



Grace Church

The Rev. Dr. Matthew Calkins
Rector

Build Houses, Plant Gardens

Sermon for the Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost, October 9, 2016

Readings: Jeremiah 29:1, 4-7; Psalm 66:1-11; 2 Timothy 2:8-15; Luke 17:11-19

Sermon text: Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. 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. But seek the welfare 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. Jeremiah 29:4-7

Allow me to repeat our opening prayer: “Lord, we pray that your grace may always precede and follow us, that we may continually be given to good works; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.”

I love the image of grace as a sort of guard dog, preceding and following, keeping us safe, guiding our way. This benevolent bracket of grace allows and encourages us to “continually be given to good works.” The implication is that the fears and distractions of finding the way and keeping safe often prevent or at least hinder the good work we are supposed to do. But God, merciful and loving, shines the light of grace on our path before and behind.

Yet another metaphor: grace serves as a sort of personal assistant, taking care of the things that might otherwise keep us from our main work—the work only we can do.

This reverses the picture we might have of our role as God’s servants. Rather, God is helping us, going before and looking after, in order to give us the space and time for important work.

What then is so important? What good work has God given us to do?

Tending the garden is one of them. After all, when God set Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden he gave them a job: tend the garden and protect the animals.

This original work receives the stamp of Enlightenment approval. In *Candide*, Voltaire's satirical take on Leibniz' idea that God has created the best of all possible worlds, the hero encounters all kinds of disasters that test the hypothesis that this world is the best possible. Life seems rather to be one trial after another, aided and abetted by religious fanatics and political tyrants. But in the end the hero finds a peaceful home in Constantinople. The closing moral: We must tend our garden (*Il faut cultiver notre jardin*).

The great prophet Jeremiah, a much different man and religious sensibility, comes to something of the same conclusion in his famous letter to the exiles in Babylon in the sixth century BCE. His earlier warnings had fallen on deaf ears; Jerusalem was sacked by the invaders and many carted away to captivity. Jeremiah sensed that a generation or two or three must pass before the people return to Jerusalem. So he advises the exiles to build houses, plant gardens, get married, and work for the good of the city in which they find exiled. "For in its welfare you will find your welfare."

I think it was Baba Ram Dass (Dr Richard Albert) who said, "wherever you go, there you are." Certainly he said, "be here now" (the title of one of his books). Simple platitudes, of course, and easy to make fun of. Be here now, be somewhere else later. What's the problem? Wherever you go, there you are. Your luggage is another story. But if you take the thought and apply it not to the practice of mindfulness, say, but to the practice of settling in wherever you find yourself, perhaps there is more to be said.

Wendell Berry once divided the European colonizers and immigrants of North America into two classes: settlers and exploiters (*The Unsettling of America*). The question is not just about whether they stayed in one spot and cultivated the land or the business. But whether their work and life contributed to the common good, or rather just went to personal gain. Capitalism in general has this problem: capital moves in—say, helps purchase a fishing fleet for a village. The more fish, the more money. The capitalist has no incentive to create a longterm gain because after this place is fished out, the money can go to another venture someplace else. Moving on. Strip mine, strip cash, find the next vein or pocket.

Rather settle in—even temporarily, as sojourners, as the Israelites in Babylon—and work for the welfare of the city in which you find yourself. That is the biblical wisdom, the universally understood ethical imperative. But it can't be enforced as a matter of law, as if people were serfs whose life condition is decreed by birth. This ethical imperative is taught by example, and by the long term success of community building, and the long term failure of individual self-seeking.

This is the second Sunday of the month; consequently we will have confirmation class following church services. So I want to say something particularly directed at young people. "Bloom where you are planted" is a pretty good summary of what I have saying so far. Be part of the community in which you dwell and do your important work within its common life. But you are after all human, not a plant or a narrow territorial animal. Humans as a species have survived and thrived by spreading to all parts of the globe and adapting. I trust we will continue to spread and adapt—as I mentioned in my sermon last week. Increase your vision—heighten your sense of the possible. And cultivate your gifts, design your life—as I preached two weeks ago. Take responsibility for the choices you make that shape your life. Travel, be curious, explore, try different jobs out. As another wise teacher once wrote, "Oh the places you'll go!" (Dr Seuss).

But wherever you go and whatever you do, do it with a heart for all and a passion for excellence. Do your work as if working for the Lord.

For it is by grace that you have the gifts you have. Grace came before you to prepare this place for you, and grace will come after to carry on. So here now, in this place at this time, do all such good works as God has given you to do. Settle in and work with all your strength and all your heart and all your mind, seeking to love God and neighbor. Build houses, plant gardens, get married, raise a family, participate in civic life—vote! volunteer! For in the welfare of community, whether big city, suburb or rural village, you will find your welfare.

In Christ's name, Amen.

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