

Sermon
Community United Methodist Church of Coeur d'Alene
Sunday, October 1, 2023
10am

Texts: Jeremiah 29:4-7 & 1 Peter 3:8-13

Theme: Love Where You Live: Be Zealous to Do Good

[prayer]

Did any of you do something to observe National Good Neighbor Day last week? My sister and I went out to dinner at a family-owned restaurant in our neighborhood, and we also met the neighbors who live below us when we thought we saw a bobcat in our backyard! Part of the Good Neighbor Pledge¹ is staying aware of what is happening in our neighborhoods and promoting the well-being of our neighbors. There are a lot of small children and pets in our apartment community, so even though we weren't certain it was a bobcat, we called the sighting into the courtesy officer and management sent out a message encouraging people to be aware. It felt good to do our part to help keep our neighbors safe.

This week in our "Love Where You Live" worship series we are focusing on just that: Doing good. In our Old Testament lesson, we hear this command from God:

"Promote the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because your future depends on its welfare" (Jer 29:7).

As we were reminded last week, God has called each of us to a particular time and place to share the Good News of Jesus with the people in our immediate context. This is the work of evangelism! Evangelism is nothing fancy or complicated. It is simply loving the people and place around us in the same way Christ loves us. Whether in word or deed, love is how we share the glad tidings of the kingdom of God.

This work of love seems simple, yet it felt anything but to the prophet Jeremiah's audience. The book of Jeremiah is a collection of letters sent between Jeremiah

¹ <https://nationalgoodneighborday.com/>

and a group of Jews who were deported from Judah to Babylon in 597 BCE. A decade earlier, the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar II laid siege to Jerusalem and forced the Judean king Jehoiakim to pay tribute. When Jehoiakim refused, Nebuchadnezzar killed him and then took his son, his entire court, and a portion of the population of Jerusalem captive to Babylon. A few years later Nebuchadnezzar returned to Jerusalem, destroyed the city, sacked its temple, and deported even more of the Jewish population.

In Psalm 137 we hear a record of the deportees' lament:

*Alongside Babylon's streams,
there we sat down,
crying because we remembered Zion.*
2 *We hung our lyres up
in the trees there*
3 *because that's where our captors asked us to sing;
our tormentors requested songs of joy:
"Sing us a song about Zion!" they said.*
4 *But how could we possibly sing
the Lord's song on foreign soil? (vv. 1-4, CEB)*

For years God had warned His people through His prophets that a great calamity would befall them if they did not stop worshiping false gods and oppressing the poor. The Babylonian captivity was this calamity. God appointed Jeremiah as His prophet in Jerusalem to address both the people left behind in the ruined city and those who were sent into exile. God commanded Jeremiah to make a yoke and then wear it around his neck. The yoke symbolized the oppression of Babylon. Jeremiah told the people that if they humbly submitted to this yoke as God's just punishment of their sins, God would save them from utter destruction (Jer 27).

Jeremiah prophesied that it would be seventy long years before the exile from the Promised Land would end. The oldest deportees would die in captivity. So would their children and grandchildren. For a people whose identity was deeply connected to Jerusalem, this punishment felt impossible to bear. And so, when a false prophet named Hananiah predicted that the exile would end in just two years, not seventy, people latched onto his words. Even though Hananiah's

prophecy was false, the people were desperate to believe anything that would spare them the intense grief of never seeing their homeland again (Jer 28).

Jeremiah did the opposite of Hananiah. Instead of giving the exiles false hope, he encouraged them to accept their new reality. “Thus says the LORD...Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters...multiply there and do not decrease” (vv. 5-6 NRSVUE).

Jeremiah encouraged the captives to make a new home for themselves in the land of their enemy. This was a counterintuitive message for a people who had been taught to keep themselves separate from other nations. But Jeremiah emphasized that it was *God* who sent the people into exile. And God is a god of life. God had not forsaken the captives; He could choose to redeem this period of exile for the blessing of His people. If the exiles accepted the reality of their situation, settled down, and were faithful to the LORD, God would fulfill His promise of blessing, even while they remained in a foreign land.

Jeremiah then takes his message a step further. He encourages the exiles to focus on not only their own welfare, but also the welfare of Babylon! The word “welfare” in Hebrew is *shalom*. *Shalom* encompasses all that is necessary for the flourishing of life. God’s encouragement through the prophet to His people was thus: Build houses for yourselves...and for your neighbors. Plant gardens for yourselves...and for your neighbors. Seek safety and security, love and relationships, physical and spiritual health – for yourselves...and for your neighbors. For your welfare is bound up in their welfare; your *shalom* depends upon their *shalom*.

Or, as Jesus summarized: “Love your neighbor as you love yourself” (Matt 22:39 CEB).

This is what we call the common good. In the kingdom of God – God’s neighborhood – your well-being is connected to your neighbor’s well-being. What is good for one must be good for all. God was promising the exiles that if they were faithful to God’s commands, He would fulfill the promise He made to their ancestor Abraham: “All the families of the earth will be blessed because of you” (Gen 12:2-3). Blessing does not exist for its own sake; it is meant to be shared with our neighbors.

