

Bloom Where You Are Planted!  
 A sermon by David Roquemore  
 First Presbyterian Church, Newton NC  
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Jeremiah 29: 1, 4-7

When I first went to Princeton, it was strange. Most of us think of NJ as this greasy strip between Philadelphia and New York. Actually, to the south of that strip is all pine forests, and to the north is mountains. So it is a beautiful state, with a strip right through the middle of it. Anyway, it was strange: you can't pump your own gas. Everywhere you go there are these diners, which purport to sell whatever you want to eat, but don't. Half the people don't speak English, and those who do speak it with a weird accent. They are all very sophisticated, and look at a southerner as a benighted soul who, bless his heart, can't really help it. I had a t-shirt that said, "Camp Pee Dee," which is in Pee Dee Presbytery, now a part of New Harmony Presbytery. I was laughed at, until I pointed out that it was a Native American name of a river, and at least it was pronounceable, as compared to Monongahela. The first day I was there I went to an evaluation by the Speech department. I read a passage of scripture, and the woman stared at me, finally shouting, "where are you from?" When I told her South Carolina, she nearly fainted. It was, all in all, a strange place, and I felt like an outsider.

In this reading from Jeremiah, we see that the king and several of his officials, the people in power, are outsiders. They have been taken into Exile in Babylon. The Babylonians would conquer a place, and take almost all of the people back to Babylon. That insured that there would be no uprising in the conquered territory. In the case of Judah, the southern kingdom, this happened in 587 BC; the northern kingdom had been conquered in 702 by the Assyrians. Well, the Babylonians conquered the Assyrians, and took the people of Judah into Exile. They took them in several waves, starting with the rulers, and working down through the educated and rich folks, down to the poorest farmers.

There have been prophets telling the people that their exile will be short. These were stirring up trouble among the exiles, even rebellions. There were similar things happening in Jerusalem, as those who were left behind tried to throw off the Babylonian yoke. But this was not to be.

Jeremiah has managed not to be taken. He remains in Judah, and writes this letter from Jerusalem to the Exiles. He says that they are to settle into the cities there, marry the people, and establish themselves. He goes on to say, after our reading ends, that the Lord says they will be there for seventy years. That is a long time to wait, and so the people need to get on with life. Their time will come, perhaps in their grandchildren's day, but for the meantime, they need to eat. And so they need to work where they are and bless the city they live in.

We really don't know a lot about how the people lived in Babylon. Was the king treated well? Was he killed? Did the people live in ghettos, or did they mix into the population? Speculation abounds, but there are many questions we simply can't answer. Whatever their situation, they looked back at Jerusalem and wept. How can they sing the Lord's song in a foreign land? How can they praise God when this has happened? God should have prevented this; where is our hope?

In some ways the Church these days lives in Exile. It wasn't always so. In 1950, the War was over. The Depression was over. It was the era of stable economy and lots of children. Most congregations that I

know of either were started in that period, or built huge education wings in that era. Churches were full, and growing. And then, something happened. No one is sure just what it was – and there are lots of theories. Something happened, and church attendance began to fade away. Something about the vision of American Protestants no longer spoke to as many people as it had in the past. In some ways, what we see is simply a return to a more normal church attendance, but for those who remember the Good Old Days, this seems like a terrible decline.

In those days the Presbyterians were strong. You had an education, you made money, you went to the Presbyterian Church, unless you were born in the Episcopal Church. We still suffer with that impression out there in the world, you know: you go to the Presbyterian Church, you are among rich people. I am told that in Lafayette, Indiana, the President of Purdue University, the Catholic Bishop, and the Presbyterian Pastor would meet in the Presbyterian Pastor's study, and decide what would happen in the town. Nowadays, I doubt the three even know one another. In those days the Presbyterian sermon would be published in the newspaper each week.

But now all of that has changed. The Presbyterian Church, the church in general, is no longer a voice that anyone pays much attention to in the halls of power. No one cares; no one remembers how it was, except some of us. And no one misses those days. Except some of us.

I am describing with broad strokes the world of Christendom, a world in which the Church was established, and wielded some real power. Even in this country, which emphatically had no established church, there was an establishment in which Protestant Christianity – and many would rightly say “White Protestant Christianity”, had real power. Now the world of Christendom has given away, and there are many reasons why that is a good thing, frankly. But now we live in an unfamiliar world, a world which some say is a world of exile. The Church is in exile from the culture in which it thrived. The Church lives without that power.

And it seems to me the Church has a choice in these days. We can become an enclave, or an outpost.

If we choose enclave, and many congregations have, we have to face what it means. An enclave means circling the wagons. You know, on the way out West, those early white settlers would circle their wagons for protection. This helped keep animals and Native Americans from attacking. So if we are an enclave, we have our wagons circled, our doors guarded.

