

Seeds for the Sowing

A sermon by Jackie Clement

Delivered at the Unitarian Universalist Church of Sherborn, MA

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First Reading

Jeremiah 32:1-3, 6-15, adapted

¹The word that came to Jeremiah from the LORD in the tenth year of King Zedekiah of Judah,..

²At that time the army of the king of Babylon was besieging Jerusalem, and the prophet Jeremiah was confined in the court of the guard ... ³where King Zedekiah of Judah had confined him.

⁶Jeremiah said... “my cousin Hanamel came to me in the court of the guard... and said to me, “Buy my field that is at Anathoth in the land of Benjamin, for the right of possession and redemption is yours...” Then I knew that this was the word of the LORD. ⁹And I bought the field... and weighed out the money... seventeen shekels of silver. ¹⁰I signed the deed, sealed it, got witnesses, and weighed the money on scales.

...and in the presence of all the Judeans who were sitting in the court of the guard... I charged Baruch, saying, ¹⁴Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: Take these deeds... and put them in an earthenware jar, in order that they may last for a long time. ¹⁵For thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: Houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land.

Second Reading

My grandmother was a remarkable woman. There are many stories about her worth repeating, but the one that springs to mind is the Christmas Cake story.

My mother, grandmother and I spent the war years running and hiding. Because we were Jewish, every day could have been our last. My grandmother was the inspiration behind the survival schemes. I am sure that she truly believed that we were going to survive. She had little evidence for it, because when it was all said and done, sixty-one members of our immediate family did perish, but she had faith and it served her well.

We did survive and shortly after Germany's capitulation we came back to Krakow, our hometown, to face the present which was not all that rosy. While we no longer faced the possibility of being hauled off and killed, we had lost pretty much all of our material possessions and there was a general lack of shelter and food. The country was devastated.

We were lucky we had relatives in the West. My uncle wrote to my grandmother and asked what he could send her in way of food. His wife, a very proper German lady, expected a list of staples so she was astonished to receive a request for raisins and almonds.

My grandmother wanted to bake a Christmas Cake. She understood the importance of symbolism to manifest the faith she had in the future. It was a splendid Christmas Cake. At this time of the year I think of that Christmas Cake. I think of emerging from the orphanage and going home to have Christmas Cake.

Sermon

The year I entered theological school I came across an Edward Koren cartoon thumb tacked to the door of a minister's study. Two people sit sipping elaborate, umbrella'ed drinks on the patio of a bustling tropical seaside café. The smiling woman turns to her rather downcast companion, a man clearly contemplating the emptiness of his beach bum existence. "Why," she says to him, "would you ever want to exchange a wonderful lifestyle for a more rewarding life?" Why, indeed?

I bet if we went around the room, and each said why we were here, at this church, in this moment, we would not duplicate answers. As a math teacher friend of mine says, "Ask N Unitarians what they think, and you'll get N+1 answers." But I would posit that there is actually one common reason why we are all here, and it is the reason why Jeremiah bought land in a war zone and why Marisha's grandmother asked for raisins – and that is because the future matters. It is, simply put, hope. It is the long look to a rewarding life, not a life of rewards.

The stories told in the two readings we heard a few minutes ago might point to what I mean when I say we are here because the future matters. The first was of the prophet Jeremiah. At the time of the story things were not looking good for Brother Jeremiah. Not only was his country being overrun by the Babylonians, but Jeremiah had so annoyed everyone by predicting that the Babylonians would win that he was placed under house arrest by his own king. Then the Lord spoke to Jeremiah, and told him that his cousin Hanamel would come, that Jeremiah should buy his family's land from Hanamel even though it was in territory occupied by the Babylonians. And so it came to pass, and Jeremiah bought the land saying...

¹⁴...Take these deeds,... and put them in an earthenware jar, in order that they may last for a long time. ¹⁵For thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: Houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land.

—*Jeremiah 32:14-15, adapted*

He paints I those two sentences a picture of a hopeful future.

The second story is more modern. It is in the form of a letter I received from my friend Marisha who was born in Poland in 1937 to a Jewish family. In the letter Marisha writes of returning to Krakow at the end of World War II. Sixty-one members of her immediate family gone, only Marisha, her mother and her grandmother survived. All their possessions were gone, there was a general lack of shelter and food. The country was devastated. She writes:

My grandmother wanted to bake a Christmas Cake... It was a splendid Christmas Cake. At this time of the year I think of that Christmas Cake. I think of emerging from the orphanage and going home to have Christmas Cake.

This is my friend's story. These are our stories. And so I would posit that this is the one common reason why we are all here, and it is the reason why Jeremiah bought land in a war zone and why Marisha's grandmother asked for raisins – and that is because the future matters. It is, simply put, hope. It is the long look to a rewarding life, not a life of rewards.

Jeremiah was not interested in land futures. His community was not only being attacked, and overrun, by the Babylonians, but he had so annoyed everyone predicting that the Babylonians would win, that he was under house arrest by his own people. Things were not looking good for Brother Jeremiah. And so he redeemed his family's land. In a war zone. An act of hope, an almost defiant act of belief that the future matters.

Marisha's grandmother did not have a sweet tooth. Her community had not only been attacked, but overrun. She was a woman who made tough decisions, splitting up her family so that the remaining members would survive. She did not need something as inconsequential as cake. She wanted to give something as substantial as hope.

Jeremiah and Marisha's grandmother and Mahatma Ghandi and Rosa Parks and all the prophets of all the ages had an abiding faith in the future that was represented through their acts. When the people around them were filled with fear and despair, they chose to demonstrate hope. Perhaps I could subtitle this sermon "When smart people do inexplicable things," because hope often looks inexplicable.

