



All In

(The sixth in the Fall Sermon Series "Taking Jesus Seriously")

Jeremiah 29:1, 4-7

Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost ~ Sunday, October 13th, 2019

First Federated Church of Peoria, Illinois

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Text: Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat their produce. (v. 5)

Several years ago I had a monthly lunch with a high school principal. Professionally he seemed to me to have the “Midas touch”; everything he touched seemed to me to turn to gold. As I got to know him better, I began to realize that the secret to his success was that he was fully engaged in whatever he was doing.

He began his education career as a tennis coach. But he was not just a tennis coach who put in minimum effort; no, he not only coached during the high school season but he built community feeder programs all the way down to the grade schools.

As principal he was just as committed. He didn’t look for the next rung on the ladder of success. He fully committed himself to the job at hand without neglecting his family responsibilities. He was, in today’s parlance, “all in.”

I thought about him as I reflected upon today’s lesson from Jeremiah. In this lesson, the people of Israel found themselves in exile. Babylon’s King Nebuchadnezzar laid siege to Jerusalem in 589 bce. Two years later the city fell and the Temple, the nation’s pride and the residence of God was totally destroyed.

The best and the brightest were carried into Babylon as slaves. Those not killed during the siege and the aftermath were left war torn poverty. Life in Babylon was hard. Their captors taunted them. We know this because of the 137th Psalm.

By the rivers of Babylon--
there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion.

On the willows there we hung up our harps.

For there our captors asked us for songs,
and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying

“Sing us one of the songs of Zion!”

How could we sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land? (vss. 1-4)

At the time of the prophet Jeremiah everyone longed for the way things were. They longed for the good old days. But they were gone forever. They couldn’t go back. No one can. You simply can’t turn back the clock anymore than you can put toothpaste back in the tube.

In the face of all of this Jeremiah sent a letter to the captives in Babylon that contained the Word of the Lord.

“Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat their produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. But 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, stop fantasizing about what was. Focus on where you are not where you wish you were. Make the best of the current situation. Get on with life. Like my principal friend, be “all in”; all in the present moment.

You may wish you were somewhere else or that circumstances were different, but God says to live fully where you are. Or, as one commentator said, “Redeem the circumstances you find yourself in.” (Magrey R. DeVega, A Preacher’s Guide to Lectionary Sermon Series: Thematic Plans for Years A, B, And C, Proper 23: Disciples Make the Best of “Babylon”. John Knox Press, c. 2016)

Put down roots. Have children. Give your sons and daughters in marriage. Have grandchildren.

What we are really talking about here is a sense of contentment. In the Letter to the Philippians the writer said,

“I have learned how to be content with whatever I have. I know how to live on almost nothing or with everything. I have learned the secret of living in every situation, whether it is with a full stomach or empty, with plenty or little. For I can do everything through Christ, who gives me strength”. (4:11-13, New Living Translation)

People who decide to take Jesus seriously have a sense of contentment about them.

Contentment is not about geography--where we live. Nor is it about having the perfect job or spouse, or being part of “the perfect” church or attending the perfect school or whatever. None of those things exist. Nor will they ever.

We may not live in a literal exile like the people in Jeremiah’s reading but we are in our own “Babylon”, nevertheless.

So what are we to do? What insight does our reading give to us?

The secret to contentment is learning to make the best out of a situation.

Making the best of a situation does not mean that we tolerate the imperfect. Rather, we invest ourselves in the world around us. Despite its imperfections people who take Jesus seriously live fully right where they are.

I made a discovery years ago; Decisions determine destiny. The decisions that we make Today determine our Tomorrow.

If I had a screen I would show you a clip from the old Billy Crystal movie, “City Slickers”. You may remember the movie. Billy Crystal plays a man going through a middle age crisis. He’s depressed and critical of everything and everyone around him. He goes off on a “cowboy” retreat with some buddies. While on a “working ranch” he gains a new perspective. At the end of the movie, his wife says to him, “Honey, if you want to change jobs, it’s OK with me.” His response?

“I don’t need a new job. I just need to do my job better.”

Isn’t that true of all of us?

To God be the glory. Amen.