

Citizen Disciples: *Jeremiah 29:1-7*

August 9, 2015, Norwalk Christian Church, Disciples Together Series

I'll Fly Away, O Glory, I'll fly away. To a home on God's celestial shore. I'll fly away.

This world is not my home, I'm just a'passin' through. My treasure's all laid up, somewhere beyond the blue. And I can't feel at home in this world anymore.

*O Beulah Land, sweet Beulah Land, As on thy highest mount I stand,
I look away across the sea, Where mansions are prepared for me,
And view the shining glory shore, My heav'n, my home forevermore!*

Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. ⁶Take wives [and husbands] and have sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. ⁷But 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.

The lines from the old, beloved hymns do not seem to sync with the lines from the old prophet Jeremiah. The hymns sing of a home beyond this life, discarding this world, as we long for a home in heaven. And yet, here is the prophet Jeremiah, calling a group of exiles to put down roots. To make their land of exile their home, to seek the welfare of their captors.

I grew up singing those old hymns, and hearing old sermons that echoed the lines from those old hymns, calling us to forget about life around us. What really mattered was heaven, and doing whatever it took to get to heaven. We didn't do much for the poor. We weren't involved in justice issues. We didn't go to city council meetings, or do much for local schools. But we did knock on doors and ask people, "If you were to die right now, do you know for sure, without a doubt, that you'd go to heaven to be with God."

Because that's all that mattered! Heaven! And doing all we could to keep those we thought were "lost" from the eternal fires of hell! It didn't matter that people all around us were living in hell right now. That was not our concern. The world's going to all burn up one day, we were told. So ignore it, and focus on heaven.

It would have been easy for Jeremiah to have told the exiles of Israel the same thing. This book we call Jeremiah was birthed out of a catastrophic time in the history of Israel. The Babylonian Empire, the biggest, baddest empire on the planet, had invaded Israel, destroyed the capital city of Jerusalem, leaving the Jewish Temple in ruins.

The Babylonians then took the elite of Israel as captives, the strongest, smartest and wealthiest. The rest were forced to flee as refugees to Egypt, their former land of captivity. It is too the captives in Babylon that this word of God we call Jeremiah is given.

Jeremiah could have taught them the old hymns. Just close your eyes, he could've said. Imagine Jerusalem, her walls. Don't settle down in Babylon. *Babylon is not your home, you're just a passin' through. Oh Jerusalem, sweet Jerusalem! As on thy highest mount I stand, I look away across the sea, Where mansions are prepared for me, And view the shining glory shore, My Jerusalem, my home forevermore!*

Jeremiah could've taught them the old hymns. But instead...instead he says, "*Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. ⁶Take wives [and husbands] and have sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. ⁷But 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.*"

I'll admit: sometimes, it's easier to sit in the sanctuary, daydreaming about heaven as we fly away from all the trouble and pain and mess in this world. Karl Marx has been credited with saying that, "Religion is the opium of the people." It deadens us to the troubles of the world, makes us forget what is wrong, so we don't stand up and demand that it become right. If our eyes are fixated on heaven, then what happens on earth is none of our concern. It's certainly easier that way.

Yet, hard as we try, we can't ignore what's going on when we leave these walls. Pain. Suffering. Crime. Drugs. Cuts in school funding. High cost of living. Medical bills. Choices between paying the light bill or paying the insurance premium. Racism. Sexism. Classism. Homophobia. Hunger. Multiple jobs and still not enough to pay the rent. Lack of adequate clothing. So much gun violence. Homelessness. Greed. Exploitation.

We can try to ignore it, but sooner or later, the pain hits home. It's your school that gets funding cut, your checks that bounce, your family thrown out into the street. When it's happening to you and to those you love, when you see your world falling around you, then, no song can help you ignore the pain. You're holding on for your life.

I cannot hear our text without thinking of my former employer, The Jeremiah Group. For 2 years, we lived in New Orleans, Louisiana. I worked for the Jeremiah Group, a non-profit community organization of churches, religious and community institutions that took it's name from our very text today. We existed to seek the welfare of the city of New Orleans. We were, as we simply called ourselves, Jeremiah.

