

Building Bridges to Our City

Jeremiah 29

Prince Edward Island is located off the eastern coast of Canada just north of Nova Scotia. Many of us came to know and love Prince Edward Island through the book (and movie) *Anne of Green Gables*. In 1873 the government of Canada promised the residents of this island that if it would become part of Canada that it would provide a reliable way to get between the mainland and the island. For over a century this meant running ferries to the island. But after a long, contentious debate, a nine-mile, one-billion-dollar bridge was built between the mainland and the island.

As you might expect, some people on the island love it and some people hate it. Tourism is booming on Prince Edward Island – especially around Green Gables where you can find Anne’s name on dolls, t-shirts, potato chips, and a building at the Green Gables Country Club. Because of the bridge, you can now find “big box” stores such as Wal-Mart, Home Depot, and Staples. Some people on the island think this is a great development. But others think that the bridge has caused all sorts of negative unintended consequences and that their quality of life has been forever diminished. (The debate sounds familiar, eh?)

In his book *The Church of Irresistible Influence* Robert Lewis recounts the history of the bridge connecting Prince Edward Island with the mainland of Canada and concludes this:

With the completion of the bridge, only one thing remains certain: the island, for good or for bad, will never be the same. (p. 90)

Lewis goes on to point out that “the church is often an island.” The church is often isolated from the world around it. A lot of church-goers love when the church is an island: it may be monotonous and boring, but it feels safe and comfortable. When the church is an island, you may talk **about** all those other people on the mainland, but you don’t actually talk to or interact with them.

And then somebody rediscovers the mission of the church and concludes that we’re not supposed to be an island. Somebody proposes that we build bridges to our community – bridges that carry two-way traffic. Some people love the idea and others hate it. But one thing is for certain, that if you build bridges to the community around you, the church will never be the same.

Here at Faith, we are rediscovering a sense of our mission here in Manhattan and have concluded that we have been an island for far too long. We believe that we need to build bridges to the community around us – bridges that will take us out into the community and bridges that will bring the community closer to us. Only when we build such bridges will we be in a position to see **many people** come to faith in Christ and begin experiencing God in all of life. If we don’t build bridges we’ll only be talking to ourselves year after year.

Today we are going to discuss a primary way of building bridges to our community: **service**. We build bridges when we serve our community with no strings attached. We have ultimate motives for service (we want to see people come to Christ), but we don’t have ulterior motives in the sense of laying down all sorts of conditions on the people we serve. We serve because Jesus

calls us to be servants and because we have genuine compassion for our community. And doing so builds bridges that have the potential of bearing fruit for the kingdom.

Today we are going to look at Jeremiah 29 and see that there is precedent for bridge-building even in the old covenant. Even when the people were in exile, they weren't supposed to isolate themselves; they were supposed to seek the well-being of the city in which they lived. The people in Jeremiah's day serve as an example to us as we build bridges through serving our community.

Let me set the context. In Jeremiah 28 Hannaniah prophesied (falsely) that the exile to Babylon would be over in two years. As you can imagine, this had the potential of giving great hope to the priests and the people left in Jerusalem. The problem, though, was the Hananniah was not speaking a word of prophecy from the Lord; this was *not* what God was going to do, so it was only false hope. Jeremiah confronted Hannaniah and reiterated that the people would be in exile a long time (70 years). This reality would have implications for the few who were left in Jerusalem *and* for those who'd been taken into exile to Babylon. Today we're going to consider the implications for those in exile – the topic if Jeremiah 29.

“Seek the welfare (shalom) of the city. . .” (Jeremiah 29)

1 Now these are the words of the letter which Jeremiah the prophet sent from Jerusalem to the rest of the elders of the exile, the priests, the prophets and all the people whom Nebuchadnezzar had taken into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon.

Verses 2 and 3 give further historical details about the letter Jeremiah sent to the people in exile (including lots of Jewish names that are hard to pronounce). Beginning in verse 4 we have the content of the letter that Jeremiah sent to those in exile in Babylon. Notice in verse 4 that the Lord says that He is the One who sent them into exile; the exile was God's judgment upon them for their idolatry/rebellion:

4 "Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon,

Beginning in verse 5 Jeremiah tells them to live their lives in Babylon as if they would be there for a long time:

5 'Build houses and live *in them*; and plant gardens and eat their produce. 6 'Take wives and become the fathers of sons and daughters, and take wives for your sons and give your daughters to husbands, that they may bear sons and daughters; and multiply there and do not decrease.

