

The Mission Is for Neighbors

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

4th in a six-week series

October 1, 2017

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Jeremiah 29:1, 4–14 (CEB)

The prophet Jeremiah sent a letter from Jerusalem to the few surviving elders among the exiles, to the priests and the prophets, and to all the people Nebuchadnezzar had taken to Babylon from Jerusalem. . . .

⁴The LORD of heavenly forces, the God of Israel, proclaims to all the exiles I have carried off from Jerusalem to Babylon: ⁵Build houses and settle down; cultivate gardens and eat what they produce. ⁶Get married and have children; then help your sons find wives and your daughters find husbands in order that they too may have children. Increase in number there so that you don't dwindle away. ⁷Promote the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile. Pray to the LORD for it, because your future depends on its welfare.

⁸The LORD of heavenly forces, the God of Israel, proclaims: Don't let the prophets and diviners in your midst mislead you. Don't pay attention to your dreams. ⁹They are prophesying lies to you in my name. I didn't send them, declares the LORD.

¹⁰The LORD proclaims: When Babylon's seventy years are up, I will come and fulfill my gracious promise to bring you back to this place. ¹¹I know the plans I have in mind for you, declares the LORD; they are plans for peace, not disaster, to give you a future filled with hope. ¹²When you call me and come and pray to me, I will listen to you. ¹³When you search for me, yes, search for me with all your heart, you will find me. ¹⁴I will be present for you, declares the LORD, and I will end your captivity. I will gather you from all the nations and places where I have scattered you, and I will bring you home after your long exile, declares the LORD.

John 17:12–21 (CEB)

¹²When I was with them, I watched over them in your name, the name you gave to me, and I kept them safe. None of them were lost, except the one who was destined for destruction, so that scripture would be fulfilled. ¹³Now I'm coming to you and I say these things while I'm in the world so that they can share completely in my joy. ¹⁴I gave your word to them and the world hated them, because they don't belong to this world, just as I don't belong to this world. ¹⁵I'm not asking that you take them out of this world but that you keep them safe from the evil one. ¹⁶They don't belong to this world, just as I don't belong to this world. ¹⁷Make them holy in the truth; your word is truth. ¹⁸As you sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. ¹⁹I made myself holy on their behalf so that they also would be made holy in the truth.

²⁰"I'm not praying only for them but also for those who believe in me because of their word. ²¹I pray they will be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. I pray that they also will be in us, so that the world will believe that you sent me.

In the midst of devastation, we all need neighbors.

So much loss. Such vast devastation. Harvey. Irma. Despair, hopelessness, grief, and more. This is what we probably ought to expect after such storms and there is assuredly much of it. But what I have been so struck by is resilience, bolstered by and embodied in countless scenes of neighbor helping neighbor, communities banding together to make the best of it, showing the true meaning of love, a Christlike love. Here is one story from among the thousands.

When Adrielle Smith is old enough, what a story her parents will share about the day she was born. That happened early Monday in Houston, where historic flooding caused by Harvey left her expectant mother, who had gone into labor, trapped in her apartment and unable to make contact with either 911 or the Coast Guard.

As reported by *People*, Andrea and Greg Smith — both doctors, coincidentally — made preparations for a risky at-home delivery, though they had no medical supplies and no specific specialization in obstetrics. She works in geriatrics. He's a pediatric anesthesiologist. A doctor friend with experience delivering babies was prepared to talk Greg through the procedure via Skype, *People* reported. Several other medical

professionals also live in the couple's apartment community. A request for help went out to the entire complex Sunday, and before long help arrived with equipment and supplies.

As Greg Smith's mother boiled the instruments to sterilize them, a decision was made to move the delivery to a second-floor apartment, away from the floodwaters. Someone in the group sent a message to an acquaintance whose father lives near a fire station. He alerted the firefighters and, unknown to the Smiths, a rescue mission was hatched. As Greg Smith prepared for the delivery, a dump truck came lumbering down the street. He ran outside to hail the people inside. They responded, "We're here for you," Smith told *People*.

What happened next will be remembered as among the devastating storm's most poignant moments — a testament to human will and compassion.

One by one, neighbors clasped hands and formed a chain in the waist-high water, carefully guiding Andrea and Greg to the truck's bed, where they climbed on board and were driven to the hospital. "Moments like these are incredibly precious and remind me of all the good in the world," neighbor Molly Akers, who captured the moment on video, said on Facebook.

For the Smiths, their good fortune seemed like divine intervention. Having twice miscarried, according to *People*, they'd become intently focused on their faith with hopes of getting pregnant again.

Their baby girl, Adrielle, was born at 1:59 a.m. and later assigned to the intensive care unit with unspecified medical issues. Greg Smith told *People* that the child is healthy and that he and his wife are relieved to be in the hospital, where she can receive proper care.

"Everything about this pregnancy we said is God's will," he told the magazine. "That's why her name is Adrielle. It means she belongs to God."¹

But what's next?

Not only is that the question on the mind of our hurricane victims, it was on the mind of the thousands of Jews who had been ripped out of their homes in Jerusalem in 587BC and shipped to exile by the Babylonians. They had traveled a thousand miles from home and were thrust into Babylonian society with no prospect of ever returning. They had seen their majestic city destroyed and the temple erected by Solomon knocked to the ground. God's temple pulled down. How could it be? It could only mean that God had abandoned them . . . or so they thought.

And now what? What should they do? The answers to those questions are sent to them in a letter from the prophet Jeremiah. The Jeremiah passage above is a portion of that letter. The letter is a classic. Take a few minutes and read through the passage above. Even better, grab a Bible and read the full letter in Jeremiah 29.

