

19th Sunday after Pentecost

Sermon 9.25.16

Scripture: Jeremiah 32:1-3, 6-15

1 Timothy 16:19-31

The tenth year of King Zedekiah of Judah was the year 587 B.C.E.

If you're a Bible scholar or a seminary graduate, that date resounds with meaning as much July 4, 1776 does, or September 11, 2001. If not you're not a Bible scholar or a seminary graduate, though: well, that's what preachers are for.

587 is the year Babylon invaded Jerusalem for the final time; it's the year this empire from the East at last sacked the so-called city of peace, destroyed the Temple, and forced the Judeans into exile. The army of the king of Babylon that was, as a Jeremiah noted, "besieging Jerusalem," would destroy the city, and it would be two generations before the people could even imagine rebuilding their lives in this once "promised land." It would all now be left in ruin.

That's what was happening at the time of this real estate deal—for the right of redemption by purchase belonged to Jeremiah.

That from which the land needed to be redeemed, and that from which Jeremiah's cousin Hanamel also needed redemption, a buying out of a worthless situation: Jeremiah had long warned of it. He had long railed against the people for their waywardness, had long foretold doom for their pride and vanity, their failure to live a collective life of justice for the downtrodden in their midst.

Forty years he was a prophet of the Lord, so during that long time he'd promised and prophesied. He'd cautioned and warned. He'd annoyed the people and aggravated their king to such a degree that at last he was imprisoned—confined in the court of the guard that was in the palace of the king of Judah, where Zedekiah had confined him. Refusing to claim that the Lord would be on the side of this people who had long since ceased to be on the side of the Lord, refusing to affirm the political and military decisions this people was making, Jeremiah landed himself under house arrest, now in prison.

He'd wept and wailed. (The weeping prophet, he is sometimes called).

He'd demonstrated and protested: if the people continued to grow complacent, to engage in decadence, they'd no longer be able to count themselves as a people of God.

And now, he was all but silenced.

And now it would come to pass: Babylon would overthrow them.

Now it had come to pass: Babylon invaded, Judea was soaked in blood, Jerusalem was left desolate except for a few expendable folks whom the empire didn't bother to take into exile, and everything was rendered worthless, worthless.

And this is the only thing that's impressive about the reading from Jeremiah, which (let's be honest) probably didn't impress you. Really, unless you're a real estate attorney or really into contract law, this reading probably didn't even interest you—because the reading itself isn't interesting. The copying and signing and witnessing, the dotting of I's and the crossing of t's and the sealing of that which needed to be sealed and the weighing of coins on scales to measure their true worth: this is all as if to read a stenographer's notes or a stranger's daily journal. I remember my 7th grade students finding the first 100 pages of *The Diary of Anne Frank* pretty boring, a point that I argued against though (let's be honest) they weren't wrong. So, as their teacher, I simply kept reminding them of what was going on all around the journal that otherwise concerned the minutiae in the life of a regular 12-year-old girl. Her lengthy description of her new bike and her intense disapproval of the boy next door really are beside the point.

It's the context of this reading that makes it all interesting.

It's the fact that Jeremiah bought land from prison that makes this interesting—because to be in prison means you have little need of land.

It's the fact that he bought land from his cousin that makes this interesting—his cousin who was apparently desperate to sell, and perhaps because he was destitute amidst this warzone, perhaps in pressing need of funds as civilization came unraveled.

It's the fact that Jeremiah bought *this* land that makes this interesting—a vineyard that likely had nothing left growing in it and little hope of anything growing there for a long time.

It's the fact that Jeremiah did this all legally that makes this interesting—for this is what's implied in the grinding detail herein. Where exactly the witnesses were sitting in relation to the signing of the deed, how exactly the open deed and the sealed deed were to be stored for safer days, and that the seventeen shekels of silver actually weighed what seventeen shekels are to weigh: this all implies that Jeremiah followed the letter of the law.

Yet why should he do that? Because, of course, this would have been a perfect time to get a vineyard at a cut rate. Really, when the law of the land has been suspended by the rules

of war, it's a great time to take advantage. When the society that honors and upholds the law has been subsumed by chaos, it's a great time to make a killing in real estate. And yet Jeremiah didn't. Had he never heard of looting? Did he not know the time-honored tradition of getting while the getting's good?

