

Buy a field

Rev Alida Ward - 2/12/17

Jeremiah 32

Every Friday afternoon, whichever of our Deacons is on duty on Sunday checks in with whoever is preaching on Sunday to find out what the scripture passage is that they'll be reading out loud. And their fingers are always crossed that it's not going to be some crazy long scripture with words like Baruch son of Neriah son of Mahseiah like this one.

Thank goodness Seth Baratz is a really good sport. As he wrote to me on Friday, "Hard-to-pronounce names AND a complex real estate transaction!" -- all in one reading!

That pretty much sums it up. This is, indeed, a scripture passage about a real estate transaction, a really stupid transaction from all appearances, pretty much a "hey, I've got a bridge to sell you" deal. It's not the most well-known story in the bible, so let me just run you through it again. Jeremiah the prophet is sitting in a jail cell in Jerusalem, the year is 594 BC. And his cousin Hanamel comes visit him with a financial proposition. "Jerry," he says, "Hey cousin. Have I got a deal for you. There's this field I think you might want to buy. Nice piece of property, back in your home town of Anathoth. Whaddya say?"

Now here's what you need to know about Jeremiah's situation. Jeremiah was in jail because he had managed to incur the wrath of every important politician in Jerusalem, up to and including the King. And the way he'd done this was by having the courage to point out to them that their beloved country was headed in the wrong direction. The poor were getting poorer, justice was a joke, and things were spiraling down. And so Jeremiah had said -- I'm paraphrasing here -- "People, our days are numbered. Right across the border the Babylonians are gathering to invade us, and honestly, we probably deserve it. If we don't shape up, if we don't start treating people better,

the barbarians are literally at the gate and Jerusalem as we know it is going to disappear."

To which the king had responded,
"Treason!" and threw Jeremiah in jail.

So here's Jeremiah, sitting in a jail in Jerusalem,
knowing, *knowing* for sure that his beloved country was about to fall.
And what does he do next?
He buys that field that his cousin is offering for sale.
A field in what's about to be a war zone,
a piece of property in a country about to be conquered.
Jeremiah knows all this.
But still he says "You know what? Yes. I'll take it. I'll buy that field.
Seventeen shekels? It's a deal."

Now, the prison guards watching all this happen,
they're astonished.
The Voice of Doom himself investing in the land of Israel?
"Yeah, I'm buying that field," Jeremiah says, "and you guys can be my witnesses.
And here's what you're witnessing:
I'm buying that field because I believe that nothing is impossible with God.
I'm buying that field because I know that one day fields and houses and vineyards will again be
bought in this land."

When it comes right down to it,
Jeremiah wasn't so much investing in real estate
as he was investing in God's future.
What he did was an act of hope.
He bought a field.

Today after our [second] service,
we've got a great discussion planned with a panel of three of our church members -- Jay Lauf, Tony
Hwang, Christian Crews --
talking together about the Future, each from their own particular perspective in the world of
journalism, and politics, and business respectively.
I'm really looking forward to it.
So I figured I'd use my time up here today to give you the preacher's perspective on the future,
using our friend Jeremiah and his purchase of a field --
which although a little obscure is to me one of the most inspiring passages in the Bible.
And what Jeremiah tells us is --
it's time for each of us to buy a field.

We all need to buy a field.

I don't **literally** mean buy a field.

I am not envisioning some kind of re-creation of 'Field of Dreams'

where Kevin Costner up and leaves the city and moves to Iowa and buys a cornfield -- if you haven't seen it, it's on Netflix, you really should.

But that's not what I mean.

I do mean this:

I mean that all of us need to buy a field in God's kingdom.

I mean that all of us, all of us are called to invest in God's future,
and by that I mean invest in what brings peace

and what creates justice

and what makes for joy.

I mean investing not shekels of silver

but our hearts and our love and our time in

peace and justice and compassion and joy --

for our communities, for our world, for ourselves.

We all need to start buying our fields.

Yesterday, we had a funeral here for a woman who died at the age of 97.

There were people, family, here from all over,
dozens and dozens of people who adored her.

And David and me, we adored her too.

