

A CHURCH FOR THE CITY: A PUBLIC CHURCH

Jeremiah 29:1, 4-7

May 1, 2022

Exactly nine miles due south from where you now sit, on the northwest quadrant of Monument Circle at the literal heart of the city of Indianapolis, there is a bronze plaque. Now I speak from experience in sharing that this bronze plaque is not as easy to find as you might expect. I drove down, expecting it to be put up in lights or perhaps lifted up from the ground. The truth is that it's down on foot level, difficult to find. I asked several folks walking by about the plaque, and they looked at me like I was crazy. Eventually, I found it, and that plaque on the northwest quadrant, nine miles due south from here, reads, "On this site stood The Second Presbyterian Church, organized 1838, Henry Ward Beecher, first pastor." Now, even though you might miss the plaque if you didn't know it was there, its very existence has something important to say to *us*, the community of faith gathered nine miles north on the same street in the same city, whose congregation bears the same name nearly two centuries later. The message is this: Second Presbyterian Church is, and has always been, a church *for* the city of Indianapolis. In 1840, when that fledgling congregation and its 27-year-old pastor moved into that first building, the city itself was less than two decades old. It was very much a work in progress, the wild west. In the 182 years since, much has changed in our city and our state, and much has changed in our church as well. The building in which you now sit, nine miles north, is the third site for Second Presbyterian. The challenges and attendant opportunities faced by church and city have shifted over time, and the same is true for us. But I'm convinced that the relationship conveyed by that simple plaque in that space has not fundamentally changed—that Second Presbyterian Church is now, as it has always been, a church for the city.

Way back in September, at the beginning of a new program year, we introduced the theme that would guide our worship and work together this year: *Equipping the Saints for the Work of Ministry*. Now, as we draw that same program year to a close over the next three Sundays, we'll be exploring the markers of that work of ministry to which we at Second Church are called—the markers that have been a part of what Dr. Enright describes as the DNA of Second. *A public church. An equipping church. A sending church.* All drawn together in that mission to be a church *for* the city. From the outset of the series, I want to be clear that my intention is to expand and not circumscribe our call beyond the walls of the church. When I speak of the city, I do so in its broadest possible sense. I know that our worshipers and our members come from many parts of our region, and now, by the reach made possible through broadcast and digital engagement, literally we gather from around the globe every Sunday. Still, there is a rootedness inherent in the Christian movement. There is both a desire and a compulsion to be the body of Christ in a particular time and place. Just as Jesus himself lived as God enfleshed in all the particularities of that reality, we, too, are called to a place and a time.

I begin with a cautionary tale, a story told by a woman who was a member of a small Christian church in Germany in the early 1940s. Her church was located next to the railroad tracks where, every Sunday morning in worship, one could hear the whistle of trains in the distance, the sound of the wheels on the tracks, and, in those days, the cries coming from inside the passenger cars. Those cries came from women, children, and men being transported to a nearby concentration camp, a place

of unthinkable suffering. Sunday after Sunday, the congregation would gather for worship, the whistle would blow, and the church members would prepare themselves for the horrifying sounds from the train. When the woman was asked how that congregation reacted, her response was both honest and heartbreaking. She said, “If we heard the screams, we sang louder. Soon we heard them no more.”

Now before we judge too harshly, can we acknowledge that in every age, including our own, there is a temptation for faith communities to withdraw and separate themselves from the real-world contexts around us? To sing louder and plug our ears to the world outside? To live as an isolated sectarian subculture, maintaining a kind of imagined purity rather than risking the contamination, the complexity, or the controversy of engagement? Though the situation may not feel as dramatic, the question is the same in every generation of the Church’s life. What kind of responsibility do followers of Jesus bear for the circumstances of our neighbors? What contribution can God’s Church make to God’s Kingdom in the midst of troubled and turbulent times? Whenever we seek faithful answers to these questions, we turn to the words of scripture for guidance and direction, and there we discover that people of faith have been grappling with their role in wider society for thousands of years.

Case in point: the words we just heard from the prophet Jeremiah, words spoken in a particular context, a time, a place. Jeremiah writes to the people of God whose hope was fading and whose God seemed absent. Indeed, they were war refugees, displaced in Babylon. They were a community in exile, strangers in a strange land, removed from everything they knew, forced to live as aliens in an empire ruled by the powerful King Nebuchadnezzar.

In such a time as this, to such a people in such a place, the prophet, writing from the bombed-out city of Jerusalem, offers the word of God in a letter to the exiles. And what he writes is a series of astonishing commandments. In this hostile land, God commands

the exiles to build homes, to plant gardens, to celebrate marriages and raise children. Jeremiah calls people of faith to make a home and plan a future right where they are. And what’s more, to do it in a way that benefits others.

