

Sermon – Sunday October 9, 2022

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“Lord, we pray that your grace may always precede and follow us, that we may continually be given to good works...” 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.

Exile...do you have an experience? Or maybe more than one? One of mine, simply speaking, and certainly not of the scope of the captives in Babylon and what it is Jeremiah has to tell us today... is being a sophomore in High School-maneuvering classroom seating to be close to the guy whose attention I hoped to attract but being redirected by Mr. Biancucci, who sang Duke of Earl from time-to-time during our class time, to take the seat assigned to me... doomed to first period phys-ed, and swimming being the ruination of hairdo and make up with next to no time to restore any semblance of Glamour Magazine's must-dos, or hope that the chlorine scented essence could be disguised by some Avon cologne roll-on recently purchased by saving up babysitting payments. Separated from classmates I'd known since elementary school, learning to navigate a system quite foreign to me, seemed a cruel and barely survivable task. HA! While my recollection is that I did okay in Mr. Biancucci's history class, I might, perhaps, have fared better if I had been a bit more aware of the knowledge and wisdom being imparted for my “welfare” and that of my 15 and 16 year-old classmates. If the “prophetic words” of my instructor, sit down, listen and learn, had reached my immature ears sooner, maybe my self-imposed “exile” would have caused less angst!

Shall we revisit the collect for today and the short verse from the Hebrew scripture appointed for this Sunday? “Lord, we pray that your grace may always precede and follow us, that we may be continually given to good works...and, 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.

It is by God's grace that you and I are able and empowered to do good works; it's exactly what makes our good works possible. Thank goodness-doesn't it make the whole lot more manageable?!

Jeremiah, the prophet, didn't have a lot to be happy about. His was a life was filled with great difficulty, sorrow, hardship and many anxious moments. Being of the tribe of Benjamin, he lived in a territory that was the least favorable in the division of property by Joshua. Really pretty barren, without fruit and with plenty of desert wind and heat waves...but Jeremiah's lot isn't the focus of today's sermon and can be a history lesson for another time. What is important is that Jeremiah is a prophet and, therefore, he is in the business of truth-telling and speaking truth to power. He provides words of strength and encouragement, not the “everything's coming up roses, no worries” status quo, business as usual gloss. Rather, he takes the opposite approach, and sends word to those held captive and in exile, get real! Prepare for the long haul. Do the work you've been given to do. The work Jeremiah was talking about was meant to help the people reconnect with God in a foreign place. They will by God's grace, be reminded that God is still with them.

Is that true, perhaps now, in our 21st century lives? Our lives aren't always easy. And though we may not like it, we might be called to drum up the courage to accept it? Even stepping foot out of bed in the morning may be a challenge, but by the grace of God and with thanksgiving, one does it.

At first it may feel a fearsome task, to speak as a prophet. God does send you and I. What we hear and say in our 21st century place need not be compared to whatever words were spoken by the prophet Jeremiah. But we are by grace shown ways to do the work, to speak words of truth with love and compassion, as we heard from Timothy's 2nd letter.

What might our world look like, this kingdom on earth as it is in heaven, if each of us chose to consider the welfare of those in our surrounding? Had the courage to speak prophetically. If we "bloomed where planted" so to speak? If we offer blessings rather than curses when things don't go our way or seem to be contrary to our beliefs? If we strive to love others (and all things) as God loves us?

I don't know about you, but for me it is oftentimes a huge and uncomfortable undertaking to love things in and of themselves-for what they are and not for what they can do for me. It is a discipline, but a necessary one, to recognize each as a living image of God. If and when you and I are able to do this, perhaps we're close to seeing this world, all creation, with God's eyes?

However it is one prays, our conversation and words are talking with God and deepening the relationship. You may want to try this, a way Franciscans pray and one that Clare of Assisi explained to another nun, Sr. Agnes. Put yourself into the Gospel reading for the day, whether using a Bible, devotional or on-line source. What character would you be? Envision yourself with Jesus, listening, learning, acting, being loved. Create in your mind's eye the scents, sounds, feel of the climate-both natural and the essence of all that stirs in your midst... Centuries ago, the fresco painters of chapels and cathedrals often chose local people as models and painted them into the art work-a child sitting at the feet of Jesus, a disciple at table, a bystander, paying attention...If you and I chose to interact this way, and it takes intention and practice, it might become a way of living, at least part of the time. While certainly it is difficult during times of exile and pain-we can begin to see Jesus in every person and encounter. We come to recognize him in creation and in what we may have felt as routine and ordinary. In turn, how we interact and relate to others could be more genuine. And as is put forth in 2nd Timothy, instead of wrangling over words, we'll be prepared to "rightly explain the word of truth."

As I continued to research while preparing this sermon, I found this insight: rather than thinking of "welfare" simply in terms of well-being or terms of our current "caste system" as some 21st century prejudicial judges do, substitute Shalom/ deep, abiding peace, for the word welfare...a more accurate interpretation and understanding of the meaning. Might it be easier to look at each person as a child of a loving God and all things created by God's generous hand and precious in His sight? Is it not our work too, to follow the teaching and example of the itinerant preacher, teacher, and humble servant, Jesus, and for me, Francis and Clare who patterned their very existence after his example? To be peace makers, not simply peace

keepers with weapons at our side or drawn to protect? Rather, to be warriors-defenders of our precious Mother Earth, to feed the poor, heal the sick, welcome the stranger? To put down roots and acknowledge with thanksgiving and gratitude all that has been given to us? To live life fully and deeply on this sacred planet, our common home?

Our readings today all have a common thread related to thanksgiving. Seeking peace for ourselves and others as we understand that this is what God desires as his Love for all is of great magnitude, the psalm that offers praise and wonder, rightly explaining the word of truth because of grace and love extended to us, the Samaritan who prostrated himself before Jesus as he was healed.

My hope is that as you hear these words from Bishop Steven Charleston, from whom I've learned a great deal, that you'll be inspired to walk as a child of the light, be the prophet when circumstance calls you to speak and be a truth-teller, to continue the good works (ministry) that by our Creator's grace you've been doing, that your heart is led to acknowledge all the wonders of the universe and that your lips utter joyful thanksgiving.

Let my last words be in thanks to you, as I close my eyes in sleep, as I let go of light and sound, as I begin my long slow fall into the world of dreams, let my last words be in thanks to you, for all you have given me, for all you have shown me, for all you have been through with me, two travelers walking beneath the sun, now together in the mystery of the night, you the great Spirit of wisdom, me the curious child wanting to know more, how can I not thank you for this beautiful adventure, this quiet song of grateful heart: let my last words be in thanks to you.

Amen

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