

Date: October 10, 2004

SUNDAY: Ordinary 28

SERMON: Exiled Faith

Text(s): Jeremiah 29:1, 4-7; Luke 17:11-19

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For both Carol and me, this past week has brought back memories of our time in Paris rather strongly— not because of anything about Paris itself, but because the first Tuesday in October was always the beginning of one of our main outreach programs at the American Church, sponsored by our Women’s group. Entitled “Bloom Where You’re Planted,” this program culminated months and months of work by scores of volunteers. Its purpose was to reach out to all the new English-speaking residents of Paris who came because their jobs had brought them or their spouse there, or because they had come to study or simply to live for an extended time. The Bloom program was a very practical three-day survival course for folks who often felt they were exiles in a strange land.

Now, if you’ve visited Paris only as a tourist, or even if you haven’t, you may ask why anyone could possibly feel like an exile in Paris, the world’s most romantic and beautiful city, and why a survival course might be necessary. In fact, I imagine that some of you might even be wishing you could be an exile in Paris too. Not only would you get away from political campaign ads on television, but the food and wine would be terrific, too. But for those of you who have had the experience of living abroad for an extended period— either as a student or a corporate nomad or a military posting, you know that it is common to feel like an exile, particularly if the language spoken by the majority of people is not English. You can quickly find yourself reduced emotionally to childhood, where you feel incompetent at very simple tasks and where you can’t communicate your frustrations or your needs clearly. How, for example, can you possibly arrange to have your new washing machine connected? Not only do you not know any plumbers, or even what the word for plumber

is, but you wouldn’t know how to begin to communicate what you need the plumber to do for you. And using the telephone for any conversation beyond “Bonjour,” is hopeless. Believe me, when I say that the “Bloom Where You’re Planted” program was literally a life-saver for hundreds of new English-speaking expatriates every year.

Having been, for almost half of my working career as a pastor, an exile in a foreign land myself, I think, perhaps, I have a pretty good idea of the experience of the exiles in Babylon to whom Jeremiah the prophet wrote the the letter that we heard read this morning as our Old Testament lesson. And the more I’ve reflected on the exile experience, the more I understand that even for people who have never lived for significant periods of time outside their own home culture, the feeling of being in exile can nevertheless be very real, if by exile, we mean that sense of being in a situation where we’re adrift in unfamiliar or alien emotional territory, and don’t know how to function.

People who have been happily married for many years and then lose their spouse go through a very real experience of exile. They’ve spent years becoming “one flesh,” as the words of the marriage service puts it, with one another, so that they can hardly even think of themselves without the other; now, suddenly, they must somehow forge a new identity alone. Widowhood can be a foreign country.

Divorce imposes its own kind of exile, too. So many people have told me over the years that one of the hardest things for them following their divorce is that their separation from their spouse also separates them from many of their mutual friendships. Other married people don’t know what to do with them now that they’re no longer a couple. They’re still around, but it’s as though they’re resident aliens in a strange land.

We’re all more aware these days than we once were of the sort of exile that many gay or lesbian people have had to endure— being at once outsiders in their own families or their own

towns or even their own churches. The current debates over the legitimacy of gay-marriage only increases our awareness of the “outsider” status that minority sexual orientation carries with it.

Having a debilitating or life-threatening disease certainly carries with it the experience of exile, as does the experience of being the primary care-giver for someone who has the debilitating disease.

We can see this clearly in our gospel lesson where the ten lepers have banded together because they’ve been ostracized to the position of despised and feared outsiders. They’re not acceptable in polite society. So they become a society of their own— a society of exiles.

I imagine that there are quite a few people in Florida, in the wake of those hurricanes, and who are still living in shelters or whose homes were destroyed who are feeling like they’ve been exiled from all that was their normal life.

The list could go on. Since many of us have had such exile experiences, it shouldn’t be too difficult for us to empathize with the unfortunate citizens of Jerusalem who had been carted off to Babylon after the city’s defeat at the hands of Nebuchadnezzar in the late sixth century B.C.

Actually, the Babylonian (and Persian as well) policy of not slaughtering all of their conquered enemies, but forcibly resettling the intelligentsia and political leadership was not a stupid or unenlightened policy. For one thing, they didn’t throw these exiles into prison or torture them. They actually gave them land and helped them build new homes and found work for them to do. Sure they knew that the exiles would be reluctant workers, pining for their homeland. But they also knew that in time, they would assimilate. Their children would grow up formed by the Babylonian culture, and put their skills and gifts into the service of their new land, and so contribute to the greater glory of the Babylonian empire.

But, at least in the beginning, the exiles didn’t feel anything except pain, alienation, and desperate longing for their homeland. In Psalm 137 we hear their anguish as they expressed it in prayer and liturgy:

By the rivers of Babylon—

*there we sat down and there we wept
when we remembered Zion.*

On the willows there we hung up our harps. For there our captors asked us for songs,

*and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying,
"Sing us one of the songs of Zion!"*

*But how could we sing the LORD'S song
in a foreign land?*

That’s the real question in all our experiences of exile, isn’t it? That’s the question that rises up out of the deep loneliness and anguish in our hearts when we are experiencing those feelings of being cut off, isolated, alienated from everyone around us. How can we sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land?

