

Rev. Dr. Anne Bain Epling
First Presbyterian Church
March 3, 2024
Jeremiah 29:1, 4-7
Annual Meeting/Joint Worship

“Seeking the Heart of God in the Heart of the City”

Since we are all gathered today, I want to pick-up where I left off last week, and that is talking about our vision to be a church that is seeking the heart of God in the heart of the city. As I said last week and have said from the very beginning of my ministry with all of you, you have everything you need – everything you need -- to live into the vision of being such a church.

You . . . We . . . have the advantage of people – people who bring their gifts and skills and time and talents to the church; we have the advantage of location – the city is flourishing around us; Geoff Paddock told us Wednesday night that its estimated that 10,000 people will be living downtown when the current developments are complete – and hundreds of jobs are being created in our city to build and to sustain this new infrastructure, thus bringing even more people to Fort Wayne; we have the advantage of a Foundation so we can do ministry; we have the advantage of an excellent staff; and we have the advantage of this physical plant located in the middle of it all. All of this allows us to live out the vision of being a church that is seeking the heart of God in the heart of the city.

And the history of First Presbyterian Church is rooted in being a city church. Today is the 192nd annual meeting of this congregation – that is remarkable! And during this time there have been 5 locations of First Presbyterian Church, all of which have been in the city. When others were fleeing, we stayed.

But then again, we are Presbyterians! One of the things I love about Presbyterianism is that we have always understood that the city, the world, is where God calls us to be. It’s in our Presbyterian DNA from the very beginning.

John Calvin's influence on the city of Geneva was profound: he helped to establish new regulations to assure that the scales in the marketplace were accurate and fair; and he was instrumental in passing child labor laws; and my favorite . . . he helped pass an ordinance that prohibited taverns from opening for business on Sundays until church was out. This one is still alive and well in Fort Wayne I found out when I went to buy champagne on Sunday, December 31, when I was off that Sunday, and told by the clerk at Kroger I couldn't buy it until noon. Who knew?

In April 1564, very sick and near death, John Calvin called the ministers of Geneva together to say goodbye, and this is what he said: "Let everyone consider the obligation he has—not only to the church, but also to the city which you have promised to serve" (T.H.L Parker, John Calvin: A Biography).

Calvin's disciple, John Knox, helped establish a public school system in Scotland that became the model for publicly funded education for all the children, which was a new and radical idea in the sixteenth century. And Presbyterians have been proponents of public education ever since. (And here I'll put in a shameless plug to come on Wednesday to hear Zachary Harl, the principal of Southside High School.)

Two centuries after Calvin, a distinguished scholar and popular Presbyterian preacher, John Witherspoon, was being recruited by the trustees of the College of New Jersey—later Princeton—to come to America to be the college president.

The year was 1768, and the cause of independence was already shaking the colonies, particularly New Jersey and Princeton. Witherspoon was immediately attracted to the cause and became personally involved. In time, he was appointed to several public positions and eventually elected to the Continental Congress and became the only clergyperson to sign the Declaration of Independence which concludes with these final words, "For the support of this Declaration, with a firm reliance on the protection of Divine providence, we mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes, and our sacred honor." (See Martha Lou Lemmon Stohlman, John Witherspoon: Parson, Politician, Patriot.)

And so, Presbyterians have always understood that God cares about what is going on in the world and calls God's people to be in the world in God's name because we believe the truth of Jeremiah's mandate—that in the city's welfare is our welfare. And we seek its welfare not because it's a good thing to do -- even though it is; we do it because this is what God requires and has from the beginning of time.

Nearly 2500 years ago, the prophet Jeremiah wrote a letter to people in captivity echoing this requirement. The people had grown up in Israel, but were now refugees, sent into exile and forcibly removed from their homeland. They were mourning all that they had lost and were now trying to come to grips with their new life in the faraway land of Babylon.

While the people Jeremiah spoke to are very different from us, the words have a distinctively contemporary, relevant feel about them. They speak of ordinary life, of family and home, of a life which is comfortable, settled, and peaceable. They speak of building relationships, and undertaking good, honest work, and assuming responsibility for those under our care.

Hear again the heart of the letter:

Build houses and live in them;
plant gardens and eat what they produce.
Take wives and husbands and have sons and daughters;

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.

Think of that! Your welfare, your thriving, is all wrapped up in the city, in its health and welfare. The city is your agenda.

But seeking the welfare of the city was not what the people wanted to do, nor was it what they expected God to tell them to do. They were only living in the city because they'd been forced from their homes by the Babylonians. They were prisoners, exiles in a foreign land. Immigrants really, and they were no more wanted there than some feel about today's

immigrants. And this land, Babylon, was a pagan land. They were surrounded by temples dedicated to all sorts of gods but their own.

