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In the Heart of the City

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Sunday, June 24, 2018

Jeremiah 29:4-7; Revelation 21:1-5

As I sat in my office recently, working on this sermon, I found myself very distracted looking out my window onto Nicollet Mall. This wasn't just because the view was much more compelling than facing the taunts of a blinking cursor on a blank computer screen. While grateful for our spacious new offices and the privileged view of the Granlund sculpture and the opportunity to appreciate the rhythm of the downtown, it is fair to ask of your pastors' productivity, at least within the walls of our new offices! This one particular morning, I had visitors. What caught my attention was a bird couple pecking and poking on the green roof that is growing and filling in right outside our office windows. This is the green roof that extends out above the new Nicollet Mall doors onto Westminster Plaza, right where the current, temporary tent joins the building.

The male of the pair was clearly interested in whatever late morning snack might be found in and among the plantings, and I watched as he flitted and foraged for a morsel. His partner was

much less motivated by the possibility of a meal, and more interested in securing building materials. She hunted around with her beak for a good ten minutes, examining, separating and curating, and I watched as she gathered a growing collection of shoots and scraps. She found twigs and leaves, and small bits of fluff that at some point the wind wafted up from the streets below and deposited on Westminster's new roof at 12th and Nicollet. Eventually the sprinklers came on, watering the green roof with the recycled June rain water and the two flew off, deciding it wasn't bath time. But as she lifted up and over our building and into the heart of downtown, her beak was full of treasures for nest-building. I was struck by our connection to all life in the city, and moved by the possibility that in some small way, Westminster could provide refuge and shelter for God's creatures who share home in the heart of the city with us.

I spent much of the last week, when I wasn't office bird watching, caught up in the joy and energy and controlled chaos of our Westminster Day Camp, and it was great fun! From our first-time four-year old campers, all the way up through our high school student counselors, Westminster's young people laughed and played, learned and sang for justice all throughout our city.

The guiding verse for the week was from the prophet Jeremiah, as we just heard- "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." We started each morning with this verse, and then put it in conversation with Psalm 46 and Revelation chapter 21. Each day had a focused theme for the

children to delve into: housing, government, transportation, food justice, and sustainability.

We talked about seeking the justice of the city and in this place, with all its complexities, there you will find you are part of that larger movement for justice. Through all of this we remembered that God is on the move and that God is with us in all the places where we are and the places where we are going. Many of us held fast to this belief as we moved through our days with Westminster's beloved children, keenly aware of beloved children elsewhere in our country separated from everyone and everything they know and love.

We talked about God being with Jeremiah, when God sent Jeremiah into exile. And we remembered that Jeremiah was but a boy when God called him to speak truth and further justice. The Bible has a long history of calling forth children to be agents of change, to speak God's message of love and truth to those who pull the levers of power. Jeremiah's words in chapter 29 come when he is no longer a boy, but forty years into his prophecy. He has seen much.

Now *welfare* is a big word for young ones to grasp, but we framed it in the context of health, happiness, comfort, safety and protection, security, well-being. I admit, we spent much more time talking about seeking and finding welfare, than we did exile. That seemed like a decidedly harder concept to broach with elementary students. And for the adults among us, this familiar verse may be more accessible by skipping over exile altogether.

For the recipients of Jeremiah's message, they hear his words through the knowledge that God has sent them into exile in Babylon, from Jerusalem, their home. God tells them, through Jeremiah, to live in Babylon as if they were still living in Jerusalem- to build homes and families, plant gardens- that they should quite literally root themselves to this place and look ahead across the generations to the distant horizon. Some read this text as minimalistic, as just pointers for survival. But, as one scholar put it, "Israel had undergone exile in the past...but much of this was internal displacement from which they quickly recovered."¹ Unfortunately, this message speaks of no quick recovery this time. After the destruction of Jerusalem in 587, this movement of displacement grows not only in Babylon, but into Egypt and across much of the Mediterranean. Jeremiah is speaking to a new and very difficult reality for the people of God. This message of seeking the welfare of the place where they are exiled would have sounded, at the very least, unnatural, and more likely preposterous. Not unlike imagining families at the border praying for those who detain them and the cities where they are detained.

