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Ellis White, Pastoral Intern  
Chapel Hill Presbyterian Church

## *in•ter•cede: The City*

Jeremiah 29:4-7

I have some good news! I passed my written exams for ordination, and this Friday at 2:00pm I will be examined at New Hope Church in Kent, WA, by our Presbytery. And here's a date for your calendar: Sunday February 12, 6:00pm, here at Chapel Hill, assuming the Presbytery is happy, I will be ordained as your new Assistant Pastor for Evangelism. In some ways, I'm going back to doing what I first came to do... Five and a half years ago, when my wife, Rachel, and I first came to Gig Harbor we came on Missionary visas. We were literally, Missionaries to Gig Harbor... and the first thing we did was to start a prayer meeting to pray for our city. We knew that this city could only be transformed through prayer.

Since September, we have been talking all about prayer. We've studied the Lord's prayer, we've looked at the prayers of advent and Christmas, but now we're turning our focus outward to pray for others. This winter we're going through a series called in-ter-cede. We're going to be praying over these two months for different groups of people each week. Two weeks ago we were praying for the capital 'C' Church, last week, Pastor Mark entreated us to pray for our nation's leaders, and if you didn't listen to that message, it is a must-download from our website or app. This week we are talking about praying for our city.

We're going to look at a passage from the Old Testament book of Jeremiah. Jeremiah was a prophet who lived in Jerusalem around 600 BC. The world at that time was dominated by the superpower of Babylon, and the people of God who lived in Judah—the area surrounding Jerusalem—were in constant fear of being taken captive by the Babylonian Empire. Eventually it happened, and the king of Babylon took some of the people of Judah into exile in Babylon. However, some people were left behind after that first defeat of Judah. Jeremiah was one of those left behind, and God called him to send a letter to the exiles. The situation would be a bit like if ISIS took over the US today, took some of the people and brought them to Syria. The letter you are about to read was to a people who had been ripped from their country, placed in a culture not their own, and had been humiliated by their enemy. What Jeremiah wrote was likely received as incredulous. So, as I read, imagine you are an exile in the city of your sworn enemies. How would you receive these words?

*“Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat their produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. But 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 find your welfare.”*  
(Jeremiah 29:4–7 ESV)

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Let us pray.

Jeremiah opens his letter to these exiles in Babylon by saying to them something radical: God sent you. He writes: “Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon.” (v. 4) For those who had been exiled, they almost certainly believed that God has given up on them. Judah was God’s nation and God’s nation had been defeated by the Babylonians. Clearly, the gods of the Babylonians were more powerful than the God of Judah. But Jeremiah says, no! God has not given up on you, in fact, he has sent you to Babylon.

Five years ago, I was sent as a missionary to Gig Harbor, but the truth is that every single disciple of Jesus is a missionary. The word missionary means “one who is sent.” And Jesus has sent all of his disciples into this world. Jesus said: “As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you.” (John 20:21) Every follower of Jesus is a missionary: one who is sent. And not only are we missionaries, but we are also exiles. Peter writes his first letter in the New Testament to “the elect exiles.” (1 Peter 1:1). Paul writes that “our citizenship is in heaven.” (Philippians 3:20) As followers of Jesus, our home is with God himself. But we are on this earth, as citizens of heaven, sent by Jesus as his missionaries.

So the words Jeremiah writes to the exiles sent to Babylon, I believe, apply to us. Just as they were sent, we are sent. Just as they were exiled to a land not their own, we, citizens of heaven, have been sent to a world not our own. We are all exiles sent to Gig Harbor. Therefore, what can we learn from Jeremiah’s letter about living as missionaries in Gig Harbor today? I believe we learn three things: (1) Invest in The City; (2) Seek the Welfare of The City; (3) Intercede for The City.