Florence Vermeulen was her name --

her husband Bill died just 18 months ago;

they'd had 67 years of marriage together.

And they, those two, they had spent their lives investing in God's future;

they had spent their lives buying Jeremiah's field.

Florence taught Sunday School here for years and years --

Bill raised the money to build the Memorial Room onto our Church House,
the room where we'll soon have [coffee hour][our speakers].

Florence chaired the Dogwood Festival here,

took meals to folks when they were sick,

delivered the flowers.

Bill gave weekend after weekend to Habitat for Humanity.

But what they really loved, most of all, was children.

Not just their kids, their grandkids, and their great-grands, all of whom were here and grieving yesterday.

No, Bill and Florence particularly loved kids who needed their love even more.

For years and years, they tutored several times a week in the Bridgeport schools, forming bonds of care and friendship with kids who needed them. Bill did math with the kids, Florence worked on their reading. Nothing gave them greater joy than seeing a child advance a grade level in math skills, see a kid excitedly flip through the pages of a book with them. And they wouldn't rest until they got all the rest of us doing it, too -- Bill would stand up in church and plead for volunteers, which is how I found myself at the Hallen School in Bridgeport, reading with the third graders, and getting a glimpse of the joy Bill and Florence had found there.

This was their way of buying a field, their way of investing in God's future of promise and possibility. Like Jeremiah, signing the deed on what could be, what would be.

The currency that Jeremiah used was shekels of silver. The currency that we use when we buy our fields is the currency of hope. To invest in God's future, to buy a field in God's kingdom of justice and peace, that requires that we have hope. Jeremiah's kind of hope. Hope that looks at what is and imagines what can be. But not just optimism, not just wishful thinking, no, real hope that acknowledges what is broken but believes in the one who can heal. Realistic hope that sees this world clearly, unflinchingly -- but also sees God at work it. Hope is the currency that we use to invest in God's future. Hope is what we use to buy our fields in God's kingdom, to buy Jeremiah's field.

About a decade ago now, I met a young woman from Israel who told me about some people who are right now at work in this world buying up fields, investing in God's future. You may know of them -- it's an organization called 'Seeds of Peace'. It had changed her life, and the lives of countless others. The premise of Seeds of Peace is simple, and remarkable. Each summer, they bring many dozens of young people from areas of conflict to a camp in Maine. And there they are together, just teens at a summer camp:

but they are Christian and Muslim and Jew, they are Israeli and Palestinian, Indian and Pakistani, Afghan.

And while they are there, just being teens together, they also learn what it is to be each other, they learn to listen to and understand each other.

They talk together about everything -- about their lives back home, about what separates them and, most importantly, what they have in common.

They learn, that is, the language of peace.

And then they go back, back to their homes, and their communities, and they begin to share.

They begin to share the language of peace that they have learned here.

They become seeds of peace all over the world, gathering others together to tell them that there is another way; building peace, one community at a time.

Buying up fields, that is, in the kingdom of God -- passionately and hopefully invested in God's future, a God called by different names but one God.

Centuries after Jeremiah, and centuries before now, the Sufi poet Rumi wrote this:

*Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing,
there is a field.*

I'll meet you there.

Two of the young teens in Seeds of Peace, an Egyptian named Hussam and an American named Sydney, were inspired by that ancient poem to write a song together, which has now been shared with peacebuilding teens around the world.

And in it they sing this:

There beyond the limits of rightdoing

a field peacefully lies

where you're talking with your enemy

and taught how to use your eyes.

Say hello to that field for me, say hello to the field for me.

And till I meet you in the field, my friend, take care.

The field of promise that Jeremiah bought, the field of beauty that Rumi wrote of, the field of peace those young teens sang of, that's the field we're supposed to by.

With our hope, with our faith, all of us need to buy a field in God's kingdom.

All of us are called to invest in God's future.

And it can be as simple as praying for peace,
as speaking out for healing,
as tutoring a child,
as writing a letter.

Each day you do something.
Each day you live into the future,
into God's future,
and you stake your life on that future,
you bet your life on that future
you believe that with God nothing is impossible.

You use your hope to buy a piece of the kingdom,
to buy a field with Jeremiah --
and together we make our way there.
Amen.