

**FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH  
305 EAST MAIN STREET  
DURHAM, NC 27701  
PHONE: (919) 682-5511**



## **“Radical Investing”**

**A sermon by Marilyn T. Hedgpeth**

**26<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year C)**

**September 29, 2013**

**Jeremiah 32:1-3a, 6-15; Psalm 91:1-6. 14-16; Luke 16:19-31**

---

One of the difficult things about being downtown in Durham most of the week is dealing with the desperation that one encounters without dismissing it, without stepping over it on the way out the church door.

The other day as I was leaving church for an appointment with a member, a man accosted me in the parking lot, blocking access to my car, quite upset and visibly agitated.

He clutched a map of the Triangle in one hand and waved an Amtrak schedule in my face with the other as he begged,

“Please, can you give me \$23 to purchase an Amtrak ticket to Knightdale today?”

I don't want to go back to jail. I need to go to Knightdale today.

I'll do push-ups in the parking lot for Jesus,” he said, “if you'll give me \$23

for an Amtrak ticket.” And he dropped to his hands and knees on the hot blacktop.

“Please, no,” I said. “Get up. That's not necessary.

I have \$11 I can give you, and you can use it to get a TTA bus pass to Raleigh, and then transfer to Knightdale.

I'm sorry, but I don't have \$23 on me.”

But he wanted the all-or-nothing solution and refused to be consoled.

He took my money, but would not entertain my more than half-way offer.

And he pushed by my shoulder hurriedly, instead of doing push-ups for Jesus.

He remained upset and agitated, and I felt inadequate

that I was not able to meet his deep need.

I wonder now if he was the same distraught man who was shot to death the next day brandishing a gun in downtown Durham? He easily could have been.

I wonder what Jesus or Father Abraham would have me do differently the next time?

Is there any halfway point in Jesus' parable that makes for mutual comfort, or are we always meant to feel uncomfortable, uneasy, in the presence of poverty and despair?

Or does the discomfort of both parties somehow bridge the chasm between us and bring the far-off field of kingdom life into closer proximity?

Jesus' lesson on despair, according to this parable in Luke's Gospel, seems to be two-fold: first, share what we have with the desperate

because even resurrection freedom will not transcend one's obligation to act with compassion and charity towards the down and out;

and secondly, listen to and obey the Old Testament prophets who warned about an integrity that melded faith and action long ago.

One cannot dismiss the Old Testament prophetic witness as no longer relevant to faith.

It was, and it is relevant still today!

Jeremiah's lesson on despair seems to be this: invest radically in it!

Jeremiah has been imprisoned in Jerusalem by his own government

because they claim his litany of doom is demoralizing his own people.

But by the 30<sup>th</sup> chapter of the book of Jeremiah, we get a break in his doleful dirge.

"Do not fear, O Jacob, my servant, do not despair, O Israel," declares the Lord.

"I will surely save you out of a distant place,  
your descendants from the land of their exile.

Jacob will again have peace and security, and no one will make him afraid." (Jer. 30:10)

And then on the heels of this uptick from his soulful lamentation,

Jeremiah receives a "drop-and-give-me-twenty" mandate from God which he is commanded to obey as an act of faith at a time of desperation, as an act of looking up when all else is falling down,

as an act of hope, when all else seems hopeless.

He is called to be *a sign himself*, an inkling of what God intends for all of Judah.

He is mandated to imagine a new Jerusalem, and by his actions,  
to call the new scenario into possibility.

"Go and buy a field in this God-forsaken land," the Lord commands Jeremiah.

"Go and buy a field at Anathoth, where your family once owned land,  
but is now displaced by war.

When your cousin presents you the opportunity to repossess the dispossessed,

go and buy that field with seventeen shekels of silver,

dot all the i's and cross all the t's of the legal transaction,

get witnesses to sign it, and make double copies of the document,

and give them to your secretary, Baruch, for safe keeping for a long time...

for... houses, fields and vineyards will once again be bought in this very land." (Jer. 32:15)

Jeremiah is *called to be a sign himself*,

a hint of possibility that God is still at work in the lives of his people,

that his people have a ray hope in the midst of despair,

*that God's human agents can imagine God's grace showing up exactly*

*in the spot where one is most prone to despair,*

*and that what God's human agents do can actually set God's future in motion.*

And I wonder what Jeremiah named his field after he invested in it?

I wonder if he named it *Wildhair*, or *Inkling*, or *Hunch*, or *God's Idea/Not Mine*.

*And I wonder if we today also might entertain the possibility that what we do,*

*the things in which we invest our imaginations, our time and our money,*

*help set God's hopeful future in motion in some deeply desperate scenarios?*

I had a neighbor in Charlotte once who bought a small farm outside the city.

His brother owned a similar sized farm outside of Statesville.

And one brother named his farm *Hopewell*, and the other brother named his farm *Hopegood*.