## **Invest in The City**

Jeremiah begins his letter by telling the exiles to invest in the city. He writes: “Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat their produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease.” (vv. 5-6) There were other prophets speaking to the exiles at this time, and they were telling them: you’re only going to be here a short time. Don’t bother building homes or planting gardens; you’ll be gone in no time. Don’t have kids and grandkids and

let them get confused about whether they are from Judah or Babylon. But Jeremiah has been told by God that the exiles are going to be there 70 years and so he tells them: you need to invest in this city. Don't live in tents; build homes. Don't buy food; plant gardens and eat the produce. Don't hold back from getting married and having kids; multiply. Invest long term in the city God has sent you to.

About two and a half years after we arrived in Gig Harbor, my wife and I realized that although we had invested in our church, we had not invested in our city. We had no relationships with people outside of Chapel Hill. So we prayed: God, where should we invest? Who have you called us to invest in outside of our church?

We both felt led to different groups. I felt like God was asking me to join the Y and invest in the community there. So I joined started going to a 5.30am Boot Camp class. I was not a morning person. This was going to be costly... but I made a commitment. I started showing up. I made time in my schedule so that I didn't have to leave right after the class finished. I hung out and drank coffee with them. I invested in those relationships. At the expense of sleep, at the expense of other relationships in the church, and at the expense of my dear wife who no longer had my help three mornings/week.

Rachel, through prayer, felt a sense of burden to invest in young moms in this city. So she just started showing up wherever young moms would go. She went to story time at the Library. She went to the park. She went to preschool park. She got to know others moms. Got their cell phone numbers and invited them over or went to their homes for play dates. She invested in those moms. And it cost her. She was pouring out at a time when she was already stretched thin. She sacrificed having a perfect schedule for our kids. She sacrificed our kids not getting sick from other kids. It cost her but she invested.

Jeremiah tells the exiles to invest in the city where God has sent them. To make long-term commitments to being a part of that community. Where are you, as a missionary sent by Jesus to this city... where are you investing in this city? Which relationships outside of this church are you investing in? Which communities outside of this church are you investing in? Or are you too busy? Or too tired? Or too comfortable? That's how Rachel and I felt three years ago, but we are called to invest in this city. And it will come at a cost; investments always do. But there will be a return on our investment... and we will get to that.

### **Seek the Welfare of The City**

After Jeremiah tells the exiles to invest in the city, he tells them to seek the welfare of the city. He writes: "But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile" (v. 7a) [keep slide up] Now this might seem like a difficult concept to grapple with in Gig Harbor. I mean, is Gig Harbor faring well? Yes, we're a top five small town in America! Well, so was Babylon, where the exiles had been sent to. This was the greatest empire in the world at the time and they were rich beyond any other

nation. Materially they were faring well. So what did Jeremiah mean? Well, that word welfare is actually the Hebrew word shalom. Pastor Mark last week mentioned this word; it means a deep, God-given sense of unity and harmony and well-being. Jeremiah tells the exiles to seek the shalom of the city.

When Rachel and I set out to invest in our respective communities, one of the main questions we asked ourselves was: What is shalom for these people? What is good news for these people? What we discovered is that both young moms and boot campers desperately want deep friendships. Shalom meant authentic relationships. [blank slide]

Last week a member of this church told me a story about a time she was at the Y and watching another gal doing pull ups in the weight room. She was looking at her body and thinking: "Wow, she is ripped. I wish I had that sort of body." Several minutes later they both happened to be walking out of the Y at the same time and this member told me she spoke to this woman and admitted to her that she was incredibly envious of her physique. At this moment the woman pulled out a cigarette and lit up. She said: "Don't be. I work out to try and deal with all of the stress going on in my life. What you see on the outside is absolutely no reflection of the disaster I am on the inside."

Our society is starved of relationships and as a result we continue to struggle alone, we fight alone, we isolate ourselves, we dive deeper and deeper into self-reliance and depression. And I know because I do it too! Church, the people of this city are looking for people they can trust. They are sick of people who are fake and pretend that they have it all together. Shalom for this city is deep, authentic, transparent relationships. Relationships where people admit that they don't have it together and they need help. Relationships where we no longer have to portray a certain image of ourselves. And relationships that aren't interrupted every 30 seconds by you looking at your phone.

