

"For a Future with Hope", November 8, 2015

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Rev. Ruth Martz

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Jeremiah 29: selected verses

"These are the words of the letter that the prophet Jeremiah sent from Jerusalem to the remaining elders among the exiles, and to the priests, the prophets, and all the people, whom Nebuchadnezzar had taken into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon.

Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: 'Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they 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.'

For thus says the LORD: 'Only when Babylon's seventy years are completed will I visit you, and I will fulfill to you my promise and bring you back to this place. For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the LORD, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope.'

Mark 12:41-44

Jesus sat down opposite the offering box at the temple treasury, and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums. A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny. Then he called his disciples and said to them, "Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. For all of them have contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on."

"For A Future with Hope"

What do the following phrases have in common?

Honey child, remember the bread and wine of our beloved God.

Celebrate following the Scriptures. The angels rejoice.

Laughing prophetic stone sings. Faithful worship touches chief desire.

A night sparrow finds stars in the trees. A mighty, joyful soul loves quiet.

Out of your life let holy witness deepen the righteous community.

Only the Messiah tells.

And what will probably give it away---*See many hosts and great cookies!*

What do these phrases have in common? Us—this congregation! Magnetic words that many of you picked this past September, and put together to tell our story, which is God's story. Of course, you were limited to the words that were available. To fill out the story, we might add words like: choirs singing, offerings and food collection, building homes and delivering meals, baptisms and memorial

services, hymns, friends and family—and probably more about cookies!

We might also add words that Jesus spoke, teachings and promises.

The greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader like one who serves.

Love your neighbor as yourself; love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.

Blessed are the merciful for they will receive mercy.

And this morning, let us add God's beautiful promise through the prophet Jeremiah. I have received a card printed with this promise twice, when I was seeking a new church call. These cards remain propped up on my bookcase as a powerful reminder to trust in God with hope for the future—and to be ready for the unexpected!

Through the prophet Jeremiah, God spoke to the defeated people of Israel who were sent into exile in Babylon, who felt abandoned, lost and alone, strangers in an alien culture. Psalm 137 expresses their grief and disorientation: *How could we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?*

God's response would have been a shock to them: *Build houses and live in them. Plant gardens and eat what they produce. Get married and have children. And the most shocking words: **seek the welfare of the city... pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.*** Seek the welfare of our enemy, who destroyed God's temple, whose religion and customs go against our own beliefs and values?

Yes, says God, *for in its welfare you will find your welfare.*

The people of Israel are urged to worship God, maintain their values and customs, while participating fully in the communities where they live, growing and flourishing as a people and as a vital part of this foreign city.

Then, God promises, after 70 years, the people will be brought back to their homeland. 70 years is indeed a long time, one whole generation. Their hope for the future, therefore, lies first in their thriving in Babylon, and then in the return of their children and grandchildren to Israel as a strong people.

We don't see the secular culture around us as the enemy, nor do we view ourselves as superior to those who are not part of the Christian church. It is nevertheless true that over the years, our society has become more secular, with fewer people attending church, and fewer children being raised in an organized religion or faith tradition. And this trend is expected to continue.

As one child asked, "Why do I have to go to church when none of my friends do?"

Have you noticed over the years that fewer people around you go to church? Do you ever feel like the lone Christian in a group? Does our culture sometimes feel alien to you?

As a Christian congregation, now is the perfect time to hear God speaking to us about the crucial role that our ministries of healing and hope can play in the coming years.

I don't think that any of you would urge this church to preserve its integrity by withdrawing from society and becoming an isolated community of God's chosen people. No, we are UCC people of faith in action with our neighbors nearby and far away. We take seriously Christ's call to love and serve others, no matter who they are or where they are in life's journey!

It is an essential part of our Christian faith to gather as a congregation for worship, for prayer and songs of praise, for spiritual renewal and support. Whenever we come together, we strengthen our communion with God and with one another. We also explore and deepen our understanding of where God is leading our particular church.

Then, like Jesus' disciples, we are sent out to proclaim and embody the kingdom of God, to share love and hope with others, to work at mending brokenness so that community will expand to embrace those on the margins. This mission is another essential part of our Christian faith and vision of God's realm, here now and still yet to be realized. God is still speaking to us today through the prophet Jeremiah: *In the welfare of our towns and communities, we will find our welfare.*

Do you think God has plans for the church? Possibilities that will make our heads spin? Can we believe in that future with hope? What have we yet to build, to manifest God's healing presence in the world?

In the coming 5-10 years, I believe that as the church, we will find our welfare in the welfare of our towns—and therefore stay strong-- by forming new ties and partnerships with groups or organizations beyond these church walls--- intentionally going out to them and intentionally bringing them to us, for the healing of brokenness and the flourishing our interdependent lives.

For example, one of our strengths is music---our choirs, organ and staff. *What might we offer to the future?* Well, perhaps we could initiate a conversation with people at St. Francis Nursing & Rehab facility in Laconia, and on a designated Sunday morning, instead of singing for us here, our Junior or Senior Choir would go out to sing for and with those residents. Not a one-time deal, but the first step toward a unique partnership.

When I led Worship services in nursing facilities in CT, I heard some amazing voices among these elderly residents. I remember one big smiling Irish fellow whose beautiful voice boomed out the hymns, to which he knew most of the words. If someone had thought of it, we might have arranged to bring him to a Choir rehearsal and have him sing with the choir one Sunday morning. Perhaps we could invite a specific group of people to our St. Patrick's Day dinner, with

organ music in the sanctuary before dinner.

The key to our forming partnerships and linking communities is not to add more activities or responsibilities to our already busy schedules, but rather to build on the strengths and gifts we are already sharing together as a church. Let us brainstorm possibilities and look at new angles during Board meetings and Coffee Hour.

Think for a moment of all the connections you have made in this community. There may be one that would be exciting for our congregation to explore. What might that be? *What might we offer to the future?*

No matter what wonderful ideas we come up with, however, nothing will happen without our faith in God's vision for us and our strong commitment as a church to Christ's teachings. We are called to give generously of ourselves as we do God's work in, with, and through the wider community.

That is what we hear in our reading from the gospel of Mark. A few different translations can help us as we reflect upon Jesus' words. *"The truth is that this poor widow gave more to the collection than all the others put together. All the others gave out of their spare change / gave what they didn't need/ gave what they'll never miss; she gave extravagantly what she couldn't afford—she gave her all."*

She gave her all, she gave fully of herself, which includes for us today heart, mind, body, resources, talents, time, gifts. No one here is expected to give all their money or possessions away and live homeless on the streets. But as the church, we are called to give more than what is leftover, more than what is convenient, reasonable or comfortable, because we believe in God's purpose and mission for the world.

We are committed to sharing hope and love, to walking with friends and strangers through times of trouble, sadness, joy and whatever else may come. We believe in the power of loving communities to bring wholeness and prosperity to all peoples, through the grace of God, the peace of Christ and the communion of the Holy Spirit. Hallelujah!

So, what do the following phrases have in common?

A new diamond moment shines. We can be beautiful together. Have hope, and glory will live. Borders of the vine branch out. Challenges build interfaith universe touching the nations. Tell of gracious ministries and discipleship. See many hosts and great cookies!

Us! Together, for a future with hope. Amen.

Sources

UCC (United Church Press) Stewardship bulletins for November 2015

