

Rev. Kate LeFranc

Preached at Head of Christiana Presbyterian Church, October 13 2013

“Build, Plant, Live”

Jeremiah 29:1, 4-7

Luke 17:11-19

They say the only certain things in life are death and taxes. Or, perhaps we could say *illness* and taxes. And there are certainly plenty of references to both in the scriptures.

Clearly there is something important happening, especially around these stories of illness and healing – these stories of sick people being made well just resonate with us in a way that almost everyone can relate to! The one we read today is a nice one, appearing only in Luke, although all four gospels have their fair share of stories of lepers being healed, and that difficult closing line, “your faith has made you well.”

These stories of lepers being healed are particularly interesting because of the way their condition – which really included any number of skin conditions which we today recognize as distinct diseases – these conditions left them not just “ill” in a medical sense, but “unwell” in a social sense because of the ways they were stigmatized and kept out of society and places of worship. In fact, the Levitical laws that kept them out of temples, and prohibited from contact with observant Jews, specified that in order to be declared clean, they had to see a *priest* rather than a physician. I don’t know about you, Bob, but I didn’t learn that in seminary.

So the healing which Jesus offers somehow addresses both realities, of medical healing and of social restoration. Jesus yet again risks his ritual cleanliness according to these laws by touching or even just speaking with people who were such outcasts. And in some ways it is understandable that nine of them went running off to see the priests – as they had been told to do – because it was the priests who could, according to the law, grant them the social restoration that I’m sure they craved.

But only one of them, in his joy, turned back to the one, the *person*, who had healed him. His first act, after he has been healed, is connection with another person. As a result, he is the only one to receive Jesus’ blessing, “Your faith has made you well.”

But what a conundrum that line presents us in this age when we know a little more about medicine, where we don’t attribute every condition to faith, or the lack thereof. What do we do with that statement, “your faith has made you well,” when we all know someone – or ourselves – who were not “made well”? Can we really say that they must simply have had insufficient faith? Or that we just aren’t praying hard enough?

I wonder – since we are told that all ten were “made clean,” but only the one was “made well,” if Jesus isn’t speaking as much about his spiritual wellness as his physical health. Because while the two are certainly related, they are also two very different things. And no matter the state of his skin, when this now-former leper raises his voice in praise to God, and turns his face in thanks to Jesus, his soul is a little more well.

It often just happens that way, doesn't it? A moment of connection with another person, smiling together about something, just makes you feel a little better. When just the act of giving praise and thanks, even if you don't quite feel it yet, somehow makes you feel a little more thankful.

I got a fortune cookie the other day that said, "The only day that is truly lost is one on which you have not laughed." So I stuck the bit of paper on my fridge, and it does keep making me laugh a bit. And yet sometimes it feels pretty hard to muster up a smile in the face of everything going on in our lives.

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This month, 16-year-old Malala Yousafzai became the youngest person ever nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize, for her work on behalf of girls and women in Pakistan and other areas controlled by the Taliban. When she was 11, the Taliban insurgents in her home in Pakistan's Swat Valley began bombing schools and prohibiting girls in particular from being educated. At this point, she says, she realized how important her education was, and how threatening educated girls and women would be to the Taliban rule.

She began writing a blog under a pseudonym (and then eventually using her real name), and speaking to the BBC and the New York Times and any other media outlets she could get to, telling them about what it was like to be women and girls under Taliban control, and in particular advocating for the right to education. So many of the girls' schools had been destroyed or forcibly closed, but her school was able to reopen and continued to teach behind unmarked doors.

Last October, she was on the bus going home from school, when a Taliban soldier stopped the bus and got on. He asked, "Who is Malala?" She looked up and squeezed her best friend's hand, and he turned and shot her, twice, in the face.

Miraculously, she survived. And the experience has only strengthened her resolve and bolstered her courage. She has founded an organization called the Malala Fund, working for the rights of girls in the developing world to be educated. She appeared on the Daily Show this week, and she spoke about her reaction to the Taliban's threats against her, which have been renewed in the wake of her increased publicity:

I used to think that the Talib would come and he would just kill me, and I said, if he comes, what would you do, Malala? Then I would reply myself, Malala, take a shoe and hit him! But then I said, if you hit a Talib with your shoe, then there would be no difference between you and the Talib. You must not treat others that much with cruelty and that much harshly. You must fight others, but through peace, and through dialogue, and through education. Then I said, I'll tell him how important education is, and that I even want education for your children as well. That's what I want to tell you, now do what you want.

Her confidence and her conviction would be remarkable in anyone, but her gracious and peaceful response is nothing short of astounding coming from a teenage girl who not that long ago was looking down the barrel of a Taliban shotgun.

I come back to the words of the prophet Jeremiah: “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 “praying for your enemies” writ large, and not pulling any punches.

