for me, because we are talking about the dark ages back in 1970, and I had to sit down in Europe and write a letter to Mom and Dad and tell them the bad news. But, I appended to that letter of doom Jeremiah 29:11, a future and a hope. And, by the grace of God, the congregation here assembled at that time extended to me an invitation to return here and to become their pastor once again. I never really thought about it so much as I have just reflecting on all of this for this message. I have been

accused of being a "Johnny-one-note" with the theology of grace, and I'm guilty. That remark resembles me. But, there was grace here before I came back. There was a people here full of grace who made a very bold move in extending to me the opportunity to be their pastor when the next item on my agenda was a divorce, having three little children to care for and one chapter of my dissertation written. Now, that's a risky business and this congregation was full of grace, and it was that grace and that experience of grace that made Jeremiah 29 come true in our lives together.

The 70s were heady days. The experience that was mine became a paradigm for the experience of many people who were broken and bleeding and bruised and hurting, who had been excluded in one way or another from the Church. We became a model of gracious acceptance, and that theology of grace that was resident in the people before I came became the hallmark of this community, and the growth went off the charts, so that we had to go from one service to two and from two services to three, and then eventually we had to build this sanctuary, for when I came back, we were in the original little church that is now the Parlour. It was June of 1978 when we held a service starting there and we processed out of that sanctuary around the sidewalk and into this sanctuary. The longest running television program on the networks at that time was CBS' "Look Up and Live," which was on every Sunday morning. The CBS cameras were here to catch us leaving there and coming in here, and they broadcast our first service in this sanctuary.

Well, those were pretty heady days. The growth was exciting and the grace was resplendent. About that time I began to worry about that growth. I don't know if I ever articulated this publicly or not, but I began to worry about becoming an entrepreneur of religion. We were becoming a mega-church before the era of the mega-church, and I could see how easy it would be to get caught up in that and to be determined and shaped and formed by that exploding growth rather than shaping that growth in a way that was consistent with my understanding of the word of God and the Christian tradition. I actually spoke that to some of the leaders and they were very, very understanding of what I was talking about. So, in 1980, we came out with our second Identity Statement. Perhaps you will remember that last week I held up this little brochure, "Dreaming the Future." There still are a few of them in the boxes around the church. In this brochure, there are Identity Statements from 1971, full of grace, 1980, and 1993, and the one from 1980 is very interesting, in light of what I have just been saying, because it was in 1980 that we began to ask the question, not how do we continue to grow and succeed, but after all, what is God calling us as a church to be? In that statement which is a rather long statement, these points occur,

We would be a place for the intersection of the word of God and the world, of the Christian tradition and contemporary culture. We would be a place where the Christian tradition is translated into the idiom of contemporary culture, giving it a voice to speak meaningfully in the pluralistic society of

our day. We would be a place where controversial issues, ethical, social, political, find a forum for discussion, enabling persons to understand the issues and to live out a faithful response as a people of God.

You can begin to get a sense of what was going on at that time, a growing awareness of the world about us and a growing intention to address that world from the perspective of the Christian tradition. And then there is this significant statement –

We determine to be true to that which we believe God is calling us to be, whether that means harmony with the religio-cultural flow or not. We will adjust our program and mission with the dynamic movement of history, not in order necessarily to be successful in institutional terms, but in order to be faithful to what God is calling us to be, and to be effective in mediating the grace of God to the world. We will be what we determine God is calling us to be, not in order to be successful, but in order to be true.

It was a watershed moment for us as the decade of the 80s dawned and we had all of this exciting growth behind us. It was a watershed moment in which we said success is not an end in itself. We determine to have integrity. We determine to be true to what we feel God is calling us to be.

It was during the decade of the 80s after this statement was published here that I was invited eventually to be Professor of Preaching at the Seminary. It was in 1985 that a Reformed journal was founded for the purpose of stimulating theological discussion in the Church, and I was invited to be on the Board of Editors of that journal, and I began to write articles and those articles reflected the things that we had been talking about here, the things I'd been preaching about, the things I'd been teaching on Wednesday nights. It was like a harvesting of all of that. It was a bringing together and coming to clarity of all of the ferment that had been a part of the scene here now for some 14-15 years, and those articles brought me to clarity and bringing me to clarity, that clarity began more and more to be expressed in the pulpit here.

