

**“Why Are We A Community Church?”**  
**Jeremiah 29:4-14 (English Standard Version)**  
**Irresistible – Can The World Live Without Us?**  
**August 20, 2006**

I just got back from study leave in Alabama and one of the thoughts that stayed on my hard drive for a number of reasons was this – things aren't going the way they should be. In saying that, I'm not suffering through a mid-life crisis at 30 nor am I talking about my marriage or my son or things here at the church. I spent time listening to friends try to articulate the hell they were living with day in and day out. I was reading and thinking about the difference between what is and what should be. As you've listened to the story coming out of Thailand about the arrest of this man accused of killing Jon-Benet Ramsey, who he called the love of his life even though she was 6 – do you not shake your head and say, 'that just ain't right?'

What if life was different? What if things were the way they were supposed to be – a world of honest politicians and no reality TV. A world where deserts and death and disease would be no more. Imagine a place where no one goes to bed sobbing into their pillow and where everyone goes to sleep with a pillow and a bed. Wrap your mind around neighborhoods where you could leave your doors unlocked and not worry about whether your five year-old was going to find the 9mm you keep in the drawer of the bedside table for protection. Can you picture a place where everyone could do work they enjoy and where such work would be fruitful; a place where enemies could work through their differences and come out on the other side with newfound respect. Paint a picture of a world where the trees are always ripe with Granny Smith apples, where there is no such things as thorns and bee stings and where we would never run out of new beauties to behold in nature and where what we already know would always feel brand new. Wrap your mind around an existence where every man, woman and child lived as family – brothers and sisters; a world where people didn't run around with gaping wounds in their chest inflicted by the words of their parents; a world in which every person would look to God, walk with God, lean toward God, and delight in God – where shouts of joy would bellow from valleys and echo across the oceans from women in the streets to men on ships<sup>1</sup>.

That might sound like another verse to the John Lennon song 'Imagine,' but in reality all of those things are part of the Old Testament's vision of life as it should be. But for us, that vision provides us with an answer to a question, namely, why are we a 'community church.' If you're visiting with us or have been gone during the summer, several weeks ago we changed our name from Christ Church Presbyterian to Christ Community Church and inevitably, the question we're asked is why? Are we ashamed of being Presbyterian? Not at all – in fact, changing the name has caused us to become even more committed to our historic and biblical roots. Simply put, the reason we changed the name of the church has everything to do with this picture that each of us have formed in our head of a world that is different than ours, a world in which all that has been broken has been fixed, a world in which things are the way they're supposed to be.

Now some of us are here as visitors – students taking the grand tour of churches in the area; family and friends visiting someone in town – and to be honest, you really don't care a whole lot about why we call ourselves a community church. And I get that, so let me ask you this question, particularly if you would consider yourself to be

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<sup>1</sup> Cornelius Plantinga. *Not the Way It's Supposed to Be*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans. 1996) pp. 9-10

a Christian, a follower of Jesus: how should you as a Christian relate to non-Christians? I don't simply mean on a one-to-one basis – the question I'm asking is this: how does our team treat their team?

But that still doesn't cover everybody - what about those of us who wonder what any of this have to do with my life if I'm not even a follower of Jesus? Great question – and we're glad that you're here – here's how I'd put it for those of us who have reason to suspect or be convinced that we're not a Christian: we should be asking how we're supposed to think of and act around people who not only are different than us but are hostile towards us. People who don't look like us, talk like us, dress like us, act like us – and on top of that go out of their way to make our life a living hell? How do we live around people like that? Maybe that's the way you need to think about this tension that all of us face as we live in a world where not everyone is like us and not everyone likes us.

