

<Jeremiah 29:1, 4-7; Psalm 66:1-12; Luke 17:11-19>

Prayer: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be pleasing and acceptable to you, O Holy One, our Rock and Redeemer. Amen.

When I was younger, around 14 or so, my parents wanted to start introducing me to the concepts of financial responsibility. Along with the usual agreement of allowance for set chores, they entrusted me with a youth offering envelope every Sunday morning - \$1 to put into the weekly Sunday School offering. Also important to know is that, at that age, my parents would often leave to go to church early for choir rehearsal and, in nice weather, I would walk from home to church a little bit later on. On many levels, it was a wonderful exercise in independence and responsibility.

Also important to note is that, at that age, my sense of self-discipline was still very much in development, and every Sunday as I walked to church with that dollar in my pocket I would walk by a corner donut shop. You can easily guess how much a donut cost. Could I have walked a different route? Probably, but this was the most direct and the most familiar; and it wasn't my fault that the donut shop happened to be right there at the half-way point, with the aroma of fresh-baked dollar donuts wafting toward the sidewalk.

I was an intelligent child, but there was still a lot that I didn't know. For instance, it never occurred to me that the envelope my parents left for me with that multi-purpose dollar would have a number on it, and that number would be attached to my name. It also didn't occur to me that my dad, as someone who volunteered to help count and record the weekly offering, would see each week whether or not that dollar was applied to my giving record, the one I didn't know I had.

I learned a lot in my 14th year, including a good deal about how the church works behind the scenes. While those were practical lessons that have paid off in my daily vocation, I began to learn some even greater lessons, as well.

While we've generally spoken about the prophets of the Old Testament in previous weeks, and highlighted some specific details about the context of our readings, it's worth noting that the prophets of God are generally speaking to one of two contexts: either the people have strayed from God, and God is calling them back before it is too late; or the people have been sent into exile due to their wayward living, and God is both calling them back and offering them hope in the meantime. Jeremiah, at different times in the history of God's people, speaks in both of these general contexts, but our reading from today is from the latter: the people are in exile in Babylon, and Jeremiah is writing to them in order to offer them hope for their future.

In such an instance, we don't need to strain our imagination too far to get a sense of what the people might be experiencing and thinking: they have been taken from their homes, and they want to be returned. They have strayed from God's commands and statutes, and they are now eager to return to God's ways. It would not be hard at all to imagine that all their energy, all their hope, all their expectation is on being released from exile and returning to their home.

But that is not what Jeremiah offers, at least not initially. First, Jeremiah instructs the people that they must do the antithesis of what they have imagined: they must invest in the area, the city and the people, where they currently find themselves. Rather than focusing their attention on a future departure, they are called upon to double-down and invest in the place where they are

for, as Jeremiah writes, "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.*"

This is a reversing of the usual frame of human thinking. The usual frame starts with the self and, depending on the circumstances, moves outward: we see to our own needs first and then, if it seems favorable and we have the ability, we offer something toward the needs of others. But Jeremiah's exhortation reverses that: the only way to see to the needs of the people is to *first see to the needs of the foreign city where they are in exile*. By investing in this foreign place first, then they will realize their own needs, and their futures, secured.

This is not an easy shift in thinking. As I have mentioned before, members of the human race are wired to secure our own needs, our own welfare and security first. Again, it goes back to our primal survival mode, that "lizard brain" which is found in our amygdala, the part that views everything in the world around us as either threat or benefit. It is that survival mode that we are called to overcome, but it is that survival mode which so often becomes the filter we use when viewing the world around us.

The encounter of Jesus and the Ten Lepers speaks to this, as well. It's one we are familiar with: Jesus, encountering ten lepers, heals them and sends them on their way to the priests.

Leprosy was a broad term in the Ancient Near East, and could be used to describe any kind of skin condition ranging from actual leprosy to eczema, and in all cases it was deemed a state of being unclean. For anyone dealing with "leprosy," the response was clear: they must carry with them a stick with bells on it to draw attention to their condition, and announce from a distance to all in earshot that they were lepers, they were unclean, they were to be avoided by the general populace.

But now Jesus has encountered this group of ten, and rather than shying away at a distance like an observant Jew, Jesus - upon hearing their cries for mercy - offers them healing and wholeness. Jesus instructs them, "'Go and show yourselves to the priests.' And as they went, they were made clean." They all go off, but one, a Samaritan - a despised outsider, remember - turns and returns, offering thanks.

I don't fault the nine for simply going on their way with joy; they were told by Jesus to go and present themselves to the priests, who would verify that they were healed, and so they went. Where previously they would have had to wave sticks with bells on them and announce that they were lepers, they were unclean and to be avoided, now they could draw attention to the fact that they were clean, acceptable, and no longer needed to be shunned. I don't fault the nine for doing as Jesus instructed, but there is something to be learned from the lone Samaritan who has been cleansed just as the others, but returns to Jesus, as well. And it has to do with what receives our attention, or in other words, what we invest in.

Because the one Samaritan leper offers us a key reminder, and that is not necessarily to be more faithful wherein the other nine were not. Rather, through his example, we are reminded to place the focus back where it truly belongs.

The other nine, going forward, are doing as they have always done: calling attention to themselves, though this time it is to proclaim the miracle that has been offered. They are going to the priests, as instructed, to essentially say, 'look at me! Look at us!' The Samaritan, however, stops and first returns to Jesus, the source of the miracle, the author of faith, and quietly proclaims, 'Look at Jesus! Look at God!'

The Samaritan, in centering the attention back on the person of Jesus and the presence of God, is calling us to invest our attention not in him, and not in society or the work of the priests, but in the Divine. Jeremiah, exhorting the people of God to invest in the foreign city in which they live in exile, is ultimately reminding them to place their trust, to invest their faith, in God and God's future for their security.

As people of faith in today's world, and as members of a Reformed denomination, we are to be invested in always pointing back toward God - with our words, with our deeds, with our gifts and our spending, with our very being. Our calling is to, throughout our lives, invest in pointing back to God, back to Christ, back to the Spirit, back to the source of our life and living in the first place.

At 14 or so I didn't realize, at least not initially, what my parents were trying to help me understand. Too much lured by the promise of a weekly doughnut, I missed the point that my life, and all it entails, was to be invested in God, first and foremost. And I was called out about that, when it came to light. But rather than just chastising or punishing me, my parents explained what was really going on, what my meager one dollar offering truly represented: an investment in seeing God more fully realized and recognized.

What do we invest in, today? As we make our pledges, we invest in the ways this church points back to God, and life in Christ. We invest in ministries and efforts to see God's Kingdom realized. And we invest in an ongoing invitation to renewed and deepened faith. Let us invest whole-heartedly, now and always. Amen.

(Sermon preached by Rev. Dr. Jason Cashing at Clarence Presbyterian Church)