

October 21, 2018

TEXT: Jeremiah 32:1–15

TITLE: Risky Business

By the Rev Dr. Randy Bush

A few days ago, I attended a board meeting for the Metro-Urban Institute, which is a program of Pittsburgh Seminary focused on urban ministry. We sat around a conference table and followed our agenda, but at some point the conversation shifted into a criticism of how ministry is done now—that churches are too focused on self-preservation and too slow to respond to the needs of the community around them. Why must we invest in so many buildings? Instead of real estate, why not invest in real people—training them to be the church in the world? As the pastor of a sizeable piece of real estate, I didn't say anything. I didn't have a quick answer to that question, and honestly I was thinking more about the single mother, relative of a church member who had died recently and left behind an 18-year daughter, about the church member in the hospital after a work accident being fitted for a back brace right then, and how later that afternoon two wonderful women would be gathering in our sanctuary for a wedding rehearsal. So what does it mean to do urban ministry today?

A few days ago I met with the delegation of visitors from Malawi and South Sudan who are here through the International Partnership of Pittsburgh Presbytery. I was asked to explain the American political process to our overseas guests. I talked about the three branches of our government and the system of checks and balances established by the Constitution. Then I was asked specific questions: Has America turned its back on Africa, allowing China to now be the dominant superpower on that continent, part of its so-called “New Silk Road” policy? And how can America be sure it has an independent judiciary given the recent political battles over the Supreme Court and the amount of money in our election process? I answered as best I could, struck by the seriousness of these questions directed to me—a simple pastor far from Washington D.C. whose earth-shattering tasks for that day involved finishing a bulletin draft, helping with logistics for the church rummage sale, and remembering to pick up milk on my way home. So what does global ministry look like today?

Ministry questions are not just for pastors. They are aimed at all of us—all who claim to follow Jesus Christ and his gospel of servant leadership and resurrection hope. All of us are called to urban ministry, global ministry, courageous, faithful ministry. Perhaps my role as a preacher is to fire you up and send you out into the world to fight for change, stand up for justice, work for peace, risking everything you have for the glory of God's kingdom. But then I remember—wait a minute, we're Presbyterians! We're the ones who (this is a true story from White Plains, Kentucky) chose to install motion-sensor lights in our sanctuaries to save money, only to have the entire church go dark halfway through worship because no one was moving. Even worse, the lights stayed off and the pastor kept preaching in the dark until the final benediction, when everyone got up to leave, which made the lights come back on. This is the crowd I want to go out into the world and take risks for Christ?!

About 2600 years ago, the good people of faith in ancient Jerusalem were in trouble. The Babylonian empire was on their doorstep. The army of King Nebuchadnezzar had surrounded the hilltop city of Jerusalem and laid siege to them. The people couldn't go out to harvest crops or tend to their cattle grazing in pastures because an enemy army occupied their land and was eating their crops and livestock. The prophet Jeremiah was a trusted religious figure to the people, but not a beloved figure to the king, because Jeremiah had long predicted the fall of Jerusalem due to the people's sins and lack of faith in God. He once took a large pottery jug outside the city gates and smashed it to the ground announcing that in the same way the Lord would smash their entire city. He put a wooden yoke around his neck and walked through the city announcing that the Babylonians would soon put a yoke around the people of Jerusalem.

King Zedekiah had a serious P.R. problem in Jeremiah. But unlike our modern Saudi counterparts, Zedekiah did not have Jeremiah secretly killed; he simply put him under house arrest. He didn't want Jeremiah's negative prophecies to cause the people to give up during the long, hard months of the Babylonian siege. Surprisingly, it was precisely then that Jeremiah did something out of character—he did a positive prophetic act. He did something that was an amazing act of hope and trust in God, although at the time it seemed like risky business.

In ancient days, possessing land was often a matter of life and death, because owning land meant you had some degree of power and security in an ever-changing world. Jeremiah's cousin came to him and, likely needing money during those hard times, asked him to purchase a field so that the property would stay within their larger family. There were only a few problems with this request. #1) The field was currently underneath Babylonian boots and likely going to be their property for the foreseeable future. #2) Anyone who publicly bought land then would logically be expected to benefit from the land; therefore the buyer must be a traitor in collusion with the enemy. So why would Jeremiah agree to such a risky and dangerous plan?

Well, the short answer is "Because the Lord told him to." The slightly longer answer is "Because Jeremiah acted faithfully, trusting in the providence and power of God." Jeremiah acted faithfully, which Hebrews 11 says is the "*assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.*" Faith is trusting that God is present and at work in our world, doing so in ways that both include us and transcend us. Scripture consistently tells us that God's thoughts are not our thoughts, for as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are God's ways higher than our ways. (Isaiah 55:8-9) Faith is having the courage to believe that we participate in something that far transcends us yet which wills what is best for us. Theologian Paul Tillich called this having the "courage to be" and to see God as our "ultimate concern."

Despite the many reasons for why he should not accept his cousin's offer, Jeremiah bought the field in Anathoth—doing so carefully, dotting every "i" and crossing every "t" in the legal process. Then he offered a word of hope to people of faith: *Houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land.* Jeremiah did a prophetic act that

made hope real, reassuring a frightened and soon-to-be exiled community that God was with them and in time they would return home and live in peace.

Now, the easy path from here to the end of the sermon is simply to challenge you to be people of hope. It goes like this: Friends, as an Easter people, we are stubborn, persistent, joyful people of hope—who, in the words of preacher Peter Gomes, believe in love in the face of hatred, life in the face of death, day in the dark of night, and goodness in the face of evil. We are people of hope—who, in the words of theologian Daniel Migliore, know that faith isn't finding shelter from the storm in a safe harbor, but instead is going out from the harbor to face life's storms. That type of motivational message is able to get even a Presbyterian church moving enough so that the motion-sensor lights won't turn off on us.

But what about real hope for where we find ourselves now? What does urban ministry look like today—what does global ministry look like today—what does courageous, faithful, Jeremiah-buying-a-field ministry look like today? I can't tell you precisely. There is no formula for this, because by any definition, a formula would only reflect human understanding and human plans, and we know our understanding and plans comes nowhere near God's wisdom and ways. Should we sell our church and give away all we have to the poor? There's biblical precedent for that. But the bible also tells us to gather together, to share fellowship and worship and the bread of life—so whether in a big cathedral or a small house, we'll need someplace to be the body of Christ. Is there more value in sending \$50,000 to Doctors Without Borders or paying the salary of a church youth worker who sits beside a teenager late one night on a mission trip to West Virginia and offering loving acceptance that the young girl will remember years later in a time of crisis? Both acts could change the world, but I can't tell you in advance which one it will be. I can't quantify those relative values.

All I know is Christ—Christ crucified, Christ risen, Christ at work in us and through us. Christ who walked dusty roads, shared simple meals of bread and fish, told parables about pearls of great price. Before him, Jeremiah spoke of trusting God always, even as he bought a field during a time of war. And in the years since, churches have been built and ministries have gone throughout the world, and often simple acts of daily faith have made great changes. Why, I seem to recall a seamstress whose simple act of refusing to leave her bus seat led to a faith revolution.

If we act with faith and courage and hope and integrity each day—intentionally every day, wherever God has placed us—sometimes it will involve risky business. But never doubt the power of God to turn ordinary acts of faith into something extraordinary. For through us, in way we can only dimly perceive now, God is glorified, Christ is followed, the Spirit of resurrection power is proclaimed. All I know is that's the ministry we're all called to live out.

AMEN