We're not the first people to feel like we're getting bullied around. Take the people of God here in Jeremiah 29. They are living as exiles in a foreign land called Babylon – and exile is a pretty rough gig. Jerusalem had been surrounded and the supply lines cut off by the Babylonian army, which means no food or water which led to disease, crime, cannibalism, nothing short of anarchy. It was almost a relief when the Babylonians broke through the city wall and burned the place down. But when you find yourself hundreds of miles from home, living in a makeshift hut across the river from the Babylonian capital city, you start thinking about the good ole' days and look around thinking, this isn't how life's supposed to go.

Desperate for any good news, some of the religious leaders begin to lie to the people and tell them they have a word from God – kind of like the dudes on TV whose wives looked they just lost a paintball war – and you have leaders like this guy named Hananiah who tells the people that God was about to save them and within two years, they'd be back home in Jerusalem. But God didn't say that...

What He did say to his people is something we need to hear this morning. So we're going to read Jeremiah 29:4-14 and then hear what God has to say about it and what it has to do with our life. One of the challenges of preaching is that everyone has different preferences in preaching – some of us want preaching to be a running commentary; others like the three alliterated points with a dollop of Jesus on top; others of us like sermons that deal with real-life issues; others of us like stories. Here's what I know – preaching is opening the Scriptures and connecting you to Jesus through the message of a particular group of words. Some of us have heard of the phrase expository preaching – that's what we do here. There's more than one way to talk about the Bible and to be honest, how you do it matters far less than the fact that the Scriptures are open, everything points to Jesus and our hope is in God's work on our behalf, not the other way around. Take that for what it's worth – but I wanted to get us on the same page about what we're doing here.

<sup>4</sup> "Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: <sup>5</sup> Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat their produce. <sup>6</sup> 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. <sup>7</sup> But seek the welfare [or the peace] 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. <sup>8</sup> For thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: Do not let your prophets and your diviners who are among

*you deceive you, and do not listen to the dreams that they dream, <sup>9</sup> for it is a lie that they are prophesying to you in my name; I did not send them, declares the LORD. <sup>10</sup> "For thus says the LORD: When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will visit you, and I will fulfill to you my promise and bring you back to this place. [NOTE: This letter was written and sent from Jerusalem] <sup>11</sup> For I know the plans I have for you, declares the LORD, plans for wholeness and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope. <sup>12</sup> Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will hear you. <sup>13</sup> You will seek me and find me. When you seek me with all your heart, <sup>14</sup> I will be found by you, declares the LORD, and I will restore your fortunes and gather you from all the nations and all the places where I have driven you, declares the LORD, and I will bring you back to the place from which I sent you into exile.*

Now remember that all of us are hanging onto at least one question this morning – they're actually all forms of the same question, but don't miss the fact that God is speaking directly into the details of your life. For some of us, we're wondering why this church is a community church; for others, we're thinking about how we as Christians should think about and act towards non-Christians; and then for those of us who are still trying to make sense of Jesus, we simply want to know how to act around people who are both different and hostile towards us.

Ready for the answer? The reason why we are a community church is very simple – we have to be. We have no choice. We are a community church because *we are a community for the community*. Let me say that again, the reason why the word 'community' is on the marquee is because we are a community for the community. That might sound strange – 'a community for the community' – but this is what we mean. First of all, those of us who make up this church are a community – we hold things in common with each other. Specifically we share three things with each other – we share pain, we share hope, and we share life. Whether you cry out 'Vanity of vanities' or sob through tears that all of life is meaningless or sit across from someone going through hell and the only words that come out of your mouth are 'life sucks' (because it does sometimes), we all share the experience of searing, agonizing, mind-numbing, heart-draining, paralyzing pain. But what sets us off from the world is that in the midst of the darkest depths of that hell, we share a common hope in Jesus.

