

SEEK THE WELFARE OF THE CITY

August 22, 2010

Texts – Jeremiah 29: 1 - 7
James 2: 1 - 4, 8 - 9, 14 - 17

It is not hard, with just a little imagination, to picture what must have preceded Jeremiah's letter to the exiles (the beginning of which we have read this morning). Israel, we know, was utterly vanquished by the Babylonians in 598 B.C.; her capital city decimated. The entire leadership elite of society – everyone from the King and the Queen Mother all the way down to the skilled craftspeople – had been carried off into exile.

“Help us!” they must surely have prayed; “deliver us . . . rescue us!” Any number of prayers recorded in the book of Psalms come to mind. “*O that deliverance for Israel would come out of Zion!*” the 20th Psalm says, for instance; “*when the Lord restores the fortunes of his people, Jacob shall rejoice, Israel shall be glad.*” (Psalm 20: 7) Or again, Psalm 9 says – “*Be gracious to me, O Lord! Behold what I suffer from those who hate me . . . Arise, O Lord! Let not man prevail; let the nations be judged before thee!*” (13, 19)

Surely they prayed, you see, as you and I might do in similar circumstances . . . indeed, as we still do from time to time – “Help me! Get me out of here! Deliver me!” And in response to their prayers, Jeremiah – the spokesperson for God – says . . . says what? “*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]

Not exactly a comforting response, is it? You ask for deliverance, for rescue, and I say to you “Have patience”? But it's worse than that, isn't it? It's not just “patience” they must have. They are to “*seek the welfare of the city where (they languish in) exile, and (they are to) pray to the Lord on its behalf.*” It almost sounds like “*love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,*” doesn't it?

Jeremiah's letter was not “warmly received.” He was branded a traitor and a fellow traveler. Little wonder; we would do the same and then some, wouldn't we? I would; wouldn't you?

“*Seek the welfare of the city . . . pray to the Lord on its behalf.*”

Times change. The sweep of history moves on. Words from twenty six hundred years ago take on new meaning, but they still speak with force and vigor, and for many of the same reasons. Many today, for instance, loathe the word “city.” It has become synonymous in their minds for “crime, decay, corruption, vice” – be it New York or Chicago or even Burlington.

We make jokes sometimes about our relationship to the rest of Vermont. “The nice thing about Burlington is that it's so close to Vermont!” people say. Burlington is not Vermont. Why? Because Burlington is a city . . . and “Vermont” means lush hillsides and rolling meadows and beautiful lakes and rivers. Part of what makes Vermont such a desirable place to vacation is that

it is everything a city is not. A friend beginning his ministry up in the Northeast Kingdom was advised (in all seriousness) to “watch out for those people in Chittenden County.” They are “city folk” . . . we are “city folk.”

Seek the welfare of the city There are a thousand reasons why you and I ought to take those words to heart. Most of them are self-evident. “*In its welfare you will find your welfare,*” Jeremiah says. That’s literally true for most of us, isn’t it? Certainly it is true for the First Congregational Church! If the Church Street Marketplace were to die, and the center core of this city were to shrivel up and empty out (as has happened in so many American cities in the last half century), this sanctuary would soon empty out as well.

A number of years ago we adopted as a congregation a set of affirmations which we hoped would inform the life and ministry of our church in the years to come. One of those was (quote) “to bolster our faith community as a center-city anchor for the city of Burlington as it becomes a multi-cultural community.” We went on to say that

“to ‘seek the welfare of the city’ means to renew our commitment to First Church as a vital center of faith and service. . . . We believe that as more and more people come to experience the powerful spirit of the Risen Christ in our midst in the very heart of the city, so too will more and more be invited to renew their commitment to the city's welfare.”

I believe those words really do describe a major piece of God’s agenda for us.

“*Seek the welfare of the city . . . pray to the Lord on its behalf.*” Times change. The sweep of history moves on. Jeremiah’s words take on new meaning, but they still speak with force and vigor, don’t they?

I hear a new layer of meaning in this old text today, and it’s really that which I want to focus on this morning. In the sixth century B.C., the words referred to Babylon. In the 19th and 20th centuries A.D., many faithful people heard them as referring to the urban centers of human life. But in the 21st century, I wonder if we must not also hear them as speaking of the “global village” . . . “the global city” . . . we all share.

A number of years ago, the United Nations World Commission on Environment and Development published a report entitled Our Common Future. It made clear the fundamental interdependence of the whole human community. The erosion of the ozone layer above the Antarctic is not just Antarctica’s problem, the report said; the effects of the nuclear disaster at Chernobyl, it went on, is not just Russia’s problem. Today the evidence of this fundamental interdependence of the world’s climate systems is well known. None of us can go it alone as individuals or as communities or as states or as nations when it comes to trying to address these problems.

We live in a “global village” . . . a “global city” . . . today. Listen to Jeremiah’s words from this perspective – “*Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you . . . , and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.*” It fits, doesn’t it?

But what is this “global city” really like? One way to look at it is to imagine its composition if there were only 1,000 inhabitants on the earth.¹ There would be 329 Christians, 174 Muslims, 131 Hindus, 61 Buddhists, 52 Animists, 3 Jews, and 34 members of other religious faiths. In addition, there would be 216 persons with no religious persuasion at all. In this global city, there would be 564 Asians, 210 Europeans, 86 Africans, 80 South Americans, and only 60 North Americans. Finally, in this city of 1,000, just 60 people have half the income; 500 are hungry; 600 live in shanty towns; 700 cannot read or write.

It is a sobering picture, isn't it? Would you think it a good investment to buy a home in a city where 60% of the people lived in shanty towns? Of course not. Would you want to raise your children in a city where one out of every two persons was hungry? Not if you could help it. Would you run for the School Board if 70% of your fellow citizens were illiterate?

But in a metaphorical sense, this is exactly what we do every day. Like it or not, we live in a global city and, as offensive or scary as it may be to say, Jeremiah's words do ring true – *in its welfare . . . (lies) our welfare*.

I don't think I'm stretching too far to make this linkage . . . do you? Israel's exiles did not want to hear Jeremiah's message. “Get us out of here!” is what they were saying; “deliver us!” Isn't that pretty much what we want? Isn't that at least a piece of what makes Vermont in general and Burlington in particular so attractive a place. Poverty, hunger, homelessness, illiteracy . . . we don't have those problems here. Those are big city problems. Those are Third World problems. But what if there isn't a Third World, or a Second or a First? What if there is only One World? What if the place we live really is a Global City? What then?

“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.”

If you take this image of a Global City seriously . . . if you allow yourself to think of the overwhelming amount of hunger and despair and poverty that is growing on this globe today . . . it is frightening. “Exile” is not too strong a word to describe what it feels like. And so we shut it out, don't we? We block it out. It's overpowering. We don't think about it. “Out of sight, out of mind.” It's not that we're bad or evil; it's that we're human. It's just too much.

I imagine that's pretty much how the exiled Israeli's felt in 598 B.C.. Don't ask me to pray for Babylon. Don't tell me to seek its welfare. It's just too much to ask. But of course, that is exactly what God asked of them. Twenty six hundred years later, it is what we are asked to do as well.

1 . The metaphor of a global city of 1,000 comes from Diana Eck's book, Encountering God: A Spiritual Journey from Bozeman to Banaras (Beacon Press, 1993), p. 202 and following. I recommend it highly.