### “The Kingdom Within” Steve Finlan for The First Church, Oct. 9, 2022

**Jeremiah 29:4–7**

4Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: 5Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. 6Take 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. 7But 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.

**Luke 17:11–21**

11On the way to Jerusalem Jesus was going through the region between Samaria and Galilee. 12As he entered a village, ten lepers approached him. Keeping their distance, 13they called out, saying, “Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!” 14When he saw them, he said to them, “Go and show yourselves to the priests.” And as they went, they were made clean. 15Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice. 16He prostrated himself at Jesus’ feet and thanked him. And he was a Samaritan. 17Then Jesus asked, “Were not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they? 18Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?” 19Then he said to him, “Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well.”

20 Once Jesus was asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God was coming, and he answered, “The kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed; 21nor will they say, ‘Look, here it is!’ or ‘There it is!’ For, in fact, the kingdom of God is within you.”

Sometimes I dig deeply into one or two Scriptures and try to find what riches are there. Sometimes I discern that the same fundamental values exist even between two passages that don’t seem to have much in common. That’s the case today. If we look closely and listen for clues we may be able to hear common themes and threads that tie the Jews of ancient Israel to the lepers of Jesus’ time, and to us today. We are going to find that abundant living and responsibility are what tie these passages together.

Let’s look at the Jeremiah passage first. In it, Jeremiah’s God tells him to go ahead and invest in the future. “Build houses and live in them” (29:5). This may have seemed audacious, because many people were thinking there was no future for them, since the Chaldean army had marched from Babylon, and had conquered them. Jeremiah says you *do* have a future, even though this has happened. He is freeing them from shame and despair, strengthening them to lead full lives with hope for the future. Released from the burden of resentment, released from fear and shame, released from worry, their inward freedom will allow them to share their gifts with family and community.

Even when they are sent away into exile, they should “seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf” (29:7). The Jews are to be productive and helpful citizens, even if they have to do so from Babylon, and that is exactly what came to pass.

It became common Jewish practice to be productive citizens even as a minority population in a foreign land. They are to pray for the good of the Gentile population around them. A radical concept! And this is how all Jews continued to live for about nineteen hundred years, before the re-establishment of Israel. Living by faith, without political power, lent itself to a certain civic-mindedness and humility, since it is hard to be domineering if one does not have a homeland or an army.

The basic values in this Jeremiah passage are hope and responsibility. They are to have hope enough to believe in the future, to do things that entail faith in the future. And they are to be responsible dwellers in another people’s land, to be responsibly committed to the welfare of the city where they are sojourning. God has given all of us talents and skills that we can use to share God’s love among us. By being freed from fear and resentment, able to trust God, they can more fully participate in life and bring forward the message of love and hope.

Next, the gospel passage tells the story of a group of lepers whom Jesus healed, only one of whom came back and praised God for the miracle. What is the result of being healed of leprosy? One can rejoin society. One can return to one’s family home and not live in a cave or somewhere segregated from others. So Jesus gives them a chance for abundant living. Jesus draws attention to the facts that only one person returned to give thanks, and that this one was a Samaritan. He sends him on his way, saying “your faith has saved you” or “your faith has made you well” (17:19). I prefer the translation “your faith has saved you.” The healing released the lepers from shame and isolation, giving them a new lease on life. No doubt the other nine lepers were already happily rejoining their families and thinking about what activities they could undertake. The one leper had the graciousness to give thanks for Jesus’ gift.

These recipients of healing ought to be responsible enough to show some gratitude, but only one of the ten did so. And Jesus remarks upon the fact that only the foreigner, the Samaritan, was responsible enough to show gratitude.

The captives of Babylon put aside fear, worry, and anger. Released from these burdens, their inner light was set free, bringing joy to their daily living. The lepers were set free from isolation and shame, and could resume living more normal lives.

The last two gospel verses show Jesus setting everyone free to live in faith-action every day. Where should we look for the kingdom of God? Is it here or there? Is it in our church or our town? Does it have a geographic location? No, says Jesus, the kingdom of God is not far away or in a singular place, but the kingdom is within you.

What *is* the kingdom of God? If we look at all the places Jesus uses the term, it seems to refer either to the will of God or to the way of God, the way of God that prevails among people when they are loyal to God. This would involve abundant living, the ability to thrive with their talents and to share God’s love. So, to say that the kingdom is *within* is to say that we already have the tools we need within us to seek and find the will of God, and to redesign ourselves to conform to God’s way. We have the wherewithal inwardly to make the God-connection. And we have the power to do God’s will.

We have the ability to pray and to seek, and not only to seek but to find. It is not something that needs to be laid upon us; we already have the ability to find God’s will. The children of God also have the ability to discover and discern the spirit, and even to critique their religious experience. We can correct our course if we find that we are going in an egotistical direction, or are failing to be ethically sensitive to others. Course-finding and course-correcting are powers we already have. We are allowed to make mistakes, and to learn ways of being kind to others and to ourselves and to show mercy.

This means we have the ability to make judgment calls, to decide and choose. Each of us has the power of judgment within. In fact, we are forced to make judgment calls all the time. We can use our inner light to guide us when we are unsure of the next step.

Along with all these powers that we have within us comes responsibility. Whenever there is power, there is an accompanying responsibility.

Further, we can experience the joys and certainties of faith. We can experience the joy of a relationship with Jesus, and give thanks for his teaching and his example. We can feel that our spirit is content within us when we step forward with God’s love, or pause and listen for God’s word within us.

And “within” is the right word there. The NRSV translation actually has “the kingdom of God is among you,” but “within” is a more accurate translation of the word used there, *entos*. I think today’s scholars are very anti-individualistic, and the kingdom of God being *within* sounds too individualistic to them. They are more comfortable saying that it is “among you,” that it is in the *community*. But I am sticking with the primary meaning of the word used. Before the kingdom can blossom in a community, surely it must first arise within individuals.

Jesus gives true spiritual freedom to us as individuals today, right now, and the consequence of that is the need for responsibility. These are important parts of Jesus’ teaching. He pictures the importance of the *one* sheep over against the ninety-nine. When talking with the apostles individually, he asks the individual, Peter, “do you love me?” (John 21:16). It is the individual who, by having faith the size of a mustard seed, will witness miraculous things in his or her life (Matt 13:31; 17:20). It is the individual Samaritan to whom Jesus draws attention when the fellow comes back to give thanks and praise.

The individual, of course, will have a desire to share, to show kindness, and to be grateful for the gifts he or she has received. We will not want to horde our spirituality but to bring it into our world.

The kingdom of God is within *you*. It is not controlled by the church, or by the pastor, or by a group of elders or bishops. It is your direct link to God. That information sets you free, but it also asks you to be responsible. It asks you to judge rightly and wisely. Whether you’re the woman at the well or a short man climbing a sycamore tree, or whether you are forced to go into exile to a foreign city, you now have the power and the responsibility of manifesting the kingdom of God in your life and of benefitting others.

You are a living testimony of the power and love that has been poured out upon you. Let spiritual creativity blossom in your personal life, let spiritual freedom flourish, but also seek the welfare of the city where you live. Become aware of this awesome power, this direct line to God. Accept the responsibility of bringing God-love into our world. Be set free with the knowledge that you are loved by God.