



Broad Street Presbyterian Church

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“Draw Near to Hope”

Jeremiah 33:10-16

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This past week I’ve been thinking a lot about waste. I thought of popular expressions and sayings that include the word “waste.”

Waste not. Want not.

A mind is a terrible thing to waste.

Don’t waste your breath.

Haste makes waste.

Waste of space.

Waste of time.

It’s clear. Waste is a bad thing. The less waste the better for everyone. This past week, I did a little research into waste management. Here in Franklin County 46% of the waste generated is recycled, composted or reused. This county’s modest goal is to reach a 75% recycling rate by 2032. Other communities aim higher. There is a growing movement of people and communities trying to get to zero waste. There are books, podcasts, online communities, consumer products that promote this outcome. Here in Ohio, Logan County is leading the way with a goal to be at zero waste by 2020.

Because waste is to be avoided.

Especially when it comes to time. I pride myself on not wasting time. My time. Your time. By starting meetings on time. Ending them on time. Being focused and organized in our time together. That is especially true of worship. I’m convinced that somewhere in the Bible its says,

Thou shalt not worship past 11:59 a.m.

Actually, the Bible doesn’t say that. But maybe it should so that none of our time is wasted. Waste is to be avoided.

Actually, not everyone feels that way. There’s an event held yearly in California called *Wasteland Weekend* when people gather from across the country to immerse themselves in post-apocalyptic role-playing. Participants wear costumes, trick out their cars, and spend a few days in the Mojave Desert imagining a bleak future.¹

¹ <http://www.wastelandweekend.com/>

We don't have to attend such an event to know what a wasteland looks like. Think Nagasaki after the bomb. Think Aleppo after the battle. Think Paradise, California after the fire. We know what a wasteland looks like.

So does the prophet Jeremiah. In his time, the 6th century BCE, Babylon has become the strongest power in the Middle East and has attacked Judah. Jerusalem is under siege. The old king, along with other prominent citizens, has been deported. The new king quickly tires of Jeremiah and his prophecies and throws him in jail. Jeremiah writes these words from a prison cell. His situation is bleak. His beloved city is being laid waste by a foreign army. He has been imprisoned by his own people. It's a mess. A disaster. A waste.

From that vantage point, he writes

In this place of which you say, "It is a waste...there shall once more be heard the voice of mirth and the voice of gladness..." (Jeremiah 33:10-11)

Huh? Try telling that to the people of Paradise. Try telling that to someone whose spouse died last year. Try telling that to anyone and everyone who looks around their life and sees a barren landscape.

In 1988, flames engulfed 1.4 million acres in and around Yellowstone National Park. Over 9,000 fire fighters came from all over the country to participate in what would eventually become a \$140 million dollar effort to extinguish the fires. They built more than 800 miles of fire line, used 117 aircraft and dropped more than 1,000,000 gallons of fire retardant. In the end, it was only the fall rain and snow that stopped the fires.

I spent the following summer working in Yellowstone. It was less than a year after the fires had been extinguished and it was an awesome and sobering sight to see the acres and acres of charred landscape.

But my dominant memory of the park that summer is one of color and light. The wildflowers loved the rich soil left behind by the fire. I remember blackened earth accented by brilliant reds and pinks, yellows and blues. There was new life among the ashes.

In this place of which you say, "It is a waste...there shall once more be heard the voice of mirth and the voice of gladness..."

Maybe Jeremiah is on to something. But, I wonder if Jeremiah can envision hope and growth and new life only because of the way he sees waste. Maybe where others see something that is worthless, the prophet sees possibility.

Gregory Boyle is a Jesuit priest who has spent decades working in South Central Los Angeles. He founded an organization called Homeboy Industries that works with former gang members. Its motto is "Nothing stops a bullet like a job." This morning's scripture reading is one of his favorites. In his writing, in his sermons, he returns to it again and again. Because the people he works with—former gang members, the poor, the incarcerated—these are people that most of society believe to be a waste of time and resources.

