"Seek the Welfare of the City"

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Digging Deeper
A Sermon: Seek the Welfare of the City
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(Originally given October 10, 2010, 28th Sunday of Ordinary Time, according to the Revised Common Lectionary)

Readings: Jeremiah 29:1, 4-7; Psalm 66:1-12; 2 Timothy 2:8-15; Luke 17:11-19

Jeremiah 29:1, 4-7 These are the words of the letter that the prophet Jeremiah sent from Jerusalem to the remaining elders among the exiles, and to the priests, the prophets, and all the people, whom Nebuchadnezzar had taken into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon. … 4 Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: 5 Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. 6 Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. 7 But 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.

Psalm 66:1-12 Make a joyful noise to God, all the earth; 2 sing the glory of his name; give to him glorious praise. 3 Say to God, "How awesome are your deeds! Because of your great power, your enemies cringe before you. 4 All the earth worships you; they sing praises to you, sing praises to your name." Selah 5 Come and see what God has done: he is awesome in his deeds among mortals. 6 He turned the sea into dry land; they passed through the river on foot. There we rejoiced in him, 7 who rules by his might forever, whose eyes keep watch on the nations—let the rebellious not exalt themselves. Selah 8 Bless our God, O peoples, let the sound of his praise be heard, 9 who has kept us among the living, and has not let our feet slip. 10 For you, O God, have tested us; you have tried us as silver is tried. 11 You brought us into the net; you laid burdens on our backs; 12 you let people ride over our heads; we went through fire and through water; yet you have brought us out to a spacious place.

2 Timothy 2:8-15 8 Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, a descendant of David— that is my gospel, 9 for which I suffer hardship, even to the point of being chained like a criminal. But the word of God is not chained. 10 Therefore I endure everything for the sake of the elect, so that they may also obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus, with eternal glory. 11 The saying is sure: If we have died with him, we will also live with him; 12 if we endure, we will also reign with him; if we deny him, he will also deny us; 13 if we are faithless, he remains faithful— for he cannot deny himself. 14 Remind them of this, and warn them before God that they are to avoid wrangling over words, which does no good but only ruins those who are listening. 15 Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved by him, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly explaining the word of truth.

Luke 17:11-19 11 On the way to Jerusalem Jesus was going through the region between Samaria and Galilee. 12 As he entered a village, ten lepers approached him. Keeping their distance, 13 they called out, saying, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!" 14 When he saw them, he said to them, "Go and show yourselves to the priests." And as they went, they were made clean. 15 Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice. 16 He prostrated himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him. And he was a Samaritan. 17 Then Jesus asked, "Were not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they? 18 Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?" 19 Then he said to him, "Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well."
Jeremiah Reading (29:1, 4-7)

Challenge #1: Seek the Welfare of the City (29:7)

Setting: The last surviving Jews taken into the Babylonian captivity between 597 and 584 B.C.E. Most devastating event is in 587 when Jerusalem and its Temple are destroyed. The actual number of Jews in exile numbers 4,600.

The 9/11 of the Old Testament.

Nebuchadnezzar took them into exile (29:1), but juxtaposed to this the Lord says “I have sent you into exile” (29:7).

Exiles are to plan on a long exile spanning at least two generations. Build a house, have children and grandchildren. Increase and not decrease (what are the odds of this happening?).

Don’t just think about yourselves but think about the foreigners in whose land you are now immigrants. Reminds us of “Love your enemies…”

Welfare=shalōm, a Hebrew word which means more than “peace” but includes well-being, restoration, health, wholeness, and what we might call thriving. A big order! “Pray to Yahweh on its behalf.”

Babylonians’ shalom means your shalom.

Walter Brueggemann:

Imagine that! A letter written to displaced persons in hated Babylon, where they have gone against their will and watched their life and culture collapse. And they are still there, yearning to go home, despising their captors and resenting their God — if, indeed, God is still their God. And the speaker for the vision dares to say, “Your shalom will be found in Babylon’s shalom.” The well-being of the chosen ones is tied to the well-being of that hated metropolis, which the chosen people fear and resent. It is profound and disturbing to discover that this remarkable religious vision will have to be actualized in the civil community. The stuff of well-being is the sordid collection of rulers, soldiers, wardens, and carpetbaggers in Judah and in every place of displaced, exhausted hope. An incredible vision even now for people of faith who feel pressed and angry about the urban shape of our existence, to say nothing about the urban shape of our vision. But again it is affirmed that God’s shalom is known only by those in inclusive, caring community.¹

Psalms Reading (66:1-12)

Challenge #2: Come and see what God has done (66:5)

If this task seems too great, then we need the encouragement offered by this psalm, especially the invitation to see what God has done.

