

We Can Only Do Small Things With Great Love

Jeremiah 32:1-3A, 6-15; Psalm 91:1-6, 14-16; Luke 16:19-31 + Rev. Rob Shearer, ec + AbbeyChurch + September 28, 2025.

Jesus, in your grace, open our hearts to do small things with great love. Amen.

It was the eve of the millennium, 1999. Does anybody here remember the Y2K scare? For those of you who don't, the end of the world was predicted as people figured that aging computers wouldn't be able to properly make the leap from 1999 to 2000 - and that chaos and meltdown would ensue.

On December 31, 1999, I was part of a delegation of Christian activists, who decided to spend that New Year's Eve afternoon blocking access to the offices of the International Monetary Fund in Washington, DC. I mean, if it's gonna go down, you might as well be right at the centre of it all, right?

The IMF were well-known for their loans to the 2/3rds world - creating a system of dependence and of impossible, crushing debt with loan and trade policies which favoured the 'haves' in the world.

Linking arm-to-arm and praying and singing hymns at every entrance of the building, we did actually manage to shut down their offices for a few hours before, predictably, the police moved in and arrested a number of people.

As reflect on that, as well as other symbolic actions that I've been part of over the years, I know that none of these have changed the big picture of things. So why bother, right?

...I can't help but wonder if there isn't a hint of an answer in our readings today.

Our Hebrew Scripture has God instructing one of the great Hebrew prophets, Jeremiah, to go buy a garden from his cousin in Jerusalem; the city that Jeremiah, himself, has just predicted will soon be occupied by invading forces. On the surface, this action feels futile, absurd, ridiculous.

Last week, in a newsletter that our own Michelle sent out to her network, she shared the term VUCA v,u,c,a - (some of you may be familiar) it stands for *volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous*. The term was initially used by the military and now feels like it describes so much of both our social, political and dare I say even our personal and spiritual spheres. This, too, is the kind of moment that Jeremiah was living through.

Jeremiah is imprisoned for his prophetic utterings; that the Babylonians would occupy Jerusalem - considered unpatriotic and treasonous. Free speech is under attack in the era of Make Judah Great Again. And now, the Babylonian armies are encircling the city. And, so, what happens?

Jeremiah receives this word from God: no, not to invoke revolution or build an army - but to go buy that garden for his cousin in the soon-to-be occupied city... Which he does - paying great detail to publicly make the transaction, going so far as to store the paperwork in earthen vessels for posterity. This is what we call public witness.

And it was a symbol of hope that the occupation would not last forever that ‘houses and fields and vineyards would again be bought in the land.’

A few chapters earlier, Jeremiah gave an instruction to the people his people who were living in Babylonian exile. Plant gardens, he tells them. Marry and make home and seek the welfare of the occupied city that you’ve been planted. And here, in today’s story Jeremiah embodies that nonviolent instruction, even from royal prison.

Buy a garden? This is not the act the revolutionaries and politicians might have wanted. In a time of collapse and polycrisis – it’s a simple, small, symbolic and ludicrous action. Perhaps like someone purchasing investment land in Gaza city today.

And, in these times- when the weight of collapse feels so strong, I wonder if we’re not called to the same approach? If so, there’s a couple things I’d like to say about that:

The first is that I don’t believe that we can believe our small acts will actually change the world. *I can’t change the world, but I can change the world in me if I rejoice*, as an old song goes. What if, in doing these actions, the point is that we’re actually changing ourselves and embedding hope in our hearts and the hearts of those all around. Hope instilled by getting our hands in the soil and just being a witness to something possible that God is already doing in spite of the evidence.

You see, I think if we think that we are the ones with the capacity to build the city of God, to usher in a world of justice and peace, then we’re going to be sorely disappointed. And that’s because the forces of evil are strong – both out there, yes, as we can see in the news daily – and, dare I say it, right here in our very hearts. And our tiny acts of resistance like buying a garden behind enemy lines aren’t going to actually topple Babylon or Washington or Moscow nor the IDF. If they did, I’m not convinced that we’ll necessarily be any better than the ones who we are critiquing. We need a bigger solution than our supposed capacity to make things better.

The second thing I wanna say, and it’s related to that, is that what we do flows from the grace of God. Again, if we try to do even small symbolic public actions on our own fuel – and I’ve learned this the hard way - we’ll burn out by the weight of evil all around and our own brokenness. But I’d suggest to you this afternoon, friends, that it’s because we’ve experienced grace and love and mercy of Jesus that we are freed up in joy to engage these tiny, irrational acts of resistance and love; to reflect that love and grace in dangerous times as a tiny seed of hope amidst despair.

