

Living Into the Mission
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As Jeremiah opens this morning, we find him imprisoned for his prophecy against Jerusalem. We are in the tenth month of the ninth year of the rule of Zedekiah, King of Judah. Jeremiah's "imprisonment" is actually in the open space where the guards are located. He cannot leave, but others may visit him.

It is not an easy time for Jeremiah. After foretelling the capture of the city, he manages to be freed and captured several times; imprisoned in dungeons and custodia libera - the open custody of the guards, until the Jews finally submit to Nebuchadnezzar on the advance of the Chaldeans.

If it sounds like there was a lot of chaos – there was.

Still, according to this reading in at least one way: life goes on. Amidst the prophesying, imprisonment, and impending destruction of the temple – Jeremiah stops to take care of a little real estate transaction with his cousin Hamamel.

There is, as always, more here than just a purchase of land. The ancient right of possession and redemption fell to Jeremiah based on his heritage, and the land, which was part of the land of the Levites – the Priestly Tribe – might have been lost to another tribe, had he not bought it. He could have refused to buy, giving up his right of kinsman ship – but he didn't. To do so would have broken with tradition.

So, Jeremiah makes the transaction, Baruch records it, and places the agreement in an earthenware jar, so that after captivity others of his kin might have the document to prove their inheritance.

Part of what is fascinating is the way that the land is used to symbolize not only Jeremiah's belief in God (remember, God showed all this to him in a vision), but his practice of that belief. Jeremiah has prophesied the destruction of the temple, which was approaching. He has prophesied the captivity of the Jews (both pretty easy to see at the moment) – and he has prophesied liberation – after a time. The purchase of the land was a sign he believed what God had called him to say, and that he was buying the land for a future that the Jews would one day have.

Non si male nunc et olim sic erit—
Though now we suffer, we shall not suffer always.

What can we learn from this passage? Was it Jeremiah helping a family member by kindly offering the little he had in a real estate transaction that had little

importance? Or was it as stated – a call by God to Jeremiah – a purchase of land as a sign of the promise?

Chances are the story would not be included in the writings of Jeremiah/Baruch simply to show the prophet's kindness. More likely, it is included to show that in the midst of Jeremiah's mission and ministry – even he had family obligations and traditions to tend to – and that this time would not be an end to such things.

The reading clearly makes the point that taking care of worldly possessions, (without them over-taking us) – is part of the human path upon which we travel. Part of our mission requires us to be stewards of material things as well as spiritual practices, in ways that reflect purpose and balance in our lives and our calls to service.

And, I think it is the challenge of stewardship as integral to mission that causes the juxtaposition of today's second reading of Luke with Jeremiah.

Luke continues to challenge us with his description of the parables of Jesus related to money and wealth. Last week, he caused some near-apoplexy in Jesus's seemingly favorable remarks about the dishonest manager. We had a very lively talk-back following that passage. Answers: probably none that totally resolved the disequilibrium, although there was some agreement that Jesus did compliment the dishonest manager on his shrewdness – but not his dishonesty. There's one of the fine lines that gives you a flavor of our conversation.

And, this morning, we who live in this affluent part of the country with a good deal of affluence of our own – come face to face with another passage that places the rich man who never did anyone any harm – in hell, seeking just a drop of water from the fingertip of the wretched beggar- now in heaven - who he never really **saw** right outside his door.

When I was growing up, even into my late teens and early twenties – I think these passages and the lives of some like Francis of Assisi were always part of the struggle I had about why are we here, what are we doing, am I going to spend my life pursuing possessions, or work more to follow the teachings of generosity, modesty, and the spiritual more than the commercial. All of that and more...

A couple of my friends were actually concerned that I was going to give everything away and run off in a sack cloth of some kind. I think they were most concerned about lining up to get first dibs on some of my albums – but the truth was, I never had such an intention – but I did struggle and continue to struggle with the balance of my own ability to earn an income and spend and live responsibly – and the needs of others who have less. (or, in some cases – more).

Herein, somewhere, I think, lay the meaning of the parable. And it is a parable, – important to remember that once we take a parable literally – it is no longer what it was intended to be. There is meant to be elasticity, so to speak, in how we can consider these words in terms of our own life, surroundings, and those we serve.

Is the idea of possessions or even wealth a bad thing? Is that the message? I don't think so. Jeremiah owned a bit of land; the wealthy of Jesus' time supported his mission (man of them women). In these and many other instances, the possessions of people were used not just for themselves but in some sort of mission to help others. How much? How little? That, I think, will always be the struggle and the discernment we face in our individual hearts and circumstances.

No, I think the sin of the rich man of the parable (frequently called Dives – but really never named) was his blindness to Lazarus and his own call to mission. Everything that describes the rich man refers to his opulence without any suggestion of being dishonest or evil. He just never saw the beggar outside his door. He missed his mission: using some of what he had to help others, and one with the least of those with less – was right outside his door.

Luke has a powerful way of showing just how Jesus brought multiple levels of the injustice and imbalance of the rich and the poor of the times into one laser-like focus parable that gets the attention of his audience.

Time and again in Jesus' teachings, we are directed to good use of our blessings, stewardship not hoarding; awareness of others not just with furtive glances; and a generosity of spirit and faith that leads to action and a demonstration of our faith.

How much? How little? When? In what way? These are the questions the rich man, it seems, never even considered. These are the questions that we embrace all the time, and therein, I think, is the difference between him and us. We come here to remember we are not blind, so that together we can see the needs of others and respond. We each bring our own sense of vision, energy, and resources – for the work of the congregation we share and for the individuals and groups we hope to serve – and it all becomes part of the mission of Palisades Presbyterian Church – in all sorts of ways.

Coming here, being active, and a part of this church is a way, I think, to avoid losing touch and sight of others and giving in ways that make a difference. It is not so much a way of protecting ourselves from judgment and being eternally parched – but a way of being fulfilled and blessed in our lives and work with others that reflects the teachings of Jesus and the gratitude we have for the God we come here to worship together.

To quote J. Hudson Taylor, 1835-1905 and English Missionary to China who founded the China Inland Mission and a missionary to China

"God's work done in God's way will never lack God's supply."

We are part of God's supply – a prayer, indeed, of itself.