Literary form: Thanksgiving Psalm of the Community. How they arose: on occasion the whole community complained; then the whole community were saved; therefore the whole community gives thanks.

Invitation is for “all the earth” not just the chosen few. God’s deeds are awesome. Poet thinks about the Exodus: sea to dry land. Poet thinks about entering the promised land: pass through the river on foot (Jordan). Power can either be for liberation or for control.

Rule of God (kingdom of God): by might forever; watches over all the nations. Keeps referring to the peoples (plural).

Yet, his own people are tested and purified like silver, basing through fire and water. The trouble we are in is not an accident which falls outside God’s power or concern. Nor is our trouble a reason to reject God.

God “brings us to a place of abundance” (Hebrew: *saturation*)! — talk about the myth of scarcity in our society, and the false promise that technology, consumerism, and therapy can solve all problems. We are told constantly that our bodies are the problem for which there is a technological solution (e.g. drug ads on TV). The world wants to keep us in fear and paint a dismal picture of the present crisis. The church can easily fall into the same attitude. Not the psalmist: “Should for joy to God, all the earth” — his name is full of glory, and so should be our praise.

The whole earth worship and praises God — creation in its entirety is in the service of the great King Yahweh. If the whole earth serves the God of Creation, so should we. There can be no scarcity when our Redeemer is also our Creator.

The Epistles Reading (2 Timothy 2:8-15)

**Challenge #3: Remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead (2:8)**

Setting: Timothy is Paul’s young protégé. Paul is moving rapidly to the end of his life, and suffering is more frequent. He is “bound with chains as a criminal.” His condition is not unlike the Jews taken in Babylonian captivity.

But “the word of God is not in chains”! Therefore, Paul is willing to endure everything for the sake of God’s people (the word “elect” in 2:10 is coded language for those who belong to God). Paul wants to obtain salvation for as many people as possible — he’s not talking about himself but about those to whom he ministers. Recall Jeremiah: Seek the shalom of the city.

Paul leads off with “Remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead.” The heart of the Gospel is the hopeful promise of new life. Not just an ethereal existence beyond this world, but the real possibility of new creation within this world. Hard to imagine this world as a transformed, renewed place of well-being. That’s what the resurrection of Jesus Christ makes possible.

Heavy responsibility on our shoulders: endure everything, die with Jesus. When these things come, “Remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead.” Resist the temptation to deny him or be faithless. When such failings overshadow us, “Remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead.” Greater challenge: not to get sucked into hair-splitting theological debates: “quarrel about words.” When this slippery slope begins, “Remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead!”

We are “workers” (Greek: *ergatēs*). Secular usage: one who works the soil; hard-working, strenuous; one who practices an art. Presenting ourselves: how well do we live up to the standard of “Jesus Christ, risen from the dead”?

Rightly handling the word of truth. Greek verb *orthotomeō* means: “To cut in a straight line.” A bit like the farmer plowing his field — keeps his eye on a guiding marker at the end of the row.

There are many things in the Bible. The Bible consists of the words of many writers to whom the word of the Lord came (see Jeremiah 1:1-2). We can easily become entangled in the words and not hear the Word. Jesus warned the religious leaders: You search the Scriptures for you think that in them you have eternal life — not
so! They are testimonies to me! (John 5:39). Why do we make such a big deal of the Gospel reading during our service? Not because the other readers aren’t important, or because the preacher’s reading is more important than everybody else’s. Rather, we lift up the Gospel because in it all the other Scriptures finally make sense — they are point to it — the Gospel is their fulfillment: Remember, Jesus Christ, risen from the dead!

**The Gospel Reading:** (Luke 17:11-19)
**Challenge #4: Go and Show; Get Up and Go (17:14, 19)**

Jesus regularly walked on the borderli ne between the comfortably religious and the culturally rogue. In this case, the road he walks lies between Samaria and Galilee. Samaria — the land of disenfranchised persons who held to Torah but worshipped in their own Temple on Mount Gerazim (not Jerusalem) (when the Jews weren’t burning it down!). Read John 4 for a close-up interaction between Jesus and a Samaritan.

Samaritans needed Good News — the sort Jesus brought. So did lepers. A mysterious skin disorder (still some debate about what it was) was highly contagious and required quarantine — just about the only medical remedy available to those who had it and those who didn’t. Kept people away from each other. Hard to bring the healing to the sick when the healer couldn’t have contact with them!

