

Sermon for Sunday, May 15, 2011  
Last Sermon preached at The Presbyterian Church of Palatine  
The Rev. Judith Watt

Jeremiah 29: 1, 4-14  
2 Timothy 4: 1-5

*Kitchen Cupboard Instructions*

In 1989 or 1990, I had the opportunity to go with some fellow seminary students and one of our professors to Harlingen, Texas to study immigration issues at the border between Texas and Mexico. Those were the years when so many people were fleeing their Central American countries because of war-- Nicaragua, El Salvador. The trip meant that I would be away from home for a solid week. Our daughters then were about 12 and 8. They would be in school during the day, but after school they would be with baby sitters until Dave got home. A week of my absence, during the month of December, while they were still in school, was going to be complicated.

And so, I got the yellow legal tablet, and started writing instructions. I had one page for every day I would be gone. The instructions included things like who was driving to school on which particular day. They included after school activities, where those were, how to get there, in case a babysitter would be the driver. There were phone numbers. There were instructions about food, bedtime, anything I could think of. I taped each sheet of 8 ½ by 14 sized yellow legal paper onto the kitchen cupboards, clearly marked, one sheet for each day.

I joked once I finally got on my way and was in Texas that I had left so many instructions at home that it was as if everyone would know even when to breathe in and to breathe out. I wanted everyone at home to be safe. I wanted them to thrive while I

was away. I didn't want them to miss a beat. All of those instructions were the result of what I used to call my mother bear instincts.

Any parent knows that those instincts come from a deep, abiding love.

It is deep love for you that makes me want to leave all sorts of instructions here, that makes me want to assure you over and over again with the same phrase Julian of Norwich used in the 14th century. Julian was a Christian mystic. She said, "All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well." It is my mother bear kind of love for you that makes me wish I could post 8 ½ by 14 sized yellow legal pad sheets everywhere here, each one of them with instructions and the words, "All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well."

But, you've already got the instructions in this book. You've already got the instructions in this book.

Jeremiah sent a letter from Jerusalem to the exiles who had been deported by King Nebuchadnezzar to Babylon. The people who had been exiled wanted nothing more than to go back home – to go back to Jerusalem – to change what had happened to them – to go back to life as they knew it. The letter Jeremiah sends to them helps them to interpret their situation – tells them they must accept their predicament and see it in positive terms. The key to this acceptance "lies in believing that God, in spite of appearances, is still in control. He is still 'the God of Israel' . . . . . If they can make some sort of sense of their new situation, then perhaps they can throw themselves into it rather than counting the days until it is over. 'Live in the present' is the crux of Jeremiah's advice." (Christine E. Pilkington, The Lectionary Commentary: Theological Exegesis for Sunday's Texts, Eerdmans, 2001.p. 431)

Jeremiah's instructions are also for you, this church, as you continue to live in community together, and they are for any of us in our own individual exiles – away from life as we once knew it, experiencing change we didn't choose.

First, he tells them to build and to plant. In other words, have long term projects just as you would if you were home, just as you would if things hadn't changed. Yesterday our garden workers opened up the plots in preparation for spring planting right on the other side of this cross. There is a concrete and visible example to every ministry team in this church to keep on doing what you are doing in the present in anticipation of and with expectation for God's provision in the season to come. Build, plant.

Then he says, "Marry, and have children." In other words, live, love, choose life. What a tremendous privilege it was for me today to officiate at the baptism of James Thomas on my last Sunday here. Because, I officiated at the memorial service of his grandfather, Tom Lundeen. And I officiated at the wedding of Kiersten and Johnny. And now, on my last day here, I've been privileged to baptize their son. The baptism today is a sign to us, another reminder, of the necessity to keep choosing life, even when there's been loss and grief. Choose life, Jeremiah tells the exiles. Plant, build, choose life. Do not simply tread water until you get back home.

And so, I charge you with a specific instruction. This very next week, one of your own will preach – Marc Wendleton, a seminary graduate and an affiliate member of our church. Next week, our current seminary intern, Abby Mohaupt will preach. The following week, the Rev. Paul Palmer, great friend to this congregation, will preach, and then Nancy Dolan and then Mark Schimmelpfennig, both former seminary interns. Eventually an interim pastor will arrive and will stay until your future search committee

calls your next installed pastor. I charge you to begin this very next week – and each and every week after that– to confer authority in your hearts and in your minds on each preacher who preaches here. To come on Sunday with expectation that each week God will speak to you through each preacher. Pray every week for each preacher who steps into this pulpit. View each one of them as God’s messenger to you, today, in this present time. Don’t view any of them as anything less than God’s chosen people to preach God’s word to you in the present.