In appropriate ways, our Day Campers explored what difficult realities can exist for people in the heart of the city, from struggling to find healthy food in the midst of food deserts, to finding shelter when high barriers exist. They joined God in our neighborhood on foot, in the Skyways, on city buses and by enjoying Minneapolis's parks, lakes, and playgrounds. In talking

¹ Garrett Galvin, Working Preacher, http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1773

about city government at the beginning of the week, they thought about how a city can be organized in order to serve the welfare of all. On Tuesday, the older campers visited City Hall, a first for many, and even had the chance to meet with Mayor Jacob Frey in his office. We prepared ahead of time by talking about the structure of the Minneapolis city government, that the power intentionally rests more heavily on the thirteen council members, representing distinct areas all over the city. A few astute campers made the connection between that model of polity and our own Presbyterian system of governance and decision-making. We asked the children to be quiet and respectful, especially as we walked back into the City Council office space, as people were hard at work for the city we call home. Mayor Frey came out into the lobby and warmly greeted the group with a “Good morning! And how are you?!” And our quiet and respectful children didn’t utter a word, lest they disrupt city progress with a noisy response! They did eventually loosen up a bit and asked the mayor questions as they toured his office and the Council chamber. They had the chance to sit in the council members’ seats and make motions and even debated the merits of metal versus recycled plastic playground equipment.

But earlier that morning, before the trip to City Hall, they spent some time thinking about what was needed to create a governing body, and what the city it would oversee could be like. You can see their drawings and creations posted in Westminster Hall, including the one from a group which created a benevolent matriarchal monarchy ruled by two queens and two princesses

(their counselors). They even drew the castle to serve as the seat of power, complete with a prominently featured welcome mat.

Westminster's children named beliefs about, and their hopes for, the way a community might work and live together. The beliefs they held fast to were that everyone is accepted for who they are; allowed to love who they want; and is entitled to their own thoughts. For their hopes, they lifted up that everybody would have enough resources; transportation would be affordable, accessible, and eco-friendly; that government helps everyone; there should be background checks for gun ownership; that all people should have access to food, shelter, healthcare and other basic necessities, whether they can afford it or not. Perhaps without realizing it, our young theologians named those exiled in our own city, those who lack shelter, healthcare, enough food to eat, and a sense of being seen and treated as an equal.

Now the cynics among us can quickly make a mental list of all the reasons why a government supporting such a utopia based on these hopes and beliefs isn't realistic, affordable, attainable, or sustainable. But if we believe, as Revelation tells us, that God will make *all* things new, and that weeping and death and crying and pain will be no more, God has to start somewhere. The promise in Revelation isn't that God will make a new heaven and a new earth all at once, but it may just be that God starts this radical renewal through the audacity and courage of 8-year-old city dreamers.

We did hear from a several parents who said at the end of the week that we were creating little social justice advocates in our young people, which can produce, once we hand children back to their parents, something of a challenge! Or we might say both an opportunity and a challenge!

On Thursday we visited the market stalls up and down Nicollet with our four to seven year olds. They had a set amount of money to buy three specific items for all campers and leaders for Friday's meals. They had one dollar to spare in their clutch of cash. On our way, we stopped and took pictures at 7th and Nicollet, where this congregation worshipped and thrived in the heart of the city from 1883 to 1895, before moving five blocks to 12th Street. Next to the historical plaque marking Westminster's presence at that corner in the 19th century, sat an older man who was holding a cardboard sign and asking for assistance. One of our kindergarteners wondered if we could use our money instead to buy him food. These are young social justice advocates, indeed, who seek the welfare of the city and its inhabitants. And in that encounter we identified at least one person exiled to the streets of Minneapolis, in the context of the reverberating echoes of the telling presence of this congregation over 120 years ago.