It was in 1988 that I wrote the now famous article on "The Habit of God's Heart" in which I suggested that maybe the extent of God's grace was as broad as the human family. Even though that article seriously called into question Hell, all Hell broke loose, and the Church decided that no Professor of Preaching with that kind of wobbly theology ought to be nurturing new preachers, and so I came back here. But, I came back here saying we must be not *less* radical, but *more* radical, because I had begun to sense that that is where the rub was. Martin Luther in a marvelous statement says you can confess Christ all over the board, but if you don't confess Christ at the point where the issue is burning, you betray Christ, and so we began to deal with the issues more forthrightly than ever before and in 1993, we published what is now on the back of your liturgy, printed on everything we do, and that was another movement forward for us.

That text, Jeremiah 29:11, was my inaugural text March 14, 1971, for it had been not only my own existential anchor, but it was that vision with which we began and now, in 1993, we wrote the statement that is still our statement, and we moved to be specific about the grace of God in terms of those who were embraced. We added one category, that of sexual orientation, because that is where the fire was raging, and we wanted to be clear and explicit that there was nothing in the sexual orientation of a person that had anything to do with exclusion from the grace of God.

There was one other point in this last statement - we had come to see that if the grace of God is as broad as all of that, then there must be revelatory and salvific significance in the religious traditions of others, and so we said it explicitly that the light of God is found in other traditions. To say it another way, we denied the exclusivity of salvation through Jesus Christ alone. In so doing, we have found ourselves standing alone, an independent congregation.

As I look back over that unfolding, that developing story, I see how an energizing vision becomes the emerging vision of a people on the way. To me, it is an exciting business. It fascinates me how important it is to ask "Who are we?" To have a sense of identity and a sense of purpose, to live with awareness and to live with intentionality, for a people who does so will continue on a journey and will get to a point where we are today where we have the opportunity to re-imagine what the Church is all about.

I have been using that language for some time, but this is the time now to do it, to think entirely new thoughts about the very structure and the nature of the Church, for the Church is an ancient and venerable institution and its structures and its ways taken for granted, never even thought about anymore, and we are at a point at which, well, to use my old phrase, we can throw all the pieces up in the air and let them come down once again. For, maybe the congregation gathered in worship today and in the future is just one facet of this Center of Religion and Life. Maybe we will look back in ten years and we will say there was a watershed in the year 2000 when we chose an academic person to come in and run this church rather than another ordained clergy person. Maybe it will indicate that our move is to a Center where there is awareness and intentionality through reflection and serious, hard wrestling with the truth, which frees up worship which is celebrative, in which the passages of life can be celebrated, the passages of birth and confirmation and marriage and death - a Center wrestling with reality, reflecting on the truth which filters down into a marvelous Worship Center where our grandchildren are told of the love of Jesus in a way that will enable them to wonder and to grow and to come into their own experience of reality without all that painful dismantling that so many of us have to go through, a Center academically tilted, perhaps, because if you are not aware, if you don't understand, if you don't know, then how can you worship right? How can you nurture? And that correct thinking must ultimately lead to correct action and compassion.

If you walk in these halls some day during the week, you may bump into some elderly person obviously needing help and, being helped with tenderness, being accorded respect and dignity, for our Adult Day Care ministry is underway. And so, whether it is a newborn upon whom we place the waters of baptism, or whether it is the last rites for one who is moving from life through death to life eternal, whether it is a child in the Worship Center hearing the stories so that they may ultimately put their hope in God, or whether we're caring for one another, the marginalized, the most vulnerable members of society, as a matter of fact, there will be a community aware, intentional, ever re-inventing itself, re-imagining itself, becoming what it must become because of what it sees and understands.

James says, "What of your life? What is your life?" This will be a place where you can come and, in all of its various facets, be faced with that question, "What is your life?" God knows when you get to this advanced point, you recognize that James is right. It is a brief moment; it is a vapor, but the thing that is important is the nurturing of the young so that the future generations will come with us, not to imitate our forms and structures, but having been grounded in the truth, set free to find their own way.

I was in the airport in Rome a couple of weeks ago and going back and forth from pilgrims to gates to passport control and walking through that vast hall, and there was a moment in which it was like all the action froze, just for a moment, and I saw people everywhere dashing for a gate, furiously fumbling for their cell phones, lugging their luggage, and I looked on their faces and I wanted to say, when the action stopped for me just in that moment, "Do you all know who you are? Do you know where you are going? What is your life?" What really matters is awareness, intentionality, issuing in worship irrepressible and nurture that sets free and grounds and gives wings, and compassion that never quits