Finally, it's the fact that Jeremiah did all of this because the right of redemption was his: that's what makes this interesting. The land had no value, and moreover no value to him. The cost of this transaction to Jeremiah far outweighed what it would profit him. And yet he went through with it, and because the right of redemption was his.

I wonder if there is any such right in your life. I wonder if you find yourself in such a place as to be able to redeem some otherwise hopeless situation, some seemingly thoroughly lost cause. I wonder the same thing about me. Every day, actually, I wonder that about me: what wasted time might present itself for me to repurpose, what heartbreaking situation might I come across able to rework, what rising conflict might I stumble into that I can defuse? In just the right place at just the right time, how will any one of us be the rightful one to work redemption?

God is *always* doing it, so why not us too?

To re-deem is to reassess the worth of something. If to deem is to regard or consider something in a specified way (which it is; I looked it up), then to re-deem is to regard over again, to reconsider, that thing in a specified way. It's about worth. It's about significance. It's about the importance or meaning of a thing. To redeem is to look again at a thing whose worth or meaning has long been settled, and to ask, "Are we really so sure?" It's to invest in such a thing so that worth is restored.

You might have noticed, since I've been preaching on it a lot: redemption has become a favorite theological concept of mine. That God is a God of redemption; that God is a God who looks at what lesser gods might simply give up on or abandon to hell or cast into condemnation or let slip into nonbeing; that God would redeem such a thing, would reinvest in it, would save it: this has become a most fundamental truth about the God to whom Jesus testifies.

And this is why. In this age of recognizing the impact of our own human tendency to "throw something away" (as if there is an "away"), when we see what our own disposable thinking has brought to pass and as we discover that, if we're to continue to thrive in our

earthly environment, we're going to have to redeem *everything* we once deemed as "waste," the idea of God as one for whom there is *no such thing* as waste seems truer than a lot of true things said about the Lord—not to mention more urgent and more inspiring.

In God there is no such thing as disposable.

In God there is no such a thing as a lost cause.

All can be redeemed. All can be reinvested in, reformed to have use and worth. All can be fit into the perfected whole—for indeed to lacking any of that "all" would be tantamount to things not being perfected and whole, for indeed salvation means wholeness, means nothing lost, nothing left behind. In God, nothing is lost; nothing is left to waste.

I figured this would be a small congregation today. Gould Farm is hosting its Run for Recovery, and given how integral Gould Farm is to this congregation, I figured we'd be a small gathering this morning. But that's okay because the sermon today's lections from scripture all would produce is a sermon that those who know and love Gould Farm don't need to hear. They already know it by heart. They preach it with their lives. Everyone who participates in life at Gould Farm already knows about redemption, already knows about reinvesting wherein others might feel it safe to conclude, "All hope is lost."

But I actually wouldn't even limit this hopeful conviction to those of this congregation most closely associated with the likes of Gould Farm. I think it's widely held here as true that redemption is real and even something we can live by and live out. I think the words that Paul wrote to his apprentice in apostleship, Timothy, are words that we all might enjoy hearing but would hardly be revelation to us.

That of course there is great gain in godliness combined with contentment; that of course the *love* of money is the root of all sorts of ruin, but the *usefulness* of money insofar as it can be put to good purpose, and even the value of money in the larger project of redemption, are all reasons to hope that what wealth we each have might be put to work for good; that of course if we have food and clothing we're to be content with these, and to otherwise fight the good fight of faith and take hold of the life that truly is life: I think this congregation is, to an unusual degree, already cognizant of the truth of these things.

So what can I tell you? What can I tell you that Paul didn't already tell you, that Timothy didn't from him learn, that Jeremiah didn't demonstrate to Hanamel and thus to us all? What can I tell you, save for the significance of the year 597?

I did a pretty good job of telling you that, right?

So, if this morning is just reminders, that's okay by me. "Truth" in Greek is *aletheia*, which means to stop forgetting. If that's what this morning is about, then thanks be to God.