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“Blessed Be the Ties that Connect”

A sermon by Michelle J. Bartel

Installation Service of The Reverend Mindy Louise Douglas

Trinity Sunday (Year C)

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Jeremiah 29:1–14

These are the words of the letter that the prophet Jeremiah sent from Jerusalem to the remaining elders among the exiles, and to the priests, the prophets, and all the people, whom Nebuchadnezzar had taken into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon. This was after King Jeconiah, and the queen mother, the court officials, the leaders of Judah and Jerusalem, the artisans, and the smiths had departed from Jerusalem. The letter was sent by the hand of Elasah, son of Shaphan, and Gemariah, son of Hilkiyah, whom King Zedekiah of Judah sent to Babylon to King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon. It said: Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. 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. For thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: Do not let the prophets and the diviners who are among you deceive you, and do not listen to the dreams that they dream, for it is a lie that they are prophesying to you in my name; I did not send them, says the Lord.

For thus says the Lord: Only when Babylon's seventy years are completed will I visit you, and I will fulfill to you my promise and bring you back to this place. For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope. Then when you call upon me and come and pray to me, I will hear you. When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart, I will let you find me, says the Lord, and I will restore your fortunes and gather you from all the nations and all the places where I have driven you, says the Lord, and I will bring you back to the place from which I sent you into exile.

Last fall after being on a work trip for about a week—a trip in a long series of trips because I travel a lot—I got home, walked into my house, and for the briefest moment I thought, “Well, this is an interesting hotel room.”

I decided I needed to address my schedule for the next few months and see what I could do about being home for a decent period.

Because for a place to be home—*home-home*—you need to be connected to it somehow. Many of us do something with our outdoor space, putting in climbing roses, or simply mowing. After a few years, those roses might be a fragrant trellis, and a mown lawn looks peaceful. Gratifying things to do since we extend ourselves to create beauty, a profound way of connecting to this particular place, making it home.

We add on porches or decks, we renovate a room, paint, decorate, arrange furniture, rewire a room, build bookcases.

I like to cook, so getting the kitchen organized is a particular pleasure. In a kitchen you put things where you can get to them in the right place at the right time. I like having cooking utensils handy by the stove, so they're arranged like bouquets on my left as I'm cooking. Coffee has a particularly important place in my life, so the coffee maker is the easiest appliance to find and use.

In a kitchen it's fun to develop muscle memory so you can prepare something on the spur of the moment because you know where things are without even thinking. Sometimes it can even be fun getting a few dishes going at one time while handling a) questions about theology, b) "Aunt Michelle that is a stupid movie; why did you watch it," c) that great bakery, and d) puns. At least this is how it goes with my family.

All of us know this in one way or another, this warm, settled feeling inside that satisfies and comforts us.

Or we don't know it. We long for that warm, settled feeling because we do not have it and long for it.

So the people of God have been exiled, sent away by God for forgetting their God and their calling as a people, and for trivializing it. They are exiled and sent to Babylon. This means they have been sent out from their family holdings, land they've been caring for, land that was theirs to take care of, kitchens they were familiar with, maybe groves of olives and figs and they planted themselves years ago. The place where they had been born, and their parents, maybe their children and grandchildren as well.

And they have been sent to a strange place where the people are not their people, a place where they don't want to live, don't want to settle down, don't want to make home because it is not their home.

Except God sends them word that it is.

God—who sent them into exile—is still their God, still the God who loves them, and who is calling them to be a particular kind of people.

The words God sends, that we read in this passage in Jeremiah, are all about the satisfaction and pleasures of having places to call home.

From our own experiences, we can likely identify with their struggle as exiles, at least a little.

Let's exercise our imaginations and consider an imaginary family in this crew and imagine their frustration.

I really enjoy the Badlands by the way, but let's say these people have been exiled from North Carolina to Western South Dakota. I'm thinking they can only conceive of North Carolina as being home, right? They do not even know what barbecue is in the Dakotas, not in the way North Carolinians do, or the difference between UNC blue and Duke blue. These things seem trivial, right? But they are touchstones for us, ways we connect to the world around us.

And now God is saying, yep, right here in South Dakota, I am saying go ahead and connect to *this* place. Build houses—be gratified in creating a space for shelter and warmth and celebration. Build houses and *live*—really live—in them. Plant gardens here and eat what they produce because they will start as little seedlings, but over the years they will grow and produce more and more berries and sunflowers.

