

“THIS THING CALLED CHURCH”

Jeremiah 29: 1, 4-7

Dean Feldmeyer 10.12.25

In golf, the rule is that you play the ball where it lies.

If it lies in the mud, you have to hit it out of the mud. If it lies in the water, you have to hit it out of the water or you are penalized one stroke.

There are exceptions, of course.

If your ball lands in a hazard that is temporary and manmade – say there is some construction going on that has created mud or a puddle of water – you are allowed to lay the ball out of the trouble but no closer to the hole.

And there are winter rules that take into consideration the bad weather in the winter. If the ball lands in a patch of snow or gets all muddy you're allowed to move it out of the snow and you're allowed to pick up the ball and clean it and drop it again without penalty.

But, for the most part, the rule is that you play the ball where it lies. If you have to ask if you can move the ball the answer is probably going to be “No!”

Take what you have and make the best of it.

There is a similar rule in poker: Play the hand you're dealt.

If you are dealt a hand with no face cards and no pairs, you have to play that hand. If you are dealt a hand that is almost good but for one card, you still have to play that hand.

There are exceptions, of course.

There are versions of poker – draw poker – that let you throw away some cards and get new ones. But you only get to do that once. After that you have to play the hand you're dealt. In Texas Hold'em you get seven cards and you try to make the best five-card hand out of those seven. But seven is all you get. The hand you're dealt has seven cards in it and that's the hand you have to play.

If you say to the other people at the table, “Gosh, I have terrible cards, here. Can I just turn them in and get some new ones?” The answer will be a polite but firm, “No!”

BABYLONIAN HOLD-EM

About 2,700 years ago the Hebrew people did not like the hand they had been dealt.

Their homeland had been invaded and conquered by Babylon under king Nebuchadnezzar. Their beloved Holy City, Jerusalem, had been utterly destroyed, raised to the ground, and their temple ransacked, looted, and burned. Their leaders, teachers, politicians, artists, and businesspeople – scholars say somewhere between six and ten thousand people – had been marched over seven hundred miles north to the city of Babylon.

They were required to live in the city. They could not leave. They were not slaves. They were free to make a living any way they could. In fact, the Babylonians actually believed they were doing these people a favor. Why, they no doubt wondered, would anyone want to live in that little, primitive, backwater, burg of a town – Jerusalem – when you could live in the great city of Babylon? Babylon was a huge, thriving, multi-cultural, luxuriously wealthy metropolis – a city full of opportunity. Free enterprise reigned and laissez faire capitalism was the order of the day. If you couldn't make it there you couldn't make it anywhere. If you were willing to fit in, to go along, to adopt the Chaldean lifestyle, as the Babylonians called it, you could go far.

On the other hand, the Hebrews (they were not yet called Jews) were outsiders. They didn't speak the language, and they had weird customs and a really weird religion. They worshiped only one God whose name they were not even allowed to speak. And they had rules, religious rules, about what foods they could eat. How weird was that, huh?

And they insisted on retaining and preserving their old culture and ethnic identity. They just sat down by the river all day and wept and sang sad songs about the old country. Their god, they said, was going to come and save them. They refused to blend in.

Then one day a letter arrived from Jerusalem.

It was from Jeremiah, son of Hilkiah of Anathoth. Everyone knew who he was. He had cut a pretty wide swath back in the day. His father had been one of the high priests and he was on the fast track to the priesthood, but he said God had called him when he was a teenager to be a prophet instead. He had been the royal tutor and an advisor to the king. He had served as ambassador to Babylon, but he had fallen out of favor at court, said something critical of the king, and had consequently done some time in jail.

When the Holy City, Jerusalem, finally fell he went to Nebuchadnezzar and pleaded for the life of the king which was granted but with a horrible twist that no one saw coming. King Zedekiah was allowed to live but he was forced to watch his family – his wife and children -- all murdered and then was blinded with hot iron rods and thrown into the dungeons below the

city of Babylon. No one was allowed to visit him, and no word had been heard from him since then.

When Jeremiah heard what had happened, he went before Nebuchadnezzar and cursed him and his country to his face and said that God would punish him for his cruelty. The man had guts; you had to give him that.