They weren't supposed to put their lives on hold just because they were in exile. They were supposed to settle down and establish themselves by building houses, planting gardens, getting married, and having children. This approach was in stark contrast to how they would have lived if they were going to return from exile in two years (as Hananniah prophesied): they wouldn't have taken this type of long-term approach of establishing a life in Babylon. But Jeremiah tells them to settle in and “multiply there and do not decrease.”

Verse 7 goes further yet. What Jeremiah writes is very counter-intuitive:

7 '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 have welfare.'

Think about how the Jews would have heard Jeremiah's challenge. You can imagine someone in exile saying, "Let me get this straight, Jeremiah . . . you actually want us to 'seek the welfare' of the city that has dragged us off into exile?!? You want us to work for its prosperity? We want to see Babylon collapse because it's such a wicked place. These Babylonians are godless, violent people who want to conquer the entire world!" Can you see how counter-intuitive – even unpatriotic – Jeremiah's challenge is? That's why Jeremiah was so unpopular in Jerusalem. He seemed to be pro-Babylonian.

Understand that Jeremiah wasn't furthering any political agenda. He was merely communicating the mind of God. God had revealed to him that the people would be sent into exile for 70 years and *then* restored to the land. To fight against the Babylonians was to fight against God. Therefore, the sooner the people accepted the discipline of God the better. One aspect of accepting the discipline of God involved "seeking the welfare of the city" where God had sent them into exile.

The term translated "welfare" (or "peace and prosperity" in the NIV) is *shalom*. The term *shalom* has a range of meanings depending upon the context, but the basic meaning is wholeness, completeness, and well-being. In this context, when Jeremiah told the people to "seek the *shalom*" of the city of Babylon, it has this basic meaning of well-being. They were supposed to do things that would enhance the well-being of the city.

Some of the exiles rose to positions of influence and power. Daniel, for example, sought the *shalom* of Babylon as he ruled over a third of the kingdom. He didn't try to sabotage everything the king was doing; rather, Daniel ruled with justice and wisdom (as Joseph had done in Egypt centuries earlier). The city of Babylon was a better place because of Daniel. On another level, "seeking the *shalom* of Babylon" meant obeying the laws, loving one's neighbors, helping the poor, etc. Even though they weren't citizens of Babylon (they were exiled Israelites), they were supposed to act like good citizens.

A key component of "seeking the welfare of the city" is prayer: *pray to the Lord on its behalf*. This is one of those places where the Old Testament surprises us, especially if we've bought into the stereotype that the OT is all wrath and vengeance toward your enemies and that the NT is all love and forgiveness. Here the Jews in exile were supposed to pray for the well-being of the city of Babylon. To pray to the Lord on behalf of Babylon would require them to let go of anger and malice toward their captors. They would have to legitimately want God's best for Babylon. You can't fake it in prayer; we all bring our true selves to prayer – our biases, anxieties, and motives. This command to pray is also a command to have the right heart-attitude toward the city.

Let's notice in verse 7 one more dynamic of seeking and praying for the *shalom* of Babylon: Jeremiah says, "for in its welfare (*shalom*) you will have welfare (*shalom*)." This is very sound, practical wisdom. If the economy and social structures of Babylon fell apart, everybody in the city (including the Jews) would suffer. By contrast, if the city experienced *shalom*, the Jews would experience *shalom*. It was not only *right* that they seek the welfare of the city; it was in

their own best interests that they seek the welfare of the city. Wishing the downfall of the city in which you live is like “cutting off your nose to spite your face.”

In summary, during the 70 years of the exile, the Jews were supposed to pray for and work for the welfare of the city of Babylon. They were supposed to actively seek the well-being of the city in which they lived. This simple observation leads to the question:

Should we not also seek the welfare (shalom) of our city? I would have to answer that question with a resounding “yes!” Of course we too are supposed to “seek the well-being” of Manhattan, Kansas and pray to God on its behalf. Just like the Jews in Babylon, we are supposed to avoid being an island, isolated from our community; rather, we are supposed to actively work for its well-being. In doing so we build bridges.

