

## The Church Community and Our Larger Communities

Genesis 12:1-2 Jeremiah 29:4-7 Matthew 5:13-16

When God called Abraham to leave his homeland and travel to the Promised land, God said:

I will make of you a great nation, and

I will bless you so that you will

be a blessing (Genesis 12:2)

This is who we are as part of the people of God in the world: a people blessed that we might be a blessing to the world. *No church is an island.* The renewal of community then involves our care-giving for the community and communities around us, our city, state, nation and world.

### I

The prophet Jeremiah had prophesied the fall of the nation to Babylon, and so it did. Now he gave those carried away into captivity in Babylon instructions from God on how to live in exile: They would be there far longer than they hoped, so here were God's words:

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 (Jer. 29:6).

There it is, build houses, plant gardens, get married, make babies! Live in the daily goodness of God even when the times are dark. Then God says:

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 (Jer. 29:7).

We're talking about Babylon here! The land of their enemy. So today we are called to work for the welfare of the city and nation in which we have been placed. Sir Thomas More said, "The times are never so bad but that a good man can live in them [or woman]."

In the early days of the church in Egypt a plague hit. The church became the church as it cared for the sick and dying and dead. People would not care for the sick because of their fear of contracting the disease, nor bury their dead. But the church did both, nursing the sick, burying the dead and the church made an

impact and grew because of its witness of love. The earliest hospitals in the Roman empire were begun by the church.

## II

Jesus sounded the same call in the Sermon on the Mount:

You are the salt for the earth. But if the salt loses its taste who can make it salty again? It is good for nothing, and can only be thrown out.... You are light for the world. A city built on a hill-top cannot be hidden. No one lights a lamp and puts it under a tub; they put it on a lamp-stand where it shines for everyone in the house. In the same way your light must shine in people's sights, so that, seeing your good works, they may give praise to your Father in heaven (Matthew 5:13-16, The New Jerusalem Bible).

We are salt for the world, light for the world. Jesus was not only Immanuel, *God-with-us*, he was *God-for-us* and for the world. Our good works are a form of the praise of God and lead people to praise God.

I like the metaphor of the church as salt for the world. Salt gives flavor, preserves, heals. Isak Densen wrote: "The cure for anything is salt water: sweat, tears, or the sea."

Salt also makes its difference with a little bit of it. The church is called to be a moral minority in the world, making a difference though relatively small. I

distrust those who call themselves the “Moral Majority” because they are so eager to impose their version of morality on the world. So, don’t be afraid to be in a minority, to be different, to be what God has called you to be, even if it stands out from the crowd.

At one time in history salt was so valuable a commodity that it was used as a form of currency. So valuable is the church in its saltiness.

And light. We are light for the world, the light of love. Not God’s only light—but God’s true light of love. Here is Wendell Berry’s exquisite short poem:

I know that I have life  
only insofar as I have love.

I have no love  
except it come from Thee.

Help me, please, to carry  
This candle against the wind.<sup>1</sup>

Help us, Christ, carry your candle against the wind.

### III

Barbara Brown Taylor, acclaimed preacher and writer has said that the Church of Jesus is a “poured-out church”. It is here we embody the Christ who poured himself out for us and the world.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer watched the German Christian church fall under the thrall of Hitler. They were taken up in the dark energies of racism and nationalism. But they also valued above all their *security*, and Hitler promised them that. The church can lose its soul as it seeks to save itself.

While in prison awaiting execution under orders by Hitler, Bonhoeffer wrote a series of letters and reflections smuggled out of prison by friends. These are compiled as *Letters And Papers From Prison*. In one letter he wrote:

“The church is only the church when it is there for others.”<sup>2</sup>

Who will we be for? Who will we be for today?

#### IV

When Jesus gave his beatitudes in the Sermon on the Mount, blessed are the poor in spirit, the merciful, the peacemakers, and so on, the word blessed also carried with it a note of congratulations. Blessed are you, happy are you, congratulations to you who are...

Today I want to say to you, Grace, happy are you, blessed are you, congratulations to you because you are a people blessed who want to be a

blessing, a community who prays and works for the welfare of the communities in which you have been placed, because you are salt and light for the world, because you are the poured-out church, a church for others.

We began the day honoring our teachers. They are servants of God in the world on behalf of our children. This past year and a half they have worked heroically for our children during the pandemic and now have a most challenging new year as covid cases are on the rise. We salute you today!

We also give thanks for those who teach our children and youth, today and for fifty years, starting with Janice, Brenda and Sarah. A recent study asked young adults in their 30's why they have come back to church. The number one reason: The non-parent adults in church who led them and befriended them.

And I want to salute all of you for the ways you care for the well-being of people and communities around you, how you work to be good neighbors and good citizens. You began as a church with the mission for those beyond your walls as central to who you were. You are expanding the ways you are salt, light and blessing. You care about the most vulnerable in our world, and you seek to address the causes of the problems people face in our community.

I see you in your professions bending and shaping your professions to better serve others. I see you serving on institutional boards and volunteering for

helping agencies like ICM and Fifth Street. I see you who have avocations outside of work that are about caring for people and making a better world. And I see you who, not working for money, have made a life-work, a profession of caring, as parents, neighbors, care-givers, friends.

I see you living out your Christian calling as described by Parker Palmer, as being “*celebrants, advocates and defenders of life wherever you find it.*”

We went to Congregation Emanuel for a service a few years back. In the order of worship were the words from the Jewish Talmud:

Do not be daunted by the enormity of the world’s grief. Do justice now, love mercy now, walk humbly now. You are not obligated to complete the work, but neither are you free to abandon it.

Such is why we sing at every communion service, “Do justice, love mercy, walk humbly”. It is we who are.

Fanny Lou Hamer, one of the heroes of the Civil Rights Movement, when times got tough in a protest or march would begin singing, then others would follow:

This little light of mine, I’m gonna let it shine,

This little light of mine, I’m gonna let it shine,

This little light of mine, I’m gonna let it shine,

Let it shine, let it shine, let it shine.

Let your light shine, for the praise of God and the healing of our communities.

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1. Wendell Berry, *Leavings* (Berkeley: Counterpoint Press, 2010), p. 33
  2. Dietrick Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers From Prison* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), p. 503.