

A Future of Hope  
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A Sermon Preached at the Larchmont Avenue Church  
October 10, 2010  
Texts: Romans 12:9-18. Jeremiah 29:1,4-14

*Romans 12:9-18*

*Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.*

*Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.*

*Jeremiah 29:1, 4-14*

*These are the words of the letter that the prophet Jeremiah sent from Jerusalem to the remaining elders among the exiles, and to the priests, the prophets, and all the people, whom Nebuchadnezzar had taken into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon.*

*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 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; 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. For thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: Do not let the prophets and the diviners who are among you deceive you, and do not listen to the dreams that they dream, for it is a lie that they are prophesying to you in my name; I did not send them, says the LORD.*

*For thus says the LORD: Only when Babylon's seventy years are completed will I visit you, and I will fulfill to you my 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 a future with hope. Then 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, and I will restore your fortunes and gather you from all the nations and all the places where I have driven you, says the LORD, and I will bring you back to the place from which I sent you into exile.*

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Jeremy was one of my most thoughtful and genuine kids in youth group. Raised by a single mom, he was wonderfully close to his grandparents and in particular his grandpa who had stepped in as a father figure to him. Wonderfully intelligent and creative, his favorite pastime was creating movies with his friends - making up plot lines and acting them out in front of the camera. The elaborate detail with which he could describe his movies conjured in my mind the extravagance of sets and costumes, makeup and story.

In youth group he was engaged, sweet, respectful, fun. He was a joy to know and to be around. He was also terribly bullied in school. The school he attended was a very small rural public school and both kids I knew who attended both had problems with bullying. As far as I knew at the time it wasn't about sexuality or gender issues, although these kids were likely accused of that. It was just about being different. It was about being an outsider. It was about being ostracized for who they were.

Their parents complained to the school. The administrators said there wasn't anything they could do about it unless they caught the kids in the act. But bullies are notoriously secretive - words were usually spoken on buses or on the walk to and from school, whispers in hallways and locker-rooms. Who could catch them?

It is a bit of an exile, isn't it? Perhaps not because we want it to be, but because our western culture has reinforced this idea that adolescence is this particular developmental period - that time when young people are betwixt and between. No longer children, not yet adults. The exile comes in part because children are set aside in education systems to learn, mostly with their peers, set apart from families and loved ones. They are in many ways removed - removed from the work force, removed from family security, set aside to develop and grow into independent, autonomous adults. There are good reasons for this separation - child labor laws, public education opportunities, but...there are some consequences as well.

If adolescents are already isolated, then the isolation that comes with being bullied is even more intense. If a young person already feels not quite understood by the larger community, then how much more will they feel that if peers turn on them with words of hatred and bigotry. Add to that the inescapable nature of the internet - so that bullying words can never be left behind but can appear about you even in your own home, on your own computer. Add to that the way in which those words multiply and can be heard and read by thousands in just a few moments. Add to that the possibility that the words used to bully and hurt are words that are true. That the word that peers use to

dismiss and denigrate is a word that names outwardly the very complicated feelings inside. Add to that all those who stand by, silent.

Can we imagine a more painful exile or isolation?

The words of Jeremiah were spoken to the people of Israel during one of the most difficult times of their history: during the exile and destruction of the Temple. The history of Israel during that time is a story of competing factions and alliances with Egypt and Assyria, finally ending with the prevailing Babylonians capturing the leaders of Israel and taking them in chains to Babylon. At the time of our text we learn that the exiles have not been tolerating well their situation, and have begun to arrange a revolt against the Babylonians, joining with neighboring countries still resisting the conquests of Babylon.

They are preparing to fight back.

Jeremiah's words come both as a surprise and as a warning. For a people who had long been warned against marrying outside of their ethnic boundaries, for a people who understood themselves as set apart for God, Jeremiah seems to go against tradition and reason in his prophetic voice to the Israelites in exile. Settle in. He says, Find peace. "Build houses and plant gardens, take wives in marriage and raise your families... 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. Only when you have been there for seventy years will I bring you back to Jerusalem."

We can only imagine how the exiles might have heard this word. Despairing, desiring justice, desiring a return to hope. So often when we want hope and justice we want it right now. So often when we want relief we want it to come immediately. "How can we sing a song in a strange land?" come the cries from our text last week. How can we endure this pain any longer?

