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July 16, 2017

Jeremiah 29:1-14; Matthew 5:43-48

## COMMONWELLTH – PRAYING FOR OUR ENEMIES

We have been exploring what kind of commitments and actions lead to the common well-being or commonwellth. The prophet, Jeremiah, has been our primary guide. As we listen to him, we hear he envisions a faith that is quite challenging, but also extraordinarily enriching. He is absolutely confident of the divine intent for the well-being and wholeness of all of God's children. That's a good thing for us to remember as we receive one of our faith's greatest challenges from Jeremiah and also from Jesus in our readings today.

As I've mentioned in past weeks, Jeremiah was a prophet during the time that Babylon was a rising foreign power that threatened the independence of the Hebrew people living in Judah. A series of mind-pictures might help us understand the vast changes in the context of our passage. The first picture shows the Hebrew leaders behind the wall around Jerusalem, looking out with fear at the Babylonian troops which surround the city. In the second picture, we see many of the Hebrew leaders with hands bound and eyes downcast, walking at spear-point toward exile in Babylon. Picture number three: these Hebrews have a bewildered look on their faces as they gaze out on the Babylonian people and culture which now surrounds them. They long to be free to return home. And there are voices telling them to keep their bags packed, that God would bring them back soon.

But Jeremiah writes telling them that it wasn't to be so. Those who were in exile would be there among their enemies for the rest of their lives and he urged them to build a life for themselves there. One more mental picture:

can you imagine the look of anguish on the faces of these Hebrew leaders when they hear that Jeremiah is urging them to seek the welfare of Babylon and to pray to the Lord on its behalf? These were the people who were their worst enemies! Their armies had destroyed their homes and separated them from their families. They had stripped the temple of its holy contents and left the land they loved in a shambles. Then they had forced them to live in exile, not knowing when they might be killed, imprisoned, enslaved, or released. Seek their welfare and pray for them? That was the farthest thing from their minds.

Jesus goes even beyond what Jeremiah proposed. “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.” There may not be too many of us here who will be forced to live in exile for the rest of our lives. Matthew’s Gospel was written at a time when early Christians were being martyred by the Roman Empire. There are Christians in several places in the world who face such a threat. But we are not so threatened, so the question comes: who are our enemies? Sure, there is ISIS, North Korea, Russia, all considered enemies of our country. But are there individuals or groups who have somehow hurt your loved ones, who have received a job or some possession you valued, or who damaged your reputation? Has there been someone who bullied you or was mean to you? Even when we are not physically held captive by an enemy, our spirits can be ‘captivated’ by resentment and thoughts of revenge. That is not a sense of the well-being desired by God for us or for the one we might view as an enemy.

In response to that spiritual reality, Jesus is teaching us that it is not enough to pray for peace. It is not enough to work for justice. It is not enough to struggle for liberation of the oppressed. Justice and liberation are not enough, for all too often these goals have been sought through violent means

that have only added to oppression and injustice. We are called to love the very ones with whom we struggle because God has not given up on any of God's children, whether they are our enemies or not. God continues to broadly pour out life and blessings such as sun and rain. God is interested in long-term well-being, not short-term revenge.

There was a person who had done wonderful things in service to God, but there was one concern in heaven – that the man held great enmity in his heart for someone he considered an enemy. So an angel was sent to offer the man a blessing – choose whatever you would like, but understand that whatever you choose for yourself, the one you consider an enemy will get twice what you choose. The man thought to himself – should I choose wealth? But no, my enemy would be twice as rich as I. Should I choose extensive land? Again, the one I bitterly despise would have land that would dwarf my own. Should I choose long life? Oh, but I can only imagine, long as my life would be, still my enemy would have opportunity to dance on my grave. The angel returned to the man. What will you choose as your gift from God? The man thought, “Enmity or blessing, enmity or blessing.” He thought about his enemy receiving double for what he wished as he told the angel, ‘Make me blind in one eye.’<sup>1</sup>

The movie, Selma, came out three years ago. It tells the story of the racial tensions in Selma, Alabama in the mid-sixties. Jim Clark was the sheriff in Selma at that time. He, more than any other, was responsible for the beating of civil rights marchers at the Edmund Pettis Bridge on that March, 1965 day that came to be called ‘Bloody Sunday.’ For a period of time in those days, Sheriff Jim Clark symbolized the oppressive law enforcement forces of the city and state. It was during the time of high emotion soon after that event that there was a large civil rights gathering at a church. The sheriff and many of his men were a threatening presence just outside the church meeting, when

news came that demonstrators in Montgomery had suffered serious injuries in a confrontation with police there. The crowd was angry and quite agitated upon hearing the news, and the leadership of the meeting was concerned that they had an explosive situation on their hands.

Then a young preacher went to the microphone saying, “It’s time we sang a song.” He improvised on a gospel call and response song entitled, “Certainly Lord.” He sang out the question, “Do you love Jesus?” The crowd sang back, “Certainly, Lord – certainly, certainly, certainly, Lord.” Then he sang about the leaders of the movement, “Do you love Martin King?” “Certainly, Lord.” Next it was “Do you love Rosa Parks?” Each time the crowd, warming to the song, sang loudly, “Certainly, certainly, certainly Lord.” Then suddenly, the preacher sang, “Do you love Sheriff Jim Clark?” The crowd was stunned by the question – only a few voices replied, “Certainly, Lord.” So the preacher sang again, “Do you love Sheriff Jim Clark?” The reply was a bit stronger this time: “Certainly, Lord.” Once more the preacher sang, “Do you love Sheriff Jim Clark?” By this time, his point had been made, and the crowd’s voices rang out, “Certainly, certainly, certainly, Lord.”<sup>2</sup>

Those Christians discovered the well-being that comes on those occasions when we are able to reflect the grace and generosity of spirit that God conveys all the time. God can move us to the liberating place of giving up our enmity toward someone who has been our enemy, where we can wish that person or group well and pray for them. That does not mean we wish them success in behavior which hurts or destroys, but we can pray that their needs be met in constructive ways.

I won’t sing it, but I’ll ask it – Does God want our well-being? And you can respond: “Certainly, Lord.” Does God want wholeness? “Certainly, Lord.”

Is it hard to get there? “Certainly, Lord.” Is the journey a challenge?  
“Certainly, Lord.” Will God make a way? “Certainly, Lord.” Will God  
make a way? “Certainly, Lord.” Will God make a way? “Certainly,  
certainly, certainly, Lord.”

<sup>1</sup> From a presentation to a Global Education Associates gathering given by Eileen W. Lindner, "A Christian Perspective On World Order," [www.g-e-a.org/docs/Lindner2.pdf](http://www.g-e-a.org/docs/Lindner2.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> From a story told in Walter Wink's book, Jesus and Nonviolence: A Third Way, Fortress Press, 2003.