

## Rebuilding the Foundations *The Art of Neighboring*

Jeremiah 29:1, 4-5, 7, 11-12

April 21, 2024

### ***What if we are neighbors?***

On Wednesday evening, I attended an interfaith Passover seder down the street at Indianapolis Hebrew Congregation. It was not my first Passover seder, the annual ritual meal commemorating the liberation of God's people from slavery in Egypt through the wilderness to the promised land. But this experience was unique. At my table I was joined by a rabbi, an imam, and a family of seven from the Latter-day Saints community. When we were invited to write down one thing that we would let go to free our souls, a symbol of the cleansing to open the meal, the five-year-old girl sitting next to me leaned over and whispered, "How do you spell 'Yelling?'" I figured that might be a good start for all of us.

Joined by strangers who are neighbors, we walked through the rituals and the prayers of the seder rooted in that ancient story. But what struck me throughout the evening was the explicit connection between that story and our stories. At one point we were invited to consider what held us captive. At another time, we were offered the charge: how can you extend freedom to others? There was a direct link made between all who suffer oppression and injustice in every age. It struck me again that these Biblical stories are true not because they happened once, but because they are happening now. How they speak of and to universal human conditions. How these ancient stories are built to last.

The words you've just heard from a letter written to a people in exile were penned by Jeremiah, the child prophet, the agent of God's will, first called as a youth. They are written to a community in a moment of crisis. Things had fallen apart. They were exiled in Babylon,

removed from everything they knew and everyone they loved, forced to live as refugees in an empire ruled by the powerful King Nebuchadnezzar. In that context, in that crisis, in that moment, the prophet delivers a series of astonishing orders. God commands the exiles to begin the construction of homes, to till the soil and plant gardens, to celebrate marriages and raise families. God calls people of faith to build a life in a hostile land.

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Jeremiah tells the exiles to seek the shalom (the wholeness, the peace, the wellbeing) of the very place where they are captive. Why? Because their futures are woven together. Because there is no "us" and "them." Because in time, the broken pieces of a shattered reality must be rebuilt to form a beautiful mosaic of unity. Because the wilderness of exile will not last forever and must be refashioned into a neighborhood. Confirmands, I'm talking to you. The wilderness of exile must be refashioned into a neighborhood.

In just a few moments, we will welcome you, the Class of 2024 confirmands, as new members of Second Presbyterian Church. For many weeks now, you have prepared for this day—studied scripture, reflected on what it means to follow Jesus, deepened your understanding of the Church and this church. You have crafted your own statements of faith, and I have read them. Friends, like all of us, our confirmands recognize that we live in difficult times. They feel the foundations shaking. They know that total collapse is as likely as restoration. And so, these ancient stories of exile feel relevant to us. We, too, know dislocation, division, and despair. We, too, must ask, "What does faithful living look like right now?"

I am no prophet, but in the words of Jeremiah I find a three-part charge that might offer a roadmap for rebuilding in exile. Call it *three phases of construction*.

First, we are called to build a sense of self. You see, the exiles living in Babylon were assaulted with messages designed to deconstruct and redefine their very identity. They were denied the rituals that reminded them of who they were and to whom they belonged. And so, before they could begin the work of building houses and planting gardens, God's people had to remember their primary identity.

Who are we? In our exilic time there is no shortage of messages designed to answer that question for us. Social media companies invest billions of dollars in algorithms that sort us into tribes and feed us information designed to increase engagement by driving our enragement. We are relentlessly reminded of what we lack, of who we are not. We are compared to the filtered images and imagined lives of strangers and told that we just don't measure up. And so, to resist the subtle siren songs and sophisticated systems that aim to deconstruct and redefine us, we must regularly be reminded who we really are and what truly matters. You are a child of God. Full stop. Your primary identity will never be the labels placed on you or the messages fed to you by those only interested in capturing your attention for monetary gain. Yes, the chaos and the noise that surround us threaten to drown out the voice of the Spirit. Do not let this happen. Do not let them define you. Remember who you are.