The prophet summarizes his command with a challenge that rings out across the generations to those who gather at worship today at Second Presbyterian Church in Indianapolis, nine miles north. Jeremiah uses a Hebrew word you will recognize. “Seek the *shalom* of the city where I have sent you. Pray on its behalf, for in the city’s *shalom* you will find yours.” Shalom is peace, but more than peace—wholeness, completeness, welfare. According to Jeremiah our wholeness depends on the wholeness of our community. Our welfare depends on the common good. Our peace depends on the peace of our neighbors. It is a clear call for exiled believers to get up, get out, and get to work—to serve the city with acts of love, justice, and compassion. It is a promise that God has not abandoned us but walks with us in this work.

I am so proud of the ways in which Second Presbyterian Church lives out its God-given call to seek the shalom of the community in which we find ourselves, to be that church for the city. I am moved by the depth of your commitment to Washington Township, to the city of Indianapolis, to the whole region of central Indiana, and our state. Every single week, I have the privilege of hearing about the ways you are seeking the shalom of our city as a community, a congregation, and as individuals. Thanks be to God for the vision, for your commitment. Seek shalom right where you are, because where you are is where God intends you to be. The prophet commanded the exiles, so we, too, are called to love. We’re called to serve. We’re called to care. As a people of faith, our identity demands a faithful response to the crushing needs in our own community.

But our work does not end there. The shalom we seek will take more than Christian charity, as essential and valuable as that charity is. The great theologian

Reinhold Niebuhr perceived this in the 1950s, and he wrote these words, “When we talk about love, we must become mature, or we will become sentimental. Basically, love means...being responsible.”ⁱ

People of mature Christian faith are called to the responsibility of love. Why? Certainly, because our God-given call is made clear in scripture. But also, I would submit, because of the contextual reality of our ministry. Can I be bold enough to say it this way? Our responsibility exists in direct proportion to our power.

In fact, I believe Jesus said something similar.

These days, you might know Niebuhr is best remembered for what’s called the serenity prayer:

*God, grant me the serenity
to accept the things I cannot change,
courage to change the things I can,
and wisdom to know the difference.*

In my experience, the emphasis and weight are placed on that first phrase. Even the title of the prayer discloses this. We need a sense of serenity about what cannot be changed by our initiative and power. That’s true. But I have to remind you that there is a second petition, a prayer for courage. “God grant me the courage to change the things I can.” Our power is not unlimited, but it is considerable. There are things we can change.

This week I spent some time asking folks what shalom and wholeness might look like in our city and how we, a public church, might pursue it. The answers were broad and diverse, a testament to the many ways we might respond and the heartfelt desire to change the things we can. One member spoke to me of the extraordinary inequities and needs among students in Washington Township Schools, where more than half of students live in poverty, where the achievement gap is exacerbated by lack of affordable pre-k options. How are we called to respond to the needs of the children in our neighborhood? Another spoke of the ongoing

crisis of tenants whose landlords neglect the health and safety of their residents. And the question is, “How can we change these conditions?” Someone else spoke of the profound and deepening divisions over entrenched or imagined ideology which prevent meaningful conversation that might lead to change. How can God use our broad and practically minded congregation to point to a different way? A way of pragmatic solutions and not shouting?

The church is uniquely positioned to respond because we care about these concerns not for political expediency or partisan point scoring, but because we are commanded in scripture to love our neighbors, to seek the shalom of our community, to repair the breach that divides us, to weave the fabric of community back together where it has been ripped apart, to pursue justice and seek righteousness, to advocate for the least of these. This is what separates the ministry of the church from the work of other well-meaning and impactful organizations. We are captive to no human agenda or ideology. We set our mind not on earthly things but on God’s vision of hope for all who are exiled. We do so because they, too, are God’s beloved children. We do not have all the answers to the complex set of challenges that plague our neighbors, but what we do have is a mandate to seek their wholeness, their peace, their shalom and to acknowledge that our wellbeing is entirely dependent on the wellbeing of all who suffer, all who are shut out.

This is the call of a public church. As we follow it, I am convinced that God will equip us, that God will send us. I believe we will experience renewal, spiritual growth, that surge of energy that is the Spirit’s surest sign. For it is who we are. Our spiritual DNA.

And so, it is not the plaque on Monument Circle that tells our story; it is the courageous witness of those faithful souls who gathered in that place. One historian writes of Second, “By the mid-1840s, Beecher and his congregation had lent a distinctive stamp to Second Presbyterian. Second was an urban church. Located in a rapidly growing city, it was

intimately engaged in the opportunities and the problems of urban life, and it had taken a clear stand for growth and improvement [in Indianapolis].”

The first members of this church were convinced that God had planted them in this city and had done so for a purpose.

I am likewise convinced that God has placed us here. That God has gathered us for this moment. That God has not abandoned us. But, friends, we must have the courage to pursue with passion the purpose that calls to us still. Seek the peace, seek the wholeness, seek the shalom of the city, and we will find our own. Amen.

¹ Reinhold Niebuhr, *Justice and Mercy*, 1974, p. 35.