So, this letter from Jeremiah was taken seriously but, once again, it was full of surprises that no one expected. Here is a paraphrase of what he said:

“God is not tied to any piece of geography. Our God is not a god of the land. He does not live solely in Jerusalem. Our God lives wherever his people live. So, stop waiting for God to come and save you. Stop sitting around down by the river, whining and complaining about how things have turned out. Yes, God will bring his people home in due time but don’t expect it to be soon. More like 70 years. So, get up. Start making lives for yourselves. Get to work. Play the hand you’ve been dealt.”

He gives some specifics, and I’ll get to those in a few minutes. But first I want to talk about the church and the hand we’ve been dealt.

THE HAND WE’VE BEEN DEALT

If God was a golfer and the church was his golf ball, you’d have to conclude that he had a mean slice. Or maybe it’s a hook. I don’t know which it would be, I guess it depends on your perspective, but the ball that is the church seems to land in the rough a lot.

The deep rough.

The church was still in its infancy, not even ten years old, and they were already bickering among themselves about whose job it was to teach Sunday School and whose job it was to serve coffee. Read the book of Acts and you’ll hear the apostles complaining that they are expected to be both the spiritual leaders and the administrators of the early church and they just couldn’t get it all done.

So, they created the role of deacon. The deacons were the administrators. They took care of the physical needs of the church – fixing meals, feeding the hungry, visiting the sick, setting up tables and chairs, making coffee, mowing the grass – and the apostles, later called “elders” were the spiritual leaders. They prayed, taught, preached, studied, wrote, and took care of the church’s mental, psychological, spiritual needs which, for them, were all the same.

By the time Paul decided to stop persecuting Christians and came on board there were Christian churches all over Asia Minor (Turkey) and other parts of the Roman Empire and they seemed to be in constant states of turmoil. Read his letters. Those people couldn't agree on anything.

What role should women play in the leadership of the church? What food is okay to eat? What should you wear to worship? Which leaders should we pay attention to, and which ones should we ignore? And what about the Nicolaitans? What's up with them?

Just a casual stroll through our history shows that we Christians are a contentious bunch.

While the New Testament was still being written there was a big fight about Gnosticism. And just a few years later there were all those heresies (That's what you call a loser in a theological debate.) like Montanism, and Arianism, and Docetism.

In 1054 there was the Great Schism when the Eastern Orthodox churches broke from the Church of Rome. And who can forget Martin Luther and the Protestant Reformation in the 1500's and the English Reformation about the same time. And with that, the gates were opened for all kinds of reforms. Today we call them denominations.

The 20th century church saw the fight between the fundamentalists and the liberals in America and Europe, not to mention the Catholics and Protestants in Ireland. And now, in what we call the post-modern church, the bottom seems to have just about fallen out of the whole thing.

Think of all the hazards we have rolled into in just the past few years. Over in the Roman Catholic church there's the Legionaries of Christ, a secretive order that has been a thorn in the side of the Vatican for some years. People are protesting sexual misconduct by priests, this time in Italy. Attendance at mass has declined more than 30 percent since 1955 putting Catholics on the same footing, attendance wise, as us Protestants.

In most mainline protestant churches attendance hovers right at about 30 percent of our membership. That is to say only about one third of our members are present at worship on any given Sunday. And our leaders often give us nothing to brag about. Bishop Eddie Long, of the Missionary Baptist church, in Atlanta, one of the biggest churches in the country, has been accused of sexual misconduct with young boys in his church. Ted Haggard's name still pops up whenever sexual misconduct and the clergy are mentioned in the same article.

The Southern Baptists last year finally agreed that there may possibly be some occasions of sexual misconduct among their clergy and lay leaders, but they haven't agreed on what to do about it, if anything, because they're afraid that talking about it will hurt the church more than the misconduct itself.

And then we hear that a survey by the Pew Forum shows that American Christians are pretty much illiterate and ignorant when it comes to religion. Fewer than half of American adults who

identified themselves as Christians could name the first four books of the New Testament, could name who preached the Sermon on the Mount, could tell how many disciples Jesus had, or that he was born in Bethlehem. Three out of ten Christian teenagers could not identify why they celebrate Easter.

