

## “BUCKING THE TREND”

Jeremiah 32:1-15, 42-44

Sunday, July 24, 2016

Betting on the future is something we all do. Just about everyone of us are betting people. Some people say buy gold, others say buy real estate. Betting on the future is what most of us do when we purchase a home, or put our money in the bank or in some form of retirement savings vehicle. Betting on the future is what most farmers do when they plant seeds in the Spring, betting that they will have a crop come harvest time.

Warren Buffett and others have made a good living by often practicing something called **“Contrarian Investing”**. - a strategy that goes against conventional wisdom and the way the crowds are investing. Contrarian philosophy says, “buck the popular trends and purchase stocks that are out of favour with the market.” If it’s a stock that nobody wants, buy it. Contrarians believe that tens of thousands of investors pursuing the same course at the same time are like a cattle stampede. Contrarians say “do not risk your money by following the crowd.” Buying when nobody wants to buy is actually the best time to buy because the price will be good and eventually things will turn around. I like what Milton Berle, once said: “the problem with the stock market is that every time one guy sells, another one buys, and they both think they’re smart.” The truth is that we all attempt to invest wisely because we all want to own a piece of tomorrow.

As people who profess faith in God, we realize that we are called to a different response - to make an investment that returns eternal rewards....not the kind of investment that’s here today and gone tomorrow.

Today's text is a classic example of investing against popular wisdom. Jeremiah is about to engage in history's worst land deal. No real estate agent of any century would come within a ten-foot pole of the land transaction that Jeremiah is about to become involved in.

It was the 18<sup>th</sup> year of Nebuchadnezzar. The army of Babylon was holding Jerusalem under siege. At the end of the 6<sup>th</sup> Century B.C., Babylon was on the move, conquering a vast swath of what was then their known world. This was more than a time of a few market jitters. Panic and fear was in the air. It was a complete melt-down in the market. The leading economic indicators of the nation were quickly eroding. The social, moral and political indicators were dropping like lead balloons. The value of real estate had bottomed right out. In fact, this tiny piece of land that God had willed to the people of Israel was beginning to look like a barren wasteland. The armies of Babylon had decimated the land like swarms of locust devouring a grain field. Vineyards and orchards were laid bare. Whole communities were turned to rubble....and now the City of Jerusalem was completely surrounded by enemy forces. The times were desperate. Jerusalem had become a place of no hope.

Over the years of his ministry, the Prophet Jeremiah had won no popularity contests going around preaching about destruction. Nobody likes a ‘bad news’ preacher. Because he had said the

obvious thing once too often, Jeremiah was now in prison, held as a traitor. Everything that could go wrong, has gone wrong. The country has no future. The king has no future. And now, it seems Jeremiah has no future.

Then one day Jeremiah's cousin, Hanamel, comes along and makes an offer Jeremiah couldn't refuse....

"Look, Jeremiah....have I got a real deal for you! You can have the family farm. Buy my field at Anathoth, because the right of purchase is yours."

What?! Common sense would dictate that Jeremiah should refuse the offer to purchase the plot of land. After all, he was in chained in the royal prison, facing the death penalty. Even if he weren't in prison, how could he work the land— the field, by the way, is just outside the city wall of Jerusalem, right about where the Babylonians were encamped. Talk about insanity personified!!

It would appear that common sense isn't what motivates Jeremiah, because against all wisdom Jeremiah agrees to buy the plot of land - something that nobody around him understood. All he had was some insider information from God - "houses and fields will again be bought in the land." "So I bought the field at Anathoth from my cousin Hanamel. I paid him seventeen silver shekels. I followed all the proper procedures: In the presence of witnesses I wrote out the bill of sale, sealed it, and weighed out the money on the scales."

What Jeremiah bought made absolutely no sound investment sense at all - kind of like buying a piece of prime real estate anywhere in Syria today at full price, while war and civil violence is raging around you. Jerusalem was about to be sacked....and Jeremiah goes against common sense and buys a piece of property in the middle of a war zone! Where is the hope in such an ill-fated investment?

On the other side of doom, there is hope, says God. Jeremiah simply acted on faith and lived in the hope that God's purposes will be worked out in the course of time.

Jeremiah was a betting man - willing to buck the trend. He was doing more than simply buying a piece of rock, sand and a few old olive trees. The current siege that has wrought fear and despair to the people of Jerusalem will not, in fact, be the end of their existence as the people of God. Jeremiah was staking his claim that God would buy back, and redeem the future of His people.

As I said last week, quoting Gracie Allan: "Never put a period where God has placed a comma." This is simply not the end of the story. Even in this overwhelming time, God is at work where it seems God is nowhere to be found.

Eugene Peterson writes: "The essential reality for Jeremiah was not that the Babylonians were camped on that field in Anathoth but that God was using that piece of ground to fulfill his promises. He bought the field as an investment in God's future project for Israel."

