

Jeremiah 29: 1, 4-14
I Thessalonians 3: 6-10
Luke 17: 11-19

Gratitude and a Future with Hope
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More than ten years ago, our church launched a capital campaign for the renovation of the Parish Hall annex to the sanctuary, plus a few improvements to the sanctuary itself. It was a very successful campaign, partly because there was so much support of time and energy from almost all of the congregation, and partly because we got a great consultant. That consultant, Jeff Newlin, led us in Bible study before we even began to think about raising any money. During that time, we came up with the campaign title or theme, “Gracious Promise” based on the words from the book of the prophet Jeremiah, “I will fulfill to you my gracious promise and bring you back to this place. For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you future with hope.” Our NRSV translation leaves out the word “gracious,” but it’s implied, and found in other versions, and we stuck it back in there for our campaign.

Lovely verses. Lovely promises. But I can’t help but think that it was removed somewhat from its context. Jeremiah was not speaking to a church community seeking to create a safe and strong and suitable place for worship and community activities and outreach. He was speaking to a completely broken, frightened, and fragmented community. As you may know, many of the prophets of the Hebrew Scriptures were wrestling with the prospect and the fallout of military defeat and exile in Babylon. It’s actually a complicated political story, not a linear defeat and exile and return. When the armies of Judah were first defeated in 597 BCE, the King and the priests and the leadership class were taken into exile. Ten years passed, then the Babylonians returned to really destroy the city and take even more people away. Jeremiah was speaking to the exiles in the in-between time in the form of a letter. He was saying, “You have survived tragedy and calamity and disaster. You have been dragged across borders, unwillingly. It might get worse before it gets better. Now I am going to tell you how to survive and how to thrive. Live with grateful and open hearts in this new place.”

Even though this period is sometimes called the Babylonian Captivity, these exiles did not live as slaves. As a foreign population within the empire, they were allowed to keep their families, their communities, their public gatherings and their worship services. They may have been homesick, but they were not destitute. So Jeremiah encourages them to build community, to maintain worship, to produce food, to encourage families. And not only that, but to “seek the welfare of the city – that’s Babylon -...for in its welfare you will find your welfare.” This seems like an extraordinary request at first. Talk about crossing a border! This is the enemy we are talking about. How can we link our well-being with theirs?

And yet, that is exactly what happened. The Jewish community prospered in Babylon: so much so that many remained there when they were given permission to return to Jerusalem 60 years later. I met a Jewish family in Iran in 2003 who were likely descendants of the exiles of 2600 years ago. And they still seek the welfare of their adopted city and country. This border-crossing recognition of common ground, common hope, rooted in gratitude, allowed so many people to survive and thrive, with their devotion to their God intact.

Recently I read of a modern version of crossing a border out of gratitude and a desire for community. In 2015, the Polish community in the UK – you know that many foreign workers come to Britain looking for employment - was experiencing discrimination. They decided to take action, to show how the Polish workers mattered to Britain and Britain mattered to the Polish workers. Some of them decided to strike: 1000 went to a demonstration at Westminster instead of going to work. That's one display of how your work matters. But some chose another route. They lined up to donate blood to the National Health Service as a way of giving back to the country and raising awareness of their contribution to British society. There is historic symbolism in this, as the Polish nation had in the past shed blood and lives for the UK. During the Second World War, thousands of Poles fought in the British army. Perhaps they thought if they showed gratitude with these donations of blood, gratitude might be reciprocated. So 1000 migrants went on strike, but 2,300 gave blood.

In 2016, we got Brexit. There has been a wave of xenophobic attacks on migrants since the vote to leave the European Union. So, were the efforts of 2015 labeled as a failure, and were they given up? No: this last August, instead of a strike, thousands more Polish workers were donating blood to coincide with the NHS Blood and Transplant's "Missing Type" blood drive campaign, an international effort calling for new people to register as blood donors. They persevered in seeking the welfare of the city. One donor said, "It's all about bringing communities together. Making us not only workers, helpers, because somebody says; you work good when you get paid. Here you don't get paid. It's like giving something."

Sometimes we think that gratitude looks to the past. We are grateful for something that has already happened. The feeling can well up in us without thinking or volition. But there is another variety of gratitude, one that looks to the future, that has a purpose and holds a gracious promise. Sometimes it can seem as though this is contrived: gratitude with a plan for gain. There are a lot of inspirational books and articles out there on improving your life, or your business or your health or you soul through gratitude, and a lot of them have lists: lists of symptoms, lists of solutions, lists of tactics to convince yourself and then enable yourself to see a future of hope. (I sometimes wonder how much money these gratitude gurus make off selling their ideas... but then some of them are good ideas, so I should be grateful ☺)

People of faith can use all these writings to create a better community, or solve our problems. But I find that our sacred Scriptures contain so much, in the form of story and encouragement, for inspiration. In another time of sorrow and persecution, another in-between, border-crossing sort of time, during Paul's separation from his beloved church community in Thessalonica, he calls up the warm feelings he has for their faith and perseverance, then he overflows with gratitude: "How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy we feel?" This expression of joyful appreciation was fuel, energy for both Paul and his readers. This joyful rhetorical question had been cultivated in prayer and in hardship, and it bore fruit: it sustained a community.

And then there is the healing story in the Gospel of Luke. Jesus, on his travels in the in-between place between Samaria and Galilee, in the in-between time between call and crucifixion, in the in-between situation between outcast lepers and healthy followers, across all those borders, hears a call for help. "Jesus, Lord, have mercy on us," the lepers cry from a distance. In this situation, Jesus does not offer the healing touch, but just instructions, following ancient Hebrew law, about going for a skin inspection by the priests. As they walk away, they realize that they are already healed, just by turning around, just by a change of direction.

Nine of the lepers, who are no doubt happy and grateful, obediently do what they were told and the law requires. Now healed, they are well-behaved, observant, faithful people. Even though Jesus wonders aloud about them, he must know that they were getting their certificates of healing at the Temple so that they can return to life as they knew it. The shock is that the Samaritan is the one who came back with an extravagant display of gratitude. But why should we be shocked? He wouldn't have been welcome in the temple anyway, even with clean skin – that was one border he could not cross. There is no cure for being a Samaritan. No priest's certificate would change that identity, no rehabilitation program to make him like them. So, out of the whole bunch, he has plenty of time, and plenty of reason, for gratitude. Gratitude has opened him up to a gracious promise, a future with hope, and he can't contain himself.

I don't know whether any of you have ever been on that side of a border, the tenth leper side of a border. It is a place where you have little to lose by being well-behaved, little to lose by taking a different path from the others. When you have met the one who makes you feel like a whole human being again, there is no question. Turn around and say, "Thank you." When you have met the one who has compassion on the outsider, who tears down the wall that has defined you as **not** OK, who crosses the border between sick and well, between us and them, between brown and white, between privileged and downtrodden, your heart opens like a flower. Your voice might even get a little loud in praise. You might make extravagant gestures – maybe a little over the top. It's OK to act like the tenth leper sometimes.

Sometimes I think that what really measures the strength and depth of community energy is how many times we remember to say thank you. "Thank you" to God every day for the beauty and opportunity in it. "Thank you" to our sisters and brothers here for each moment of warmth, each helping hand, each listening ear, each border-crossing effort, each revelation of difference and diversity. Not a mindless, or polite etiquette of gratitude, but really plumbing the depths of appreciation. This is a culture I'd love to cultivate. Whether we feel like we've been dropped here as exiles, whether we feel under threat or undervalued, God is still present to us as gracious promise. Let us take hold of that promise and seek our welfare in company with both stranger and friend. Amen.