

Jeremiah 29:1-14

Seventh Sunday after Pentecost, July 8, 2018

Mark 6:1-13

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Sermon Title: When Others Want Out

There is a story about a businessman who checked into a hotel late at night. He decided that he would stop in the lounge for a nightcap. Pretty soon he called the hotel desk, and asked, "What time will the lounge be opened in the morning?" The night clerk answered, "9:00 a.m." About an hour later he called again. The phone rang. The night clerk answered it. The businessman again asked, "What time will the lounge be opened in the morning?" The clerk said, "9:00 a.m." He called a third time, and every hour throughout the night. Each time the night clerk answered, saying, "9:00 a.m."

At 7:00 a.m. the day manager arrived. The night clerk reported everything went all right, except for this crazy man who kept calling the desk every hour asking what time the lounge would open. Right then the phone rang again. The manager picked it up this time. Sure enough it was the businessman asking what time the lounge would open. The manager said, "Look here! The night clerk tells me that you have been a nuisance all night long asking the same question. I am telling you for the last time, the lounge will be open at 9:00 a.m. You can't get in until then!" The businessman said, "Get in? I don't want to get in. I want to get out!"

These days, I experience that a lot of people want out. They want out of their troubles. They want out of their responsibilities because of the stress. They want out of working for the common good because it is not easy to work with other people and it is hard work even when the team is working well together. People want out. If you don't believe me, think about the number of community organizations that are struggling to get people to join – Rotary, Elks, Junior League, Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts and more are all struggling to get people to join. The other day I was talking with someone who is retired and who went over to the Habitat Restore to volunteer to help – they were so desperate for help that they basically said to him, "When can you start? How about now?" It's not just organizations that are working for the common good. Have you noticed the voter turnout statistics lately? They suggest that large numbers of people have dropped out of that basic responsibility of citizenship. And look at the way we build our houses now – it used to be that we built them with front porches because it was expected that we would sit on them and have conversations with people – now we build back decks and conversations have narrowed to family and a few invited guests, if indeed anyone is ever invited. Add to it all, the trap that leads people to believe that the grass must be greener somewhere else. Indeed, when we are called to love one another and to love our neighbor as ourselves, it means that we have to know one another and we have to face and get to know our neighbor – all easier said than done – particularly when people are busy and self-absorbed.

All of this makes our text from Jeremiah timely. From the prophet Jeremiah we have some great advice to the exiles in Babylon – the exiles who wanted out of Babylon and wanted to get back home to Israel.

“Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat their produce. take wives and have sons and daughters... 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.” Isn’t that a powerful statement? – In the welfare of others you find your own welfare.

In other words, if you are always looking to go somewhere else, you will miss God, who is present with you here and now. If you are always looking to get out or drop out, you will miss the experiencing the love of God shown to you in the people who are around you here and now. Underlying Jeremiah’s advice is this simple advice – trust God, work together and “bloom where you are planted,” as they say.

Let’s talk about blooming where you are planted for a minute. The Jews have had to learn to do this generation after generation. In fact, Jewish theologians have used this text from Jeremiah as a resource to guide them in what is called the “Diaspora,” which is the dispersion of the Jews after the fall of Jerusalem in 70 AD, which is some 600 years after Jeremiah spoke these words. The Jewish people have done a rather remarkable job of blooming wherever they were planted all around the world, even though they have gotten banned from owning land in many countries or even later, banished from a country. They have established themselves as part of the community and contributed service and compassion to each other and to the community – it’s like they really have been listening to Jeremiah, generation after generation!

This whole idea of the people of God blooming where you are planted reminds me of a story. The story goes like this: “Before there was anything, there was God, a few angels and a huge swirling glob of rocks and water with no place to go. The angels asked God, “Why don’t you clean up this mess?”

So God collected rocks from the huge swirling glob and put them together in clumps and said, “Some of these clumps of rocks will be planets, and some will be stars, and some of these rocks will be . . . just rocks.”

Then God collected water from the huge swirling glob and put it together in pools of water and said, “Some of these pools of water will be oceans, and some will become clouds, and some of this water will be . . . just water.”

Then the angels said, “Well God, it’s neater now, but is it finished?” And God answered ... “NOPE!”

On some of the rocks God placed growing things, and creeping things, and things that only God knows what they are, and when God had done all this, the angels asked God, "is the world finished now?" And God answered, "NOPE!"

God made a man and a woman from some of the water and dust and said to them, "I am tired now. Please finish up the world for me ... really it's almost done." But the man and woman said, "We can't finish the world alone! You have the plans and we are too little."

"You are big enough," God answered them, "But I agree to this. If you keep trying to finish the world, I will be your partner."

The man and the woman asked, "What's a partner?" and God answered, "A partner is someone you work with on a big things that neither of you can do alone. If you have a partner, it means that you can never give up, because your partner is depending on you. On the days you think I am not doing enough and on the days I think you are not doing enough, even on those days we are still partners and we must not stop trying to finish the world. That's the deal." And they all agreed to that deal.

Then the angels asked God, "Is the world finished yet?" and God answered, "I don't know. Go ask my partners." ("The Partners" from *Does God Have a Big Toe? Stories about Stories in the Bible*. by Marc Gellman and Oscar De Mejo. New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1989, pp. 1-3)

Indeed, when we want to give up and drop out, we need to remember that we are partners with one another and with God and Christ. We can't build house and live in them, plant gardens and eat their produce and seek the welfare if we live on our own, isolated from one and other and from God and always on the run to see if pastures are greener elsewhere. The job is too big, but what each of us contributes is important and is enough. My guess is that generations of Jews living in the Diaspora had to learn that quickly.

So we bloom where we are planted. But what about our personal troubles? Isn't that why Jesus attracted so many crowds? He was the one who healed, the one who drove out demons, the one who forgave, the one who restored people to community. When we heal, help, forgive and restore people we are being Christ to one another.

In today's lesson from Mark, I find it interesting that Jesus and God were at work among the people of Jesus' hometown, but the people couldn't see this. They couldn't even accept that God might be there working among them and doing so in a way that was a little new and different. In today's language, we'd say that their synagogues were a closed system, not susceptible to new ideas and activities.

What the passage from Mark teaches me is that God is everywhere – God is near, but God isn't always obvious. Seeing takes practice and speaking about what we've seen (like when Jesus sent the disciples out two by two) also takes practice. To see God and Jesus, it's important to begin with prayer – a prayer that can be as simple, as the request of the people who came to Philip saying, "We would like to see Jesus." (John 12:21) And then look for God not in things but in relationships – remember the book "God In Between," that was the sermon a couple of weeks ago? Where was God found but in between the people? Pay attention to acts of mercy, to forgiveness and compassion, and to small sacrifices. We tend to pay attention to hurts and brokenness, but if we stay there, we will miss seeing God. And finally, trust that God is there.

So what's your take away today? When others want out, it's your invitation to jump in. Bloom where you are planted. And trust God and trust Jesus because God and Jesus are with you always.