Aaron Feuerstein is a man who does inexplicable things. Aaron Feuerstein was the third-generation owner and CEO of Malden Mills, a family owned textile factory that manufactures Polartec fabric. If you were around New England 1995 you may remember the horrific fire that destroyed the Malden Mills complex in Lawrence just two weeks before Christmas. The devastation of the fire was unbelievable. I remember watching the TV coverage as helicopters circled the burning buildings. And I remember the devastation on the faces of workers, three thousand of them left without jobs. Then Aaron Feuerstein did the inexplicable. He kept his workers at full pay for a month, then two months, then three months. He sent them Christmas baskets and he went on TV and radio with messages of hope. He bucked the cultural wisdom that says that responsible businessmen (and here I quote Fortune Magazine) "never pay any employee a dime more than they have to, and that no factory owner could possibly have done what Feuerstein has done unless he'd been touched by God or is just touched, period."

Now, how is it that acting in the best interest of people and the community rather than in the interest of the bottom line has come to have only 2 options – saint or fool? It may in fact have been good solid business sense to not abandon a trained and loyal workforce. But good solid business sense or touched by God, what Aaron Feuerstein had was vision. He believed in his company, he believed in the people who worked for that company and he believed in their shared future. And through his belief and his actions, Aaron Feuerstein made that future real. Is it any wonder that Aaron Feuerstein goes around quoting the Old Testament prophets at business meetings? Aaron Feuerstein is neither saint, nor fool, but prophet.

You may have heard the old saw that a minister's role is to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable. I always thought the comforting part was about being a pastor and the afflicting part about being a prophet. But they're both really in the prophet's role, aren't they? One way to comfort the afflicted is to bring them hope of a future. We may never be in a position to grant people's futures, but we are in a position, each and every one of us, to be prophets of hope.

Now it's all very well to say be a prophet of hope when you are feeling hopeful, but what about those times when hope seems just a bit elusive? Then what do you do? If I had the answer I would be a rich woman. But I think I have a few glimmers. One is spiritual practice, whatever form that takes for you. Another is self-care, whatever that means for you. And a further component, I think, is symbolic acts of faith and of hope. Symbolic acts work on ourselves as potently as they work on others. If Jeremiah has a message for us today, it is a challenge to find our own personal and collective symbolic acts that will bring comfort and hope to our own souls and to the communities of which we are a part.

Because having hope is good, but ultimately it is not enough unless you turn it into acts of hope. Or as Katherine Paterson said, "Hope... is not a feeling; it is something you do." In our acts of hope we say that the status quo is not good enough, we affirm that while some are hurting, homeless, hungry and oppressed our voices and hands will not be stilled. In our acts of hope we work toward a new vision and a better future.

But it is sometimes difficult to see our symbolic acts as making a difference in the world, or even to see the impact of those actions that go far beyond symbolism. In the nineteenth century there was a Universalist clergyman by the name of Adin Ballou who had a notion that people living what he called a Standard of Practical Christianity could create a truly beloved community. And so he founded the Hopedale community. The community lasted 14 years, longer than most of the utopian communities of its day, but in his history of the community Ballou called it a failure. That was his view, because the vision he had was not fulfilled in the way he had dreamed. But Adin Ballou's Practical Christianity and his views on Christian non-resistance influenced a Russian Count named Leo Tolstoy who wrote a book called *The Kingdom of God Is within You* and Tolstoy influenced a man named Mohandas Gandhi who marched to the sea to collect salt in protest of the British salt tax and Gandhi influenced a woman named Rosa Parks who sat down on a bus. Do you think Ballou's work was a failure?

Yes, it is impossible to see the results of our actions, symbolic and real, some 100 years in the future, but we act because we have faith, or because we know that acts do have consequences or because there is no other choice. But we act. That, I believe, is why we are here; to gather our symbols of hope and to act toward a vision of the future. In this we are united not only as a religious community, but with all nature. As we stand here in spring, we are witness to the fact that every year here comes nature again just like the world is going to go on and on. Just as if billions of people were not doing their darndest to stop it. But every now and then you find a human prophet in league with nature.

When I was a kid, we had a picture book of folk legends and tall tales. You know, Paul Bunyun and such. There was one character in the book that you knew must have been a prophet because he was portrayed as a friend to all living things and just a little bit loopy. With tin pot on his head

and dressed in a potato sack, Johnny Appleseed wandered the country barefoot sprinkling apple seeds everywhere he went. Well, Johnny Appleseed was real person, and although it is difficult to sort the facts of the man from the legend, I think it is more indicative of the power of his ministry than of actual fact that he wore a pot on his head. The truth would seem to lie more in the direction that John Chapman was a dedicated nurseryman and naturalist. He planted apple orchards throughout the mid-west not only as an ecological ministry, but to provide the difficult to get seedling trees to settlers. In order to claim land grants, settlers were required to plant 50 apple trees within the first year, but seeds and seedlings were hard to come by. John Chapman made his living supplying these. Now by all accounts, he was willing to trade for food or clothing and often forgave the debts of the frontiersmen who could not pay, but like Aaron Feuerstein, John Chapman knew how to balance good business with a humanitarian turn. Chapman died far from broke, owning large tracts of land. But Chapman also lived a simple life, owning few possessions, sleeping in a tent or on a bed of leaves. He befriended not only settlers but the Native American tribes. He was a deeply religious man who brought his word of hope not only through trees and medicinal herbs, but through the Christianity of Lutheran Reformer Emanuel Swedenborg. I wonder if Chapman ever heard Martin Luther's remark on the eschaton, the end times. When asked what he would do if he knew that the world was coming to an end, Luther replied, "I would go out and plant a tree." Blessed be, I would go out and plant a tree.

Namaste.

Por lo tanto puede ser.

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