

**First United Methodist Church
618 Eighth Street
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“Seeking Shalom”
Text: Jeremiah 29:1, 4-7

Carnivals and amusement parks often have games that seem really easy. Just make a basket and win a prize! Climb up a rope ladder and ring a bell! Most of us have realized that those games are rarely what they seem. The basketball goal you’re aiming for is an oval rather than a circle and the ball might be over- or under-inflated. The rope ladder is meant to spin as soon as someone touches it. The game operators have created a situation where it’s nearly impossible to win. And if you do, the prizes are often not worth what you paid to play. When I worked at an amusement park in high school, I was surprised to learn how little those prizes cost the company. No matter what, the company wins.

When Jesus talked about the Greatest Commandments, loving God and loving people, some people brushed those off as easy. They are simple words that compressed all the law and prophets into two short statements. But the reality is that loving God and loving people is the biggest challenge of our lives. Fortunately, God is not a carnival owner looking for ways to cheat us in the end. Rather, God uses our lives and Scripture to encourage us to lean into our life’s calling with vigor and hope, no matter our circumstances. Following the Greatest Commandments is a challenge, but a worthy one.

The Hebrew people in our text today are looking for a way out of Babylon at all costs. You might call them desperate. Who can blame them? Their entire way of life has been destroyed and they’ve been exiled in a foreign country. Arriving on the scene is the prophet Hananiah, who claims that the exile would end in two years. Just like any of us in desperate circumstances desire to believe an offered shred of hope, the people took the bait. They were willing to press their luck by planning to revolt to bring about their return to Jerusalem. At just the right time Jeremiah steps in to prevent the inevitable, bloody disaster.

Imagine being in Jeremiah’s place. He is a prophet sent from God, clearly receiving a different message than the one Hananiah is speaking. But as with many things in life, the easy road is not the one worth taking. Jeremiah risks his life and good standing to speak a hard word to the people: “You are not returning to Jerusalem anytime soon. Make a life. Set down roots. And quit hoping for a miracle--instead BE the miracle...for everyone.”

In the *Tattooist of Auschwitz*, Lale is a Jewish man imprisoned by the Nazis at Auschwitz-Birkenau. By the kindness of another prisoner, he is apprenticed into tattooing identification numbers on the those who arrive each day. It is often unpleasant work, but it grants Lale the opportunity for more freedom around the camp as well as extra food rations. Lale recognizes that rather than spending his days seeking a way to escape, he ought to spend his time caring for

others. Always bearing in mind that “to save one is to save the world,” Lale sets out to make the most of every opportunity to extend love and care to Jews, Gypsies, and political prisoners in the camp. It didn’t matter who they were—Lale saw that they needed care. Lale’s life was the flower pushing through the brokenness of the Nazi concrete. He took risks in order to care for others in the camp and his actions had far-reaching impact.

When Jeremiah calls the people to marry and have children, he is reminding them of what happened another time their people were in exile. As they married and raised their families, they overwhelmed the Egyptians, setting the stage for the Hebrew people to enter the promised land. The time between entering and leaving Egypt was not short—it was many generations. Jeremiah’s reminder is a sobering one to his hearers, but it carries a word of hope. Just as the Hebrew people in Egypt were liberated by God’s abundant power, they would again experience redemption by the power of God rather than by their own might.

In addition to reminding them of their past, Jeremiah challenges the people to seek what the NRSV calls in verse 7, “the welfare of the city.” The NIV translates this Hebrew word as “peace and prosperity.” The Hebrew word here is **shalom**, one of the most famous and faith-focusing words in all of Judaism. Shalom is a deep sense of completeness and wholeness—a restoration to God’s perfect creation. What Jeremiah is saying to the people is that they should seek out and create an environment where even the Babylonians would experience the deep peace of God. The Jews should live such amazing and missional lives that the city of their captors should be saved from the oppression of a scarcity mentality.

Imagine being an exiled person hearing this! You are displaced, forced into a foreign culture with a new language and strange religion, likely not being treated very well by the Babylonian people, and you’re being told to essentially save your oppressors from themselves. Wait...that sounds oddly similar to another teaching I’ve heard before. I think there was a different prophet that once told his followers to love and pray for their enemies! When Jesus taught in the Sermon on the Mount for people to love their enemies, it wasn’t a new and radical teaching. It was rooted in Jeremiah’s teaching here and from others throughout the Old Testament. The enduring idea is that God desires for all humanity to prosper (no matter who they are) and that flourishing ought to be brought about by God’s people. As children of God, our task is to share the good news that God is for ALL of us!

This week I took an informal survey of my Facebook friends in Columbus, asking what they perceived as the most pressing problems in the city, especially those if solved would lead to the best outcomes for the most people. Essentially, I asked what things could be done to improve the welfare of the city as a whole. The responses were wide ranging, including access to more efficient transportation, providing truly affordable rental properties as well as helping more people with home down payments, provision of more addiction and mental health services, and providing a living wage. These are systemic problems requiring substantial funding or coordination among government and private groups. I think it’s easier for each of us to identify the problems but then do little to help solve them because the solutions are seemingly out of our reach. As human beings, we end up feeling broken or overwhelmed by the enormity of the problems. Usually we hope that somebody else will work on it, and we tend to criticize them for the solutions chosen!