“Who stood at a distance.” Powerful symbol for the distance between human beings. God isn’t at a distance. Jesus isn’t at a distance. He sends them to the priests. Usually this was to confirm recovery. In this case, it’s the faithful and hopeful anticipation of recovery!

On the way they are cleansed. Only one leper “turned back” and praised God with a loud voice (compare Psalm 66). Returns to Jesus, falls on his face at his feet and gives thanks. At this point, Luke tells the readers the startling fact: “Now he was a Samaritan.”

Jesus does the math. Ten healed. One returns with gratitude to Jesus. Compare to the story of the lost sheep. One hundred sheep, one lost, ninety-nine left in the fold while the shepherd looks for the 100th. In that case, we marvel at the risk of leaving so many in search of the one. In this case, ten lepers, one returns, and Jesus asks, “Where are the nine?” Not were is the one, as in the parable of the lost sheep, but Where are the nine?

The wonder lies with the ready gratitude of the one Samaritan leper — the foreigner (Jesus says this tongue in cheek, since people didn’t like Samaritans).

Good News: Rise and go your way. Faith is attributed to a Samaritan. Faith is not the property of the chosen few, but the privilege of those who are at last able to Rise and Go.

**Conclusion**

If we reach back to the first three centuries of the Christian era, the period of genuine development for early Christian thought, we encounter a large number of works written by the church fathers. These represent the perspectives of Christians after the death of the apostles. Contrary to popular understanding, the Gospel flourished during this period and numerous defenders of the faith emerged from the fiery trials of persecution which lasted until the days of Constantine. Among the writings which have survived, is an anonymous work, believed to have originated from the late second century, though some place it as early as 125 C.E. We include two sections of this document to tie together our thoughts about the relationship of Christians to their nation. The thoughts expressed there will inspire and encourage us: here is the voice of Christian freedom and faith in the coming kingdom. May God use its message to strengthen us this day as we seek the welfare of our city.
From Mathetes: *Letter to Diognetus 5, 6 (end of second century).*

Christians cannot be distinguished from the rest of humankind by country, speech, or customs. They do not live in cities of their own; they do not speak a special language; they do not follow a peculiar manner of life. Their teaching was not invented by the ingenuity or speculation of men, nor do they advocate mere book learning, as other groups do. They live in Greek cities and they live in non-Greek cities according to the lot of each one. They conform to the customs of their country in dress, food, and the general mode of life, and yet they show a remarkable, an admittedly extraordinary structure of their own life together. They live in their own countries, but only as guests and aliens.

They take part in everything as citizens and endure everything as aliens. Every foreign country is their homeland, and every homeland is a foreign country to them. They marry like everyone else. They beget children, but they do not expose them after they are born. They have a common table, but no common bed. They are in the flesh, but they do not live according to the flesh. They live on earth, but their citizenship is in heaven. They obey the established laws, but through their way of life they surpass these laws. They love all people and are persecuted by all. Nobody knows them, and yet they are condemned. They are put to death, and just through this they are brought to life. They are as poor as beggars, and yet they make many rich. They lack everything, and yet they have everything in abundance. They are dishonored, and yet have their glory in this very dishonor. They are insulted, and just in this they are vindicated. They are abused, and yet they bless. They are assaulted, and yet it is they who show respect. Doing good, they are sentenced like evildoers. When punished with death, they rejoice in the certainty of being awakened to life. Jews attack them as people of another race, and Greeks persecute them, yet those who hate them cannot give any reason to justify their hostility.

In a word: what the soul is in the body, the Christians are in the world. As the soul is present in all the members of the body, so Christians are present in all the cities of the world. As the soul lives in the body, yet does not have its origin in the body, so the Christians live in the world yet are not of the world. Invisible, the soul is enclosed by the visible body: in the same way the Christians are known to be in the world, but their religion remains invisible. Even though the flesh suffers no wrong from the soul, it hates the soul and fights against it because it is hindered by the soul from following its lusts; so too the world, though suffering no wrong from the Christians, hates them because they oppose its lusts. The soul loves the flesh, but the flesh hates the soul; as the soul loves the members of the body, so the Christians love those who hate them. The soul is enclosed in the body, yet it holds the body together; the Christians are kept prisoners in the world, as it were, yet they are the very ones who hold the world together. Immortal, the soul lives in a mortal house; so too the Christians live in a corruptible existence as strangers and look forward to incorruptible life in heaven. When the body is poorly provided with food and drink, the soul gains strength. In the same way the number of Christians increases day by day when they are punished with death. Such is the important task God has entrusted to the Christians and they must not shirk it.

Glory to God! Amen.

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