It may look like there is no hope, but God has plans for them, a future. But for now, they are to build new homes, plant new fields, tend new flocks. Neighbor working alongside neighbor to make a new future in Babylon. There is no time to wallow in their loss, there is work to be done. They are to work and to pray for the good of their new home, Babylon. God has not abandoned them and in seventy years will begin to bring his people back to Jerusalem. In the meantime, they are to be neighbors . . . good neighbors working *together* to live as God's people. There is yet more to their part in God's mission.

Neighbors, working together as one

On the eve of his crucifixion, Jesus met with his disciples for one last meal. He began it by washing their feet and concluded it with his lengthy prayer to the Father (John 17). Of course, Jesus praying is not quite like you and me praying. Jesus is the Divine

¹ As reported by Andrew deGrandpre for *The Washington Post*, August 30, 2017, on-line edition

Revealer in what he does, what he says, and who he is. To put it another way, Jesus is the complete and definitive revelation of God. Thus, Jesus is not only praying to the Father, he is also addressing us with a prophetic word that we need to hear.

There are several themes in Jesus' prayer: the glorification of the Father through Jesus' death and exaltation, Jesus' obedience of the Father, the revelation of God in Jesus, setting the disciples apart from the world, the disciples' protection, and their mission.² First and foremost, though, Jesus' prayer is for unity among the believers. Unity in Christ. Unity in truth. Unity in mission.

Why are we to be united? Or to put it more carefully, why has God set us apart as a single body, grounded in God's truth?

First, Jesus has given us the glory that was given him by the Father (v. 22). "Glory" is often a misunderstood word. It refers to the manifestation of God's being or character through an act that reveals it. Glory is about showing that God is God. Jesus revealed the love and faithfulness of God in his suffering and death. We too are to reveal God's love and faithfulness in what we do. The world is to see who God is through us. That is mission!

Second, we are one *so that* the world can know that the Father sent Jesus and loves the world just as the Father loves Jesus. There could hardly be a more striking evangelistic appeal. We are not formed into God's people for our own sakes, but for the sake of the world. God's purpose is that every person might come to know God and know God's love. Our mission, as believers, is to carry forward that purpose.

Time to go

There can be no sitting on our hands, no comfort with the status quo. Are there people who do not know that God loves them and that Jesus is their Lord? Are there believers who have only begun to taste the riches of God's faithfulness?

Whether it is reaching out to children or to youth, to white or to black, to the rich or to the poor . . . we can never forget why God has blessed us by calling us to him and setting us apart for his work.

None of this is a burden or even an obligation. Rather, revealing the love and faithfulness of God is a privilege, a profound and energizing privilege. This is not only who we are to be, it is who we are. God has formed us into a fellowship, empowered by his Spirit, to do and to be more than we would ever imagine.

We proclaim to the world a God-on-mission, determined to reconcile all the families of the earth to himself. And we, his church, are an essential part of this mission. God has chosen to work through us rather than around us, even in our ordinariness. That's us – ordinary neighbors seeking to build for the kingdom of our extraordinary God.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

The discussion questions for this series are drawn from the curriculum for our Connection Groups, which will be meeting throughout the series. The questions were written by Rev. Allison Jean.

1. Share about a time in your life when you have experienced strong Christian community. What was that like? How did that sense of community help you to grow in your understanding of what it means to live as a Christian?
2. What do you think the difference is between loving a stranger and loving someone very close to you with the love of Christ? When have you struggled to love someone very close to you as Christ calls you to? What do you do in these more difficult times?

²From D.A. Carson's commentary on John in the Pillar New Testament Commentary series, Eerdmans, 1991.

3. Jeremiah challenged these exiles not only to feel comfortable in a new land, but to feel comfortable forming new relationships with people very unlike them. When have you had an experience of "starting over" in your life? What was that like? How did you connect with new people?
4. Jeremiah is challenging his people to believe that God can work in any location, despite its distance from the temple. Where are some places you find it challenging to find God's presence? Why? How do you try to see the ways God is working in those circumstances?
5. What does it mean to you to know that Jesus prayed for you, for St. Andrew, for the church as a whole in this prayer? How does this enhance your understanding of our relationship with Christ?
6. What does the word "unity" mean to you, not in a worldly sense, but in a Christian sense?

Daily Bible Readings

This week: *More on Jeremiah's letter and Jesus' reflections and prayer*

Monday, Jeremiah 29 The full letter to the exiles in Babylon

Tuesday, Jeremiah 30 A "scroll of comfort" for the exiles – Part 1

Wednesday, Jeremiah 31 A "scroll of comfort" for the exiles – Part 2

Thursday, John 14 Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life.

Friday, John 15 Jesus is the true vine.

Saturday, John 17 Jesus prays to the Father.

Scott Engle's Bible Classes

Monday Evening Class

We are studying the book of Exodus.

Meets from 7:00 to 8:15 in Piro Hall

Tuesday Lunchtime Class

We are studying the book of James

Meets from 11:45 to 1:00 in Piro Hall

About the weekday classes:

Join us whenever you can. Each week's lesson stands on its own. This is very "drop-in." Bring something to eat if you like. Bring a study Bible.

On occasion Scott must cancel class, so if you are coming for the first time, you can check www.scottengle.org to make sure the class is meeting.

Scott's 10:50 Sunday Class in Festival Hall

This is a large, lecture-oriented class open to all ages.

Starting this week: *The Old Testament: Sacred and Strange*