

Proper 21C2010; September 26  
Jer 32:1-3a, 6-15; Ps 91:1-6, 14-16  
I Tim 6:6-19; Luke 16:19-3

A FEW WEEKS AFTER HURRICANE KATRINA, I drove down the Gulf Coast shoreline with a car-full of volunteers. The stately homes which I had admired before had vanished. Gone were the white columns, the restaurants, the hotels, even the huge casinos in Gulfport. Bare cement slabs bore witness that there had once been subdivisions. The treetops were littered with clothing and underwear. Even the beach was blocked off; there was so much torn metal and broken glass under the sand that you could not go there. If some man in a well-cut suit had driven up to me in a limo and told me to buy land there, right now, I would have thought he was crazy.

But that is what Jeremiah does. In the tenth year of King Zedekiah of Judah, when the city was besieged by the Babylonian army, mere weeks or months before it fell, the word of God came to Jeremiah and told him to buy land, there, in the midst of the storm. Now, Jeremiah had been prophesying for years already that it was too late for Judah; the Lord had set the day of their destruction, and even repentance would not avert their fall. But when the Lord spoke to him, Jeremiah took his money and bought a field, sealed the deeds into a jar, and buried them, saying, "Thus says the Lord...: Houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land." (Jer 32: 15) He was not revoking the city's destruction, but he was promising that it would not be permanent. It was far off; it would not be in his lifetime, but a new day would dawn for Jerusalem. Like a slave lying in a field under the stars, dreaming of freedom until he turns his steps north and begins to walk, so the prophet hurls his heart ahead of him, investing all that he has left in building a future with hope.

We need that hope today, my friends. We need that hope, because this has been a hard time in our country. More people in this country are now in poverty than at any time since they started counting. Jobs are hard to come by. The experts told us this week that the recession ended a year ago, but our experience says otherwise. People are afraid, and with fear come a host a demons: Racism. Nativism. And a kind of blind self-interest, which ignores the common needs of our people and insists on what benefits self alone. Forty years ago, Martin stood on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial and said, "We refuse to believe that the bank of justice is bankrupt. We refuse to believe that there are insufficient funds in the great vaults of opportunity of this nation. So we have come to cash this check — a check that will give us upon demand the riches of freedom and the security of justice." Today, our bankruptcy is more than financial, my friends; the values of our secular society have become worthless. We have cheapened our precious gifts of life and liberty, and traded them for an empty consumerism: freedom to shop, freedom to buy, freedom to spend my money on me, and let the brave world spin. We have become a nation like the callous man in the Gospel, stepping past the hungry at our door, even when they wear the faces of our neighbors.

But now, as in the days of Jeremiah, there is a word from the Lord, a word of hope. Be quiet, my friends! Be quiet, and listen! For there is another sound, almost a whisper, far off, at the edge of our hearing. It is the sound of a voice crying out in the wilderness: "Comfort, O comfort ye my people." "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth; and all flesh shall see the salvation of our God." (Luke 3:4-6) Even now, the hand of the Lord is working. Even through our dissonance, the chords of heaven can begin to be heard. Even now, if we reach for it, there is a future with hope.

In the twenty-ninth chapter of Jeremiah, an astonishing letter is preserved. It is a letter which Jeremiah wrote from captivity to his people, who had been taken into exile in Babylon. He writes, in part, "Thus says the Lord of Hosts, the God of Israel, 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." This is your home, he says. It is not the home you have chosen, but it is the home I have given you. You are not far from me, even here, for it is the place to which I sent you. And your work, for as long as you are in exile, is to foster the health of this land. Put your hand to the plow, and plant fields. Bend your back to vine, and harvest grapes. Here, in this exile, you will learn to grow toward the sun. Here, in this exile, you will learn that I am your true home. "For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope. Then when you call upon me and come and pray to me, I will hear you. When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart." (Jer 29:4-7, 11-13)

The word which God spoke to Jeremiah, God is speaking still, for the words of God do not fall silent. This may not be the home we would have chosen. It may not be the time we would like to live in, but it is the home and the time we have been given, and our work is not different from that of our forebears. Seek the welfare of this place, for in its welfare we will find our own. We cannot silence the voices of hatred, but together we can speak a word of unity, a word of compassion, and a word of love. That's why God has given us this place, this church, this community: so we can learn to hear and speak the things that God is saying. We come here for the strengthening of our soul.

