“***Build Houses***” by S. Finlan, at The First Church, Oct. 20, 2019

**Jeremiah 29:1, 4–7**

These are the words of the letter that the prophet Jeremiah sent from Jerusalem to the remaining elders among the exiles, and to the priests, the prophets, and all the people, whom Nebuchadnezzar had taken into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon. . . . 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 18:1–8**

Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart. 2He said, “In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people. 3In that city there was a widow who kept coming to him and saying, ‘Grant me justice against my opponent.’ 4For a while he refused; but later he said to himself, ‘Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, 5yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming.’ 6And Lord said . . .7 “Will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them? 8I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them. And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?”

Take wives, build houses, plant gardens—these are things you do when you believe that you and your descendants will live in a certain place for a long time. It is a statement of faith in the continuity of the community—in this case, the continuity of both the Jewish community and of the bigger Gentile community within which they are located.

I think the most important saying is this one: “Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you” (29:7). This is telling the Jews to *care* about the people among whom they will settle, and to *help* the culture within which they will be living. If they settle in Palmyra, they should care about Palmyra and seek the good of the city, even if most of its denizens are pagans. They are to be good citizens and good neighbors in that city. Likewise, we Christians should be good citizens and contributors to the towns and countries where *we* live. We are neither to be isolated from secular society, nor wholly immersed in it to the point of losing our identity. Our primary identity is that we are disciples of Jesus. We only have *secondary* identities as West Bridgewatrians or New England Yankees or even as Americans. My identity as an American is extremely important to me. I pray for the good of the city, that is, my country, and I worry about it right now, but my highest identity is as a child of God and a disciple of Jesus.

Here, the Jews are being told to get involved in the life of the city. *Care* about your neighbors, even if they have a different religion. That is the prophet’s message to the Jews who are living in exile. He is saying “grow where you are planted. Not only that, but care about those around you who are of different nationalities.”

Now I want to look at the gospel parable. Later we will see a parallel to the Jeremiah passage. What is a parable? It is a story that is meant to illustrate *one* main point. It is important to discern the one point, and *not* turn it into an allegory. An allegory is a story where every character symbolizes somebody, and many of the details have symbolic meaning. For instance, if I were to tell a story of the founding of our nation, and I said that there was a lion who was noble and dignified, who taught the other animals to promenade in orderly fashion; and an owl who was wise and scientific, who told the animals to inspect everything closely and carefully; and a very idealistic crane who was always trying to teach the animals to break free and fly, you might guess that the lion stands for George Washington, the promenading symbolizes the unity and cooperation that he taught, the owl stands for Ben Franklin, the careful inspecting stands for the rigorous pursuit of truth, the crane represents Thomas Jefferson, and flying symbolizes gaining political freedom.

That’s how an allegory works. But the parables are not allegories, and it is a mistake to look for a correspondence for every figure in a parable. If you did that, would have to guess that the unjust judge is God, and then you would completely misunderstand Jesus. In fact, the judge is just the opposite of God, in this story. Jesus is saying that if *even* an unjust judge will give in to persistent appeal, *how much more* will the good God give you what you are seeking? God is *contrasted* with this judge, not *equated* to him.

He stresses this point by saying that God is fair and compassionate, and will grant justice to those who cry for it day and night. He has left the parable behind and he is just talking about the good and kindly God. Then he shifts gears and asks a remarkable question: “when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?” (Luke 18:8). The implied answer is yes. He seems to be saying that the Son of Man wants to meet up with—join hands with—our faith. God is reaching down for us, and hoping we are reaching up for God. Those will be the faithful people who will be able to recognize and greet the Son of Man when he returns.

Jesus is affirming the value of this world, just as Jeremiah was affirming the value of the cities and countries where we live. These are not messages about a world that we are temporarily occupying, while awaiting its destruction. On the contrary, we are to seek the good of the city and the country and the world, while also growing in our faith, so that there will be faith on earth when Jesus returns. We are to have children here, and plant gardens here, and care for them. We are to work for a better future. We are to cry out for justice, trusting God, but also, I think, trusting in a framework of legality.

Now I’m going to reuse the fable that I mentioned, recalling first how Washington worked for national unity. The nation had indeed coalesced around him, and he easily could have seized king-like powers. But he determined to retire and he carefully prepared a Farewell Address, in which he warned of the dangers of partisanship and “single-issue political movements” (Ellis, *Founding Brothers*, 129), calling on people to subordinate regional interests to their “common identity as Americans” (156). He also envisioned the abolition of slavery, but didn’t feel he could push that explosive issue at that time. Ben Franklin called for honesty and clear-eyed understanding, and Jefferson called for freedom of religion for all. If we preserve unity, honesty, and freedom, we will do good for the welfare of the community.

Now, when the Son of Man returns, will he find a civilization with honest and faithful people? Will we become good disciples *and* good citizens? Why not? We can grow inward soulwise, grow upward toward God, and grow outward into our earthly citizenship and responsibilities. We can be guided by the advice in the first verse of our gospel lesson: “we ought always to pray and not lose heart” (Luke 18:1).