And it's in that train wreck of pain and hope that we do life together – walking alongside and sometimes carrying others (and sometimes being carried) to Jesus as our hope in a really messed-up world. For some of us, the biggest thing we need to hear this morning is God's call and invitation to give yourself to community. And I know that's hard – this church is the perfect place for no one – we will hurt you and disappoint you and we fully expect that you'll do the same to us – but if God has brought you here, we believe he's called us to share pain and hope together as we figure out how to be the people of God. That means if you're a student, don't do the typical show-up-at-church-on-Sunday-until-you-find-something-better routine. I perfected that in college – it really won't help you out now or later. We'd love for you to hang around and do life with us – jump into a community group where you'll be cared for and where you can point other people to Jesus. For others of us who have been dating this church for several months, we need to ask why we haven't committed ourselves to this church. I know the music's loud, I know you don't like my hair, I know I use words that you don't like – but what do those things have to do with the pain and hope we have in common?

But to call ourselves a 'community church' is bigger than our life together – again, we are a community *for the community* and we get that from Jeremiah 29:7 where God corrects two faulty ways of thinking about our interaction with people who are different and hostile to us. When you step back into the story of God's people, you find that the Babylonians, who had been ruthless in their siege and torching of Jerusalem, began to act very charitably towards the people of Israel. Rather than beating and humiliating the people, the Babylonian leaders treated them well, making sure they were well-provided for on their journey to Babylon and giving them land on which to live when they arrived there. If the people needed food or work, they could cross the canal and go into Babylon where they were well-treated and regularly invited to move into the city and live the good life. If that sounds fishy, it should because the Babylonians were smart enough to realize that you don't destroy a culture violently nearly as well as you can destroy it with kindness. 'Move into the city and live like us and in just two or three generations, you'll become just like us.' This is the melting-pot approach to *cultural assimilation* – and it works. For our community, the danger is that we become so much like the world that we lose our distinctiveness – a distinctiveness not of language or dress or musical style but a distinctiveness of hope. When our hope rests in the hopes of the world around us, then we have nothing left to say that the world doesn't already say better than we do.

The Jewish leaders were well aware of what the Babylonians were up to, so their reaction was to separate from the city as much as possible, interacting with the people of Babylon only enough to provide for their needs or the needs of the tribe. This is *cultural tribalism*, the same kind of isolation tactic that marks much of Christianity here in Watkinsville. In the name of purity and holiness, we separate from the world and create our own Christian subculture – Christian music, Christian gyms, Christian books, Christian t-shirts, even Christian schools. We take on the same attitude as the people of God in the Old Testament who had been told to isolate themselves from the world around them so they wouldn't become polluted and wander away from God.

And then verse 7 happens. Here are the people of God resisting assimilation and doing a wonderful job of isolation, waiting for God to avenge them and save them from this hell called Babylon – and then they get the letter. The letter written to them that tells them not only to get comfortable where they are because they're going to be there for a long time – what is almost impossible for us to grasp is the radical revolutionary shift in the entire construction of life for the people of God that we find in 29:7. Actually, we might be able to understand it just a little bit because when we read this call to 'seek the peace of the city' and we begin to understand that this is not just their call – it's our call – then we start to freak out because this isn't what you signed up for at church camp when you made a decision to follow Jesus.

I mean, we have a really hard time even understanding what it even means to 'seek the peace of the city.' When we think of peace, we think no more fighting – which is part of it but the word we translate as peace is the Hebrew word *shalom* and it's much deeper than putting our guns away. Shalom is the weaving together of God, humans and creation in justice, harmony, fulfillment and delight<sup>2</sup>. Shalom is this vision, this picture that we began with earlier – everything put back into place; everything the way it should be. The scriptures help us understand that not only can

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<sup>2</sup> Plantinga, 10.

sin be thought about as missing the mark or falling short of a standard, but when you work in this concept of shalom, you begin to see that sin is the vandalizing of shalom, the ruin of God's design as each of us in countless ways have kept other people and all of creation from being what it should be, and in doing so we have made a mockery of God.