I wonder what your Jeremiah’s garden might be. What is that small act of joy, of public witness of resistance for you? And no, I don’t think it has to be some big political action like occupying the IMF. Perhaps, in this season of creation, it could be as simple as putting your hands in the soil to remind us all of the goodness of God, the Creator and Redeemer of the Earth. It could be paying forward for someone in a checkout line. More personally, it could be forgiving a debt or forgiving a debtor be that economic or for something you hold against them. On this Sunday closest to

orange shirt day, it could be a relational act with a survivor of a residential school. Perhaps it's an act of hospitality, of art, of laughter of praise in the face of all that is wrong and evil in the world.

Friends, we live in times that are volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous - to say the least. It's a time when our own Story, the story of Jesus has been coopted by forces of evil who seek power and oppression over compassion. In a time where fascism and autocratic rule is on the rise, where the most vulnerable are at the mocking words and actions of vultures - who come in the name of nation and God - and thus, it's all the more necessary to experience that grace and to live in love and be public witnesses for the nonviolent Way of Jesus - just as He did on the cross.

[pause] In these times, it's good to hear Jesus telling us yet another story through our ancient scriptures. Our gospel reading is a tale of disparity - and the peasant hearers of Jesus' words, living on limited calories would have been furious at the contrast between Lazarus and the rich man.

The first thing that I might want to note about our gospel passage is that this is not meant to be some kind of accurate description of the afterlife or of hell. Almost no early Christian interpreter looked at that way. And look, even if we did read it that way, we'd have to note that damnation is not about right belief or accepting Jesus, but, instead, like it is in the parable of the sheep and goats in Matthew 25, it's about how we treat the most disadvantaged in society.

But I think there's something deeper going on here than even that. The call in our gospel tale is to surrender from the things that hold us back from love.

This is a story of two solitudes - of great disparities. Lazarus, a name derived from the word meaning "God being my help" has a life of squalor; daily hunger, sores which, the story goes on to describe the dogs licking at. The notably unnamed rich man feasts sumptuously and wears the finest suits. Both die and in this metaphorical vision of the afterlife, the rich man receives punishment for his lifetime of living in opulent wealth while ignoring the plight of poor Lazarus.

Of course, we, the listener, are drawn to take the side of Lazarus - as we should be. Even in death the rich man expects to be served, as he was by their disparity in life - bring me some water, warn my siblings about this, he begs. The symbolic figure of Abraham says: look, the warnings are all there in the law and prophets. They were laid out in front of you your whole life so what makes you think they'll believe it now?

The call to open our hearts that is implicit in this folk tale is huge. In the face of so many gaps in the world, how are we to respond? This story could be the contrast between me in my cosy home and full fridge, and someone in Gaza at this very moment. How can the rich go on living in of luxury while there are those who are living in hunger, pain, degradation? It's an important question that Jesus asks.

But even so, I want to remind us not to get caught up in the us versus them – for this isn't about scapegoating our perceived enemies – in fact, I'd suggest that the moral of this tale is quite the opposite.

The untold story of my day in Washington in 1999 was that of a small delegation of people including a radical catholic priest, a queer human rights activist, and a few others who were allowed to go up to speak to the spokesman of the IMF. They learned that the person they were to meet with was also a Catholic priest & it turned out to be a difficult but beautiful engagement between 'enemies'. I don't expect minds were changed, and the injustices of the IMF certainly weren't stopped – but as they talked, maybe even prayed, I believe that something changed in each of them.

How might that moment have changed both the 'oppressor' and the oppressed as they realized they prayed to the same God and ate at the same table? How might Jeremiah's heart have changed as he was surrounded by Babylonian babies whose were made in God's image as much as his own people? How might the rich man's life might have changed if he, in his life, had engaged Lazarus as beloved by God in his lifetime and even invited him to share at his table?

As we ponder that question, I'll leave us with a quote from Miroslav Wolf, who said this:

Forgiveness flounders because I exclude the enemy from the community of humans even as I exclude myself from the community of sinners. But no one can be in the presence of the God of the crucified Messiah for long without ... transposing the enemy from the sphere of the monstrous... into the sphere of shared humanity and herself from the sphere of proud innocence into the sphere of common sinfulness. When one knows [as the cross demonstrates] that the torturer will not eternally triumph over the victim, one is free to rediscover that person's humanity and imitate God's love for [them].

In these VUCA days, how are we Jesus people called to be? How are we called to speak truth in love even as we humanize those at the opposite poles. How do we do that recognizing our own capacity for harm - even in our best intentions?

In all this, what can we do but small things with great love, as Mother Theresa once said. Tiny things as a mustard seed, grain of yeast sign as a mere hope of the inbreaking reign of God. An impossible hope that almighty God comes with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm to redeem all of God's beloved creation.

As we look to that that hope, may the words of that ancient Psalm we chanted earlier rest in our hearts – that as we wait, we dwell in the shelter of the most high, that the wings of God cover us, like those of a mother hen and that the very faithfulness of God is our shield.

And so it is that we abide in joy and deep surrender, safe under the protection of the Creator of the universe, who, in the face of all that is wrong, invites us to reflect from grace and love we've received all as we engage in absurd little things with such great love. *Amen.*