



Pleasant Hill Presbyterian Church
Connecting faith with everyday life

Sermon Archives

“No More To Do With It”

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Jeremiah 32: 1-3, 6-15

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This sermon is about God’s call and the appropriate response of God’s people when faced with circumstances of absence, neglect, and abandonment.

I begin with an article from the On June 2, 2014, the Presbyterian News Service on June 2, 2014, entitled “Detroit 1954: A Tale of Two Cities.”

The article reads as follows:

“Sixty years ago, the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. – now the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) – held its 166th General Assembly in Detroit.

The U.S. auto industry was booming, and the city had acquired considerable wealth and size. At the same time, however, Detroit was experiencing an “inner-city problem.”

Practically within the shadow of industrial smokestacks are neighborhood houses and inner-city churches trying to rearrange their programs of activities to attract the new groups of factory workers who now live in the homes formerly occupied by church members. Miles away, in suburbs whose growth is hard to equal, is the bulk of Presbyterian congregations, including a few of the most well-to-do in the denomination.”

The article continues:

“In the face of white flight, many city congregations faced the question of whether or not to welcome African Americans into their churches. Leading up to the 1954 General Assembly, the Presbytery of Detroit had reiterated the PCUSA stand in favor of integrated churches and called on congregations in Detroit to minister to all persons in their communities. Not only did the PCUSA support the U.S. Supreme Court’s recent *Brown v. Board of Education* decision ruling school segregation unconstitutional, but the assembly stood behind the committee’s call to sessions,

ministers, and church members to “make it their Christian concern to communicate the claim of Christ to every person within reach of their church, we call upon all Christians to *work* for, not *wait* for, a Church and a society which rise above racial restrictions.”

As a Presbytery, I’m proud of this stance. But due to industrial restructuring, the loss of jobs in the auto industry, the construction of highways, leadership problems, and rapid suburbanization, the once 4th largest city in the country (behind New York, Chicago, and Philadelphia) deteriorated precipitously. Between 1950 and 2013, Detroit’s population declined by more than 60 percent. In 2013, with a woefully inadequate tax base, it became the largest U.S. city ever to file for bankruptcy. Stories of whole city blocks abandoned and neglected made the headlines of news outlets all over the country.

Satirist P. J. O'Rourke said, “Detroit's industrial ruins are picturesque, like a crumbling Rome in an 18th-century etching.”

Motown singing legend Marvin Gaye said, “Detroit turned out to be heaven, but it also turned out to be hell.”

Undoubtedly, some people eons before in the days of Jeremiah were making similar claims about a preeminent city of their day: Jerusalem turned out to be heaven, but it also turned out to be hell!

The city was under siege by a foreign power. Many of the city’s best and brightest were rounded up and deported—forcibly taken from their homes and relocated to Babylon where they didn’t know the customs and culture and where undoubtedly there were communication barriers.

A few others who could fled the chaotic city in the dark of night and leaving behind only a remnant—the poorest, the most vulnerable, the least mobile, and the easiest to throw under bus, to throw out, or throw away.

Do you know what happens when we disinvest in God’s creation? When we withdraw human energy and resources? When we abandon and ignore people?

In 2010, Warner Brothers Studios released a film directed by Rob Reiner entitled “Flipped.” The movie is about two kids, Julie and Bryce, growing up in the 1950s and 60s, who like each other—and not. When they meet in second grade, Julie Baker falls instantly in love with her neighbor, Bryce Loski. Bryce, however, does not reciprocate. He tries hard to keep the unpredictable Julie at bay. Six years later, there’s a shift. Tired of having her feelings hurt, Julie writes Bryce off. After six years of flirtation, she ignores Bryce completely. For days on end, she won’t even make eye contact with him.

The more she ignores him, the more he craves her attention; and most importantly the more he questions his value.

A famous Psychologist William James once invited his readers to consider what it would feel like "If no one turned around when we entered, answered when we spoke or minded what we did, but if every person we met acted as if we cut dead—or non-existent—a rage and despair would well up within us from which even bodily torture would be a relief!" It's in the face of this kind of dehumanizing neglect that God gives Jeremiah what seem to us a perplexing set of instructions. Go buy a field my field!

By this time, the land had no value! You know as well as I do when people buy property, they want it to be nice. They want it to be safe. They buy it because they can envision a return on it.

But this! This was a region was in conflict and under siege!

And God says buy a field. Take these documents—both the sealed and the open deeds—and put them for safekeeping in a pottery jar. For life is going to return to normal. Homes and fields and vineyards are again going to be bought in this country.

At a time when, from a worldly perspective, the land had little value, God said purchase it. Invest of yourself in this property. Hold it. Be a steward of it.

This is what faithfulness looks like. This is what stewardship really looks like. This is what care and nurture look like. When faced with difficult circumstances, rather than have nothing more to do with it, that we'll just wash our hands and walk away.

Our faith teaches us to give generously for God loves a cheerful giver.

Our faith challenges us to seek first the kingdom of God trusting that all else will be given unto us.

Our faith requires that we do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with our God.

Our faith demands we be the kind of stewards who (from the prophet Isaiah 58 chapter):

break the chains of injustice, get rid of exploitation in the workplace, free the oppressed, cancel debts, share your food with the hungry, invite the homeless poor into your homes, put clothes on the shivering, be available to your own families, get rid of unfair practices, quit blaming victims, quit gossiping about other people and give yourselves to the down-and-out.

If you do these things, then and only then shall light break forth like the dawn, and our healing spring up quickly;

Our vindicator shall go before us, the glory of the Lord shall be our rear guard.

Then our light shall rise in the darkness and our gloom be like the noonday, and we

shall take delight in the Lord, who will make us ride upon the heights of the earth; The Lord will guide us continually, and satisfy our needs in parched places, and make our bones strong; and we shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters never fail.

Our ancient ruins shall be rebuilt; we shall raise up the foundations of many generations; we shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in.

A final word about Detroit. Within the last decade, several initiatives were taken by Detroit's citizens and new inhabitants to improve the cityscape by renovating and revitalizing neighborhoods. People of goodwill—some with money and many without serious money—organized themselves finding ways to reinvest in the city's infrastructure and recruiting new inhabitants.

Six years ago, in 2014, I was in Detroit for the Presbyterian Church's meeting of the 212 General Assembly. While there, I walked those blocks...

I was there again just last month. I walked some of the same blocks I walked six years earlier. I was amazed at the turnaround. All because of the decision of those present to invest rather than continue the trend of walking away.

God has blessed human beings with the capacity to bring life. I believe that with God's help, human beings can bring renewed life to any situation! So, in all things, let's be strong in our faith and hope in Christ looking to the heavens while putting our shoulder to the wheel and trusting God in every situation to bring the increase.