

Beloved Community: Loving Inclusively
A Sermon by the Rev. Scott Herr
First Presbyterian Church of New Canaan – Sept. 13, 2020 (Rally Day)

Please Read:
Jeremiah 29:1, 11-14
Romans 14:1-12

Saul Bellow, the Nobel prize winning novelist, writes, “To be modern is to be mobile, forever *en route*, with few local attachments anywhere, cosmopolitan, not particularly disturbed to be an outsider in temporary quarters.”¹ It strikes me that all of us, to some extent are *outsiders in temporary quarters*. Maybe that’s why, deep down, our longing for home is so strong?

Today is Rally Day, and it’s been explained to me that today is a kind of *homecoming*, a day when we regather as a church family after the summer holidays and getaways up north. This is a particularly poignant pandemic Rally Day, as many of us have been socially distanced since March, and we are only now cautiously coming closer (but not too close!) for worship together. It is a gift to see old friends, and for me to meet many of you in person for the first time.

One of the reasons I am so thankful to be with you and feel called to serve as your pastor is the inspiring Mission Statement with four simple goals that I think we all can remember: *Live Spiritually; Love Inclusively; Learn Continuously; and Leave a Legacy*. Last week I talked about living spiritually, and today, I can think of no better rallying cry than to “Love inclusively!”

As Presiding Bishop Michael Curry of the Episcopal Church says, “*If it's not about love, it's not about God.*” Love is at the heart of the gospel and I believe that if your interpretation of the Bible does not lead you to a greater love for God and your neighbor, it’s wrong! You’ve heard it said that the main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing. Well, the main thing for followers of Jesus is love!

Unfortunately, too many people outside the church think of Christians as just the opposite of inclusive lovers of humanity. Words like hypocrisy, bigotry, hateful, judgmental and exclusive are often used to describe Christians these days and in many ways the church has been an exclusive institution. But that’s only true when we major in the minors. When we get it right, we focus on the more noble declarations in Scripture like: “God is love. For God so loved the world... We love because God first loved us. Love one another as I have loved you...” and perhaps my favorite, “The only thing that counts is faith working through love.”

There aren’t qualifications on who is included in God’s great love, and so I find our mission statement with the explicit goal to *love inclusively* refreshing. I appreciate the more expanded version of our mission statement, which asserts, and I quote: “As a **congregation of inclusivity** we strive to welcome all people into the life of our church. We are a friendly and caring church where people of all ages, backgrounds, and life situations are always welcomed, and where our differences are celebrated and respected. We encourage the openness and authentic humanness that breaks down barriers of fear and builds bridges of trust and love.”

¹ Saul Bellow, “Mozart: An Overture” in *It all Adds Up* (New York: Penguin Books, 1995), 6.

In the lectionary Romans text for today, Paul starts off with a word of welcome, because welcome is a concrete expression of love. The first century world had its own cancel culture, with the church caught in an intricate web of tribalism and racism between Jews and Gentiles.

We're not going to go into the details of the food and calendar controversies of the first century church, but I want to invite you to think with me about how Paul warns the church in Rome (and consequently, in every place) about the dangers of failing to celebrate and respect *diversity*. Whether one is weak or strong in faith, the main denominator is that we are all created in the image of God, and in the church we are brothers and sisters, siblings in Christ who need one another to reflect the fullness of who God really is. Unfortunately, like in the first century we also have the inclination to alienate and marginalize those who are different.

We discriminate against those of a different race, gender, sexual orientation, culture, education or economic background, for starters. Too often we in the church simply reflect the way of the world, the strong dominating the weak and where the ones who are minoritized are excluded, shunned, and silenced. The wealthy and educated, regardless of their faith, tend to look down on the poor and uneducated. Yet, the apostle calls us to reflect God's love for all, honoring and appreciating the *imago dei*, the image of God in every person. It was Julian of Norwich who said with inspired insight, "We are not just made *by* God. We are made *of* God!" The church is the household of God, where everyone is welcome and loved as part of the family of God.

Sometimes, you have to have go through alienation or marginalization to let go of prejudice and bigotry to truly love and respect all others. The Jeremiah text is a message to the Jewish elite taken into Babylonian captivity. It's one thing to welcome people who are different than you, but it's quite a bit more challenging to love those who sent you into exile!

Granted, we haven't been carted off to a foreign land in chains, but in many ways, we are experiencing cultural, moral, economic and social exile with the current pandemic, social and climate change crises. It's a time of reckoning that is disorienting and disturbing. We can't fall back on familiar patterns of life. We've lost control in significant ways and politically we need to recover basic decency and civility. Thousands have lost their lives, and many millions have lost their jobs. Too many are losing hope...