When his world was crumbling around him, Jeremiah was strong enough to believe that there was still a future for God's people in their holy city of Jerusalem. Making the deal with his cousin Hanamel, at the worst of all possible times, was simply a tangible demonstration of his faith that nothing is too hard for God. What Jeremiah did was, literally, to put his money where his mouth was so that people could see that hope was real. His hope was not in vain, because his hope was in God. God had willed the Israelites the Promised Land, and God will allow them to keep it as their homeland, even though they had to be forcefully evicted for a time. When the time is right, God would once again bring a remnant of Jews back to redeem the Promised Land.

“For this is what the Lord of Heaven's Armies, the God of Israel, says: ‘Someday people will again own property here in this land and will buy and sell houses and vineyards and fields.’”

Now, flash forward to another city...the City of Sarajevo, capital of Bosnia-Herzegovina is under siege by the Serbian army from 1992 – 1996 - the longest siege of a city in modern warfare. At the height of the war a story was told about a group of glass workers in Sarajevo. Day after day the shelling of that Olympic city would break windows all over town. But the glass workers, rather than despair, got together and agreed that the one thing they could do to instill hope was to replace the glass day after day. Imagine that, every day knowing that you are going to have to replace the glass you put in the day before. Hoping this might be the day things would hold together. They couldn't stop the war or defeat their enemies, but they could defeat their hopelessness.

Our story of Jeremiah buying the family farm is a powerful symbol of hope.... a symbolic act of investing our lives in a community others are giving up on.

Our society is radically changing...the future is not as predictable as it once was. The church we've come to know and love is changing...even disappearing. Since the 1980's, the church has gone from being the center of community life, to nothing more than a footnote or an afterthought for many. The dwindling few of us are left wondering -- even despairing her future. The fog of uncertainty is thick around us.

Last Sunday when I got home from church, Carol told me about the morning message at Innerkip Presbyterian. The preacher, Brett Andrews, a YFC staff person, referred to a recent book entitled 'Good Faith: Being a Christian when society thinks you're irrelevant and extreme.' When I looked on-line, the writers gave this picture: “Many Christians today feel overwhelmed as they try to live faithfully in a culture that seems increasingly hostile to their beliefs. For many people of faith, it's becoming harder to live their convictions outside of their religious communities. It feels as though forces are pushing religion to the margins. In fact, to millions of people, faith is irrelevant or even bad news. Many Christians, and believers in other faith traditions as well, are feeling overwhelmed, sidelined and misunderstood. The sense for many believers is that society is hostile to faith in general and to Christianity in particular.”

What does the future hold for people of faith today, when growing numbers of people perceive Christians as irrelevant and extreme? What can we do to buck the current trend and be a people of real hope in the midst of a world that more and more believes religion is bad?

Jeremiah was out of step with his world....willing to place his bet on a future he could not see. He risked bucking the trend....preaching hope....even when everyone else had turned to despair.

Like Jeremiah, we are called to be a people who live lives of radical hope....a hope, which is not simply some sentimental feeling, but a hope and an orientation which is a commitment to action. Maybe it's time for today's church - for you and me - to be out of step with the current culture - to be a people of hope in the face of despair....willing to place a bet on the promise of God's future. If we are going to be God's people...if we're going to reflect God's realm in our community and beyond, we've got to let go of our comfort zones and boldly leap toward faith....a faith strong enough to buck the current trends of a secular world. It is God in whose hands our future rests. Like Jeremiah, then, we are the ones called to make the investment to live into hope.

Welcome to God's World. As I've said on previous Sundays, God is not done with us yet. Regardless of the surrounding conditions in the church and in the world, our God is a God of endless possibilities. The hope of God's Kingdom is now. As the Apostle Paul has said, "Don't copy the behaviour and customs of this world, but let God transform you into a new person by changing the way you think. Then you will learn to know God's will for you, which is good, pleasing and perfect." Living under Christ's reign (living out a Jesus-shaped way of life), we can work for the common good by investing our various talents and resources in ways that are relevant to the majority culture around us. The dark and chaotic times in which we live today will not be the final word in God's story. As Jeremiah would say, own your tomorrow. "Buy the farm." Invest your lives in the promise of God's future.....

....where the hungry are fed and there is bread enough for all

....where malnutrition is a plague of yesterday

....where there are no more diseases and generic drugs are made available to all who are in need

....where bombs, guns and threats of terrorism are the evils of the past and God's children live in peace, harmony and safety.

....where the material resources of the have's are shared equally with the have-not's of our world

....where each person is valued for who he or she is rather than what they have

....where the sorrows of today become the laughter of God's new day.

....where people live and act in hope today, for that future day when God's Kingdom will come on earth as it is in Heaven.

According to Jeremiah, God's future is the only future worth investing in today. It will be a future where the oppressed will be set free....the lost will return to love their neighbour....and all will seek justice, love mercy and walk humbly with their God.

My friends, I believe the prophet Jeremiah is saying to each one of us today: "Go ahead....buy the farm....build up the church....build up the kingdom. God owns our tomorrow. The investment you make today will reap eternal rewards.

There's an old Greek proverb which says that a society grows great when old men (women) plant trees in whose shade they know they shall never sit. I believe we can say the same thing about a great church....even a church just like St. Paul's Simcoe.