Jeremiah’s answer to that plaintive question, if I can put it in simplistic terms might be “Bloom Where You’re Planted.” Or perhaps, “If life hands you a lemon, make lemonade.” But Jeremiah’s answer is both more eloquent and more profound than those clichés.

“Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage; multiply there and do not decrease. But seek the welfare of the city where you are in exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare, you will find your welfare.”

Seek the welfare of the city where you are in exile, for in its welfare, you will find your own welfare.

I can’t imagine that the exiles in Babylon,

who had been so cruelly uprooted from their homeland, driven without possessions to a foreign land where they were despised and defeated aliens, were particularly happy to get this letter from Jeremiah, can you? Instead of sending them jingoistic messages inciting them to resist their oppressors, instead of sending them a nostalgic exhortation to pray every day for their return to Zion, he urged them to build a new life for themselves and to actively seek the welfare of Babylon as the surest route to discovering their own welfare. This is a long-range program he urges upon them, for he speaks of their marrying and raising families and seeking marriage partners for their children as well.

But yet there is a wisdom here that can help us cope with our own experiences of exile, whether they be the self-imposed kind or the sort that life thrusts painfully upon us. What the exiles learn that enables them to begin blooming where they are planted, is that their own well being is bound up inextricably with the well being of their enemies. This goes against all logic and all natural human reaction. My enemy is my enemy. If he's on top, then I'm on the bottom. If I rise to the top, then it can only be as I put my enemy down and stand on top of him. But apparently this is not God's way of dealing with enemies. William Barclay once said that one of the things we learn from the stories of Jesus is that God's way of destroying enemies was to turn them into friends. That is the counsel these exiles receive; they can either give in to despair and accept their enemies' own view of them— as defeated nobodies— or they can “seek the welfare of the city,” to seek their enemies' welfare and in so doing, ensure their own.

What distinguishes Jeremiah's counsel from being just trite Hallmark-card sentimentality is his conviction that neither the exile itself nor the future belong to the Nebuchadnezzars or the Babylons of this world. Rather, the future belongs to God, and to work for the welfare of the city of their enemies is not a counsel of

despair or accommodation or defeatism or lack of patriotism, but rather a counsel of hope, an exhortation to live by faith, by their trust in the long view. In fact, if we had continued our reading this morning, just a few sentences further on, we read, “*For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope.*”

Out of their seemingly hopeless attempt to sing the Lord's song in a foreign land, in fact, God will shape a future for them that is good. It is not that God has foreordained either the exile or the precise shape of that future so that the human participants are just puppets dancing on a string. No, the God whose word speaks through this letter from Jeremiah is a God who is living, active in the very dynamics and processes of human history, a God whose ultimate will for the shape of the creation cannot be defeated by evil. Rather, as human agents in the drama, we can grasp that future by catching a vision, a vision accessible by faith and hope. Instead of looking backwards with regret and nostalgia for what once was, or looking fatalistically and passively at what now is, if we enter into that ongoing divine creativity, we can become partners with God in forging a future that is redemptive, a future with hope.

And perhaps it is just the people in exile, just those who are, whether through choice or through circumstances beyond their control, who are forced to be outsiders, forced to have to struggle for survival who can sometimes best see that hidden future with hope and can communicate that vision to others around them.

There were ten lepers who were healed by Jesus, in our Gospel story, but only one who recognized his healing as the work of God and came back to give thanks. The point of that story, however, is not that he was the only one of the ten who was grateful. Rather, the point is the fact that the only one who was grateful because he recognized his healing as the work of God was a double exile. He was exiled by his leprosy, but

he was also exiled because he was an ethnically-mixed and religiously-suspect, and therefore despised, Samaritan. The outsider is the one who grasped the shape of the future by faith. And that's exactly what Jesus says to him in response: "Your faith has saved you. Go in peace." Our English translations often dilute the meaning of that answer by translating Jesus' statement as "Your faith has made you well." But the word is the word for salvation; your faith has "saved" you. The healing of his leprosy is only a part of a much larger wholeness that the man has grasped by faith.

Living by faith is not an easy path to follow when we are in exile. It's not easy to turn the focus away from ourselves and begin to find ways to be redemptive in the midst of our alienation in the house of our enemies.?

And yet, this is precisely what it means to live by faith—to live by our conviction that God is present with us in the midst of our experiences of exile. That was Jeremiah's message to the mourners who hung up their harps on the willows of Babylon, who could not bring themselves to sing the Lord's song. By assuring them that God was with them in their exile, by calling them to trust in God's will for their good, they could get on with the hard work of settling in, of building houses, of marrying and starting families, of grasping a new future.

We, too, have to learn to sing the Lord's song in all the places of our own exiles. We, too have to learn to pray our sorrows, to dare to believe in God's presence and steadfast love, even when our experiences of alienation or isolation most call it into question. When life takes us in new directions that are lonely or bitter and we can hardly bear our losses, if we trust that God is with us, even in Babylon, to give us a future with hope, then we too will be able to find the courage to sing the Lord's song in a foreign land. And in singing the Lord's song, we may teach our enemies to sing it as well.