

Words Forming Witnesses

Psalm 104:24-34 & Jeremiah 29:4-7

(Hymns – 277, 284, 399, 400)

May 19, 2013

(Pentecost)

The Time and Place of Blessing

Pam Wong does a lot of things around Brentwood,
things for which we are most grateful.

In her work life, she is involved in the food services industry,
Nourishing kids to learn in our school system.
It's a good place to observe kids and how they behave.
They tend to be more themselves
in the cafeteria than in the classroom.

At Bible study on Friday night,
we were exploring further this idea of the unconditional covenant,
of God blessing us **so** we can bless others.
Pam noted a dimension of this reality
that I had not noticed before.
She said you could tell the difference in kids
between those who were confident in their parents love
and those who felt it was conditional.

The former were more confident, more open, more connected.
The latter were more fearful, more defensive, more isolated.
The former had a solid foundation from which to explore life.
The latter had a conditional foundation which often made them timid.
Or, in angry reaction against the conditions, it made them rebellious.

Pam's comments and the resulting discussion
made me aware yet again and afresh
how important it is to be reminded and to recognize
the unconditionality of God's love for us,
of God's blessings to us.

God blesses us with life and all the unique talents we are given
so
we can use all those gifts to flourish in the service of others.
And those others, let's remember, include the creation
upon which we depend for the basic necessities of life.

We are stewards,
entrusted with the care
of ourselves, our relationships, and our environment.

God loves us **so** we can love.
God blesses us **so** we can bless.

Knowing that fundamental truth,
knowing it in the depth of our beings,
knowing it is unshakeable and undeniable at the most basic level of life itself,
makes a difference in how we live.

It's the difference between confidence (literally 'with faith') and fear.
It's the difference between openness and defensiveness.
It's the difference between being connected and being isolated.
It's the difference, as God declares in Deuteronomy 30:11-19,
between life and death.

It's not that being faithful to the conditions of the covenant –
loving God,
following the divine commandments in relating to others,
and caring tenderly for yourself –
are not crucial.

They are as grateful responses to God's unconditional love.
These are the ways to give thanks to God for this amazing grace.
These are the things that delight God.
It's just that you don't have to do these things to earn God's love.
These are not conditions for God loving you.
Rather, they are the appropriate responses to God's love for you,
and for others, and for the creation.

Accept my unconditional love for you,
love what I love in return,
and you will flourish.
That's the Gospel,
and it's good news in a world increasingly oppressed
by frightening conditions.
"Do this," many seem to be saying, "or else!"
That's not the kind of God
you will find preached and followed in this congregation

It's not the kind of God that Jeremiah was writing about
in the passage we memorized and pondered this week.

Jeremiah preached and prophesied
during a turbulent time in Israel's history.

The Jewish people had turned to other gods and harsh religious practices.
Dire consequences unfolded.
Out of touch with their God, their neighbours, and their best selves,
the people suffered conquest and captivity by the Babylonians.
There were self-proclaimed prophets in the land
who promised the people simple solutions,
who assured them that the old days and ways would quickly be restored.

But Jeremiah has a different word from God.
That word is encapsulated in the letter to the exiles
that we memorized and pondered this week.
It reminds Israel in exile that God's love for them
does not depend on rituals, or human religious authorities,
or particular places of prosperity, or conditional rules and regulations.
God's love is there to make the people a blessing
wherever they find themselves.
If you are in exile in Babylon, then settle down.
Build homes, have families, cultivate gardens,
and seek the welfare of the place in which you find yourself
because it's the place to which I, the Lord, have sent you to be a blessing.

That's the core message of this passage.

It challenges us to discover the opportunities
God is opening up for us to seek the welfare
of North Burnaby, the city where this congregation is located.
If you don't live here, then it's the city where you live.
How are we seeking the welfare of our urban homes?

In many ways, this is a complicated question.
We have devised complex systems
of economics, governance, and social well-being.
To many, they seem to be getting out of hand.
Whatever illusions of having control over these systems
may have emerged over the years,
that seems to be diminishing as costs escalate,
breakdowns increase, and corruption spreads.

Perhaps it's time to go back to the kinds of basics
we've been discovering in our memorizing and pondering
so far this year.

Perhaps, on this Pentecost Sunday,
as we celebrate the gift of the Holy Spirit
that Jesus promised would lead us to greater wisdom,
it's time to rethink and reset some things.

That's what Jeremiah was saying to Israel in his day.

Here are some of the key shifts he called for:
from callous prosperity to compassionate prosperity
when it comes to economics;
from arrogant rule to collegial rule
when it comes to politics; and
from selfish hoarding to equitable sharing when it comes to social well-being.

We cannot make these shifts on our own.
We must do it in community, together,
each contributing our unique gifts to the commonwealth.

Opportunities to do this abound.
With the Holy Spirit's guidance, we can see them and use them.
That is the discipline of being a Christian.
We see things differently and we respond to opportunities differently.

Let's just take a moment or two in this space of grace,
where the light of Jesus Christ shines brightly on our lives,
to imagine when and where this coming week
we might find the time and place to be a blessing.
It might be in your home, with your friends, at work,
in your volunteering work, in your prayer life.

Daniel has written a piece for our reflection music this morning
simply entitled 'Gospel.'

While he, Conrad, and Adam play it for us,
let the Holy Spirit guide you into imagining
just one concrete way you will be a blessing this week
in the city to which God has sent you.
Then, as we go out nourished to serve,
let the Holy Spirit lead you into actually do it.

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