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**East Liberty Presbyterian Church**  
**October 10, 2010**  
**“An Outside Perspective”**  
**Jeremiah 29:1-4, 7 (with reflections on Luke 17:11-19)**

It was almost eleven years ago, and I was walking to the market in Spencer Plaza in Chennai, India to buy food for a homeless family who lived together on the side of the road near our traveler's hostel. It was Thanksgiving Day – the first holiday I would spend so far away from home, and there was a rickshaw strike in Chennai that day. While walking to the market, without the yellow metal insulation of the rickshaw walls around us, we met two people by the side of the road. The first was a man from Sri Lanka, a refugee now living in Chennai. He shared of his journey to India to escape the violence in Sri Lanka. He talked about the political unrest, the danger to his family, and the grief of living in a place that was not really home.

As we were talking to this gentleman, out of the corner of my eye, I saw a man like a shadow coming closer, but I did not turn to look or acknowledge him. He came close and began begging for money. Yet the more he cried out, the more – I confess – we turned away. His interruption to our conversation seemed rude and I did not want to honor his bad behavior. It was only after he gave up and started to walk away that I could see him in his entirety – and I realized that the man who had approached was a man with leprosy.

This is an uncomfortable memory to share, but one I couldn't help but remember as I read through our texts for this morning. One, a story about ten lepers and another about a community of exiles propelled me to our present day and to the reality that the world is still full of those labeled “outsider” in our society today. The needs and fears, the gratitude and the grace of the people at the heart of our Bible lessons for this morning became not a distant memory but a present reality as I called to mind those afflicted with leprosy and those in political exile in our world today – just there are so many who experience the wounds of marginalization, displacement, and alienation in so many ways.

The Gospel lesson is the story of an outsider among outsiders – the Samaritan leper, who, in the story's greatest twist, is the only one of the ten who return to thank Jesus for his miraculous healing. This Samaritan was able to see most clearly that it was through God's grace in Jesus that he was healed, that he was saved – and he came back to say thank you. This outsider among outsiders is the one who “got it,” and returned with a thankful heart to praise Jesus.

This text is paired with another surprising outsider story. This time, though, the “insiders” – God's chosen people, Israel, have become the outsiders who are living in exile in Babylon. King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon has attacked the southern kingdom of Israel, Judah, and carried away Israel's elite to live in exile in Babylon. It is only a matter of time until more exiles will be driven into Babylon and Jerusalem and the temple destroyed. The prophet Jeremiah writes to the exiles, although he is one of the remnant still in Jerusalem. As false prophets preach a popular word – that exile is almost over – Jeremiah shares God's *truth* that exile will actually last for a long, long time – seventy years in fact; more than a generation. His message is a stern one: the Israelites are to quit listening to what they *want* to hear and accept and live with the truth: things aren't about to get better any time soon.

The message in our verses from Jeremiah is an uncomfortable one: *let it be*. It is as if Jeremiah is saying: “You can't change things, people – they are what they *are* right now. All you can do is **live** – live your best, live as if you're at home by worshipping your God and living as a family. In fact, God wants you to live at *peace* with those who have captured you and live in community in a way that enhances not only your welfare but the welfare of the nation in which you are held captive. Live with the knowledge that you are my people and that *nothing* – not even exile – can change that fact.

**This** is a tough message. It was a tough one for the Israelites and it is a tough one for us. If we're honest, we might even admit that we outright don't like this message. This is a counterintuitive message. For busy bees and revolutionaries alike, a call to stay put – to stay **stuck** – seems untenable. For those who are oppressed and for those working to end oppression, a call to plant roots in a place of captivity and a command to edify the enemy seems, quite frankly, unacceptable. Instructions to just **be** – to accept the disorientation and discomfort of the time – to just get on with life – might just seem impossible!

The climate of our day renders this message just as difficult as it did in the time of the Babylonian exile. News stories speak of communal and personal experiences of exile in our world today. For our nation and for nations around the globe, economic recession breeds poverty; ongoing war breeds more violence; conflict among political leaders makes it hard to see a change we know we so desperately need. And headlines in the past several weeks have spoken of tragic teen suicides – gay and lesbian young people who have chosen to take their own lives in the mist of the despair of bullying and isolation in a world that too often pushes sexual minorities to outsider status.

It might feel an impossible request to hunker down in the face of such times – to get on with life when the climate around us leaves us or others we know with a feeling of displacement, truly vulnerable, insecure, unsure about the future. Where is the grace in this message? Where is the love – for the Israelites or for us?

In Jeremiah's day, this charge to the exiles to LIVE their lives is in fact a revolutionary, life-affirming message. There is hope for the present day, and hope for the future even in the bleakest of times: "Don't let them get the better of you. Remember who you are. Remember that you can be yourselves even when others seem to strip your identity away from you – they can try; they can take away your accessories, your places of worship, your home – but they can't change who you are."

One commentator reminds us that the Israelites are not just the people of the exile but also of the Exodus. While it may be unsettling to go from liberation to captivity, there is a continuous message that God is still their God – whether they are headed for the Promised Land, or whether they're being asked to stay in Babylon. The God who gave them the law still speaks to them through the prophet. The God who was with them in Jerusalem is with them even in exile. God has claimed them and is with them in and through even the most challenging of circumstances. The God who freed them from Egypt will once again return them to Jerusalem. There is reason to hope. All is not lost. They will survive, and God will be with them – even here. Even now.

This message to stay the course, to live – fully, relationally, healthily – *is* a revolutionary message, even for us. It is **not** a call to do nothing – it is a challenge to do something quite powerful: to choose life in the midst of death or desolation. It is a challenge to live when others are trying to take your life from you, disassembling it piece by piece. Choosing to live demands courage and hope; patience and faith of people. It takes a stand for an abiding internal strength even in the face of a crumbling exterior world.

As in the days of the Israelites' exile, there are small signs of life all around: in marriages and new babies; in harvest and in home; in life going on even when so much of life has been worn away. Like the crocus that pokes its head through the end of the winter snow, there are simple yet powerful reminders that pain will pass and life – even new life – will prevail. Look for it – it's all around: in a nephew's first steps, a teenager's courage, the kindness of a stranger, in the softening of a hardened heart, in the gratitude of one healed, and the hope of one struggling.

We remember, too, that the God of the Exodus and the Exile is the God of the Resurrection. In spite of the limitations of our lives, the brokenness of our experience, the sins we have committed or the sins committed against us, God in Christ has come to offer the fullest measure of redemptive wholeness in this life and in the next.

So let us find the courage to live – to live in hope, to live in peace, to live in love – trusting that God goes with us.

Thanks be to God.