Seeking the welfare of the city got significantly harder in New Orleans, on August 23, 2005. It will be 10 years ago in two weeks, when Hurricane Katrina hit the shores of New Orleans. I remember vividly as I am sure you do, watching this tragic yet sacred city drown on national TV, as the army corp levees across the city failed. Katrina was Babylon, and everything was left in ruins. It was enough to give up hope. We weren't living there when the levees broke, we arrived 4 years after, but still when we were there, all around us, was signs of a fallen community. So much pain. You could still see the

water lines in buildings. You could see the front steps that led to an empty lot, a home that had been washed away.

But in the wake of the storm, just weeks after, a group of pastors and church leaders gathered together at Trinity Episcopal Church. They were leaders of Jeremiah, community organizers trained before Katrina to organize their own communities, and they were ready.

Around that table, hope was born. They planned a new future for their city, all the while many of them didn't have a home to go home to. Some had lost family in the water. Some of the pastors lost their church buildings, and many--too many--church members.

Yet there they were, black and white, latino and latina, Baptist and Catholic, Pentecostals, Methodists, all sitting around a table in an Episcopal Church, making plans for the welfare of their city. From that meeting, they went back to their congregations and neighborhoods, having as many conversations as they could, individually or in small groups. They asked them what pressures they were facing, and if they wanted to join together as the Jeremiah Group to do something about it.

Soon, these washed out church leaders were meeting with the Mayor, their representatives, and their Governor. They organized thousands of people, trained them, and together they began changing their city.

They fought for and won millions of needed dollars of money called "The Road Home" money that would help people rebuild their houses. But then they realized that was not enough, because so many people who lost everything were renters. They had no home to rebuild, and they certainly couldn't afford a new home. So after so much hard work, they organized 70 million dollars of Federal Funds for new home-buyers to reduce the cost of homes. Nothing like this had ever been done before. They were told it was impossible. Yet there it was, Church folk--changing housing policy in New Orleans.

But the fight for the welfare of their city wasn't over. When I began working with Jeremiah, this 70 million they won was stuck in a mess of bureaucracy, still waiting to help families. One government official blamed another who blamed another who blamed another. But we kept on them. We kept seeking the welfare of the city. And six years ago this week, that money began to hit the streets.

And though it took a few years, eventually that money arrived in the hands of new homebuyers. People who had no hope of ever having a home, now could purchase a home for their families to live in. They could plant gardens and eat produce. All because a bunch of church folks were good citizens. They couldn't sit there and watch the welfare of their city wash away. They had to do something.

I don't have much patience anymore for those sermons about flying away to some home far beyond the skies, nor do I have the stomach for talking about hell. Being a disciple of Christ, I believe, demands that we turn our attention to this world, this city, and seek the welfare of this home we have now.

After all, Jesus taught us to pray, "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, ON EARTH, as it is in heaven." God's will, God's reign, happening in the here and now.

I wonder what it would look like for us to be good Citizen Disciples in Norwalk? What would it look like for us to seek the welfare of our city?

Maybe it's organizing a conversation on school bullying, providing our youth with tools to combat bullies, and advocate for those being bullied. Maybe it a church paying attention to how our city is growing. Are we only building million dollar homes and driving up the cost of living? Can our children afford to live here when they're older? Are we making sure that everyone in our community has an affordable place to live?

Maybe, seeking the welfare of our city looks like church folk working to increase school funding, so our schools have all the resources they need to care for all students.

Maybe it's our church being a part of a new, affordable daycare or parent's day out program, that provides a safe, open-minded and cheap place for families who need help, but can't afford other options.

Maybe it looks like our church going public about our welcome of all people. While some would say they doomed to hell, we openly share God's love for all, being open and affirming of all regardless of their sexual orientation.

Maybe it looks like the Norwalk food pantry always overflowing with food and volunteers, or a clothing closet created, or a jobs program started to help families find careers with good pay and benefits.

Maybe it's churches coming together to build the first shelter in Warren County for victims of domestic violence.

Whatever it looks like, I'm sure it will start like it started with Jeremiah in New Orleans, with a bunch of pastors and church folk around a table, talking with their church members and neighbors, sharing stories, acknowledging pain, dreaming dreams, and seeking together the welfare of our city.

This world is our home. We are not just passin' thru. God has given us this place. This city. These neighborhoods. These people. These problems. Seek the welfare of the city. For in its welfare, you will find your own.

How will we be good citizens? What can you imagine? How is God calling you?