

May 29, 2016
Jeremiah 29:5-7, 11-14
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“Roots”

Good morning! This is a time of year when I’m reminded of fullness and plenty: kind of the opposite of the sparse landscape and drab colors of January and February, May and June are bursting with color and vitality and growth. They are also times when family schedules are bursting. School is done or nearly done (can I hear an Amen?) and the past few weeks have been filled with music concerts and special projects, and sectional games and sports banquets. We are at the beginning of the season of commencement ceremonies and graduation open houses, of birthday and anniversary celebrations. For some of you, this weekend has solemn overtones: a time to remember friends, family members, and members of the armed services who have passed away.

For the McFadden family, Memorial Day weekend is race weekend: a time to gather and watch the Indianapolis 500. Tim and Joel are actually at the race today: Tim because he’s a fan and excited to be there for the 100th running, and Joel because he’s part of Purdue’s marching band. Both of our family cars are in Indy as well, which is why I’m driving Joel’s 1996 Honda Accord this morning. I’ve told Joel that it isn’t everyone who gets to drive a car that’s older than they are: he is not so impressed with this fact. I have actually been angling to drive his car on a Sunday morning for some time, because I’d like to see how many Brethren we could get in one Accord. Not as many as we would wish, I’m sure. It might be more comfortable to try to do that by way of a sermon instead of cramming ourselves into a two-door car -- or maybe not. I guess that’s at least partly up to you.

Jeremiah 29:11 is a favorite verse for commencements of all kinds. If you go to Family Christian bookstore this time of year, you’ll find it

printed on things from graduation cards, to journals, to Bibles, to gift bags. It's a good verse for us to remember, even without the merchandizing. I'm sure many of you are familiar with Jeremiah 29:11: "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." It's a great verse all by itself, but I'd like to put it into a little broader context.

Jeremiah is a prophet of Israel, and he's sent the priests and elders and all the people of Israel these words through a letter. The letter is not being delivered anywhere in Israel, even though that where all these folks are from; the letter goes to Babylon, where all these folks actually are. They are living in exile in after being captured in Jerusalem and deported by the Babylonian army. Jeremiah saw this coming -- Jeremiah was God's prophet that warned the people of their need to repent or face the destruction of their country. This had predictable results. The people of Israel ignored Jeremiah, got tired of him, they got *really* tired of him, they insulted and reviled him and put him in pit. Now they're exiles in Babylon and Jeremiah writes this letter and has it delivered and read aloud to them.

The letter begins in verse 4. Let me just share the opening of it again:

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.

This is a pretty extraordinary opening. There's no hint of "Bet you wish you had listened to me now!" let alone, "Thanks for putting me in that pit. Hope you rot in Babylon!" No, this is a blessing for growth and prosperity, not just for the exiles from Israel, but for their captors in Babylon, too. There's a word which crops up a couple times in the last sentence, a word which tends to get negative press in American politics. That word is "welfare." It is, of course, the exact inversion of

“farewell,” which is kind of a formal way of saying “Good-bye.” Farewell is a parting blessing which means May it go well with you. Looking after someone’s welfare means being concerned with their well-being. Of course welfare has acquired all kinds of baggage as governmental programs in this country, but it is rooted in well-being, not only of individuals and communities, but of cities and nations. The prophet Jeremiah makes this claim that our own welfare is related to the welfare of the people and the city around us. When we put down roots and invest in the welfare of our neighbors, we all grow and flourish. Jeremiah puts this in simple terms which describe the basics of human life and community: build houses, plant gardens, get married, have children and grandchildren.

The image of a garden for how we grow and share is hardly a new one. Jeremiah uses it other places, it’s an image which appears throughout the Bible: from the Garden of Eden to the Tree of Life in Revelation. In this case, I think Jeremiah is talking about actual gardens: gardens which root you to a particular place, where you get out and get your hands dirty and talk to your neighbors, and where you live off of what the gardens produce. Gardens and cities have been around forever, but some people have been imaging new ways that gardens could promote the welfare of cities . I want to show you a 2 ½ minute trailer for a documentary called From Fencerows to Foodsheds, about gardens in two Midwestern communities. You might recognize one of them.

<http://www.fencerowstofoodsheds.com/trailer/>

I own the full-length DVD of this documentary: I might have time to watch it someday, it’s 96 minutes long. If you’re interested in borrowing it, see me. I have it here.

Gardens are optimistic projects. No one plants a garden with the conviction that it’s going to fail: why would you? Gardens are about future and hope. When we, as Christians, invest in the welfare of our neighbors, as well as ourselves, I believe we are making a statement of faith. We are sharing our belief that God cares about the welfare of all people. Not just the chosen, not just the righteous, not just the people who look and act like us, but all people. In fact, when we work for the welfare of all people, we are doing the work of God: the God

who said, "I know the plans I have for you, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future and a hope." What if one of the ways that people experience God's plan for their welfare and future is through us and the things we share with them?

I believe that when we look ahead to the New Testament and an even better-known prophet of Israel, Jesus Christ, that his gospel is congruent with this message: the kingdom of God is something we are called to work toward on this earth. It may not be fully realized until Christ comes again, but we participate in the work of bringing the kingdom of God right here, right now. Grounded this earth, and embodied by these people. It may happen in small ordinary ways, building houses, planting gardens, marrying and having children, but we who claim to be followers of Jesus get to participate in building the kingdom, one shingle or one little tomato plant at a time.

I mentioned at the beginning of this sermon that for some of you, this weekend is a time of solemn remembrance. I want to affirm the significance of those memories, whether they are of family members whom you knew and loved, or family or friends or people you never met who gave up their lives for this country. Some, like the medic friend that Jim Vance mentioned last week are living with the trauma of violence they cannot forget. War is the opposite of working for the welfare of other people. War destroys houses and torches gardens, and kills children and grandchildren. Whether they are American children or the children of the people we call our enemies, causing death does not further the kingdom of God. I believe that one of the ways we honor the memory of those who have been killed or destroyed by war -- physically or mentally -- is to work toward dismantling the systems which take us to a place where we feel that war is our only alternative. How can we seek God's will for a hope and a future for all people?

Now, it may be a stretch to imply that planting gardens will lead to world peace. Planting tomatoes and peppers won't even get us any *peas*. But I am grateful for small, or not so small things -- have you seen how big that garden is? -- that we can do to work for the welfare of our neighbors. It's not really about the vegetables we give away, it's about how working together for the kingdom changes us. This Memorial Day, during your race watching and cook-outs and

commencements, take time to remember and give thanks to the God who has plans for our hope and our future, and who sent his Son, Jesus Christ, to make that a reality in this world and in the next. Thank God for the goodness of this world, and promise of the world which is yet to come. Amen.