

Jeremiah 29:1, 4-14
Love Where You Live!
WRCoB 6.27.21

My wife, Judith, left her home in Nigeria 12 years ago
To move with me to the United States.

She left everything and everyone
That was near and dear to her
And accompanied her husband to the U.S.
To start a new life.

It was a choice she made.

Once here in the States, she could do one of two things.

She could mope about
Depressed and unwilling to try to fit in
To her new surroundings.

She could spend all her emotional energies
Wishing she were back home
With family and friends
Her culture, food and language.

She could refuse to engage her new environment.

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Or she could get involved
Learn new things
Be open and willing to embrace a new culture.

She could invest in new friends
Get an education for a new occupation
And try to adapt to the best of her ability.

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Judith did the latter.

And in my opinion, not only has she done very well
But she has contributed to the betterment of society.

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Now imagine, being FORCED from your home
Forced to live in a foreign land?

FORCED to stay against your will?

Could you embrace your new country
And be eager to be a part of your new surroundings?

Could you become friends
With the very people who took you captive?

Could you become an active, engaged citizen?

If you read the Book of Daniel
You discover that there were some like Daniel
That didn't mope around.

They engaged in their new surroundings
And did very well for themselves
As well as contributing to the society around them.

Daniel became a valued advisor to the king.

But for the most part
The people of Judah in exile in Babylonia
Did not engage, could not adapt
Mourned the loss of their homeland.

But really, how many of us wouldn't be like them
Sulking about, depressed
Unwilling or unable to fit in?

The Psalmists describes how they felt.

**137 By the waters of Babylon,
there we sat down and wept,
when we remembered Zion.**

**² On the willows there
we hung up our lyres.**

**³ For there our captors
required of us songs,
and our tormentors, mirth, saying,
“Sing us one of the songs of Zion!”**

**⁴ How shall we sing the LORD's song
in a foreign land?**

**⁵ If I forget you, O Jerusalem,
let my right hand forget its skill!**

**⁶ Let my tongue stick to the roof of my mouth,
if I do not remember you,
if I do not set Jerusalem
above my highest joy!**

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For the people of Judah
The worst that could happen, happened.

Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon
Swept through Judah
Sacking Jerusalem
And destroying everything in his path.

They, then, took captive all the dignitaries
The wealthy, the skilled, anyone who might be useful
And sent them off to Babylon.

They left the undesirables behind
The poor, the elderly
Those that were a burden on society.

A precursor to what we know today as “brain drain”
The emigration of highly trained or intelligent people.

Meanwhile, Jeremiah, the author of our story
Remained behind in prison.

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God tells Jeremiah to write a letter to the exiles in Babylon.

“Thus saith the Lord

‘Get used to your new surroundings’

‘Make the best of your situation’

‘Unpack your bags, settle down, build homes, plant gardens’

‘Put out an asparagus patch, strawberry beds.’

‘Find wives and husbands for your sons and daughters.’

‘Seek the welfare of the city of Babylon

And pray to the Lord on its behalf.”

‘You’re going to be stuck here for a while.’”

Imagine!

God is telling the exiles to pray

For the peace and prosperity of the city of Babylon?

To pray for the very people that just destroyed their homes

Killed their relatives, their friends, their neighbors?

Pray for them?

Seek what is beneficial to them?

That’s what God said, whether we like it or not!

We hear this again in the New Testament, don’t we?

That we are to love our enemies

And pray for those who persecute us.

Jesus says this in the Sermon on the Mount.

It is a bitter pill to swallow for sure.

But there you have it, God's word!

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God tells Jeremiah to tell the exiles
70 years they will have to endure.

Most of them would not live to see the day
They return to the homeland.

But that doesn't mean God forgot them.

**11 For I know the plans I have for you, declares the LORD,
plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future
and a hope.**

Finding themselves in untenable circumstances
The Jews felt abandoned by God

But God had not abandoned them.

God still cared and loved them
Still had their best interests in mind.

However, God allowed for difficult circumstances
To bear down upon them as a way
Of disciplining and purifying the people.

There were no short cuts to restoration

Jeremiah encourages them to settle in
And make the most of a bad situation.

Jeremiah reminds them

That divine blessings will reach them

In the new place they are to call home.

"Crises of every kind will find us ... [But] these crises enter our lives not just as challenges to us to retain our balance and stability, but as invitations to stretch our hearts and minds ... [Every crisis] includes within [itself] an invitation for us to move from being good people to becoming great people."— Ronald Rohlheiser

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This saith the Lord

Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you

For in its welfare you'll find your welfare.

Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you

Should be the vision statement for West Richmond.

For in some ways

The Brethren in Richmond are exiles.

If exiles mean resident aliens.

At best, we are second generation Brethren in the city.

We may have come here for school or work

But in many ways, we feel we don't belong.

It is a new environment for Brethren.

But it is God's call for West Richmond.

So how are we to do it, seek the welfare of the city?

Love where you live!

That doesn't necessarily mean
You like where you live.

It does mean wherever God places you
You reach out in love to those around you.

Most of our emphases are on a more personal note.

We want to get a good education.
We want to find a job that satisfies our calling
And we want to make a decent living.

We want find a house that will become a home

We want to raise our children
In a happy, secure atmosphere
And in a Christ-centered atmosphere.

We want to belong to a community of faith
To edify, educate, and challenge our faith.

That's good.

These are individual and family goals.

We all brought them into this city.

And most of us find ourselves
Living comfortably in our surrounding.

Some of us become a part of other networks
Other communities
Whether it be a yoga class, running club
Or some sort of volunteer activity.

As long as we are good, well-behaved
Law-abiding citizens
Here in Richmond Virginia
We feel we have done our part.

To put it simply
Our inclination is to take care of ourselves first
To seek our own welfare, peace and prosperity.

But is that enough?

God calls us individually and corporately
To seek the welfare of the **city**
In which God has placed you.

That's you and me
And that's West Richmond church of the Brethren.

Seeking the welfare of Richmond
Largely means a commitment to serve
Where we are most needed.

Where the struggle for basic survival
Where the fight for justice

Where the cause for peace is the greatest.

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In our book study

We have looked at this term “zero sum”.

The author suggests our American society

Lives with a “zero sum” attitude.

Meaning that in any given situation

Whatever is gained by one side

Will be lost by the other.

Her title to the book, “The Sum of Us”

Makes the argument that what is good for me

Will be good for you

What is good for my tribe

Will be good for your tribe.

What is good for society

Will be good for all that reside in society.

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God makes the same argument here in today’s text.

In seeking the welfare of the city

Its peace and prosperity will be ours as well.

By raising others up, we raise ourselves up too.

When we touch our neighbors with the love of Christ.

When we make an impact in our places of work.

When we get involved in issues surrounding
Poverty, and justice, and racism

When we seek the welfare of others
It will also be of benefit to us.

No zero sum here.

Everywhere we go we can be people of *shalom*.

For that is the word which the NRSV translates as welfare.

At work, at school, at home, in our local community
And in the larger context of our city
It is God's call to us and to our church.

Wherever God has planted us
There we are to bloom.

And not only us but to help all who are planted here
To bloom as well.

We, who are resident alien Brethren,
Living as exiles here in the city of Richmond.

Are called by God to make the most out of our time here
To make an impact on those living around us.

Build houses and live in them
Plant gardens and eat what they produce.
Marry and have children

And seek the peace and prosperity of the city
Where God has sent us
For the glory of God and our neighbors' good.