Father Boyle, affectionately called G or G-dog by those he works with, shares the story of Chico, a sixteen-year-old homeboy from the projects in Los Angeles. One day Chico calls Boyle, and asks the priest to find him a job. Boyle goes to meet Chico and finds a shy kid with a quick smile who wants to move past gangs and work with computers. Father Boyle obliges, finding him a job that will provide him with a consistent wage and some training. In return, he asks that Chico attend school every day before work and meet with him every Friday afternoon to collect his paycheck. The first few days that Chico is supposed to be at his new job, Boyle doesn't hear anything from Chico. Boyle is convinced that Chico has abandoned his plan for gainful employment and

training. But Thursday at 3 p.m., a message emerges from the fax machine on Father Boyle's desk. Written in large letters, all caps, it reads:

DEAR G,
I AM LEARNING HOW TO USE A FAX MACHINE
I AM LEARNING A GANG A'STUFF HERE.
LOVE,
CHICO
P.S. I REALLY LOVE THIS JOB
THANKS FOR GETTING IT FOR ME

Chico sticks with his new job and the deal he has made with Boyle. The boy loses his shyness and, in their weekly conversations, peppers the priest with questions about God: "What do you think heaven is like? Do you think God listens to us?"

Then, one morning, Chico's mom calls. Chico has been shot while standing on the sidewalk in front of his house. A week later he dies.

It is the eighth funeral Boyle has officiated in three weeks. This is how Father Boyle describes what happens at the graveside.

I decide to walk away from the coffin and spot a lonely tree not too far from the crowd. I stand there by myself and allow myself to feel this great loss and I cry. Before too long, the mortician appears at my side. He is more acquaintance than friend. Now he has broken the spell of my grief and unknowingly invaded the space I had carved for myself... There is an obligation, clear and immediate, to break the silence, to make the mortician welcome in my space, uninvited though he be. I remove my glasses and wipe away my tears. I point feebly, at Chico's coffin, and I know that I need to find some words to fill our blank air.

"Now that," I whisper to the intruder, "was a terrific kid." And the mortician, in a voice so loud and obnoxious, it turns the heads of the gathered mourners, says, "HE WAS?" My heart sinks. I know exactly what he's thinking... there is some large disconnect for him.... How could it be possible that a sixteen-year-old [gang member], gunned down, not far from home, is a terrific kid?

But who wouldn't be proud to claim Chico as their own?²

Boyle then quotes Jeremiah.

In this place of which you say, "It is a waste...there shall once more be heard the voice of mirth and the voice of gladness..."

Here's the thing about Jeremiah's vision. I think it can only come true if we stop seeing people and communities as waste, not worthy of our time and energy and love, not worthy of God's time and energy and love. Again, Father Boyle:

We imagine, with God, this circle of compassion. Then we imagine no one standing outside of that circle, moving ourselves closer to the margins so that the margins themselves will be erased. We stand with those whose dignity has been denied. We locate ourselves with the poor and the powerless and the

² Gregory Boyle, *Tattoos on the Heart: The Power of Boundless Compassion*, p. 205-212.

voiceless. At the edges, we join the easily despised and the readily left out. We stand with the demonized so that the demonizing will stop. We situate ourselves right next to the disposable so that the day will come when we stop throwing people away.³

Some people think this stance is a waste of time.

In this place of which you say, “It is a waste...there shall once more be heard the voice of mirth and the voice of gladness...”

In God’s eyes, none of us is a waste. In God’s eyes, none of us is disposable. We know that because of Jeremiah’s words. We know that because of Jesus. The church long ago decided that Jeremiah’s words are pointing to Jesus. This hope that Jeremiah speaks of is pointing us to Jesus.

Jesus who enters a roomful of important people and makes a beeline for the person everyone else considers to be a waste of their time. The widow—the outcast—the sinner... All of us matter to Jesus. All of us count. No one is disposable.

This morning the season of Advent begins. We prepare our hearts to welcome Jesus. We prepare our hearts to welcome the one who embraces that which the world sees as waste.

So this Advent, I invite you to walk towards those the world considers to be a waste of time. This Advent, may we walk into places that are considered not worthy of our time: prisons, nursing homes, hospital waiting rooms.

In doing so, we reclaim our own worthiness. In doing so, we draw near to hope.

Because

In this place of which you say, “It is a waste...there shall once more be heard the voice of mirth and the voice of gladness...”

Amen.

³Gregory Boyle, *Tattoos on the Heart: The Power of Boundless Compassion*, p. 190.