And I asked my preacher/neighbor

why he and his brother named their farms *Hopewell* and *Hopegood*.

He said it was because of John Calvin, who once said that we don't know  
which people are going to be among the elect  
and which are going to be among the reprobate,  
which are going to be shown God's favor and which are not,  
but we are called to "hope well for all."

We are called to entertain the possibility of hope, buy the field, and set the hope into action.

Bob Lupton, one of the most remarkable people I met in Atlanta  
during my seminary years there, did a noble thing.

He bought a vacant lot near Grant Park in the midst of a run-down, crime-ridden  
neighborhood and made plans to build a house for his family there.

He tells the story of his radical investment in his book, *Theirs Is the Kingdom*,  
which includes an account of his across-the-street neighbor, Mr. Boyles.

After Lupton signed the deed to the lot, while the ink was still fresh on the page,  
he walked across the street to meet his new neighbor,

maneuvering through the piles of junk heaped on the front porch,

trying to ring the broken doorbell,

knocking loudly on the rickety aluminum screen door while calling inside

to summon the neighbor from where he sat in boxer shorts and a sagging

athletic shirt that covered about half of his grey chest hair.

When he finally came to the door, Lupton introduced himself

and told Mr. Boyles that he and his family would be building a house across the street,  
and that several other new families also would be moving into the neighborhood.

Mr. Boyles responded with mixture of surprise and disbelief.

He muttered a few apologetic words about his personal appearance,

proceeded to tell Lupton about how bad the neighborhood was,

indicated the sad condition of his own property,

and then, with a warm smile, extended his hand to welcome Lupton.

Once Lupton had broken ground for his house, Mr. Boyles would venture

across the street to share tidbits about his former life as an urban planner:

how his health had declined along with his self confidence  
after his cardiac bypass surgery,  
how the downslide of the neighborhood matched that of his own health,  
and why the stacks of old doors, concrete blocks, and used fixtures  
now filled his yard as dreams of success had once filled his head.  
Nevertheless, over the following months, as Lupton's house continued to rise,  
Mr. Boyes began to make incremental improvements to his property, too:  
getting rid of some of the junk,  
building a retaining wall to stem an erosion problem,  
and bringing in topsoil to create a lawn.  
By the time Lupton and his family moved into their new home,  
several other houses were out of the ground, as more middle-income families  
moved into the neighborhood, too.

And Mr. Boyles went from being an observer to a participant  
as the urban blight around them began a gradual transformation  
into a vibrant community of mixed income housing.

Lupton says, "In the heart of the city, the Creator Spirit moves,  
and I watch in amazement. Young, and not so young professional couples  
are choosing to leave comfort and status, and *like prophetic beacons,*  
*plant their lives among the poor.*

Visionaries who catch glimpses of an invisible kingdom  
paint their word pictures for those who have eyes to see."

(Bob Lupton. *Theirs Is the Kingdom*, p. 66-69)

And I wonder what Bob Lupton named his lot, his field, after investing in it?

I wonder if he named it *Neighbor-well*, or *Neighbor-good*?

Or perhaps he named it *Home-well*, or *Home-good*, or *Loved-well*, or *Loved-good*?

*Is it possible that human agents might help us imagine God's grace showing up exactly  
in a spot where one is most prone to despair?*

*Is it possible that the fields, the lots in which these families radically invested*

*their imaginations, their time and money,  
somehow set God's reconciling future into motion?*

Some of you have done equally noble things in the face of desperation and despair  
that frankly take my breath away.

Some of you have invested radically and bought kingdom fields in the land of "highly unlikely"  
and named them things like:

*These Grandchildren Will Be Loved; Florence Forth; Adopted As Our Own;  
Pink Build; Loved, Though Not Sanctioned By the State;  
Answer the Door, Regardless of Who Knocks;  
Sing the Faith, In the Bull's-Eye of the City;  
Church, By History AND By Choice.*

And I so admire you for being prophetic signs, hints, inklings yourselves  
of God's redeeming and transforming love,

setting God's future in motion in exactly the spots where one is  
most prone to throw up one's hands in resignation.

"Life is hard," Dr. Martin Luther King once said. "At times it is as hard  
as a crucible of steel."

(Leonard Pitts. "Remembering a debt we owe," *Durham Herald Sun*, 9/17/13)

And yet, this Stewardship Season, we will be asked to invest in some radical ways,  
to put our imaginations, our time, talent, and money

in fields and places where desperation flourishes,

where return on investment is as invisible as a mustard seed.

And why would we defy the wisdom of the world and make such foolish investments?

Because these fields of "least likely" are the greenhouses of God's grace.

And hope lies at our feet, not to be stepped over, passed by, or dismissed,

but ready to rise up like Lazarus, like Christ,

and be showered with long-awaited mercy and favor. Amen.