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Abington Presbyterian Church

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Jeremiah 32:1-3a; 6-15

Romans 8:18-25

COMMONWELLTH – ACTS OF FAITH

We have been looking to the prophet, Jeremiah, to discern the things that might lead us toward a common well-being for human communities. The areas we have covered are not comprehensive for what is needed to move in that direction, but we have focused on just and right relationships, confronting lies beyond or within ourselves, a willingness to lament brokenness, and a practice of praying for our enemies. Today, for the last of this sermon series, we focus on acts of faith that express integrity and hope.

We Presbyterians are people who believe in thinking and like to think in our believing. We tend to have a quite rational approach to what scriptures teach in our understanding of and relating to God. When we, as a congregation are seeking divine guidance, we try to foresee different possibilities and ramifications regarding the decisions before us, using a process that directs proposals to be reviewed by committees, who then submit them to the elders of the Session, who spend time discussing the possible outcomes of various scenarios, all in the context of prayer. Presbyterians seem to want to know a great deal about a prospect before any important decision. This group process can be drawn out, but at some point we generally take a vote to set a course of action or sometimes inaction. The leaders of this congregation are charged to be both spiritual leaders and those who have a fiduciary responsibility for the care and maintenance of the institution, including a building, a staff, programming, membership relations, oversight of finances, reputation with the community, and more.

As a community of faith, I sometimes wonder whether our Presbyterianism enables a boldness of faith. For a life of faith has to do with what is not fully known. We believe certain things; we don't know them – we believe them to be true and what we believe is supposed to shape what we do. We hope certain things, but our New Testament passage tells us, much to our human consternation, that hope focuses on that which is not yet seen. How much of a risk do we take in stepping out in faith and how much beyond our comfort zone should we go as individuals and as a community of faith?

Jeremiah was among the great prophets of Israel who sometimes used their actions to augment their colorful words. Acted parables or even street theater were used in search of a compelling way to demonstrate the call of faith. One time Jeremiah smashed a water jug before his audience to illustrate the extent of the brokenness he saw about him. Another time he made a yoke bar and carried it on his own neck to dramatize subservience to the Babylonian king. Let me put you at ease – I'm not planning to visually demonstrate my sermon today.

In our passage from Jeremiah, we do hear of an act of faith that was quite risky for him. It began when his cousin, Hanamel, asked him to buy a piece of family property at Anathoth, just on the outskirts of Jerusalem. Hanamel, evidently was going to be forced to sell this property to address his indebtedness, and he was looking for a family member to buy it, or in Hebrew understanding, to redeem it by purchasing the property to keep it in the family. Jeremiah evidently had enough money to make the purchase, but no real estate agent would have ever suggested that he go through with the transaction. The first three principles of real estate are location, location, location. The piece of property was not what might be called a 'wise investment' because it was beneath the very feet of the Babylonian army that was besieging Jerusalem. The property had every prospect of being worthless for building or planting or any other endeavor. Jeremiah knew all of that, but God led him to buy it anyway. That did not make much sense to Jeremiah, however he moves

forward with the purchase as an expression of faith. At some point, he realizes that the purchase was not simply financial in nature; it was a transaction of hope, indicating that God's plan included a future for that land.

Now as a way to live out our faith as did Jeremiah, I'm not suggesting we as a congregation go out and find some flood plain property for sale and make an investment to redeem the land. Faith doesn't have to be stupid. But faith does have to step out in some risk in order to be active.

In the early 1990's, the state of Montana was a hotbed of anti-Semitic acts. There were only about one thousand Jews in the whole state, and parts of the Jewish community were frequently threatened or attacked. Synagogues were damaged; a Jewish cemetery was desecrated with Nazi swastikas painted on headstones. In Billings, Tammie and Brian Schnitzer had put up some Hanukkah decorations which included a menorah displayed in the window of their five-year-old son, Isaac. On a December evening, someone threw a cinder block through that window, destroying the menorah and causing broken glass to cover Isaac's bed. Fortunately no one was in the room at the time. The Schnitzers called the police and the investigating officer suggested they remove all Jewish symbols from visibility. This caused a bit of a crisis in the home.

Margaret McDonald, who worked with the Montana Association of Churches, read of the incident in the local newspaper. She imagined what it would be like to have to tell her own children that they could not have a Christmas tree because it might cause an attack on their home. She talked with her pastor and suggested that their Sunday school students make paper menorahs for their windows at home as a sign of solidarity with the Schnitzers and the other Jews who felt threatened. Over the next few days, hundreds of menorahs appeared in the windows of local homes as Christians publicized their demonstration of support. In a few days, the Billings newspaper published a full-page image of a menorah, and urged the citizens of the town in an editorial to display it on a

door or window. By the end of the week, six to ten thousand homes had decorated their homes with menorahs.

The bigots did not withdraw quietly. Someone shot at a sporting goods store sign which displayed the message, “Not in our town! No hate. No violence. Peace on Earth.” Bricks and bullets broke some windows at the Central Catholic High School whose marquee read, “Happy Hanukkah to our Jewish Friends.” People from town felt the need to organize a vigil outside the synagogue during Sabbath services. A church with a menorah display suffered some broken windows as did six non-Jewish families. But, eventually the harassment decreased.¹

I don’t know what’s next in living out our faith as a congregation, but I hope the officers and each one of us asks whether our faith ever breaks out of purely rational constraints. Does it live out enough risk to demonstrate the hope and power of the gospel? Does it have passion for carrying out God’s will? Can we move beyond just having a heady faith?

I said earlier that I wasn’t going to visually demonstrate my sermon. Instead, I urge you to think how you or your family or how we as a congregation can visually demonstrate a bold faith, a conviction of hope. Over the last couple of weeks, I was blessed to get to see firsthand work that Abington Church members did serving low-income Appalachian families by repairing and improving their houses. I got to see our youth working with and singing with poor children in Baltimore, developing relationships that blessed both groups. There were many here yesterday who exerted themselves for the Summer Soaker 5K which raised funds for disadvantaged children to be able to be enriched by a summer camp experience. These were acts seeking a common wellbeing. These were acts of faith and hope.

In worship at times, we affirm our faith with words. But if we don’t put our time, our energy, our creativity, our resources forward to live out our faith in a

God who brings hope to our world, then such a faith devolves into being little more than an idle idea.

You and I, working together, cannot fully enable a common wellbeing for all people. But we have a God who has a deep desire to move the broader human community toward a true commonwealth. And we have a God who invites us and urges us to participate in that kind of Godly work. If we live out a faith that captivates the imagination and frees the heart, we might find such a life to be expensive; but the transaction of hope may just be the wisest investment we ever made.

¹ Story relies on information from these web pages: <http://www.religioustolerance.org/menorah.htm>;
<https://www.facinghistory.org/resource-library/not-our-town-0>