Today is stewardship Sunday, the first week of our annual pledge drive. It is the start of a season in which we ask you to consider your financial support for this church. In many parishes, rectors will stand in their pulpits today and talk about all the wonderful programs your stewardship dollars make possible: children's programs, youth education, outreach efforts, times to have fun together. I could talk about those things today: about how our work with young people has flourished in these last four years, about the thousands of people whom we feed each month at our food pantry, about homeless men finding refuge in our buildings, about the excellent choral music which enriches our worship and wonderful concerts like yesterday's recital by Sonia Boyer, made possible by the vision and initiative of the Black Heritage Committee. I could talk about those things, but I won't mention them.

Instead, I want to talk to you about generosity of spirit, about the enlargement of our hearts. Look around you, my friends! Gathered under this roof, we are Republican and Democrat, black and white and brown, straight and gay, old and young, female and male, people who have gathered together from many nations to learn to love and serve our God. We are a living rebuke to the voices of hatred, to all those who claim that people who disagree with one another about any one thing cannot claim kin with one another. We do not agree with one another (thank God!), but we are united in the love of Christ; we are united *by* the love of Christ. We are speaking a word which the world needs to hear.

Near the end of today's parable, the rich man who had ignored the poor man at his gate finds himself in a place of eternal torment, and he cries out, "Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am in agony." But Abraham replies, "Child, remember that during your lifetime you received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner evil things...Besides all this, between you and us a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who might want to pass from here to you cannot do so, and no one can cross from there to us." (Luke 16:24-26) If you listen to the voices of hatred, they will tell you that that chasm has been fixed here and now, that already the rich must war against the poor, the native against the foreign, the strong against the weak. But that is not (it is *not*) the word of God, for the Word of God took human flesh to bridge that chasm, here, now, coming among us even today, the rich one living among the poor, the omnipotent one taking on human weakness, the one to whom suffering was

foreign taking on our native pain, our native joy. We follow a transgressive God, my friends, a man who ate with sinners and with the righteous, who taught women as well as men, making of his flesh a bridge so that we could cross it and join with one another.

Very often, Jesus describes rich people the way he describes Dives today: as callous, indifferent, caught up in their own concerns, unable to see or acknowledge the needs of those crying out for help. And it is true: money is a great temptation, and "the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil." (1 Time 6:10) The lure of money can lead us into behavior we would never consider without the promise of tangible reward, and having it allows us to think that we can make and unmake our world; it gives us so much power that we can forget we need God. But these problems are not restricted to the rich. The poor, too, can crave what money can give. And the power it gives us to do evil can also be used for good.

What makes a difference is not whether we are rich or poor; it is whether our hearts are closed or open. The question is not how much money we have, but where we invest it. We can hold it close to home, bury our talents, walk past our neighbors, and convince ourselves that we are only taking what we are owed. Or, we can remember that we are owed nothing, that this life is gift, that this day is bounty, that every breath we draw comes free from the hand of God. We can choose "to do good, to be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share, [...] so that [we] may take hold of the life that really is life." (1 Tim 6:18-19) Like Jeremiah, we can hurl our hearts ahead of us into the future of God, planting seeds of the kingdom that is to come.

O, we may not see that harvest. We may not even see the seeds blossom. But we will know that we have tended the spirit of God in those around us. We will know that we have shaped this world further toward mercy, that we have become a sign of compassion. And when the voices of division become loud and harsh, when the spirit of the world turns rabid, we will be able to come to this place and point to the cross and say, "This is the road I have taken," and point to our neighbor and say, "This is the future I have chosen: a future with hope."