

Plans for Your Welfare and Not for Harm

Jeremiah 29:1-14

I'm going to take a point of pastoral privilege this morning to say a few words about my twenty plus years here at South Church. Next week there will be a celebration of the anniversary of my arrival here in the summer of 1989. I am deeply touched that you should care to celebrate, not least because these have not been easy years. I have changed, you have changed, the world around us has changed. Even the church building has changed. When I came to South Church, the exterior of the church was black with industrial soot. In the mid-1990's we had the building washed and now you are welcomed by the warm brownstone you see today.

From time to time we have laughed, cried, raged or remonstrated about this or that, but truly I can say for my part that I have never been bored! I thank you for that; I don't do boredom well. I have preached something approaching a thousand sermons, "performed" probably one hundred baptisms, about the same number of weddings, and easily four hundred funerals. I don't care to count the number of committee meetings I have attended! I could tell you some stories that make you laugh and some that make your hair stand on end. I have been loved -- and my life has been threatened. I have been thanked -- and I have been screamed at. I have gotten many things wrong -- and I have witnessed many miracles.

Of all possible scripture passages that speak of my deepest conviction and experience here at South Church, there are two texts that mean most to me. One you will hear next week in the anniversary service: Paul's prayer in the New Testament, in Ephesians, about comprehending the height and depth and length and breadth of God, so that we all may be rooted and grounded in love. You have heard me use this text many times and from time to time we have printed up a version of this prayer for you to take home.

But today's passage from Jeremiah is the real thing. If there is anything I will be remembered for, it is spoken in Jeremiah's words in verse seven: *Seek the welfare of the city....for in its welfare you will find your welfare*. It is now eighteen years since I pushed and cajoled leaders planning our 150th anniversary celebration of South Church to adopt this message as our mission, that we are the church *Where the City Takes Heart*. We had hats and t-shirts made up. Here's one. {Show t-shirt} They didn't sell much. But the message gradually took hold. We became not just a church *in the city*, but a congregation *of the city*. If there is any miracle I could ever witness and participate in – it is that we now refer to ourselves here at South Church as a *Jesus centered, Open and Affirming, Multi-racial* church. Are we all the way there yet? No. But the miracle is that we ever began and haven't given up!

For surely, says the Lord, I know the plans I have for you, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope. Did you hear those words in verse 11 this morning? Who knew? Who knew that in 1991 we would host the first funeral service in Springfield openly acknowledging a death from AIDS? Who knew that when the city tried to shut down the Open Pantry Warming Place shelter for homeless folks, we would be the first church to open our doors and welcome 75-100 homeless men to sleep in our Parish Hall

on weekends? Who knew when a tent city popped up nearby, we would go after church and make a prayer circle around the tents? Who knew that South Church Cooks would become a regular feature of our life? Who knew that we would host a Hispanic Three Kings Day or a service of memory for former Soviet Jews or a YSET community youth group? Who knows what's next? *What plans does God have in mind for us now?*

You know what? Even more than what we have done – far more than anything we *do* -- what is beautiful about South Church is *who we are*. We are *not* many things we used to be. But we are now one important thing. We are a people of *welcome*, for we believe we have been made welcome in God's presence. We have heard God say to us the words of the text this morning: *When you call upon me and come and pray to me, I will hear you. When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart, I will let you find me, says the Lord.* We are a people who have heard God say, *Come*, and we have come, and God say, *with all your heart*, and we have brought our hearts, and God say, *Find me*, and we have found God.

And so we have become *God's extravagant welcome*. Do you remember, some of you, the Sunday a few years ago when we baptized four teenagers? They were members of the confirmation class, but they had never been baptized. And they didn't just want a few words read over them and a few drops of baptismal water sprinkled over them, they wanted to *exult* in their welcome. So we pulled the marble baptismal font out and poured the baptismal water over them until it streamed over their heads. Then some of you came up and you took towels and you wiped their heads dry while we all prayed over them?