Where are you seeking the shalom of this city? Where are you being open and transparent with those outside the church about your struggles, admitting that you need help, that Christians don't have it all together? Where are you listening to and caring for the struggles of others, rather than just rushing off to the next appointment? The people of this city want relationships with real people who admit they don't have it all together, because they need someone who they can trust to tell that they too, don't have it all together.

## **Intercede for The City**

Invest in the city, seek the welfare of the city, and finally, Jeremiah writes, intercede for the city. He writes: "pray to the LORD on its behalf" (v. 7b). The city where the exiles had been sent did not know Yahweh—the one true God. And Jeremiah calls upon the exiles to pray to Yahweh—the Lord—on the behalf of the city. He is saying to them that they can stand in the gap between those who don't

know God, and God himself, and can intercede for them. The people of that city did not know how to cry out to Yahweh, but the exiles did, and Jeremiah is calling them to cry out to God on behalf of those who don't know him. One of the most powerful ways we can seek the shalom of this city is to pray for it. To stand on its behalf before the Creator and Sustainer of the world, and ask for what this city does not know how to ask for.

Over a year ago, Rachel was on a community Facebook page where someone new to the area who had recently had a baby was asking if there were any mom's groups in the area. Rachel invited her to a playdate of her young moms group, totally expecting nothing to happen. But this mom showed up. This is how this mom described what happened, to Rachel:

"I was in a new town, new baby, no family or friends. It was probably safe to say that I was depressed, lonely, exhausted, and overwhelmed. We sat and talked about how I was new. I missed family. I felt overwhelmed and I was unsure how to meet people. You told me a bit about your journey coming to the church, that you had met a lot of people but that you were hoping to make deeper connections. I started to cry and shared with you about my husband being laid off. You asked me if it was alright if you prayed for me. And I said it was. You prayed about my husband's job and our circumstances at that time. That was the first time anyone had asked me if they could pray for me. Let me tell you... meeting you honestly changed my life. I remember driving home the Tuesday I met you and I felt hope." This young mom has been a part of that group and this church ever since.

When we who know God, pray on behalf of those who don't know God, powerful things happen. The spiritual environment changes. God's peace... God's shalom comes, and lives are changed. One of the most powerful things we can do to seek the shalom of others is offer to pray for them. And this week I want to challenge us to pray for this city. To stand on its behalf before God and ask for him to bring his shalom here. We can do that like Rachel did, and I'd love you to all look for opportunities like that this week. Another way to intercede for our city is prayer walking. In your bulletin you'll find instructions on how to prayer walk. It's pretty simple: you walk and pray. Tomorrow/this afternoon we are going to gather downtown outside the post office and walk and pray on behalf of this city. And I want to encourage you to try it again in your own neighborhood. Grab the family and take a walk. Pray as you do so, using the insert in your bulletin to help you.

Church, we are called to (1) Invest in The City; (2) Seek the Welfare of The City; (3) Intercede for The City. Before we close by praying for our city, there's one last thing I want you to see in this passage, and it's a promise. Jeremiah writes about the city: "for in its welfare you will find your welfare." (v. 7c) [keep slide up] In both my life and Rachel's life, the last year has been tremendously difficult. With the passing of my father, the raising of two kids who started the year under 3 years old, and the completion of my seminary degree, we have been incredibly taxed. I've

struggled with depression, Rachel has sought to be my rock and we have struggled to thrive in marriage and the raising of our kids.

But through it all, our respective communities of the Y and the young moms have carried us. As we have sought their welfare, we have found our welfare. The 5.30am Boot Camp class has been my place of refuge, where I have been able to emotionally, physically and spiritually find shalom, through those relationships with believers and unbelievers. And for Rachel, the same has been true of her group of young moms. Church, when we seek the shalom of the city, we find our own shalom. So may you, as missionaries to this city, sent by God: Invest in The City; Seek the Welfare of The City; and, Intercede for The City. For in its welfare you will find your welfare.

Let's pray.