

21st Sunday after Pentecost, Year C

9 October 2016

The Rev. Dr. Brian C. Wyatt, Pastor

Jeremiah 29:4-7; Psalm 31

In the 5th century BCE, not too long after the prophet Jeremiah, a man named Siddhartha Gautama, who lived in India, was so moved by the suffering of humanity that he left his royal heritage behind and became a teacher dedicated to helping others find their path to enlightenment.

Most people today refer to Siddhartha by the more common term meaning “the enlightened one,” or Buddha. As part of the journey toward

enlightenment, Buddhism begins by espousing four noble truths that apply to all humanity. And the first of those noble truths is: life is dukkha. And the best English translation for that is that “life is difficult.”

That was 2600 years ago, but I’m pretty sure Buddha’s wisdom still applies. And you don’t need Buddha or Jeremiah to remind us that life is hard and harsh and unfair.

Just thinking about my own friends, I have two who are struggling

with leaving ministry entirely. I have another going through a divorce. Three who are wrestling with the loss of a parent. Another who has lost much of his home and many of his possessions in a recent flood. My guess is you can come up with plenty of similar examples from your own lives and the lives of your friends and family as well.

If you've ever found yourself feeling spent and hopeless, we have a companion in the prophet Jeremiah.

During the early years of Jeremiah's ministry, political developments in the region made life increasingly difficult for the Israelite people. The enemy of Jeremiah and

his people, the empire of Babylon, began to flex its muscles. Nothing could stand in its way. And so, in 597 BCE Jeremiah's king surrendered to Babylon. In what was the first wave of deportation, the king and much of the nobility were taken to Babylon. Jerusalem was sacked.

I imagine that the people who were deported to Babylon looked over their shoulders one final time to see their city, their homes that lay in ruins. As their war-ravaged feet kicked the dust, as they marched to an unknown place, the prisoners probably grieved for their dreams and lives deferred.

The captives surely felt deep anger and hatred toward the soldiers who had destroyed their city. Taken from their homes. Lives shattered. Forced to live in a new nation, a new city, a foreign city. The city of their captors. It doesn't get much worse. I mean, how do you move on after seeing your homeland wrecked and your loved ones killed or deported?

Yet that is the backdrop for Jeremiah's prophecy. "Thus says the Lord, 'Build houses and live in them. Plant gardens. Marry off your children. **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.'"

Just so we're clear, God is telling the people to seek the welfare of the place into which they had been taken in exile. God tells the people to invest themselves in this community, in the life they're in now, even though it is not the life they want or the place they call home. But God says despite that, to work for the good of this place, this community. To help it prosper. To build it up rather than tear it down. To set aside their anger and bitterness and frustration with the inhabitants of their new home, the ones responsible for bringing them into exile. And to

set aside longing for a different life that they once knew.

Life continues even in hardship. How hard it must have been for the exiles to bloom in Babylon. How hard it must have been to keep going and keep hoping after Babylon had beaten them down.

I suppose it's not much different for us. When life gets tough, when hardship is upon us, we have a tendency to resist and deny. It's only natural. After all, denial is the shock absorber of the soul. But here's the thing: no matter where we run, the hardships of life will find us. As Buddha said: life is difficult.

For a number of years now, I see a

counselor regularly. It was required as part of seminary training, but I found it was such a helpful practice for my own spiritual and emotional health that I picked it up again 5-6 years ago. During that time, my counselor has helped me work through the grief of Dad's illness and death, she helped me work through my own anger and resentment and broken relationships when things at church became difficult for us a few years ago, and countless other smaller crises of life.

And one of the things that I still struggle with doing, but have most certainly learned, is that most of the time, we have to face hardships

head on. Sometimes we have no alternatives. Other times we can try to avoid facing them for a while, but eventually if we are going to maintain our physical and emotional and spiritual health, we need to deal head-on with whatever burdens are weighing us down.

If you are at all familiar with Elisabeth Kübler-Ross' idea of the five stages of grief, we may go through denial or anger or bargaining or depression when coping with change or loss or death, but the final stage is acceptance, which she describes as a "calm, retrospective view for the individual and a stable condition of emotions." In other

words, acceptance is that place we get to when we realize we cannot avoid hardship or suffering, and must figure out a way to deal forthrightly with it for our own health.

And this is where I think Jeremiah offers us some wisdom. Listen again to what he says to his fellow exiles: "Build houses and live in them. Plant gardens. Marry off your children. 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."

In other words, you must continue to live—even in exile. Even when life is hard. Or to put it in more clichéd terms: the Lord commands the

people to bloom where they are planted. Do good right now. Invest yourself in your church and community. Don't forever mourn the old life that you once knew. In the midst of your hardship there remains beauty and potential. Focus on the present and plan for the future. Don't let misfortune rule your life; don't let life's hardships and disappointments steal your hope. Find your life now, in this new and difficult place. God makes new life is possible.

Jeremiah's people needed to find that hope, to cling to the promise of new life. And they were able to do that because they knew that their future was

tied to the Lord. Their hope was in the Lord, who held their future.

Like the exiles in Babylon, we live and move and have our being in God. And it is our faith in God that sustains us during the hard times. It is our faith in God that allows us to bloom where we are planted. It is our faith in God that allows us to claim: come what may, God is by my side. Come what may, God will be with me. Come what, may the Lord can be trusted.

To God be the glory.
Now and forever. Amen.