Do any still remember one night before the big vote came in May, 2000 about Open and Affirming, the night the Deacons met to write an Open and Affirming Statement. How we prayed! How we sweated the words! And yet the words came and they flowed: Up on great pieces of newsprint we wrote: *We believe in a loving God, who through Jesus Christ has called us to love and affirm all God's children. We welcome to full life and ministry all persons regardless of mental and physical ability, sexual identity, race, religious background, or economic status. By the power of the Holy Spirit we commit ourselves to respect and support gay, lesbian, bisexual – later we added transgendered – persons who have been excluded from the life of the church. We stand together seeking justice, healing and wholeness of life for all.* Those words didn't just *happen* – we have lived them and we have become them!

None of this has come easily, nor without loss, I know. Yet that is why I find this passage from Jeremiah so deeply moving. To a people in exile far from home, grieving their losses, Jeremiah wrote to say: *Right where you are, even far from home and familiar things, build houses and let down roots, grow gardens and have families, for right in this place of shock and change you will find that God has plans for your welfare and not for your harm.* And that is what we have done here at South Church. We have let go who we used to be and grown roots in who we are now and found that God had plans for our welfare all along.

As for me, I, too, have changed and grown. I have come to know Jesus not as a figure of historical record, or a figment of theological imagination, or a banner-bearer in righteous causes, but as himself – real, gritty, funny, strong, warm, always forgiving, never abandoning – in whom is met dust and the light of stars. I have let go trying to be the perfect minister and he has taught me instead how to love. I have ceased to be afraid of conflict and change and he has shown me how to be at peace. I have dwelt here and put down roots here

and had my children here and even when all that changed when my marriage broke up, he has brought me forgiveness and strength for my journey. Jesus is in this place because he has been made welcome, and I have found him here.

Thank you, Jesus, for not laughing at my dreams or dismissing my plans. Thank you for loving me in my changes. Thank you for bringing me to this place at this time where I am never bored. Thank you for showing me grit and grace in the lives of your people.

One last story. I will never forget Rose Chase. Some of you will remember Rose sitting in her wheelchair over next to Bill Person. In her later years she kind of shrunk and got sleepy. But for those of us who knew her earlier, she was quite a figure, rather tall and with white hair that looked like great cumulus clouds on the horizon – sometimes bringing a storm. Once upon a time Rose had been an elementary school principal, much loved by her kids and teachers. By the time I knew Rose, she was retired a couple years.

One day I'm sitting in my study here in the church and I have the radio on. A news bulletin comes on saying that at DeBerry school up on Union St a bunch of used hypodermic needles had been found on the playground so the whole school is locked down until dismissal time. Volunteers are being sought to scour the ground before the kids got out.

Now today probably they would have a HazMat team out in funny suits with protective gear. But back then we were a little naïve about such things. I thought I would just dash up there and see if I could help. I pulled on a jacket – it was a very cool, sunny and breezy early spring day. I drove up to De Berry and parked on Union Street down beyond St. John's Congregational Church. Got out of the car, crossed the street, and who did I find in charge of rakes and volunteers? There was Rose – dressed in a beautiful royal blue dress, wearing white sneakers, her marvelous white hair sailing across the playground as she instructed folks where to rake for needles. We all did exactly what we were told and reported back to her when we were done. There she was – first directing, then bending over to pick something up with her bare hands – then triumphantly depositing things in a barrel – then sailing back across the playground to where things looked like they were slowing down.

How on earth did she know? How did she get there? How did she get in charge? Why was she wearing a dress that would have been appropriate at a cocktail party? Who knows? All I know is that in my more mischievous moods when I am wondering what God looks like, I imagine God come sailing out of the clouds in blue to take care of her children, knowing just what to do and calling us all out to show kids that nobody ever has to be *locked down*.

Don't you love it? Thank you, Jesus, for Rose. Thank you for this place, and your people.

Amen