To face the challenges of exile, you have to be vulnerable, even learn a new language (or at least learn how to use Zoom)! Some of you travel and know the losses of being an alien in a foreign land. Just trying to speak is frustrating. I love the story about Mark Twain who quipped, "In Paris they just simply opened their eyes and stared when we spoke to them in French! We never did succeed in making those idiots understand their own language." Humor is one way we deal with dislocation or disorientation, but cynicism and resignation is another.

Jeremiah would have none of the latter. While the false prophets warned against getting too close to the aliens of Babylon, Jeremiah spoke for God: Love these people. Live among them. Marry into their families. Seek the shalom of the city where you live... That word *shalom* here, as you know, is the Hebrew word for peace, but it means so much more than an absence of violence. It means wholeness, flourishing, "the way it's supposed to be."

The life of faith in many ways is life in exile, far from home, even if you've never gone anywhere. The word exile is from the Latin word *exilium*, and has its root in *ex* - meaning out, and *ambulare*, meaning to walk. "To walk out" is another way of thinking of exile. For people of faith, we're always "walking out" on the edges of mainstream culture, economics, politics, religion, lifestyle, fashion, etc... When you live in exile, you stand out! It is this exile existence ("walking around in a way that you stand out") which consumes most of the Hebrew scriptures, most of which was written just before, during or just after the exile.

As Christians, we are called to stand out as the most inclusively loving, welcoming people on earth. We dare to be extravagantly loving because we trust that God extravagantly loves us and holds our future. As Paul says, "if Christ be for us, who can be against us?" Jeremiah 29:11 is a beautiful promise of God, "I know the plans I have for you. Plans not to hurt you but to bless you and give you a future with hope!" Isn't that amazing? Doesn't that just make you want to take a deep breath and rest? Relax? And trust... because it's going to be OK...

We of all people should be free to love, because we know that the Lord of the Universe is not against us, but for us. And the way we "walk," the way we live is meant to express our trust in an inclusively loving God.

So, you build a house, plant a garden and eat the food, mix with the locals, pray for the peace of the city, even though not everyone in the city worships your God or any God at all. It doesn't matter. These are the neighbors God has given to us to love and respect and care for. You live in this world, with all of its ambiguities and perplexities, all of the confusion and challenges, and live the best you can to show God's love for others. That's what exiles do.

The Good news is, sometimes, you discover being in exile holds a special blessing. We worship a God who has a reputation for bringing new life even out of a tomb, and we believe that this God of life has plans for us, plans to bless us and give us a future with hope. Sometimes it seems as though only in exile, when we are most disoriented and confused about life that we are most open to God and will seek God with all our heart. Sometimes it is when we find ourselves empty handed that we are most open to receive the blessing God has sought to give us all along. In exile, God becomes real in a way we could've never known back home.

Which is the paradox of the lesson for us today. We are dislocated from "home" only to realize that our true home was never here in the first place. Our home is not a place, but a people, a community, a family that is formed by God, of God, with God and for God. Home is God's family, a loving church community where you are always welcome, no matter what...

Jeremiah challenged the exiles in Babylon to embrace the larger culture, and as faithful exiles we too are challenged to work for the welfare of the larger community especially in these isolating and demoralizing times. Cornell West said, "Justice is what love looks like in public!" Reinhold Niebuhr wrote, "Love is the motive, but justice is the instrument!" In other words, we are called to be home, the household of God for *all* people! We are here to offer healing peace and justice for everyone, for all who have been excluded or forgotten.

As more recent resident aliens, Kim and I have been unpacking our boxes and making the transition from a home congregation we love and miss in Paris. But we want you to know that we have experienced you as a wonderfully welcoming and loving community. You are a beloved community making us feel very much at home. Together, we hope we'll keep expanding that welcome and hospitality for many more over the years to come.

Finally, I know we'll have challenges. As outsiders in temporary quarters, we are not a majority community or culture. We never will be. We are a marginalized heavenly culture in earthly exile. But we are God's beloved community, and that's really all we need... I hear there's God's acre in this town but let me say there's also God's Mile right in front of us. It's a way that is opening up before us toward a future God promises will be a blessing to many. May God give us grace to be a church that breaks down fear, and builds bridges, reaching out as a beloved community to love inclusively, inexhaustibly, indiscriminately, indefinitely! While I don't know *where* God plans to take us, I believe God will journey *with* us and make a home *among* us. That promises to be a blessing for all!

In the name of the One who is our Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer. Amen.