

The Offering of Our Gifts:

Because you are a generous and kind church, committed to meeting the needs of our community:

1. More people came through the doors of our church during the week than on a typical Sunday morning.
2. Over 100 people found us to a safe space for recovery through AA and NA,
3. 100 Students joined their voices to create music
4. We hosted our monthly game night for the community,
5. Our FBCWoo small groups continued their opportunities for friendship and conversation, knitting for those in need or gathering over breakfast
6. We provided aid to families experiencing homelessness in our community by purchasing gift cards through Hope for Housing
7. Our Free Little Pantry outside has remained stocked even as it is used by those in the community
8. All of this, and we also shared our space with other important partners in our community, from First Friends to Worcester Interfaith to Park Church.
9. To whom much is given, much is required, and you have cheerfully supported all of these and many more lives and ministries this month.
10. Well done, Church. Let us continue to live into God's bright future with our generosity and service.

11. During this time, the ushers will come forward and you are invited to participate in this sacred practice of giving, of letting go of control and handing it over to God
12. Some of you give cash or write checks, while others give online – which none of us will judge if you log onto the website during the offering—but as the plate is passed in a moment, allow yourself to ponder how you will give a piece of yourself to the work of God this week
- 13.
14. Ushers please come forward.

Embodied Stories: Promise

Jeremiah 1:4-10; Luke 4:14-21

Brent Newberry

February 10, 2019

5th Sunday after Epiphany

When I lived in Texas, the church bought two parsonages, to go along with the two they already owned, so that they would have enough houses for each of the pastoral residents to live.

Because we were the first cohort of residents to live in these newly purchased homes, the church decided they wanted to tag-team-landscape them by rounding up church volunteers to tear up shrubs, lay down sod and mulch and plant new bushes and trees. Each person had a role.

Now my house had a rather oddly placed flower bed on the side of the house where nothing lived except a couple weeds and a single rose plant. I say rose plant because it was small, not like a blossoming bush, just one stem and one branch off of that. It had one single flower, bright pink, that was even more accented by the emptiness around it.

I'd only lived there a few months, but I had grown quite fond of the little plant on my walks home every day. So, when the day came for the churchwide landscaping of our yards, I was expecting this plant would be the foundation around which everything else would be planned, planted, built.

After a groupwide huddle, the team split up, each person to their assignments like they were individually called by God.

You can imagine my horror, then, when a middle-aged man, shovel in hand, heads straight for the all-but-empty flower bed on the side of my house. Like a slow motion horror movie you can't escape, I was unable to lunge in front of his shovel before he had dug up the rose plant in one fell swoop and lobbed it over his shoulder.

His job was done.

Literally.

It was the only thing in the flower bed, he dug it up, chucked it over his shoulder like a kid digging in a sandbox, then off he went to the neighbor's house to play with someone else.

Now I know my star word this year is *drama*, but *this* is the story I thought of when I read our text from Jeremiah. Something about that last verse, "to pluck up and to tear down, to overthrow and to destroy..."

Whoever that man was, and thankfully I don't remember his face, he sure felt called to pluck up, destroy, and throw away my harmless little rose plant on the side of my house.

For Jeremiah, the work of a prophet was much more than just laying down spiritual mulch to freshen up what was already rooted. For Jeremiah, for Jesus in our Gospel reading, for any person called to the

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work of being prophetic, it is about uprooting, plucking up, overthrowing, tearing down whatever stands in the way of true beauty and goodness and fairness and the opportunities for everyone to flourish. This is the work of justice; to set right that which is not right for everyone. Like overeager landscapers, sometimes we must take shovel and axe and pick axe to the status quo. No matter how pretty people think it is.

Of course, that is a scary proposition, an unsettling calling, that even Jeremiah didn't want. In reality, many of the call stories in our sacred Scriptures are ones when individuals resisted the call of God on their lives. At least at first.

So, instead of getting angry about Jeremiah's hesitation, God simply lays down the truth:

"From those moments before you were born, I knew you, formed you, set you apart to be a prophet.

"Ah, but I don't know how to speak, how to preach, I'm just a boy," Jeremiah says.

"Don't say you're too young (or too old), you'll go where and say whatever I tell you to. Do not be afraid."

And then God touches Jeremiah's mouth and says, "Now I have put my words in your mouth...Today, I appoint you to pluck

up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant."¹

The story unfolds from there. Like the others God calls, he goes on, empowered by the Spirit and breath of God.

The promise of God was alive in him, and once he came to believe it, he flourished.

Like my innocent rose plant. I didn't mention what I did after I yelped.

