The Jeremiah Project

Jeremiah 29.4 “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 (there) 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 (for themselves); (and) 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.”

Many years ago, I was a Canon at the Cathedral of St. Mark in Minneapolis. Soon after my arrival, the congregation began a major capital campaign to mark the end of the long tenure of its then

current Dean, who was to set to retire in a few years' time. To that end, I was asked by the Dean to re-envision what he might do with the large Christian Education wing of the Cathedral, which was virtually unused at that time, except on Sunday mornings. I was aware that the Dunwoody Institute, Minnesota's first technical college, bordered Loring Park where the Cathedral was located. I had also read about a Dental School struggling down the street, and I knew that the local High School for recalcitrant students was in our neighborhood, as was the Minneapolis Community and Technical College. In all of those places, I learned that there were students struggling to complete their education and training, but who were hindered by the lack of available and affordable childcare. So, I imagined using our empty Education wing during the week to remedy this situation. We then got the only nationally accredited childcare center at that time in the whole city of Minneapolis to join us in this project, which would unfortunately require a great deal of remodeling of the space to meet current national childcare standards.

We also envisioned using the wealth of volunteers from the parish to offer additional benefits to our students, like babysitting their children one night a week for free, so that the parents had some time for themselves, or offering specialized tutoring in their studies, or just free movie nights in the cathedral auditorium, with free popcorn and candy. We also

organized diaper and baby clothes collections to aid these struggling young parents. In the end, the envisioned childcare program could pay for itself with a mixture of subsidized and market rates, if and only if, the space was provided rent-free by the Cathedral, which they were willing to do so as to serve our local community. Unfortunately, the renovations needed would cost a lot of money, money that we had to raise on our own, because it was outside the scope of the planned capital campaign.

So, we formed a local non-profit called "Students with Children," to try and raise the needed funding. But here we ran into resistance from local charities and non-profits, who were generally reluctant at the idea of committing funds, not towards childcare itself, a worthy endeavor, but towards the physical renovation of a religious church building, which was sadly necessary in order to make that childcare possible. Even so, we persisted, and finally we succeeded in raising the $600,000 necessary, and after Students with Children finally opened its doors in 1994, I was awarded the Minneapolis Award for my efforts by the then mayor of the city.

Meanwhile we had named the Monsignor from the Roman Catholic Basilica on the other side of the park as co-chair of our non-profit board along with the Dean of our Cathedral, in an effort to stress the neighborhood's concern to care for our struggling students with children. Indeed, the Monsignor was so inspired by

the venture that upon completion of our renovations, he announced a second phase, the construction of affordable housing for the students on property behind the Basilica. He called that phase, "The Jeremiah Project," after the prophets' counsel in today's first reading; "~~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 (own) welfare."

Jeremiah's advice to the Israelites in captivity in Babylon was to pay attention, first to the place in which they found themselves, and not to just sit down by the waters of Babylon and weep in their distress, or to only lay around dreaming of returning to Jerusalem and rebuilding the Temple someday, but instead to attend to present needs where they were. To recognize the necessities of your local community and to respond to them. To build houses for yourselves and plant gardens; to marry and have children. To think globally perhaps, but to act locally. It's wise advice, I think. Both Students with Children and The Jeremiah Project were local undertakings addressing the basic needs of the community in which we found ourselves, and by doing so, we made a significant difference in the lives of a lot of young people struggling to get ahead.

So, if you are worried about climate change, for instance, and many people are, I am one of them, then the question is what

are you personally doing about it in your life, in your neighborhood, in your local community? Recycling and composting, I fear, may not be enough. There is a reason why Lisa and I have put solar panels on the roof of our house, and solar batteries in the basement. There is a reason we took out our oil burner and put in geo-thermal heating and cooling. There is a reason why I put solar panels on my last church and looked into them here, and for my local Homeowners Association. There is a reason I drive an electric vehicle. These are the things I can do to address climate change, here and now, in the place where I find myself.

Think globally but act locally. Seek the welfare of the place where I have sent you, says the Lord, for in its welfare you will find your own. So, if you are worried about the poor and needy in the world, then what are you doing about it here and now? There is a reason why during the pandemic our village churches came together to help at our local food bank, when their senior volunteers withdrew for fear of covid. And there is a reason we also weekly transported frozen dinners to our local Social Services for delivery to those very seniors, because senior suppers in most towns had been cancelled during the pandemic. There is a reason why this parish, like so many others, organizes back-to-school supplies, Thanksgiving baskets, and we have now just completed a winter coat collection, why we hold blood drives and food collections for our local pantry, why we encourage

Literacy Volunteers and helping with the Winter Homeless Shelter. There is a reason why we helped start a refugee resettlement project here. There is a reason why Lisa and I give away about 17% of our taxable income to preferred charities each year. We know that we have enough, but sadly, so many others do not. And we want to address the social inequity in our community, and in our country, and in this world of ours. We care about those who lack basic necessities, for in their welfare we know lies our welfare.

If you want peace on earth then and goodwill among mankind, if you want to heal our divided nation and cool down our political climate, then what are you doing about it locally? Simple street protests are not enough. There is a reason why our diocese supports Braver Angels and their attempts to help us talk with those on the other side of the political spectrum. There is a reason why I promoted the Guidelines for Mutuality when I first arrived in this divided parish, with its suggestions of not to shame, blame, or criticize self or others. With its suggestions of using first person "I" subjective statements, rather than third person declarative judgments of this or that person, or this or that opinion, as so many sadly now do. For there is real difference between the statement, "I think our nation is in crisis," and the statement, "Our nation is in crisis." The first one invites the hearer into dialogue, such as "why do you think

that?” The second statement requires the hearer to either agree with you or disagree, furthering the divide in this country!

And that division is dangerous and threatens our welfare. Our current constant name-calling of one another is just the first step towards the dehumanization of others in our communities, and the dehumanization of others ultimately leads to abuse and violence, as we can all see happening right now in our nation. Healing begins when we treat one another, not as enemies or ideologies, but as neighbors, and fellow citizens of our local communities, the very communities where we find ourselves, neighbors that are worthy of our respect and compassion, for in their welfare we will find our welfare.

Thus it is, that the Christian Church offers an alternative vision for public life, one rooted in the dignity of every human being and the repudiation of fear as the driving force in our communal living. The Baptismal Covenant that we make and renew regularly challenges us, “to seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving our neighbor as ourselves,” and “to strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being” as well as “to cherish the wondrous works of God, (and to) protect and restore the beauty and integrity of all creation.”

Friends, don’t try to solve world peace on your own, rather try to further peace in the communities in which you find yourself, says the Lord God. You are not going to end world

hunger, but you can feed the hungry in your village. To think globally by acting locally, to help change the world by changing how we act with, and how we treat one another, and thus truly loving our neighbors as ourselves, as Jesus commanded us, while caring for the poor and needy amongst us. Amen.