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Central Presbyterian Church

In the City for Good  
Jeremiah 29:1-7  
St. Paul, Minnesota

Lord, your word is a lamp to our feet and a light to our path. Give us grace to receive your truth in faith and love, and live always for your glory. Through Jesus Christ our Savior. Amen.

Jeremiah 29:1-7

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. <sup>2</sup>This was after King Jeconiah, and the queen mother, the court officials, the leaders of Judah and Jerusalem, the artisans, and the smiths had departed from Jerusalem. <sup>3</sup>The letter was sent by the hand of Elasah son of Shaphan and Gemariah son of Hilkiah, whom King Zedekiah of Judah sent to Babylon to King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon. It said: <sup>4</sup>Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: <sup>5</sup>Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. <sup>6</sup>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. <sup>7</sup>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.

The Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

They had waited a long time for this letter to come. With great anticipation were hoping to receive news that they might return home to Jerusalem. When Jerusalem had been ransacked by King Nebuchadnezzar many of the people who were living there were deported to Babylon. And so the Israelites had been living in exile and it was with deep longing they looked forward to their return home to Jerusalem. But the letter they received did not ring out with jubilant words of the glorious homecoming they were to receive. In fact, the letter the prophet Jeremiah sent to them said nothing about their return to Jerusalem. Rather it told them to raise their children, plant their crops, invest in their city, get comfortable in Babylon. The letter told them they must learn to embrace their situation, accept their exile, play the cards they had been dealt.

This letter probably came with a huge shock to the Israelites and they would have had to drastically change the way they had been viewing at Babylon. The letter no longer allowed them to despise this place of exile or sabotage the good things found there. They were now being called to adapt to their surroundings and make it their home. They were being asked to integrate with a culture that was not their own, with people who did not share their history, with a community who did not respect their religion. They would no longer be allowed to isolate themselves; they would be forced to find their own place with and among the people of Babylon. Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann says this, "There is no "separate peace" for exiles,

no private deals with God, no permitted withdrawal from the affairs of the empire. The only shalom these troubled Jews would know is the shalom wrought for Babylon.”<sup>1</sup>

The letter was not intended to crush their spirits but raise their hope. God was offering them hope in their situation<sup>2</sup>, one that had the possibility of bringing about their own welfare even in the midst of exile. The letter says, “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.” The word welfare in Hebrew is shalom. Welfare does not quite capture the fullness of this word, shalom is completeness, soundness, peace, wholeness. Finding shalom is about finding rightness in relationship with the creation, with other people, with God, and with ones self. And in this letter to the Israelites God tells them that they will find their shalom when the city finds its shalom.

There is something deeply challenging about what God asks the Israelites to do in Babylon. You could equate this kind of request to other groups found today that are at odds with each other, asking them to not only tolerate each other but to support each other, pray for each other, invest in each other. When you think of some of the great rivalries throughout history not to mention hostilities that exist in the world you can see the difficulty of this request from God. Think North Korea - South Korea. Republic of Ireland - Northern Ireland. India - Pakistan. Union - Confederates. Israel - Palestine. And I know some of you are thinking Vikings and Packers. These examples all just give you a glimpse into the magnitude of this challenge.

Israel is asked to invest in Babylon and find community there while living in exile from their home. “In the welfare of the city you will find your own welfare.” Invest in this city, make it home, and you will find your shalom. Frederick Buechner in his book, *The Longing for Home* brings this sort of investment to life. He says, “To be homeless the way people like you and me are apt to be homeless is to have homes all over the place but not to be really at home in any of them. To be really at home is to be really at peace, and our lives are so intricately interwoven that there can be no real peace for any of us until there is real peace for all of us.”<sup>3</sup>

The Israelites would be homeless until they made a home for themselves in the city of Babylon. They needed that community to be at peace in order to find their own peace. It is a cyclical scenario. For them and for us. We cannot have community until we invest in the larger community. We cannot have peace until we create peace in our cities. We cannot have a home until we make a home for one another. These are things we long for but often we do not approach them with the right frame of mind. We want community for ourselves so we look for neighborhoods to live in or clubs to join. We want peace in our lives so we buy self-help books and take retreats to the woods. We want a home for ourselves so we fill our houses with things trying to create the right ambiance. None of these things are bad but they fall short of our hopes for them.

This is what Jeremiah’s letter would say to us. If you want community, invest in your city. If you want peace, make peace possible for others. If you want a home, eliminate homeless around

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<sup>1</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Cadences of Hope*, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, KY, 1997. p. 13.

<sup>2</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *A Commentary on Jeremiah – Exile and Homecoming*. William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, Michigan. p. 255.

<sup>3</sup> Frederick Buechner, *The Longing for Home*, Harper Collins, San Francisco, CA, 1996. p. 140.

you. Not in the abstract philosophical sense but in the real tangible sense of investment. Invest in the welfare of your city and your neighbors and you will find your own welfare.

Buechner hits the nail on the head, he says, “When Jesus commanded us to love our neighbors as ourselves, it was not just for our neighbor’s sakes that he commanded it, but for our own sakes as well. Not to help find some way to feed the children who are starving to death is to have some precious part of who we are starve to death with them. Not to give of ourselves to the human beings we know who may be starving not for food but for what we have in our hearts to nourish them with is to be, ourselves, diminished and crippled as human beings.”<sup>4</sup>

When we invest in others we invest in ourselves. We eliminate our own hunger when we serve food to others. We abate our sense of homelessness when we provide homes for other people. We find our inner peace when we promote equality and justice for others.

Central Presbyterian Church gives you opportunities to promote the welfare of your city. This church is one way that you can invest yourself and find community, peace, and a home. There are opportunities here in this place to provide shelter for homeless families in St. Paul, to teach English and computer skills to immigrants in this city, to give professional clothing to women trying to find work, to provide healthy lunches to the workers in this community. This congregation works to feed, clothe, teach, and house the people of this city. The people of this church are working to enact Jeremiah’s call to promote the welfare of this city so that our members might find their own welfare, their own shalom.

One thing that promotes the welfare of the city is to have healthy, viable churches with strong programs of outreach and social justice. Central is trying to be that presence in this community. I love the slogan of this church, “in the city for good”; it is a clever pun that speaks to our goal to survive despite hardships but not just for our own sake. We want to survive so that we might promote the welfare of the city. In the city for good, pun intended!

For your own sake and for the sake of the people around you, Jeremiah would ask that you find ways to promote the welfare of the city. Make a lasting investment in this community, in this city, in this church and you will create a home for yourself and for others.

Amen.

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<sup>4</sup> Frederick Buechner, *The Longing for Home*, Harper Collins, San Francisco, CA, 1996. p. 139.