

Engage!

Gene McAfee
Faith United Church of Christ
Richmond Heights, Ohio

The Twenty-ninth Sunday in Ordinary Time
Bread for the World Sunday
Rite of Christian Initiation
October 17, 2010

Jeremiah 29:1, 4-7; 2 Timothy 2:8-15; Luke 18:1-8

“But 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.” -- Jeremiah 29:7

You'll often hear Christians, especially evangelical Christians, speak of being “in the world but not of it.” For many years, I thought that phrase was a quote from a verse in the Bible that I'd just never stumbled across, but in fact, when I set about to research it a few years ago, I discovered that it's not, actually, something the Bible says, at least not explicitly.

It's an idea based on several passages in the Bible that speak of that distinction between followers of Jesus and followers of the world. One of those passages would be Paul's advice to the Romans, in the second chapter of his letter, when he says, “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds” (12:2).

Another would be Jesus' prayer for his disciples near the end of his life, as John preserves it for us in the fifteenth chapter of his gospel: “If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you” (15:18).

Christians throughout the ages have always understood themselves to be set apart, different, not the same as the ordinary, run-of-the-mill person in this world. “You are the light of the world,” Jesus called us in the Sermon on the Mount, and he called us salt and leaven. We are supposed to be the little bit that makes all the rest different.

It's an idea that goes all the way back to Abraham, and God's call to Abraham to leave the comforts of his ancestral home, along with his ancestral religion, and go to a new place, start over, and follow a new God with a new way of life: “I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (Gen. 12:1).

And there's one of the fundamental ideas that makes the Bible an essential unity. In the midst of all the diversity of Scripture, the idea that we have been called by God for a purpose in this world, a purpose that's different from the world's purposes, is one of the unifying themes that runs from the beginning to the end of the book. So that's how we understand ourselves: God calls us to be a blessing to the world so that everyone in that world may be blessed.

The question, of course, has always been how to do that. How do you live in the world so that you're contributing to it while not being co-opted by it? That's the question that's bedeviled all of us who claim the faith of Abraham – Jews, Christians, Muslims – as well as folks from other religious traditions. Almost all religions have to strike that tricky balance between being in the world but not of it. If you're no different from the world, then your religion really doesn't amount to much. That's the theme that I keep

hammering you with. We middle-class, suburban, late-capitalist Midwestern Christians always run the danger of accommodating ourselves so comfortably to the world and its demands that there's no real difference between us and our non-Christian neighbors. We dress the same, we talk the same, we have the same sorts of jobs, we live in the same sorts of houses, we spend our time and money and energy on the same sorts of activities and toys. In short, we look and sound and act very much like everyone else, what Jesus and Paul called "the world."

So among many Christians over the centuries, especially Puritans and evangelical Christians like the sort I was raised, there's always been a strong impulse to hold oneself apart from the world. To try to get through the world as unstained as possible. To keep oneself, as the Boy Scout oath puts it, "physically strong, mentally awake, and morally straight." There has always been a great emphasis among Puritanical and evangelical Christians on personal morality.

So in light of all that, today's text from Jeremiah could sound a little unsettling to those of you who share that concern with keeping oneself distinct from the world. Jeremiah says, "But 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."

That's Jeremiah, back in the land of Israel, telling the people who've been carted off into Babylonian exile to pray for the city where they are being held captive. As you can imagine, that sort of advice would be galling to a people who watched their captors march into their country, rape, plunder, and pillage the countryside, destroy the central house of worship for their faith, and burn their holy city of Jerusalem to the ground.

Pray for Babylon and the Babylonians? Pray for those who had treated the Israelites and many other peoples so horribly?

That's exactly what Jeremiah is telling the Israelite captives to do. Pray for your enemies. Pray for those in power. Pray for those who have persecuted you. Pray for those who are running the show, because your welfare is bound up with theirs. It may be galling, but it's very practical advice.

It might or might not be nice if America were, as fundamentalists like to claim, a Christian nation, but it's not and it never has been. The entrenched powers and interests that have run America have always pursued their own interests, and those interests have always been overwhelmingly tied up with something other than the realm of God. The land speculators who bought up huge swaths of this continent may have been regular church-goers – everybody who was anybody in those days did – but the fact of American history is that the values of those who made America America and Christian values have often been at odds.