When we begin to understand how deeply and radically shalom has been broken – then we start to understand what our role is here on earth. We're here as agents of God's kingdom, a kingdom of grace and peace (grace and shalom), called to join Jesus in his work of putting things back in place and re-creating life into what it should be. For some of us, 'seeking the peace of the city' will mean spending time in the dorms sharing our faith; for some of our students, it means sitting with the 'loser' kid at lunch; we give ourselves to the community when we make things to improve the lives of others; by creating good music; picking up trash in our neighborhood; caring for AIDS patients, teaching math well, babysitting kids in our neighborhood, opening our home to our son's friend who comes from a broken home, fighting against forced prostitution and international sex trade. What God has called us to do is to neither assimilate or isolate, but to implant and influence right where he's put us – in our neighborhoods, our schools, our workplaces, our community – and to join him in his mission of making all things new<sup>3</sup>.

How does this happen? First of all, understand that the only thing that keeps us from assimilation or isolation is Jesus. What makes us different from the world is not that we want things to be better – everyone in this world wants something to go better than it's currently going. What makes us different is our conviction that only Jesus can actually bring about real and lasting change. The restoration and renewal of shalom in marriages and on Capitol Hill, in dealing with AIDS in Africa or wastewater that damages entire ecosystems – the only hope that we have of things being as they should is Jesus. For those of us who saw the movie *Superman Returns*, do you remember towards the end of the movie when Superman does what only Superman can and tosses that crazy Kryptonite-riddled island into outer space? Who else could do that? No one. God's peace, His shalom, His kingdom has been ruined in countless ways. Only Jesus can restore and renew it. Believing that makes us very different from the world around us.

But what makes us different is not merely our words – what enables us to seek the peace of the city and be a community for the community is this – *we give rather than get*. Let me repeat that one more time because if you get this, you understand what it means to live a cross-centered, grace-empowered life. When you ask what makes us a community church, when you ask how you as a Christian are supposed to react and respond to non-Christians, when you ask how you should treat people who aren't like you and don't like you, the answer is that we give our lives away. Rather than simply being a consumer of our world, we become a contributor. Rather than believing that others exist for our good, we begin to believe that we exist for their good. No longer do we look at someone and say, 'Your life for mine.' Instead, we look at them and say, 'My life for yours.'

The implications for that are massive. Take money, for instance. Instead of seeing money as currency to get, we begin to see money as opportunities to give. And we could go on and on. We examine our relationship to our spouse, our kids, our neighborhood, our favorite bar in downtown Athens, high school football teams,

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<sup>3</sup> From a blog post by Anthony Bradley: [Towards a Missional Worldview: Life's Not Supposed to Suck.](#)

parks, schools, UGA, Watkinsville, our places of work – everything and everywhere – and ask God to equip and send us to bring shalom to a world that desperately needs it. In other words, all of life counts. Not just the spiritual things. Everything that we do, everywhere we go has deep, rich, kingdom, Godward purposes.

So how is all of this going to happen? This can be deadly, you know? There's something corrosive and crippling about being asked to do something that you have absolutely no ability to do. And make no mistake about it, giving our lives away – being a community for the community – is a task we have no shot of completing. And again, we're a people of both shared pain and shared hope. Our pain is that making all things new is more than we can handle. But here's our hope – when we read the story of Jesus' death and as he gasps for air on the verge of suffocation and cries out 'It is finished,' I'm not sure what you thought he was referring to, but essentially, he crosses the goal line and declares that He has won. At the cross, sin was destroyed and shalom was restored. Sin's work is so devastating that the effects of Jesus' restoration won't be completely seen and felt until he comes again, but we woke up this morning in the middle of Jesus' kingdom, a world in which he has called us to be who we were created to be - the best citizens of Watkinsville, the most outstanding student in our classrooms, employee of the year, yard of the month – and to do it for the glory of God and the good, the peace, the shalom of a world whose hope is found in this Jesus who hung on a cross and cried out, "It is finished!" And indeed it is – Jesus' death has brought life and hope and freedom and joy and the promise that everything that has been broken is being made new; all that was ruined has been renewed.