There are some huge differences between us and the Jews in Babylon, but there are also some significant commonalities. The main difference between the church and the Jews in Babylon is that we are not living “in exile.” The exile was over geographically after 70 years when the Jews went home to Israel. But the people remained in exile spiritually until the coming of Christ. The gospels point out in a number of ways that the exile was finally over when Jesus fulfilled His mission on this earth. He lived a sinless life, died for the sins of the people, and then rose again so that people might finally come back to God. Because of Jesus’ death and resurrection, we now have the type of relationship with God that they could only dream about in the old covenant. And so the exile is over for everybody who knows God through faith in Jesus. In that sense we are *unlike* the Jews in Babylon.

But in another sense we are very much *like* the Jews in Babylon: we are living in a land that is not our home. Peter said that we live in this world like strangers and aliens (1 Peter 2:11). Paul wrote that our citizenship is in heaven from which Jesus will one day return (Philippians 3:20). This world is not our home – just like Babylon was not the Jews’ home. And just as it would have been wrong for the Jews to be indifferent or hostile toward the well-being of Babylon, it would be wrong for us to be indifferent or hostile toward the well-being of our city. Just as Israel was supposed to be the light of the world, Jesus said that we should let our light shine before others so that they might see our good works and glorify our Father in heaven (Matt. 5).

One of the primary ways that we seek the welfare/shalom of our city is through serving. We seek ways to serve our neighbors and our community as a whole. Instead of thinking, “Our citizenship is in heaven, so we don’t care what happens here on earth,” we should think, “God has placed us here for a finite amount of time, and so we should be zealous for good deeds, doing everything we can to show our community the love of Christ.” We seek the well-being of our city through service. And when we serve, we build bridges to our community.

Application: Season of Service 2008. As we did last year, this year we are designating October, November, and December as a “Season of Service.” Sometimes these months can be a time when we only think about “me and mine” – but we’re designating these months as a Season of Service. The challenge is that each of us here at Faith to serve outside the walls of the church at least once during these months.

We are going to provide some service opportunities in which you can participate. We’re in conversation with a couple of elementary schools here in Manhattan about how we might serve

them. There's the possibility of doing some Saturday-morning work days that could really provide significant help to these schools. Habitat for Humanity has a retail outlet (called ReStore) that is open the first Saturday of the month; we plan to staff that store either the first Saturday in November or December (or both). We provide meals for the Manhattan Emergency Shelter on the 20th of each month; that's an option for a few people. We will provide some "Season of Service" opportunities.

As well, we'd like to encourage (or even challenge) you to discern opportunities for service in our community. Some of you are involved in organizations that might need workers this time of year. It would be great if you could organize service opportunities in which others could participate. But independent of an organization you might be aware of someone in the community that could use help in some way. Maybe you want to recruit your Bible study or your Sunday school class to serve with you. We want to give you the green light to dream about how we might seek the well-being of our community. If you have a God-given burden for some segment of our community, perhaps God wants you to include others. If you come up with ideas that could involve others in the church, please let us know and we'll let the need be known.

There is a sign-up sheet on the curved counter in the foyer. If you give us your contact information, we'll let you know about these opportunities as they arise. Then you can decide if you're able to participate.

As well, during this Season of Service let's "pray to the Lord on behalf of [Manhattan]." Lots of people grumble and complain about our city, but how often do we actually pray for its well-being? I have to admit that this is something I rarely do. But during this season let's pray for our community and allow God to draw us closer to His heart for our community.

This Season of Service isn't an end in itself. We do hope to do lots of good during these months; we hope to have a blast serving our city during these months. But more than that, we want to get a glimpse of how we might build bridges to our community in an ongoing basis. We want to understand more of God's vision for this church in relation to our community. As we talked about earlier, being an island is safer and more comfortable at times, but the church is not called to be an island. We are called to build bridges so that we might bless our community with the love of Christ.

Robert Lewis was right: If we build bridges to our community, this church will never be the same. But if God is the architect and engineer of the bridges we build, we will never be the same in some wonderful ways. Please join me in praying for our city and in seeking its well-being.