Otherwise, there would never have been a need for the repeated waves of religious revivals that have swept across this country, beginning already among the Puritans. In 1662, only about 30 years after the Pilgrims waded ashore on Cape Cod, the Rev. Solomon Stoddard in Northampton, Massachusetts, had to put together what came to be known as a "half-way covenant" for the children and grandchildren of the first colonists who could not say that they had had the intense religious conversion that their parents had had, and therefore were not eligible for full membership in the Puritan churches. That second and third generation of colonists showed considerably less interest in their parents' faith and considerably more interest in the material wealth that was beginning to accumulate in the colonies, and this gave rise to the first calls for religious revival in this country.

And those revivals have been occurring ever since. The First Great Awakening in the 1730s and 40s, the Second Great Awakening in the 1800s, the rise of the Social Gospel in the late 19th century, Billy Graham's crusades in the middle of the 20th –

American Christians have always felt that their values and America's values were adrift, and, for the most part, I think we've been right.

But where I differ from, say, the late Jerry Falwell or any number of other evangelists who want to return America to its supposed Christian roots is in my belief that it was never Christianity's job to run a country. Christianity's job is to manifest the realm of God in the midst of the world. The job of those who claim to follow Jesus is to be, as he called us to be, light and leaven and salt, a little bit of which goes a long way.

And instead of interpreting his words to mean that we are to hold our Christian skirts daintily above the world's muck and mire, I and many other Christians over the ages have seen Jesus' teachings and life to reflect Jeremiah's words to those Israelite exiles in Babylon so many centuries before: an active engagement with the world, not on its terms, but on God's, so that the world is changed not by its methods or for its purposes, but by God's methods and for God's purposes.

Today is Bread for the World Sunday, when we remember that God calls us to engagement with the world, including its political structures, to help bring about national and international policies that will alleviate hunger. We're not playing politics because we're not advocating for our party or our candidate for the interests of our constituents. What we're doing, rather, is engaging those who make up the machinery of this country's leadership – anyone who is part of that machinery, liberal or conservative, Republican, Democrat, Independent, Libertarian, or Green – to try to direct just a small fraction of the government resources to alleviate some of the world's suffering, which we are called to do. We are calling on our leaders, of whatever political or religious persuasion, to help us help hungry people here and abroad, by changing the policies that keep hungry people hungry.

And we do so for the same reason that Jeremiah told the exiles to pray for the welfare of their captors, because our welfare, and the welfare of hungry people around the world, is tied up with the welfare of those in power. We engage our leaders not to further our political agenda or theirs, but rather to magnify our own charitable efforts to relieve hunger. Hunger is not a conservative issue or a liberal issue; it is a moral issue, and we are called to address it at every level of our society, including the top.

And hunger is only one of the many ways we are called to engage the world with the gospel of Jesus Christ. Personal conversion is another way, and I have no hesitancy at all in saying that I believe it's better to have Jesus Christ in your life than not to have Jesus Christ in your life, and I don't mean in a superficial, shallow, let-me-share-my-faith-with-you sort of way, but in the way that persuades others of the truth of Christ's way of life. I'm a dyed-in-the-wool, old-fashioned, red-hot evangelical, but I do not believe now and have never believed that you can accomplish with words what you have not been able to accomplish by example. I'll say that to conservatives and I'll say it to liberals. If your way of life of engagement with the world as a Christian isn't persuasive, then your words won't be, either, and that's where I part company with so many of my evangelical brothers and sisters who seem to think that they can talk people to Jesus. You show people the narrow gate that leads to eternal life by the way you live, or you will show them nothing at all.

Engage the world, my friends, not on its terms, but on God's. Engage the world on the terms of the one who said "I was hungry and you gave me food, thirsty and you gave me something to drink. Naked and you clothed me, a stranger and you welcomed me. Sick and imprisoned and you visited me."

He did not say, "And in doing all of that you made a handsome profit or kept your shareholders happy." That's engaging the world on *its* terms. We engage the world on God's terms by giving our lives away. Not by selling them for even a modest profit, but

by giving them away. That's God's way. How do we know? Because that's what the story says: "For God so loved the world that he *gave* his only begotten Son. . . ."

God gave Jesus Christ to the world, to us, as a gift, and all we have to do, if we want that gift, is accept it. On God's terms, for God's sake. Amen.