

Seek the Welfare of the City: Go the Second Mile

January 10, 2010

Texts – Jeremiah 29: 1, 4 - 7
Hebrews 11: 1 - 2, 13 - 16

So here we are, back at the beginning . . . or at the very least, back to where we started three years ago when we “launched” our First Church – Second Home – Third Century endeavor. This morning’s order of service is modeled on the service we took part in on October 14, 2007. We called it “Vision Sunday;” it was the day we unveiled our DVD and began to pray in earnest, “Lord, what would you do through me to further your work in my Church?”

This morning we celebrate the amazing grace which has been showered upon us in the last three years as the result of all those prayers. Two hundred and forty four pledges, totaling \$1.87 million, have enabled us to repair, restore and renew the physical body of our two hundred and four year old First Church. The results are satisfying beyond many of our wildest expectations. I know I never dreamed we would be able to raise that much money, nor did I picture just how beautiful this old building could become. We are recognizing today some of the people who helped to make that miracle come to pass, but I want you to know that I am thankful for each and every one of you. It truly is remarkable what we together have been able to achieve.

“Seek the welfare of the city” has been a foundational theme for our ministry together for many years. It was a surprising word when it first came to Jeremiah twenty seven hundred years ago. The leadership of Israel was in exile, held captive in Babylon; their homeland devastated and humiliated. They wanted nothing so much as their freedom. They longed to return to what they understood to be their promised land. The Spirit said “No.” *“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.”* [Jeremiah 29: 7]

You and I, by God’s grace, have not had to face the devastation or humiliation which wars and geo-political power struggles have visited upon billions of God’s children down through the centuries. Oh there are those among us who are here in exile from homelands rent asunder by bloodshed and violence. They too long to go home . . . home to the comfort of culture and geography, of friendship and family, of familiar foods and remembered warm breezes

. . . but they cannot. It is a very specific and literal message they hear in Jeremiah's directive – *“Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile , . . . in its welfare you will find your welfare.”*

When we began this endeavor, Jeff Newlin – the RSI fundraising consultant who worked with us on the campaign – challenged me to answer the question, What is God's mission for First Church? “If you are going to ask people to sacrificially give to this church,” Jeff said, “they need to know and you need to know what that giving will be used for, and how that fits into God's will.”

The answer I came up with was the answer to that old question, “What are the three most important things to consider when purchasing a home?” For most of us that's the single largest financial decision we will ever make, just as for most of us a contribution to a capital campaign is the largest donation we are likely to make to our church. You know the answer to the question as well as I – “Location . . . location . . . location.”

God's mission for First Church has from the very beginning been wrapped up in this location. We are in the very center, the heart, of our city . . . and let's be honest, not just our city but this entire region. Our founding pastor, Daniel Sanders, went from here to be the founding president of the University of Vermont. Each of his next two successors did the same. The land upon which we stand was gifted to us by the city. Since 1805 Jeremiah's words have been literally true for us – *“in its welfare you will find your welfare.”*

The \$1.8 million we have spent has directly benefitted the welfare of our city. Women and men who might otherwise not have had employment during these most difficult economic times have benefited from our giving, just as we have benefitted from their vocational gifts. The fruit of their labor is a facility which will be not only our home for a Third Century of ministry and mission, but a place of succor and refreshment for all of our city's citizens, most especially those who are in spiritual and/or material need.

“Seek the welfare of the city” the Spirit says, and so we have . . . and so we are. But now there's an additional word – *Go the Second Mile*. For some of us its meaning is clear: we've heard it before. For others of us, it requires some explanation. It comes from the Sermon on the

Mount which is recorded in the Gospel of Matthew, the fifth chapter. *“You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth,’”* Jesus says, referring to ancient Israel’s code of proportional conduct. *“But I say to you,”* he proclaims, laying out a new standard for his followers’ behavior:

“Do not resist one who is evil. If any one strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also; and if any one would sue you and take your coat, let him have your cloak as well; and if any one forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. . . . You . . . must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” [Matthew 5: 38 - 41, 48]

It is not enough, Jesus says here, for my disciples to base their conduct on the expectations or demands of others. Everybody does this; it is natural; it is the way of the world. But you are to be different. You are to be the light of the world . . . a city set on a hill . . . salt for the earth. You are to love even those who hate you. You are to pray even for those who would destroy you. If someone demands that you carry their load for a mile – and this is a direct reference to what was a common if hated practice in first century Palestine, namely that Roman soldiers were entitled to conscript into service any non-citizen they chose and to demand that they carry their pack for a mile . . . if that happens to you, Jesus says, don’t just resentfully comply, but *“go with him two miles.”* The first mile is what the law of human nature demands, with its hierarchy and its propensity for violence and oppression; the second mile is what demonstrates God’s law of love and grace. Go the second mile . . .

Taking our clue from this teaching, we are announcing today a Second Mile stewardship campaign for this wonderful old Church that we have so lovingly repaired and restored and renewed. As our President Tyler Atwood puts it in a letter which everyone will receive in the next issue of the Church Newsletter,

“Had the Executive and Prudential committees realized (four years ago) that a recession was going to occur in the middle of the (capital) campaign, we probably would not have recommended the campaign to the Trustees. However, that is hind sight and the truth is that we

had a very successful campaign that resulted in tremendous improvements to our church, including money saving changes, despite the recession. We must also recognize, however, the impact the Capital Campaign has had on our member's personal finances. Some of our members (for instance) were not able to increase their pledge to the operating budget last year or (to) pledge at all.”

The end result of all this is that we are in a difficult financial bind as a Church.

On average our members have tripled their giving to the church in the past three years, but . . . but our Operating Budget – which is where the funds for our programs and staff come from – ended up in a deficit last year. We cut that Budget last Spring – freezing staff salaries and eliminating one whole position – but it is headed back in the same direction again. We need your help.

The Second Mile Campaign is asking for a one-time gift from every member family to help us raise an additional \$35,000 to meet this year’s operating needs. If two hundred families will make a donation of \$175 we’ll meet that goal.

I know it is asking a lot. It seems out of proportion. The second mile always is. Please prayerfully consider how you might respond. It is wonderful what we have been able to do together over these past years. Just look around today! Let’s move forward together with even greater strength. Amen.