

The Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost  
October 13, 2019  
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St. John's Episcopal Church

Text: Jeremiah 29:1, 4-7 and Luke 17:11-19

I'd like to do things a little differently this morning, if you'll indulge me. You see, both the text from Jeremiah and the text from Luke resonated with me so, instead of speaking on just one of them, I'd like to offer a brief reflection on each of them. Perhaps this is a bit more teaching than preaching this morning. These two passages have so much to say to us about the times in which we live and how we navigate them as followers of Jesus.

This passage from Jeremiah might be titled "Strangers in a Strange Land" or "Bloom where you're Planted." God's people are in exile in Babylon. They are living in a land they don't know, in a culture that is different from their own, and God – through Jeremiah – tells them to settle in. I can't imagine that this was what they were hoping to hear.

Wouldn't they want to hear that this would be over soon so DON'T get comfortable, don't settle in, don't plant your roots too deeply, you'll be going home soon?

But it's clear from this passage that they had no idea how long they would be away from Jerusalem, away from their home. So, God tells them how to cope with their circumstances:

Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat from them; grow and multiply in number, do not decrease. And, importantly, pray for the welfare of this place in which you now live.

That is breathtaking, what God tells them. You want us not only to settle in for the long haul but you also want us to pray for the welfare, the prosperity, the peace of this place that we don't even want to be? Really God?

But what's also interesting to me is that God doesn't say anything about assimilation. God doesn't tell them to give up their own identity or culture. God doesn't say that they should become enmeshed in the culture of the Babylonians but, rather, live as they did in their own land – building homes, having families, caring for one another, praying for peace in this foreign place in which they are called to live, for however long they will be there.

It's like God is saying: be an example, be a beacon. Live a righteous life in a place that might not feel so righteous to you. Be my people wherever you are, wherever I call you to live. Be my witness.

What really resonated with me this past week about this passage – we were talking about it in Bible Study on Wednesday – is that it often feels like we're strangers in a strange land right now as we seek to live as followers of Jesus; as we seek to live righteous lives in a place and time that sure doesn't feel very righteous most of the time.

Think about it: as followers of Jesus we are called to love and welcome everyone – the stranger and the immigrant; the wealthy and the poor; people of every nation and language and ability and identity and orientation and political preference. All people.

And, we are called to be kind, to show mercy, to stand up against injustice and violence in all its forms. We're called to love our neighbors as ourselves.

But this is not what our culture today values, does it? Our current culture trades in coarseness and name-calling;

it celebrates divisiveness rather than dialogue; it champions bullies and those who wield power without mercy.

And we, sometimes without even realizing it succumb to this culture; in small ways it wears us down and seduces us into various forms of assimilation: we are quicker to judge or say something unkind instead of listening deeply to the other's point of view or simply holding our tongues.

We are more willing to trade in gossip and innuendo rather than doing to hard work of seeking truth and understanding; we're more willing to cut ourselves off from those who are different than us rather than seek to build and nurture relationships across those difference.

But we are not called to assimilate to this culture. Yes, we live in it in America today; we have been planted here for a time and we are called to be God's people in this place. We have been called to retain OUR culture – a culture that celebrates diversity, welcomes every person in love, seeks reconciliation, offers forgiveness, and humbly bears witness to God's presence.

Our predecessors built this house we sit in today – they planted deep roots not knowing how long they would be here. And we are called to continue to build, to increase in number, because this is where we all have been planted for however long we are here. We need to keep building houses like this where every person is welcome and celebrated for exactly who God made them to be; we need to continue planting gardens – literally and figuratively – and we need to fervently pray for peace for all people.

Yes, we are strangers in a strange land, but we are not ever alone. God planted us here and gives us all we need to grow and thrive. Most importantly, God gave us one another. Thanks be to God.

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And now, briefly, a few words about this passage Luke about the ten lepers.

Realizing that you have been seen and that you are included and loved exactly as you are is a powerful thing. I think that's what the one – the tenth leper in this story in Luke's gospel – understood and was responding to when he turned around and went back to Jesus when he realized he had been made well.

The tenth leper, the one who stops in his tracks, turns around and goes to Jesus to thank him and to praise God realizes that he has been SEEN and made whole. It had to come as a surprise to him. He was an outcast among outcasts – not only a leper but also a Samaritan. It would not have been unheard of for him to have been bypassed. We know about Samaritans – they are the “other”, the ones that were ostracized and marginalized. But Jesus doesn’t make distinctions.

He SEES all of those who cry out for mercy and ALL are made clean, made whole. ALL are worthy and none had to do anything to earn his mercy and compassion. And this is what strikes the Samaritan. That **even he** is included, **even he** is welcomed and loved and seen. And he responds with such joy – he praises God with a loud voice!

Can you imagine what that must have felt like? The freedom and acceptance he must have felt at that moment!

I know what it feels like, as do many friends of mine in the LGBT community who are fortunate enough to find a place like St. John’s at some point in their lives. A place that sees us and welcomes us and loves us for exactly who God made us to be.

A church that tells us, without any equivocation, that we are beloved children of God, made in God's perfect image.

This really struck me this past week by a couple of things that mean a whole lot to LGBT people but may not have resonated with anyone else given the torrent of other news this past week.

The week began with arguments in the Supreme Court that will determine whether it is legal for employers to fire employees who identify as LGBT. It is, yet again, up to nine individuals to determine whether we are worthy of the same rights and protections as everyone else.

Then, the week ended with the celebration of National Coming Out Day on Oct. 11. This annual awareness day acknowledges the anxieties and joys and heartbreaks and relief that LGBT people experience every time they come out – it's not a one-time thing, it happens over and over and over again, with every new job or new neighbor, every new church or new school. It's an ongoing part of life.

And in the midst of this week, I read this passage from Luke. This passage in which Jesus affirms that there are no borders or boundaries in God's realm; in which Jesus affirms that every single one of us is created in God's image and every single one of us is welcomed and loved and embraced as God's own. We know this and believe this at St. John's. I have seen it and experienced it myself.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.