It has been estimated that Babylon was the largest city in the world in the 17th century BCE, and again between 612 and 320 BCE— which was the time during which Jeremiah was writing. Babylon was probably the first city to reach a population above 200,000—a figure which seems relatively small to us when we think about cities, but which would have required a complex administration and organization. So to seek the shalom of the city – and shalom is the Hebrew word used here, and that’s important to know – to seek shalom of the city means that the Israelites were being challenged to immerse themselves in the largest population, the most vibrant and diverse community of people at that time in the ancient Near East.

And what is shalom? Shalom encompasses not just peace (meaning the absence of conflict), but also wholeness, fulfillment, security, satisfaction, a cooperative spirit, and a sense that all is well with the world.

This is what the fearful exiles were being encouraged to work towards. You are here, in this strange land, for the long haul, Jeremiah told them. So lift your eyes above your immediate grief and pain, and do what is good, what makes for peace, for the whole city. Through Jeremiah, God was telling them: Set your goals not on the basis of what is good for you as an individual, but rather on what is best for the whole community. Seek the shalom of the city; the whole collection of human beings who are gathered in this one metropolis.

From its beginnings, First Presbyterian has always been committed to living in and for the city. From its inception, it has attracted leaders who believe that the Christian witness extends beyond the fellowship of the membership to concern for the welfare of the city and the people who live in it. Early pastors were courageous antislavery advocates. In the 1840s and 1850s, the church founded elementary and high schools because the public system was underdeveloped. Later in the century it founded two new Presbyterian congregations. The congregation has never wavered in its community consciousness and world awareness. In recent decades, it has

been a founder of Wellspring Interfaith Social Services; welcomed MLK to dinner; provided shelter to women seeking abortions at the health clinic next door; and housed the Samaritan Counseling Center on the 3rd floor. Not only this, but a church only seeking its own welfare would never have considered a Day School ministry that provides quality affordable childcare to people living and working downtown; nor would it ever have considered becoming a permanent home to a Korean Language Ministry. Selfish churches don't do that sort of thing. And it certainly would not have built a theater or art gallery and firmly committed itself to finding new and creative ways for people to express their faith. Today, we are a founding member of the Help Not Handcuffs Coalition, we re-affirmed at our last Session meeting our commitment to the full inclusion of LGBTQ+ individuals in the life of the church, and we are regularly asked to give voice to the issues of our day.

Everything we do here – everything I have just mentioned – everything we do from worship to Bible studies, from shows in the theater to concerts in the sanctuary, from caring for others to fellowship times together – all of it works together to strengthen us to go into the world and be disciples of Christ reflecting God's love, care and concern for all. It is no accident that the last movement of worship is sending.

And we must continue to seek the welfare of the city; to seek the heart of God in the heart of the city. Now is not the time to take our foot off the gas pedal. Now more than ever the church needs a public witness. In a day and age when Christendom is long dead and folks don't automatically come to church at 11am on Sunday, now more than ever we must be that 7 day a week church that Rev. Meister exhorted you to be 65 years ago. A narrow parish outlook is selfish, and like all things selfish, is doomed. Friends, he was right.

“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.”

Jeremiah's words are still counter-intuitive, because we usually seek our welfare first not understanding that the 2 are inextricably tied together.

But do you know what happened when Jeremiah's audience followed his advice? Israel wrestled with what it really believed and learned that worship could happen anywhere, not just in the temple, and that was groundbreaking. Furthermore, much of the Hebrew Bible was formed during this period. And synagogues became a vital part of the community.

Today, too many churches turn their backs on the city, thinking the only thing that matters is what happens inside the church's walls. And the longer that goes on, the more the church declines. Show me a church in decline, and I'll show you a church that lost touch with its neighborhood. People forget that Strong cities make strong neighborhoods, and strong neighborhoods make strong schools and local businesses and neighborhood alliances and that all leads to strong churches. The 2 are inextricably tied together.

And so today, as we convene as a congregation for the 192nd time – looking back to what was but more importantly to what will be, let us face the challenge of responding to the changing circumstances of our time, when fewer people claim an active belief and participation rates in church activities are much less than in the “glory days” of decades past. Let us create new ways of being communities of faith; looking for new opportunities to make connections with people in our city; exploring the means for ensuring that our city is one which is marked by fairness and justice; and shaping a church which is committed to finding new and creative ways of expressing our faith in this city we call home.

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.

Amen.