Asked thirty-two basic questions about religion and the Bible, American Christians routinely scored far worse than atheists and agnostics, even about their own religious faith.

We modern Americans may hold the dubious distinction of being, simultaneously, the most religiously observant and the most religiously ignorant culture in the world.

All that's what we see when we look at the church from afar, taking in the big picture. Unfortunately, the close up often isn't any prettier.

Rare is that church member who hasn't been confronted with the reality of the church without her makeup. We have all suffered the unfortunate fact that Christians are often as capable as anyone else of being rude, petty and even downright mean to each other and even people they don't know. They can be and sometimes are thoughtless and clueless. Just like real people, they sometimes forget about their priorities and focus on things which, in the long run, don't really matter.

Sometimes this golf ball that is the church winds up pretty deep in the rough. Sometimes the church hand we have been dealt just seems to be nothing but warm beer, frozen water and Montana bananas. (Losing poker hands.)

So, what is a Christian person, a person of faith, to do?

CHEAT, FOLD OR PLAY

In both poker and golf, when you draw a bad hand or hit into the deep rough the choices you have are three.

One –

You can quit. You can throw your hand into the pot and lean back and watch someone else play the game. You can throw your golf clubs into the lake and storm off, swearing and cursing the game and your playing of it, leaving the rest of your foursome vexed and embarrassed. Or...

Two --

You can cheat. You can deal a card off the bottom of the deck or pull a card out of your sock. In golf you can bring out the old shoe iron, the five-toe wedge, and kick the ball out to where it's playable. In one case you endanger your reputation. In the other you endanger your life.

Or three –

You can accept the fact that the next few minutes are going to be painful and tough and then play the ball where it lies or play the hand you've been dealt.

In the church the choices are much the same. If we don't like where the church has rolled, we can quit, walk away, storm off and join another church where, eventually, we will discover that those people, too, are sinners in need of love and understanding just like the folks at the last church, the one we just left.

Or we can cheat. We can keep our membership in our current church but just not attend any more. We can send a check once a year and the church will be required to keep us on the roster of members. And then we can just leave it at that. No support. No help. No participation. No love. Just a little check once a year.

Or we can cheat the other way. We can show up and take what we need without giving anything. We can come hungry and leave happy (as they say at IHOP) and pay not a cent, give not a moment of our time, contribute not an ounce of our energy, our love, our help, or our talent.

Or...there is one other option, of course. Jeremiah lays it out for us as he did for the Hebrew people who were exiled in Babylon. It has three parts:

ONE: Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce.

That is, put down roots. Make a commitment. We can't expect to grow and flourish in a community of faith to which we are not fully committed. So, make an investment. Become part of the community. Decide that, come what may, deep rough or busted flush, this church will be our home.

TWO: 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.

In other words, make and build relationships with other people. Make the church your surrogate family. The church will die while we wait for other people to reach out to us. If we want to grow and we want the community of faith to grow we have to reach out to them. Join in. Make friends. Be the faith family you want to have.

My mother used to say, "You want to go to a really great party? Throw one!" And she lived that way. You want to belong to a really great church? Be one.

THREE: 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.

Seek the welfare of the community of faith where we find ourselves and do it in two ways:

First, we work hard. We volunteer. We take the talents God has given to us and invest them in the church. We serve on a committee, we teach, we sing, we repair the building or organize an event. We give generously of our time, talent and money.

Secondly, we pray. We pray daily for the welfare of our community of faith, our church. We pray for our pastor. We pray for our leaders. We pray for the person sitting next to us, the person who is a guest today and the person who will come for the first time next Sunday.

And, finally, we do all this not with an attitude of obligation and resentment but with an attitude of gratitude and thanks.

When anthropologist Margaret Mead asked the pacific islanders, given the unhappy misery and poverty in which they lived, how they could gather week after week to feast and sing and dance and party together. Their answer has become famous: **We do not sing and dance because we are happy. We are happy because we sing and dance.**

Sometimes, you see, we put down roots and we work and pray because we are thankful for the church we are part of, but sometimes we are thankful for the church we are part of because we put down roots, built relationships and worked and prayed on her behalf.

AMEN