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**“Peace in the City”
A sermon by Mindy Douglas**

28th Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year C)

October 13, 2019

Jeremiah 29:1, 4-7

It was December 1961 when the congregation of First Presbyterian Church voted to stay in the city. To be sure, this was not a foregone conclusion. In fact, the first congregational vote in September 1960 on this issue approved (by over 60%) the investigation into a suitable relocation site in the thriving suburbs in southwest Durham and the hiring of an architect to prepare plans for a suitable structure there.

The reasons for this approval were many:

- The current church buildings were old, costly to operate and maintain, and not large enough to hold the Christian Education programs for 412 children and 55 teachers, and 91 adult learners;
- The population of Durham had been drifting to the southwest for years;

- Downtown businesses continued to close or relocate away from the center of the city;
- Real-estate values were plummeting, and people were moving away. As Peter Fish writes in his history of First Presbyterian, “Once elegant residential areas near the Church felt the impact as affluent homeowners made for the close-in suburbs.”
- Two other Presbyterian churches were less than a mile away. Did the city really need First Presbyterian?

There were, no doubt, many reasons to leave. Were there any reasons to stay?

Ultimately, the congregation only needed one – God had called them to be in the city. This is where God planted the first eleven members of First Presbyterian Church– in 1871 – when the township of Durham was only two years old and included barely more than 260 people in its one square mile. Durham had yet to know the kind of city she would be. But God’s placement of First Presbyterian in the heart of the city gave the people all the reason they needed to stay here, no matter the temptation of more popular or thriving suburban areas. First Presbyterian Church had been planted in the city and here she would stay.

In the end, it took the congregation a little over a year of study, reflection, and prayer fully to discern this one, significant, faithful reason to stay, and when they did, the congregation rescinded their earlier decision of 1960. On December 17,

1961, they voted to stay and invest in the downtown property where they had their start.¹

I don't know if Kelsey Regan, the pastor during much of this time, or the interim pastor, Thor Hall, ever preached on today's passage from Jeremiah during this time of decision-making and discernment, but it might have made sense for them to have done so. After all, Jeremiah's message to the exiled Israelites was not terribly different than what the members of FPC eventually discerned. Jeremiah's letter to the people basically said this: God has placed you here. This is where you are to be. Do not long to be somewhere else. Be here. Thrive here. Flourish here. Build, live, plant, eat. Put down roots. And seek the welfare of the city around you. This is your home.

Jeremiah knew that this would be hard news for the exiled Israelites to hear. After all, his letter comes to them where they are in exile in *Babylon*. Their arch enemies, the Babylonians, had ripped them out of their homeland Jerusalem and placed them in a strange and foreign place – Babylon - the world's largest and most powerful city. Their temple in Jerusalem had been looted and destroyed, and many leaders had been beaten or killed. They had lost everything they once knew

¹ Peter Fish, *Downtown by History and by Choice: First Presbyterian Church in Durham, North Carolina, 1871-2013*, (Durham, NC: Carolina Academic Press, 2017), 4-5, 237-254.

– everything that was familiar to them - and now they were in a pagan city, their enemies' city, lost and without hope.

One prophet – Hananiah - told them what they wanted to hear – “don't worry, you will be back in Jerusalem in no time at all.” They loved this guy because he told them what they wanted to hear. His message helped them hope for full and quick restoration of their homeland. But there was a problem with this message, and the prophet Jeremiah knew it. It was fake news – false prophecy that took advantage of the people's desperation and fear in order to get on their good side. So Jeremiah sent them a letter with a different message, the gist of which was this:

This is your new normal, friends. You should not be surprised. God sent you into exile after multiple warnings about your ongoing lack of concern for the poor, the orphan, the sojourner, and the widow. So settle in and make the best of it. You are going to be here for a while.

Then, as if all this was not enough, God, through Jeremiah, asks them to go the extra mile. “Seek the welfare, the peace, of the city where I have sent you. Pray for them. In their welfare and peace, you will find your welfare and peace.”

This could not have been easy for them to hear.

We don't normally equate the peace and welfare of our enemies with our own peace and welfare. In fact, we tend to seek our own welfare in isolation from

the welfare of others who are not like us. But, in the words of Martin Luther King, Jr. which I quoted a few weeks ago and is worth revisiting:

[W]e are tied in a single garment of destiny, caught in an inescapable network of mutuality. . . .And for some reason, I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be , and you can never be what you ought to be until I am what I ought to be. This is the way God made the world . . .we must all learn to live together as [family] or we will all perish as fools.”²

We must all learn to live together as family, even when we are exiled Israelites in the hated Babylon.

Even when we are First Presbyterian Church in 1960 in the middle of a dying city.

“Our welfare is inextricably linked to the welfare of others.”³

Jill Duffield, editor of the *Presbyterian Outlook* magazine, knows that we don’t always acknowledge, claim, or act on the belief that we are so inextricably linked. She asks the hard questions:

² As quoted in the sermon "Blindness and a Vision of Community," the Rev. Dr. Chris Tuttle, *Day 1*, 2013.