I ran over to the plant and picked it up, flower still attached, and I ran to my friend Jenny and asked if there was any way to save it. Somehow, she knew what to do, and so we took it in the house and stuck in a vase of water. This seemed incorrect, since the only other times I've seen roses is when they've been put in vases to die slow deaths on our kitchen tables. But she assured me this was the necessary course of action.

Over the next few days, she instructed me to plant it in a pot—I didn't trust the wild outdoors anymore—and to keep watering it, give it sunlight, yada yada. All this effort, this hoping, for a little stem and a twig, was probably ridiculous. Jenny seemed to think so.

But without realizing it, I was tending the promise of the life within it.

¹ Jer 1:4-10.

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And sure enough, it lived.

It didn't grow any roses, only new leaves, but I tended the promise of life within it, my entire year in that house.

And that's another reason why this story came to mind with our reading today. Because yes, Jeremiah is called to uproot and destroy that which is harmful to others, but he is also called to build and to plant, to create opportunities for people to flourish.

The same was true of Jesus. He upset the status quo, so much so that he was killed for it. But he was also called to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind and to let the oppressed go free. To proclaim the year of God's favor.

Those were the words we heard read this morning, the words he read in a house of worship, words from another prophet, Isaiah, upon which after reading them he said, "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."²

In many ways the call on Jesus' life was to empower people to fully live into their own callings, to have opportunities to flourish in this one life they have. It wasn't just to uproot, but also to plant and to build up

their faith: that the promise of God was alive in them.

And the good news for us today is the same as it was back then:

The promise of God is alive in you.

God is at work in you.

It doesn't mean you need to become a preacher or be ordained. It means that whatever it is you are called to, God will not leave on your own. God is at work bringing about the potential of the promise of God that is alive within you.

The prolific writer, Frederick Buechner, puts it this way:

"The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet."³

That's your calling. It doesn't have to be in some pulpit.

You are called to the intersection of the essence of who you are as a person, and the great needs of your community.

Figure out where those two meet, and plant yourself there. Maybe you uproot some of the injustice around you first, but you plant yourself there, because that's where the promise of God is rooted within you.

² Luke 4:14-21.

³ Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking*.

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And then you get to work doing God's work.

Maybe it's teaching or making music, photography or other art, maybe it's friendship with your neighbors at Briarwood or maybe it's cooking or knitting or listening to people's stories.

My favorite verse in all the Scriptures is from Philippians 1. Paul writes, "being confident of this very thing, that the one who began a good work in you will carry on completing it until the day of Christ Jesus."⁴

The word for *completing* here comes from the root word *telos*. To complete, to perfect, to fulfill.

It's a different but synonymous word to what Jesus used in our reading today when he said, "Today these words are fulfilled in your hearing."

It's a word that's used elsewhere throughout the Scriptures for this idea of perfecting, completing, fulfilling. There's even one parable about a person who is planting seeds in all kinds of various soils and grounds. And the seeds that are planted in rich soil spring up and grow. And the word for springing up or sprouting

in that story is taken from that same root word *telos* –to fulfill, to complete, to perfect. As the seeds grow, they are becoming complete, fulfilling their potential.

That's how it is with us. The promise of God is alive in you. So, discover the intersection of where you feel most alive and where the greatest need around you is, and plant yourself there.

And then, bloom.

For I am confident of this very thing, that God who has begun a good work in you will continue completing, fulfilling, sprouting and growing it until the day of Christ Jesus.

Of all the things I brought with me when I moved to Worcester, Zooey and this little innocent rose plant were two of the most important. One rode in the backseat and the other on the floorboard of the front seat. When Springtime came a few months later, I gave it a huge new pot, added fertilizer, and watched its leaves blossom even more. And as silly a story as it is about a boy saving a plant and carrying it with him and his dog to Massachusetts, I am not too embarrassed to tell you that I teared up the first day I noticed a little rose bud blooming my first summer here.

⁴ Philippians 1:6.

Almost two years later.

It's never too late, friends.

We're never too young; we're never too old; we're never too damaged or worn or fragile that God won't use us.

The promise of God is alive in each and every one of you.

So, go.
And bloom.

Amen.

Embodied Prayer

We wanted a way for each of you to hold onto this image and the truth that the promise of God is alive in you. So, we have these packets of seeds.

And in just a few moments, you're invited to come forward and receive a packet of seeds that's labeled with a sticker that says "The promise of God is alive in you." And then it will have one of three words: bloom, flourish, or blossom.

These are for you to hold onto, to plant, to remember, that you hold the potential of God within you.

So, friends, step forward.
The promise of God is alive in you.