Better Together

Jeremiah 29:1, 4-7

Buckingham Church

September 12, 2021

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“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.”

This is one of the most radical instructions given by any prophet, and it carries seeds that Jesus later planted as “love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,” certainly one of the most radical, and ignored, things Jesus ever said!

There is a great deal to look at here, a great deal for us to think about.

Seek the welfare of the city. This text came up in the lectionary the Sunday after 9/11/2001. None of us who read it could escape thinking of New York and Washington, D.C. For the bulk of the United States, what happened that day had little direct impact, aside from air travel being halted. Most Americans did not know anyone who had been in the towers, the Pentagon, or the planes that hit them, or on flight 93 that crashed in Pennsylvania. And yet all of us knew that what happened there happened to us all, and that we needed to come together to support those who had been directly impacted. We prayed. We sent letters to first responders. Some people made their way to the pile in New York with search dogs or medical expertise or whatever they felt they could offer. For a brief time, even people who hate New York loved New Yorkers.

But Jeremiah goes on: Seek the welfare of the city *where I have sent you into exile.* This changes things up a bit. Now the emphasis is on seeking the welfare of enemies, rather a different kind of instruction. But the coda to that instruction—*f*or *in its welfare you will find your welfare*—helps us understand why.

It is a very small world we live in, much more interconnected than the one Jeremiah lived in, so this applies to us even more. If we have learned nothing else from COVID, we have learned that what impacts one of us impacts all of us. Everywhere in the world. It would have been natural for the Hebrew exiles to cocoon together and minimize their interaction with the enemy, but God, through Jeremiah, counsels the opposite. This is counsel that all of us forever have had a tough time accepting. After 9/11, many people asked, “Why do they hate us so much?” But then it became controversial to actually try to answer that question, and then we went to war. After 20 years, many still hate us, and we are often no closer to admitting why. Why do we hate them? Why do they hate us? Why do we all not care for the welfare of each other’s cities as much as for our own?

But we don’t even have to go that far. Do folks in Glastonbury see that their welfare is tied up with Hartford’s welfare? Do we understand that the welfare of all those Afghan refugees coming to our nation is tied up with our welfare? Do we understand that the welfare of our congregation is tied to the welfare of other churches and faith communities of all kinds, or do we see them as competition? Do we understand that the welfare of our household is tied to the welfare of other households around us? The great British poet John Donne famously said, “No man is an island…every man’s death diminishes me, for I am involved in mankind.” Every man’s death. Every woman’s death. Every child’s death. Every death, period. Those people who refuse to get vaccinated and so hold the rest of us hostage, at whom I am sometimes so angry, their deaths are not deserved, and their deaths diminish me and all of us.

Today is Homecoming Sunday. It’s meant to be a day we celebrate that Buckingham Church is a home for us. It’s a place where we gather with people like us, and people who are different from us, with people we find it easy to like and others we find it hard to like, with people who share our political and religious beliefs and others who do not. We come here to a great practice field, a place where we can try to figure out how to live out what both Jeremiah and Jesus called us to: love one another. That’s why we talk about “practicing” our faith, we don’t have it perfected, we need to keep practicing, and the church is meant to be a place for us to practice on each other! Truly, you can pray on your own, you can talk to God on your own, you can study the Bible on your own, but you can’t live out your discipleship, you can’t follow Jesus, alone. “Seek the welfare of the city,” “love your enemies,” “love your neighbor.” All of those require us to be in relationship with other people and require us to do some work to try to get it right.

That’s why I still love the church, when so many have left. Yes, the church makes so many mistakes and gets it wrong. That’s what happens when you practice something. You learn more from your mistakes than your successes.

Beloved, hear the word of God as it came to the exiles in Babylon through the continuation of Jeremiah’s letter: “For surely, (says God), I know the plans I have for you, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope.” Let us find hope in gathering with each other to seek and respond to the word and will of the God who loves us, our enemies, our neighbors, our earth, with such a bodacious passion that we can’t understand it and need a lot of practice to imitate it. Let us come home here and catch that passion and ask the hard questions and not be afraid of practicing what is difficult. Love. Amen.