But we have locks and security systems on our doors, so are we an enclave? No, I think our security systems are there to protect us from those who would come in to steal or harm us. But our doors are wide open when we are here! Our doors are wide open for all who come to worship God. Our doors are open on Sunday nights to feed anyone who comes. Our doors are open any night it is very cold, for people to come, get warm, be fed, and sleep in peace. We don't care what you look like or anything else. Just come in.

You see an enclave wants to keep out the stranger, those who are strange, those who are different from us. And you don't need door locks to do that! We can do it by subtle means, like the language we use, and the assumptions we make, the clothes we wear. The assumption that everyone went to college, perhaps, will keep certain folks outside. The assumption that everyone owns a home, or lives in certain neighborhoods, will do it. The stranger will be left out.

An enclave could be theological as well: we might use a certain vocabulary, or make certain assumptions about one another, that effectively bar the door for those with a different upbringing or a different point of view. In our time, the enclave is a tempting option, for there are so many people who are different from us! Living in an enclave will help us preserve who we remember that we once were. An enclave seeks to preserve the trappings of power, and what little crumbs the powerful toss our way.

An outpost church, on the other hand, opens the doors wide. I once had a discussion with my senior pastor about baptism; he had baptized about half the people in Glen Burnie, MD. I took the reasonable and Presbyterian view that we ought to at least get these people into the church first. He said to me, “I think the arms of God are sometimes open a lot wider than the doors of the Church.” You know, I think he is right! The arms of God are open wide.

An outpost is a place in a foreign land, among strangers, where the homeland is represented. An outpost congregation is a gathering of the faithful in places where there is need, where there are many pagan Babylonians. And so we gather and seek to represent Jesus to those who may not know him. An outpost church welcomes those who are strange and different. You, after all, welcomed me! An outpost church welcomes, even marries, the sons and daughters of Babylon! An outpost church seeks the good of the city, and wants to bless the city by its presence. An outpost seeks to live in the society, with the society, and at the same time, show it a new way of life.

You know, those Jews who went into Exile were changed by that experience. First of all, as they were far away from home, and the temple had been destroyed, they had to find a new way to honor and worship God. The name “Jew” was applied to them for the first time. They developed the synagogue faith that didn’t require the temple as much as it had in the past. They gathered up their traditions in writing, and collected their scriptures. They really had to answer that question, “how do we sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land?”

They were not an enclave that died away. Instead they took wives, and gave their sons and daughters in marriage. They sought the benefit of the city they were in. They may have missed Jerusalem, and longed to go back to it, but they also did all they could to fit into and bless Babylon.

If we see ourselves as a little outpost for God here in Newton, we can bless it in the same way. You see, we are free! We are free from the restrictions and requirements of living in an enclave. There are congregations in the community trying so hard to maintain their purity; we don’t have to do that. We are free, set free by the Spirit to be a voice for the gospel.

We can be subversive, in a way. To subvert the dominant paradigm is to live in a way that might just run against the grain of “the way things are usually done.” You know who was good at that? Tony Campolo – perhaps you’ve heard of him. He was a professor of sociology at Eastern University. He has a way of doing things that run directly against the grain of what is expected, and show people how the way of Jesus is. He lives near Philadelphia, and in Philly there are several toll bridges into New Jersey. He said once that he loved to go across a certain bridge, back when the toll was 25 cents. He’d give the toll taker 50 cents, and say, “this is for the car behind me; they are with me.” Of course, those people would be bewildered – who would pay their toll? It is kind of a silly act, but it shows how we can subvert things in ways that matter.

He also would train college students to go and live in neighborhoods that no one cared about. Their goal was just to live there and get to know the people. That was all. At first the people would be very suspicious of these white educated students, moving in. But once they got to be friends, they'd realize, these people are all right. They were there just to bless the city, one block and one neighborhood at a time. Just like Jeremiah told the Exiles to do in Babylon.

It seems to me we can do something like that here. This list is not my plan, not my agenda; it is a list of ideas, some better than others. Maybe you have ideas that will work. Some ideas:

- why can't we host concerts and musical events in our sanctuary? We do it now and then; what about a series?
- Why can't we host lectures and classes in the chapel, or somewhere in the building, for the public?
- Why can't we teach English as a Second Language classes in some classroom?
- Why can't we have homework help here after school one or two days a week?
- What about a medical clinic, with nurses to check blood pressure and give advice, maybe doctors volunteering now and then?

How can we bless this city, making this a better place to live than it already is?

You see, we can live, and demonstrate, and propose, an alternative way of life. We no longer have to prop up the status quo. We don't have to live the American dream, or be enslaved to its notions. We are free! We are free to live as Jesus calls us to live.

We can bloom where we are planted - right here. We can live in the city we find ourselves in, and make it better. We can bless it, and so we will in turn be blessed, as we live in the community of trust and love that Jesus calls us into.

Thanks be to God. Amen.