Jeremiah was writing to his people after the Babylonian army had come into Jerusalem, destroyed the holy temple that was at the center of all their religious and political lives, and taken the leaders, the wealthy, the influential people forcibly into captivity in Babylon. Among all the persecutions that beset the Israelite people over the centuries, these years of captivity in Babylon had the most influence over what is now our Old Testament. It was a pivotal event in their history because all the social structures and religious patterns they had known were thrown up in the air. Suddenly, these previously important people found themselves captive in a strange land, far from home, surrounded by strange new people, and they could not even properly worship their God without the temple around which to center their worship.

Jeremiah mentions that there were some false prophets at that time, telling people they would return to Jerusalem soon, any day now. And I can imagine they would have been very popular! Giving the people a chance to believe, this won't last long, we'll be going back to Jerusalem any moment now, you'll see, no need to even unpack our bags. We don't belong in this place.

But Jeremiah says, as comforting as that thought might be, that is not the will of God. Instead of running around, here but not here, living in a place but not actually living there, he says, build houses, and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Settle in, put down some roots.

And not just that – get married, he says. And he doesn't specify, marry only your *own* people; just get married. Have kids there, and give your children in marriage. Very practically, he is asking them to *love* these people. These strangers, and this strange land. To dare, somehow, to look into the face of a Babylonian, and smile.

I don't think this is some kind of blind optimism, though, that pretends, “well, the Babylonians aren't really that bad, these people aren't trying to conquer us, and we didn't really need that old temple anyway.” Jeremiah spends much of his prophetic career giving voice to the anguish of his people, describing scenes of desolation and mourning. He knows this pain, and the reality of the violence they are facing. Somehow, this is someone who has seen the insanity of violence and the psychological toll of state terrorism managing to speak peace in the face of it.

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Jeremiah is looking, perhaps, at the spiritual well-being of his people, rather than the material reality of their situation. Planting a garden will not get them back home, and it will not rebuild their temple or set them free from captivity. But putting down roots, both literal and metaphorical, is about more than that.

Seek the welfare of this strange city, he says. And the word that's translated “welfare” is *shalom*, which is so much bigger than anything we have an English word for. It is peace, it is wholeness, it is well-being. And when you work for the *shalom* of these unfamiliar people, he says, you will find your *shalom*.

Now, we have not (probably) experienced anything like the political exile of Jeremiah's time. But so many of those feelings are ones we may have known in other ways. Feelings of uprootedness, of not being at home in a new place; or sometimes it seems like as we stay put, the town shifts around us and we look up to find that we are suddenly in the midst of an unfamiliar city, surrounded by people we don't quite recognize, who have these strange customs (Twitter and Snapchat and FourSquare!) that are somehow *foreign* to us.

Several hundred years after Jeremiah, when the Israelite people have returned to Judea and rebuilt the temple, the region has been through so many different occupying powers and conquering armies and migrations, forced and unforced, and the people of Samaria have become, somehow, "foreigners" in the land they have occupied for some 700 years, smack in the middle between Jerusalem and Galilee. Jews and Samaritans, by Jesus' time, are foreigners and strangers to one another in their own homes, separated by a river or a patch of land or that invisible line marking "the other side of the tracks." And if there is peace, it is an uneasy one – the kind of truce where there is not much actual violence but it isn't really quite peace.

And Jesus, being Jesus, walks through Samaritan country, and reaches out with love, with healing, with kindness – to people who would have looked on him with the same suspicion with which he would be expected to look at them. And it is the Samaritan in this story, and not one of his "own" people, who turns back to him and smiles and says "thank you."

And that connection is what heals him, what makes him truly *well*. It is hard for us, any of us, to feel at peace when we look on someone else with suspicion, with fear, with hate. No matter where we are, no matter whether the people we are afraid of are actually trying to kill us or are simply trying to live their lives in a way that is slightly different from ours, that fear will fester and growl within our bellies and will poison our lives and theirs.

But that is in many ways the easier thing to do, isn't it. To let our fear build up walls around us, and do our best to walk the long way around and avoid contact. To keep saying, "they don't belong here," or "we're not staying long," "they're just doing it wrong," anything to keep from admitting that we really just don't want to learn to live together.

Peace is a much harder thing. It is a scary thing sometimes to really pause and encounter the humanity of someone we've marked "different," although I think we are lucky in this community that usually they don't have a gun aimed at our faces. Because that is not the case for everyone.

But still, it is scary, because to look past those walls we build up means that our carefully-maintained dividing lines between us and them will start to crumble. And those walls mean security, the illusion of safety. But those walls do as much psychological damage no matter what side we're on.

"But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile," says Jeremiah. "Pray to the Lord on its behalf," the *people's* behalf. For in their welfare you will find your welfare. In their peace will you find your peace, and in their wholeness will you find your wholeness. Only when we can seek the healing of those we have walled out, will we truly be well.

Our God calls us out of our hiding places. Our God sends healing and wholeness for us, and calls us out to share that healing with our community. And for that, we give thanks.