For the exiles, the need to revolt against Babylonian oppression must have been desperate. But Jeremiah's words are words of peace: "Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile..." The word translated as "welfare" in this text is one that will sound familiar: The word is "shalom." Shalom: a word that means peace, prosperity, completeness, wholeness. "Seek the shalom of the place where you are in exile, Jeremiah says, 'for in it's shalom you will find your shalom.'"

This surprising vision of peace: peace in the midst of foreign domination, peace in the midst of struggle and pain, peace in the midst of sorrow and isolation. Is it even possible? Can there be peace in the midst of such pain?

Over the past month or so we have heard story after story of young teenagers taking their lives in the wake of ruthless bullying by peers. Each one of these young people: Billy Lucas, Seth Walsh, Asher Brown, and Tyler Clementi, had been ridiculed for being a homosexual.

In my struggle this past week to make sense out of the four suicides of young teenagers around the country - - in my struggle to understand and grieve - I came across a series of videos on you tube. The videos are put together by Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender and supportive adults speaking to young questioning teenagers. Each video is titled, "It gets better."

In these personal testimonies, adults relate stories of how they endured torment and abuse at the hands of their own peers in high school. Stories are told of being called names or spit on, of having property destroyed or being outed, of being physically abused, made to feel worthless and outcast. But for each of these adults, they could also tell a story about how much better it got when they left high school, when they left a small community that could not see the beautiful person that they were, when they learned that there were others like them in the world - others who were ready to welcome them, others who were ready to respect them, to protect them, to believe in them, others who would worship alongside of them without asking them to deny who they were. "It gets better," they said, "you should be around to see it."

As I watched I could not help but hear the words of Jeremiah to the exiles - "For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the LORD, plans for your shalom and not for harm, to give you a future with hope."

What was painful in watching these videos, in listening to story after story of bullying of LGBT youth now adults, was fact that any of it had to happen at all. If only we could turn back the clock - find a way to speak a word of hope, a moment of shalom to each of these young lost lives. If there was a way to save these young lives, wouldn't we all do it? It is difficult to balance these words of Jeremiah, the words that tell the exiles to sit tight and endure with the utter urgency for justice. It is difficult to listen to person after person tell young people that it gets better when the bullying continues.

But I wonder. I wonder what it means that Jeremiah told the exiles that their own peace was wrapped up inexplicably with those around them whom they saw as enemies. I

wonder what it means that he told them that their wholeness was bound up with the wholeness of the one they saw as “other.” I wonder what it might mean for us to understand that the shalom of our youth, the wholeness of our young people - especially those who we see as most different and strange - is tied up with our shalom as a wider community. I wonder how our words might change, how our actions might change, if we see how directly we are bound together with the young people who are trying so desperately to figure out who they are and where they belong.

I wonder - how do we respond as people of faith to a community in exile?

Can we ask the most difficult questions of all: How are we culpable for the deaths of these young people? How do our words and actions help kids feel the need to fit into some particular mold of perfect: attractive, athletic, intelligent, straight? How do our affirmations and questions silently close them off to those things or people that they love? How might we look at each young person in a way that truly sees them for who they are, instead of who we wish they would be? How can we stand against bullies and intolerance of all kinds and speak out for the outcast, the isolated, the exile? How can we remind each young person, every day, of the gift that they are to us and to God?

To be honest, I don't know the answer to these questions. My heart is heavy with sorrow that any young person could be so painfully ridiculed and ostracized. My heart is heavy with the knowledge that some of the worst bullying is reinforced if not done by those who are my brothers and sisters in Christ, because they have found words in our scriptures to serve their purposes.

What they fail to remember is that Jesus said not one word about sexuality, but instead ate with outcasts and healed division. What they fail to remember is that Saint Paul said, let love be genuine, love one another with mutual affection, nothing can separate you from the love of God in Jesus Christ. What they fail to see is that we are all in this together - my shalom is your shalom, your wholeness is their wholeness.

Do we believe that God has a future of hope planned for these struggling youth, one that embraces their wholeness and peace? Do we believe that God has a future of hope planned for each of us, no matter what our particular exile? Do we believe that God has a future of hope planned for us, for each and every child of God?

What pains me is that the voices of hate and bigotry so often drown out the voices of love and welcome and grace. Perhaps it is time for that to change.

Jeremiah says, "Surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your peace, for your wholeness, for your shalom and not for harm, to give you a future of hope."