³ Jill Duffield, “Looking into the Lecionary: 18th Sunday after Pentecost,” October 6, 2019, *The Presbyterian Outlook*, <http://campaign.r20.constantcontact.com/render?m=1102135377571&ca=e3c0ce00-d915-426e-a3a5-8f6877ba203d> (accessed 10-11-19).

Do we seek the welfare of those vastly different from us? Those we fear and do not like? Do we recognize that our welfare is wrapped up with theirs because all of creation is the Lord's?

I think these are excellent questions for people like us who find ourselves participants in this downtown church. Back in the 60s, our predecessors made the difficult decision to go against the economic and social tide and to stay in the city. Today, after almost 60 years, we find that the tide has turned. The downtown of Durham is no longer an economic and social desert: It is a thriving cosmopolitan mecca of restaurants, art, music, theater, businesses, start-ups, county buildings, city halls, churches, and non-profits. Stand on our property and turn in any direction to witness the bustling activity all around us. Seeking the welfare of the city means something very different today than it meant 60 years ago.

Back then, the downtown of the city seemed to be dying. In seeking its welfare, we sought to care for those who were not wealthy enough to fly to the suburbs. We worked in the areas of hunger and housing. We fought for civil rights and against racism. We worked to ease the effects of poverty on our neighbors.

As we survey our city today, we could easily be fooled into thinking that the city is doing well-enough on its own, that our work here is done. Durham is a thriving community and we are a part of it.

Seek the welfare of the city? We got this, God. No problem. All is well over here in downtown Durham. Don't you see?

But God does see. And so does anyone else who takes the time to pull back the layers of glitz and glamor. On the same block as all the wealth and success of the Durham Performing Arts Center are people begging on the corners every day. A stone's throw from the Durham Bulls Athletic Park are people who curl up in a doorway or an ally every night. Some of the beautiful new houses being built downtown have replaced duplexes or other structures that were shared by those living below the poverty line, people who can no longer afford to live here. Every day I drive by the tall white structure of the Durham jail with its narrow windows and watch as family members on the ground below blow kisses up to their loved ones. God knows the racial disparities that show up in our educational, judicial, economic, social, and health-care systems. God knows the sex trafficking that takes place in our city. God knows the violence on our streets as teenagers kill one another. God knows the power of drug addiction that claims the lives of too many. God knows the immigrants who live in fear of deportation. God knows that our city is not well. God knows that, as a result, none of us is well either.

Our English translation "welfare" comes from the deeply meaningful Hebrew word *shalom*. Our Jewish siblings use the phrase "shalom aleichem" as they greet one another, meaning, "peace be upon you." The word *shalom* means

more than the absence of war. It conveys, rather, a deep inner peace: well-being, completeness, fullness, wholeness.

In this passage God is calling on the exiled Israelites to seek the *shalom*, the completeness, the wholeness of the city and in doing so, to find their own shalom. I believe God calls on us to do the same in our time as well. We cannot do this if we silo ourselves away in our safe cocoons of worship and insider groups. We cannot do this if we look after only our own needs and ignore the needs of others. No. We do this by knowing our neighbors, engaging with our neighbors, and loving our neighbors. We do this when we decide to live side-by-side with all God's children – without fear of the other, without fear of the unknown, without fear of difference. It takes courage to live in a world where not everyone thinks, acts, and looks like you. It takes vulnerability to know and be known by others. God calls us to be in relationship with the community around us and to see the pain and lack of shalom in our midst so that we might bring Christ's light to shine in the darkest places and bring hope where there is despair.

Friends, the good news of this passage and of all of Scripture is that God is at work for the good of the whole world. We are called to partner with God in Christ as we live the gospel in our lives and work for peace and justice in the world. We are not alone but a part of a great network of Christians in this city and

around the world who are also living their lives following Jesus— loving one another, working for justice, seeking to end oppression, teaching peace, and living in hope. We are called to live as people transformed by the grace of Jesus Christ who claims us all, and all the inhabitants of this city and the world, as *beloved* and calls us to find our own peace as we seek the peace of others.

First Presbyterian Church is uniquely situated in the heart of a city where many thrive, but where many live each day in fear, hunger, and oppression. And if any of our siblings suffer in this way, then we all do.

Frederick Buechner writes:

When Jesus commanded us to love our neighbors as ourselves, it was not just for our neighbors' sakes that he commanded it, but for our own sakes as well. Not to help find some way to feed the children who are starving to death is to have some precious part of who we are starve to death with them. Not to give of ourselves to the human beings we know who may be starving not for food but for what we have in our hearts to nourish them with is to be, ourselves, diminished and crippled as human beings.

To be really at home is to be really at peace, and our lives are so intricately interwoven that there can be no real peace for any of us until there is real peace for all of us.⁴

⁴ Frederick Buechner, *The Longing for Home*, (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1996), 139, 140.

“Seek the shalom of the city around you, writes Jeremiah, for in its peace you will find your peace.”

May it be so.

In the name of the Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. Amen.

Because sermons are meant to be preached and are therefore prepared with the emphasis on verbal presentation (i.e., are written for the ear), the written accounts occasionally deviate from proper and generally accepted principles of grammar and punctuation. Most often, these deviations are not mistakes per se, but are indicative of an attempt to aid the listener in the delivery of the sermon.

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