But what if we framed this differently? Jeremiah admonished the Jews in exile to make simple lives for themselves, taking care of what property they had and being industrious. Their big problem was that they were forced out of their homeland and were oppressed by a foreign power. Jeremiah's advice didn't fix that—it was earthy, day-to-day stuff, simply outlining what they needed to do in the meantime. The exiles were instructed to make a life that doesn't harm others and then to pray and work for the good of everyone living in Babylon. Theodore Roosevelt had the same idea when he said, "This country will not be a good place for any of us to live in unless we make it a good place for all of us to live in." By living lives open to the needs of the entire community, the exiles could create beauty from the ashes of their own broken lives.

The challenges listed by my Facebook friends are realities in Columbus, but they often don't change how we live each day. We can make our voices heard by reaching out to legislators, city officials, and by voting for candidates that hold positions supportive of the good of the many. We can attend protests and community meetings on issues important to us. These are productive and healthy things to do, but that is not *all* we can do.

We can be people who are aware and attentive to the needs of others. Whether they are neighbors and friends or strangers in Kroger, we can live with a spirit of generosity to all. We can learn about the most effective ways to help people who are struggling with systemic poverty. We can listen to other people's stories, even if their perspective grates us. We can welcome new people to the neighborhood with a plate of cookies. We can learn our neighbor's names. All this work requires us to move beyond ourselves—to step outside of the safe cocoon we've created and recognize the struggles that exist all around us. When we seek the welfare of the city, we are followers of Jesus praying for Holy Spirit-led awareness of need. We are pleading for the strength to continue to love even when our efforts meet with negative attitudes or resistance. Big change is a result of small action. And when the small actions of an entire group of followers of Jesus are combined—monumental, generational change occurs.

Jeremiah is challenging the Jews in exile to be the salvation of their enemies. They are called to live abundant lives even in the midst of the pain of exile. This is not just living in abundance to spite the Babylonians. It is welcoming them into the midst of the abundance alongside the Hebrew people. They are challenged to pray for these enemies, not as a way of pitying them or to get them to change their minds. These prayers are for the best for their captors as well—that they would experience God's abundance. Open-hearted love is only something that God can give us. It's not in our nature to love like that. Prayer is an integral part of the equation for both the Hebrew people and us today. Prayer changes our hearts! It must be God's work in our lives that grows in us the desire to think not only about the best for ourselves or those closest to us. God must change our hearts so we may do the work of creating a beloved community where *everyone* prospers.

We live in a world of factions, where people are aligning themselves with whoever can give them the best deal or the biggest voice. Most of the time those factions are created out of fear—that someone will take what's mine and give it to someone who doesn't deserve it. Jeremiah's call is for us not to wait until someone takes from us to help others. We should be on the forefront of generosity, awareness, and openness to create a new thing out of brokenness. Prayer

is the vehicle that helps us arrive at generosity. It opens our hearts to love that big and that vulnerably.

We are called to get busy blooming where we are planted. Instead of investing our energy in complaining about all that's wrong with the world by publishing Onions and grumbling to our friends about our least favorite politicians, we ought to create life where we are. We have the capacity to choose to live abundantly, with gratitude for what we have. We can breathe life into broken lives and broken homes. We can plant trees and gardens, and plant them again when they're vandalized. We can pray blessing over those vandals. We can be like Ellen Degeneres and George W Bush, truly listening to our neighbor whose political inclinations vary from ours. We can rejoice with our neighbors over new grandbabies and positive test results. We can mourn with them when retirement travel is no longer physically possible and when children are lost to addiction. Our differences matter little when our hurts and joys are so similar.

One of my favorite quotes from Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. is found in the book *Strength to Love*: "Returning violence for violence multiplies violence, adding deeper darkness to a night already devoid of stars. Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that." Our lives must be full of light and to do that, they must be full of love which can only be brought about by God's work in our hearts through prayer.

God's Kingdom is one of abundance, not scarcity. It is a place where all is renewed, and everything is made whole. It is a place where shalom is restored. This Kingdom is not a far-off place that only exists in heaven. This Kingdom is *now*, and we are blessed to be co-creators of it. God has chosen to work alongside of us to make a new thing. Even if we don't feel it now, this Kingdom is always there, popping up when we least expect it. Go out today prepared by prayer so that God's Kingdom is revealed. Have your eyes open for the needs around you. They will break your heart, but you are not unequipped. God has given you everything you need to make it all the way up that twisty rope ladder of abundant generosity. The reward at the end isn't a mere carnival bear, but a renewed world. And that is worth more than whatever pride we sacrifice to attain it. Amen.