Next, we are called to build community. This is what Jeremiah commands the exiles to do, to make a home right where you are. Call it the *art of neighboring*. It takes a lot of time. It takes intention. A couple of years ago, some of us had the opportunity to hear Bryan Stevenson speak at Butler University. Bryan leads the Equal Justice Initiative in Montgomery, Alabama, and in his book *Just Mercy*, he describes what it was like to grow up in the racially segregated community that was his home in Delaware.

Stevenson remembers his grandmother telling him, "You can't understand most of the important things from a distance. You have to get close." Stephenson describes this as the power of proximity. Getting close changes us. Intention. Time. Once you discover the humanity of another person there is no going back to writing them off. The work of the faithful is to transform spaces of hostility into neighborhoods—the kinds of places where relationships matter.

I think you should know about my friend Bud Braddock. Bud shares a birthday with our son Ben, eight decades apart. I first met Bud back in 2008 when a mutual friend invited me up to the mountains where my friend has a cabin and Bud lives full time. After forty-two years in the Forest Service, Bud and his wife Pat returned to her hometown of Suches, Georgia—population 888. They built a home in the hardwoods of Appalachia. Then Bud remembered his father's wisdom. "Son, when you retire, don't sit on the porch in a rocking chair, or you'll be dead in two years." So, Bud got busy. He started by leading hikes, and then he learned and taught the history of the region to locals and interlopers like me. He would lead "history hikes," complete with photographs and timelines. He mentored students in the community school that serves kindergarten through twelfth grade. He became a deacon at the Mt. Lebanon Baptist Church. Before long, he began to hear about the needs of his neighbors, many living in poverty but too proud to ask for help. So, Bud quietly gathered a few folks together under the radar, and soon they were surreptitiously drilling wells for neighbors who needed clean water. They anonymously purchased tombstones for families who couldn't afford them. Christmas presents showed up for children who wouldn't get any. Without fanfare, they fixed screen doors, built ramps, patched roofs, split wood, planted gardens, brought groceries, and sat on porches listening to the stories of the elderly. Now Bud is a man of very few words, especially about himself. He is also one of the finest preachers of the gospel message I have ever met. He loves God by loving his brothers and sisters. Right next to his

meticulously planted garden, no weed in sight, bursting with vegetables he will one day give away, there is a large shed that Bud built with his own hands. And on that shed, there is a simple sign which he also made, painted forest service brown. The sign says, "When your barn is well fill'd all snug and secure/ Be thankful to God and remember the poor."

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In the shalom of your neighbors, you will find your own.

The final charge comes with a promise. *When you call upon me, when you come and pray to me, I will hear you. When you search for me, you will find me.* We are called to build a sturdy faith.

Today we celebrate a milestone in the lives of our confirmands, and perhaps it's a good day to reflect on those moments in our own lives of consequential decision, those moments that have been turning points for us, those moments of deep commitment, those moments of transformation, those moments around which there is a before and an after. But we should also remember today that discipleship is never a destination, always a journey. If God has a plan filled with hope for you, then living into that plan is a daily decision. You see, we build faith the same way we build a life. Brick by brick. Choice by choice. Step by step. Moment by moment. How we spend our days is how we spend our lives. If you are looking, you will find God in the messy middle of it all.

So, how do we live in times of exile and uncertainty?

*Remember who you are.*

*Get close enough to practice the art of neighboring.*

*Build faith by walking daily with God.*

I was reminded again this week of the distinction made by the writer David Brooks between *resumé virtues* and *eulogy virtues*. The first are those skills and experiences that you bring to the marketplace—they are necessary, and they are helpful, but they are far from sufficient for a meaningful life. Eulogy virtues are different. They are those qualities of your life that will one day be lifted up at your funeral. Now, having given and heard hundreds

of eulogies, I can tell you this: when it comes time to summarize your earthly years, those who love you will say precious little about the pile of accomplishments you have earned, even less about all the things you've accumulated. The bullet points on your resumé will be a blip on the radar. Their gratitude for you will be rooted in the kind of person you became, the quality of community you formed and served, the depth of faith you cultivated.

You have been given this one precious life. For God's sake, don't waste it on anything less. Amen.