

Faith Mennonite Church  
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### **Things to do when life is on hold**

*Jeremiah 29: 1, 4-7; 2 Timothy 2:8-15; Luke 17:11-19*

Do you sometimes feel that life is on hold? Many things stop us in our tracks: an unexpected diagnosis; a conflict that blindsides us; a betrayal by someone we trust; an accident that requires months of rehabilitation; a move to a new community; an untimely death.

There are also the not-so-sudden yet paralyzing things that seem to have no beginning or end: depression; an unsatisfying job that we're afraid to leave because the prospects of finding another aren't good; a dysfunctional family system; an addiction; injustices in society such as poverty, racism, homelessness, inequities based on gender or sexual orientation.

And there's the church – the regional conference and wider denomination of churches that we are part of, as well as wider Christianity. Different contexts, different theological understandings, and different priorities within this larger body sometimes keep us from moving in directions we would like, at least at the pace we would like.

It's not difficult to compile a list of situations that leave us feeling exiled from the life we wish and long for. How do we return from exile? How do we press "restart" for a life on hold?

Our biblical lessons this morning hold three examples of life on hold: the first, from Jeremiah, was the physical exile of the people of Israel who were forcibly removed to Babylon. The second, from 2<sup>nd</sup> Timothy, is the Apostle Paul, incarcerated and in chains because of his Christian witness. And third, from the Gospel of Luke, are ten men with a physical condition that stigmatizes and segregates. Each of these stories holds distinct responses and a word of grace and truth for us.

As hopeful as Jeremiah's words sound to us today—"seek the welfare of the city"—they were probably greeted initially with incredulity if not resistance. Another prophet, Hananiah, was predicting that exile would be a fleeting experience—everyone would return in two years. But Jeremiah countered: we're in this for the long haul, at least a generation. So settle in folks! And there's more: seek the peace, the welfare, of this alien place you now find yourselves in. Put down roots, get married, have children and grandchildren, plant gardens, invest in business. If you seek the peace for this place, you will find peace and health for yourselves.

We know from Psalm 137 that this was not the optimistic mood of the exiles. As we sang in one of our opening hymns, based on this psalm, those in exile sang songs of bitter lament: "By the waters of Babylon, we lay down and wept, when we remembered Zion...how can we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?" This scenario reminds me of our current situation with the recession. Our country's economic plunge was due to many problems in a complex system, including the tendency for many people to desire a lifestyle beyond their means. Both of these require painful corrections and long-term changes, yet the electorate wants a prophet Hananiah to promise and deliver an immediate turn-around at no cost.

Jeremiah called for a paradigm shift: he called this exiled community to find good outside of the national boundary they had always considered was the domain of God. He called the exiled Israelites to work for the good of foreigners they had always considered outside the realm of God's loving care. This required a very new way of thinking: Maybe God's love extended

beyond the Jewish people, beyond Israel. This kind of change often takes more than a generation. In fact, 500 years later when Jesus walked in Galilee, his call to love the Samaritan—a distant cousin, at that—still found resistance. But the seeds of change that began in exile no doubt engendered a new understanding that shaped Jesus as he grew into his ministry.

The wisdom and call of exile is to seek the good *within* our very situations of pain and to make a commitment for the long haul. There are many different ways we might apply this concept of exile. I'd like to suggest that it might be helpful as we consider our relationship with Central Plains Conference and Mennonite Church USA, especially when we have disagreed over the inclusion of glbt persons. Some in our community don't feel a natural affinity to this larger body and wonder why we stay connected if the relationship constrains us. But if the conference is our Babylon, a place we don't necessarily want to be, then might not Jeremiah's words be a word for us? Might Jeremiah tell us to seek the welfare and the peace of churches in southeast Iowa and in rural Nebraska? Can we accept that the work of understanding might take a generation or more, just as previous struggles for change have taken? Can we accept that somehow our very welfare is tied to their welfare?

The Apostle Paul's attitude toward his detention was quite different from that of his ancestors in Babylon. Rather than feeling punished or victimized and working to gain his release, Paul considered his suffering to be an honorable mark of his commitment to follow Jesus. He did not choose to suffer in a masochistic way, but he believed that his imprisonment and rejection drew him more deeply into the mystery of salvation that came through Jesus' suffering and death.

The watchword for Paul in his suffering was "remember." He invited Timothy and the Christian community to view his suffering not as shameful defeat, but as the opportunity to *recall* how deeply God's love penetrated our world. "Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, a descendant of David." Jesus, the Holy One of God, was the human one of God who turned the world around through his suffering love. But remembering was more than mere recollection for Paul. It was also embodied *re-mem-bering*, entering into the very suffering of Jesus.

The middle section of the words we read from 2<sup>nd</sup> Timothy is thought to be fragments of an early Christian baptismal hymn. "If we have died with him, we also live with him" is an allusion to the death that baptism symbolizes as one goes into the water. In our baptism, says Paul, we die to a former, self-centered way of life and enter into a life oriented toward God, oriented toward the people of God and toward the wholeness of God's desire.

The wisdom and call of suffering, according to Paul, is that it invites us to better understand, and indeed share in, the suffering of Christ.

Finally, we turn to the ten men with leprosy in Luke. It's difficult for us to imagine the desperation that surrounded these men as they approached Jesus and asked him to heal them. At the time, leprosy was a dreaded, contagious illness with no cure. Those who contracted it had to live isolated from the community. This brings to mind the way that persons with HIV-AIDS were treated and feared in the early days of the illness before methods of transmission were understood. It's also the modern fate in some parts of the world for women with obstetric fistula. This condition results from prolonged, obstructed labor where there is inadequate medical care. The pressure creates a hole in the membranes of the vaginal canal and bladder or rectum and if not repaired, a woman has a constant flow of waste from her own body. Unlike lepers who

sought the company of others, women with fistula often are turned out and left entirely alone because their condition is so unpleasant.

As if moved by the urgency of the situation, Jesus didn't prolong the suffering of the lepers another minute, either by asking questions or even by taking the time to extend an affirming touch. He said, "Go, show yourselves to the priests," indicating that the cure was already taking hold. And they did just that; off they went. Except for one man, a Samaritan, the über-outcast among the outcasts. He stopped when he realized that his body was clean. He returned to Jesus, disobeying Jesus' command to go to the priests, and fell on his face to say thank you. An official declaration of healing from the priests was secondary for him. His first concern was to honor the one who had changed his life.

I doubt this was the first occasion of this man giving thanks. I imagine that he was a person who cultivated an attitude of gratitude every day. While his companions lamented their exclusion from the wider community, he no doubt countered, giving thanks for his leper band. When the others complained of their indigent life, moving around the outskirts of towns hoping that people would leave them food, I imagine this man offering a prayer of thanksgiving before each meal, no matter how meager. This man had come to see life as a gift, no matter how blemished. When Jesus restored his health, he intuitively knew that the fullness of healing would come through the expression of gratitude.

The wisdom and call of this Samaritan, healed from his leprosy, is to give thanks in all things, to recognize the generous hand of God sustaining us through the bleakest times of our lives.

Is your life on hold? Is our life on hold? With our ancestors in exile, let us seek the good within our situations of pain, even if we're not guaranteed in our lifetime the full harvest of the seeds of change that we sow. With our brother Paul, let us use suffering that may come to us as an opportunity to re-member and enter more fully into the mystery of the suffering of Jesus. And with the Samaritan who returned to thank Jesus, let us cultivate gratitude in our lives. May our prayer at the beginning and the ending of each day be "Thank you, thank you."