God also commands the exiles to pray for Babylon. *Pray for your neighbors who are your enemy!* This also sounds a lot like Jesus: “You have heard that it was said, *You must love your neighbor and hate your enemy.* But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who harass you so that you will be acting as children of your Father who is in heaven” (Matt 5:43-45 CEB). Jesus taught that we are to do more than just pray for the people we naturally love; we must also pray for those who would do us harm. This creates space for reconciliation, where enemies are transformed into neighbors.

Jeremiah’s message challenges us to embrace being a blessing wherever we are. It is true that it is easier to walk away than stick it out with people we do not like or trust. Sometimes, for our own well-being, we must walk away. But other times we walk away simply because we just don’t want to do the hard work of loving our neighbors. Working for the welfare of the places where we live requires engagement that goes deeper than surface-level ‘niceness’ and tolerance. The way of love that Jeremiah encouraged, and Jesus teaches, is invested in transforming relationships between people. And transformation takes commitment and vulnerability. So often when we start to feel uncomfortable or unhappy – exiled from what we think should be normative in our communities – we choose to relocate ourselves. We move to a different neighborhood, we move our children from one school to another, we avoid certain people and places, we even change churches. Again, it is sometimes necessary that we do these things. But we also do these things because we don’t want to deal with the discomfort of difference and conflict.

I am not pointing this out to cast judgment, but instead to illustrate the long-term effects of this attitude in our society. We now have communities that Christians are transforming not into the beautifully diverse image of God’s neighborhood, but instead into echo chambers of sameness, where we only choose to interact with people who look and think and believe exactly as we do, and where hate and fear of the other is encouraged.

I believe that this entrenching behavior is a reaction to the church’s declining influence in our culture. The exodus of Americans from church pews has been ongoing for a half-century but has rapidly accelerated in recent years. Scholars have dubbed this phenomenon “The Great Dechurching.”² This massive religious

² <https://religionnews.com/2023/09/07/the-great-dechurching-explores-americas-religious-exodus/>

shift makes those of us who remain in the church anxious. And when we are anxious, we can be tempted to isolate ourselves and double-down on unhelpful beliefs and habits to preserve a sense of control.

What if this cultural exile, so to speak, is an opportunity for us to re-invest in our Christian mission? To focus less on trying to get people to “do” church with us, and instead focus on cultivating *shalom* in our neighborhoods? We can do this by combatting hate and fear, advocating for access to food and affordable housing for, and establishing safety and security for those who need refuge.

Throughout the global Church’s history, it was in times of cultural exile, when the surrounding community did not conform to the culture of the Church, that we lived out our mission the best. For the early Christians in Asia Minor, whom Peter addresses in his letter, seeking the welfare of their cities looked like living the Way of Jesus in a deeply pagan context where they had little influence. Their pagan neighbors were not particularly interested in joining them at their tables of fellowship to study Scripture and worship God. Sometimes these neighbors were even enemies who sought to harm Christians. But Peter encouraged them to repay the abuse and ostracization with a blessing (1 Pet 3:9). Like the exiles in Babylon before them, the blessing they would inherit from above was tied to the blessing they extended to their neighbors, even their enemies. Peter exhorted the believers not to speak ill of their antagonists, to turn from evil and do good, and to pursue peace (vv. 10-11). He asked this rhetorical question:

“Who will harm you if you are zealous for good?” (v. 13 CEB)

The Greek is actually “to become zealous.” The zeal to do good is an active choice. It takes commitment. Sometimes it is even risky. Peter does not mean that we will be spared harm just by doing good. Instead, he argues that our zeal for doing good to our neighbors, even neighbors who antagonize us, glorifies our Father in heaven. His Son has commanded us to love our neighbors as ourselves and pray for our enemies. Zeal for doing good in our de-churched context does not look like cynical efforts to get more people to come to church on Sunday morning. Instead, it looks like a love that centers the well-being of others, especially our most vulnerable neighbors. It looks like a love that speaks truth to power. It looks like a love that sticks it out with our neighbors, even when it feels like our differences are irreconcilable and peace is a pipe-dream.

For does Paul say – “Love puts up with all things, trusts in all things, hopes for all things, endures all things” (1 Cor 13:7).

On this World Communion Sunday, as we gather at the Lord’s Table once more, we remember what unites us as Christians: Jesus Christ and the mission that he has given his worldwide Church. In this institution of bread and cup, we receive a foretaste of the kingdom of God – that beautiful, eternal neighborhood which is already growing among us! The grace that we receive in Christ’s body and blood nourishes us and grows our zeal for doing good. May we find today new courage and strength to be a blessing wherever God has planted us, to whomever God places in our sphere of influence, not for the sake of escaping exile, but for the sake of sharing the Good News through our loving witness. “Let us not grow weary in doing what is right, for we will reap at harvest time, if we do not give up” (Gal 6:9 NRSVUE).

Amen.