When I interviewed with the search committee 8 years ago, I remember saying to them, “Even if your building were to burn down, you would still be the church, because the church isn’t the building you inhabit.” And today I say to you, even though you are losing a pastor, you are still the church. My charge to you is to keep being the church in every way you can. Build, plant, choose life.

That doesn’t mean you should think it’s not important to have a pastor. That used to be an attitude I would hear when I first arrived here, from time to time. And that was understandable, given what you’d been through as a congregation. It is important to have a pastor. A pastor fills a particular role among you and that role is important. And it is important to have a healthy relationship with a pastor. And we’ve had that. So, don’t skip the grief and don’t be shy about talking about missing me, as though it is something you shouldn’t be doing. I know full well that I have been grieving and will continue to do so. Tomorrow you will be a congregation without a pastor. And I will be a pastor without a people. And on June 13 when I start my new call, those people still won’t be my people –not in the way you have become my people. Because that all takes time. So don’t skip the grief. Grieving properly will help you make the very best choice in your

next pastor. But keep on being the church through it all, because your mission and what Christ calls you to do is what is so important. Keep on seeking the welfare of the city in which you are planted, says Jeremiah. That is Christ's call, too.

Build, plant, and choose life. You are a strong people. Look around at what some of you are bearing in your own personal lives. Tremendous personal challenges. You are strong. You are strong as individuals and as a collective group. Build, plant, choose life. Welcome every visitor through these doors knowing your strength. And knowing that it is a gift that you have been given faith. Show your love to everyone who comes. Pray, not only for each preacher, but pray for new people to walk through these doors and then when they do, and they will, greet them with confidence. Don't greet them with the disclaimer that this is some kind of limbo time, but as though this is real time, the present, and that you are proudly and responsibly being the church obedient to Jesus Christ and your call. All shall be well, Julian said. And God said, "For surely I know the plans I have for you, plans for your welfare, and not for harm, to give you a future with hope."

It really isn't like me to be tearing up so readily in front of people as I have in the past weeks. I've been struck by that. So, either I'm losing it or this is about something I really can't explain. And I think it's the latter. And I think I know what the inexplicable is. I was called here. I felt it then. The search committee felt it then, too. It didn't make sense to me in so many ways. . I took steps into an unknown future and really didn't know how it would work out. And you did the same. You didn't know how any of it would work out either. We both began and we found our way and together we tried as best we could to be obedient and faithful. My tears are more than tears of sadness at leaving you. They are tears of sorrow because I am leaving you, but sorrow mingled with

joy because God did something here – not simply because of me – but God did something in us and for us together. God didn't just transform you, this church, but God transformed me, too, by my being with you. God was faithful to us. That's what so touches me about all of this. I have been blessed by you and by watching you offer your gifts – and by watching your gifts multiply and burst forth and bloom. And the same has happened for me. I've offered my gifts and they have multiplied and bloomed, too. A gracious and steadfast, loving God has done that for you and for me and for us together and that's why my tears. They are tears of way more than sadness at our parting. They are tears of gratitude I can't express adequately for the love and faithfulness of God to you and to me.

There are more instructions in 2 Timothy 4. They are Paul's instructions to Timothy but I think they are instructions to you as the body of Christ. They are so clear, all I have to do is just read them again as they are written. "In the presence of God, and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I solemnly urge you: proclaim the message; be persistent whether the time is favorable or unfavorable; convince, rebuke, and encourage, with the utmost patience in teaching. . . . . endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, carry out your ministry fully."

Carry out your ministry fully.

And then, Paul continues with some words that apply in part to this day, and with some words which do not. He says, "As for me, I am already being poured out as a libation, and the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith."

It is true that the time of my departure has come, but we are not finished fighting the good fight. You must continue and I must continue, because we have not finished the race. And so we must go on. We have kept the faith together, to the best of our ability, but we must go on, keeping that faith, fighting the good fight, and always, with gratitude, remembering what our gracious and loving God has done for us. Alleluia! Amen!