This summer, as part of our Wednesday evening Clearing gatherings, we have been sharing in a new ministry. Over dinner and worship, we have lifted our voices in song, and ended each evening offering our prayers for ourselves and our community on small tags, and then we have tied them to the railing on Nicollet Mall for the city to see and share. All during the week people stop

and read, sit and reflect, and Sarah affixed a box with markers and blank tags for people walking by to write their own. And they do. We have had to refill the tag supply several times a week as people enact praying for the city, for one another, and invite others to be in prayer with them. This week, as many of our Day Campers and counselors stayed for dinner and worship, they wrote out the people and places, situations and concerns on their hearts and added them to the prayer procession down the block. On our way back from the market on Thursday, I looked down and saw that one of the prayer tags from the railing had come undone and traveled a few blocks into the life of the city.

This petition I came across had been stepped upon and had the grit of the city sidewalk imbedded into the smooth finish of the cardstock. The edges were curled and dog-eared and the words a bit faded. But this prayer, “for the very old and the very young, that they are loved and respected and cared for,” made its way from our little corner of downtown Minneapolis and out into the heart of the city. All those feet that carried it along, and the stories and needs and hopes of those who walked with it, merged together with the noise and the yearnings of our city. It felt to me like another reminder, like the industrious bird couple, that the church is not contained within the walls that surround us here. Just as Day Camp carried Westminster out into the heart of the city, the stories come back to us to be part of who we are, where we are, and who God is calling us to be. Those exiled in troubles of mind, body or spirit, gave themselves over to faith in a God and community who listens, and who relentlessly pursues their welfare.

Earlier this week at the General Assembly of the PC (USA), the body unanimously approved overtures that affirm and celebrate the gifts of people of all sexual orientations and gender identities in the church. This is a long-awaited inclusion for those historically exiled within the family of the church. The assembly “affirms the full dignity and the full humanity of transgender people, their full inclusion in all human rights, and their giftedness for service. The assembly affirms the church’s obligation to stand for the right of people of all gender identities to live free from discrimination, violence, and every form of injustice.”² As we celebrate Pride weekend, in the heart of the city, we give thanks to God for this new day in our church, for a movement toward freedom for those held captive.

Part of what I think Day Camp brought forward is the tension that we can’t just be social justice advocates in the ways that make us feel good, serving the Gospel in comfortable and convenient practice without looking exile and separation and power in its face. But we also can’t exile ourselves from the hurts of the world and not realize that God invites us to find our way into being part of renewal and newness of life.

A wise member of the congregation shared with me a meditation from Richard Rohr a couple of weeks ago. He speaks of love in the context of the push and pull of attachment and detachment, saying that love that is too attached is impure and self-seeking, and isn’t really love at all. Rohr writes that we actually have to

² <https://www.pc-biz.org/#/search/3000312>

“pull back and learn the great art of detachment, which is not aloofness, but the purifying of attachment. Our religion is neither solely detachment nor attachment; it’s a dance between the two.” Rohr makes the point that, “Jesus moves back and forth between desert and city. In the city, he feels himself losing perspective, love, and center; so, Jesus goes out to the desert to discover the real again. And when Jesus is in the desert, his passionate union with [God] drives him back to the people in the city.” Rohr names this dance between the two as the Third Way, the middle ground between fight and flight. He says, “Some prefer to take on the world: to fight it, change it, fix it, and rearrange it. Others deny there is a problem at all. ‘Everything is beautiful,’ they say and look the other way. Both instincts avoid holding the tension, the pain, and the essentially tragic nature of human existence.” Finding our place in the Third Way, Rohr says, is neither taking a stance of a power position, nor denying the fear and pain that will come in facing the suffering of the world head on. He says we must hold this hard reality in place until it transforms us, “knowing that we are both complicit in evil and [that we] can participate in wholeness and holiness. Once we can stand in that third spacious way, neither directly fighting or fleeing, we are in the place of grace out of which genuine newness can come.”³

Westminster’s children learned the beginnings of walking the Third Way this week, moving into the hard spaces in our city and understanding what that means for them in their journey of faith. And they are part of the genuine newness that is coming. Might

³ Richard Rohr, *Creativity: The Third Way*, June 4, 2018. <https://cac.org/the-third-way-2018-06-04/>

we all be led on our own new beginning, out into the heart of the city where God has placed us, and beyond.

Thanks be to God. Amen.