Get married! Share the joy of your kids getting married right there in South Dakota, and their kids and their kids, and look forward to holding those infants for decades to come.

I've heard it said that the point of this passage is that home is wherever God is. I think the point the prophet is making is that God is saying, "That's not exactly it: home is being connected to the land, the walls, the kitchens, the gardens, each other."

And, more to the point, connected to everyone and everything else on the land. This call to experience a full and abundant life isn't *just* for them. God

says, “But seek the welfare of the city where you live, for in its welfare you find your welfare.”

This brings me to this congregation, First Presbyterian Church of Durham, and your explicit commitment to be in this city, to seek its welfare. Your commitments to the wellbeing of God’s beloved humans and their homes, families, and work are doing just this: pursuing the welfare of the city in which you live. You are downtown by history and by choice.

You have a rich history of this work and service, and you have called a pastor in Mindy who shares your commitments and passions, who can support you as congregation and staff. On a day of installation like today, you and Mindy join together in this celebration because from now on into the foreseeable future, you go forward together.

Forward into seeking the welfare of this city, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.

So there’s this movie, *Guardians of the Galaxy*. It’s one of these superhero movies, if you haven’t seen it. It’s fun, and you don’t need to see it to understand this interchange:

There’s an orb. It has an infinity stone. The infinity stone can destroy a planet, and the bad guy wants to do just that. And then destroy the galaxy.

Rocket, the raccoon, says to Peter Quill, “I can’t believe you’ve been carrying that in your purse!”

“It’s not a purse it’s a knapsack! We’ve got to get it somewhere safe!”

“What do you care about the galaxy? What has the galaxy ever done for you?”

“I’m one of the idiots who lives in it!”

You live in this city—to seek its welfare is to seek your own as well, the building up of a whole community that opens up possibilities for all people to receive God’s wholeness, God’s love.

I imagine this has not been easy over the years, at least not at times. Let’s face it, congregational life is not always easy. And it’s not always easy to work with civic organizations that are partners in your work, and it sometimes takes a lot of work, tedious work, emotionally draining work to be the people of God, to be downtown by history and by choice.

One of the promises of this passage is that God will never disconnect from you. Oh, I know full well that it can feel like God is nowhere to be found, but as we keep reading, we hear God promising if you seek me with all your heart, you will be found by me, and anyway, the future I am creating for you is for your hope, to prosper you, not to harm you.

That is what God has in store for this congregation. Blessed be the ties that connect: connect us one to another, to God, as a congregation, as families and friends, as neighbors, as a city, to the land, to food, to celebrations, to the abundant goodness of God who is always planning for a future to give you hope even while you seek the welfare of the city.

Knowing Mindy, I can’t help but be gobsmacked by how this all makes so much sense because I know that she shares your vision, and even more than her abundant energy, she has passion and commitment to seeking the welfare of this congregation and this city.

I know she is like the tree in Psalm 1, replanted by living water.

I know God desires so much for each of you and all of you, abundantly far more than all you can ask or imagine.

I know that the Triune God who called this congregation into being has called you, your staff, and Mindy to go forward together, connected in so many beautiful ways.

Oh, your rich history has propelled you into an exciting future of being the people of God, proclaiming the gospel of Christ here in this land, in this city, in this place.

To God alone be the glory, now and forever, Amen.

The Rev. Dr. Michelle J. Bartel is a Teaching Elder in the Presbyterian Church (USA) and is currently the Coordinator of Theological Education and Seminary Relations for the ministry area of Theology, Worship, and Education in the Presbyterian Mission Agency. She holds a Ph.D. and a M.Div. in theology and ethics from Princeton Theological Seminary and a B.A. in psychology from Calvin College. In addition to her teaching experience, which includes positions at Augustana College, Sioux Falls, South Dakota; Hanover College, Hanover, Indiana; and Bellarmine University in Louisville, Kentucky, she also served as a supply pastor and college chaplain. Her publications include Explorations in Christian Theology and Ethics: Essays in Conversation with Paul L. Lehmann, for which she was a co-editor and essay author. Her interests include poetry, movies (from the sublime to the ridiculous), music, walking, cooking, dark chocolate, and bourbon.

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