

Where We Are – Jeremiah 29:1, 4-7

Rev. Matt Nieman

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Recovery. When you hear the word, you might think of a number of things. These days, the first thing you might think of is the recovery efforts that are and will for a long time be taking place in Florida following the hurricane. It will be a long recovery.

Another kind of recovery, though, is more constant. It is the kind that takes place in rehab centers, hospitals, community centers, and church social halls every week. It's drug and alcohol recovery.

I've never been to an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting to observe what happens at them, but I've heard others speak to their power.

People who go to an AA meeting have recognized an issue in their lives that needed addressing. At some point, alcohol became so destructive that they made the difficult decision to eliminate it from their lives. And, in most cases, that change in behavior has meant that they now must lead different lives than the ones they had been living while they were still drinking.

Their lifestyle has changed maybe, the ways they socialize have changed, perhaps they've even had to leave old friends behind and make new ones to accommodate their commitment to sobriety.

No doubt, there are times when those in recovery miss the lives they have left behind. It takes a long time in some cases to carve out an identity that is free of alcohol and the life that comes with consuming it.

It is not far-fetched to say that recovering alcoholics feel as though they are in exile. They have left a land—in some cases unwillingly—that they knew and loved and are now living in a different place, one that is ultimately better for them but yet seems strange and unfamiliar. It is in this new place that they are challenged to recover—to live and thrive.

And in this new place, they have sought out the assistance of others. Someone has told them or they have decided for themselves that this new land in which they are living will be much easier to settle into if they rely on others who are also in this land. For it is through the support and encouragement of other exiles that they will find the strength to succeed. And that support community is AA.

Those in recovery know they can't cope in their new life without the support of others. Hence, these weekly meetings that take place in so many different locations across the country and even the world.

I've thought about AA this week as I unpacked this passage from Jeremiah 29. It is a message from the Lord to those Israelites who had been cast into exile in Babylon. They had been forced to move their families to an unfamiliar land far away from home largely due to their unfaithfulness. And for the foreseeable future, they would have to come to grips with the reality that what was familiar to them would no longer be home. They now were living in a strange and unfamiliar land.

God, however, has some instructions for the exiles. And those instructions boil down to this: live your lives where you are. "Build houses and live in them," God says. "Plant gardens and eat what they produce. Take spouses and produce children. Do not decrease."

God commands them to be God's people—where they are. In the midst of their exile, in the aftermath of having left home, and knowing they won't soon return home, God tells them to make a prosperous life for themselves.

You don't have to be going through drug or alcohol rehab in order to be in exile. Nor do you have to be, literally, in a foreign land to call yourself an exile.

In essence, each of us is in exile when we've been either extracted from a way of living that is familiar and safe or willingly gone to a state of being that is foreign to us.

Maybe it's a case of a broken relationship. Maybe it's a case of failed health. Maybe it's a forced retirement from work. Maybe it's been the slow and steady decline of the church.

Christians and the church today in North America find themselves in exile. Compared to the roaring 1950s and 60s, we are a population that no longer seems to reside in the land we once did. While we were once the mainline of the culture, we now find ourselves just one of many options for people's attention and spirituality. We no longer have the built-in benefits of being the prominent force in the culture.

A half-century ago, the doors of the church only had to be opened and the people would come in masses, not only on Sundays but mid-week as well. Now, it's no longer the case. We fight for people's time and allegiance as much as every group does today.

Throughout the church in North America, there is a growing sense of despair today. Our exiled state is causing us to live with an anxiety and nervousness that we haven't experienced in this generation. And that sense of despair is paralyzing us and keeping us from blooming where we are currently planted.

I've heard this before in slightly different terms, but it used to be that a certain night of the week was designated as church night for local schools. That meant no schools activities were on the calendar on Wednesdays.

Now, we can debate whether having a designated church night was ever a good idea. But the fact remains: Based upon where we used to reside, we now live in exile.

God says to us what he said to the Babylonian exiles: Seek the welfare of the city where I've sent you, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.

The exiles were to turn to one another in support to get them through this period of exile. They were to rely on each other and make life better for everyone in their community, for if they did they would find their own welfare increased.

The good news is that God calls us to be the church where we are today. As exiles in what seems like a foreign land, God hasn't forgotten us. God calls us to plant ourselves where we are and prosper. We should live—we should build our houses and raise our families in the midst of what seems like a very strange place.

God also calls us to do this as individual disciples. Whatever position of exile we are in, we are to be faithful disciples wherever that place is.

And, much like God called the Israelites to seek the common welfare of the community where they now resided, so is God calling us to take care of one another—both those inside our family and outside. For if we do this, we will find our own welfare.

Jeremiah reminds us that God is always present. We are in a strange and foreign land but God is not absent. And God calls us to manage the welfare of our city in this dramatically different state. Through God's son Jesus Christ, we are enormously blessed. And we will find greater blessing when we tend to those around us.

By being about the business of tending to one another, we will find our own spirits strengthened. Much like a participant in AA who finds comfort and support from others in the room, we will find our nurturing of others to have a nurturing effect on us. There is strength in numbers, they say. It's true for AA and it is certainly true for a church in exile today.

Eugene Peterson has said, "No life of faith can be lived privately. There must be overflow into the lives of others."

We are where we are. Our building here is in the same place it was decades ago when the church was founded. Yet, within our society, we can all agree our place has moved. Still, in committing to living together—with those in our church family and with those outside it—we can still live prosperously and can make a difference in the common welfare.

A few years ago at the Seattle Special Olympics, nine contestants, all physically or mentally challenged, assembled at the starting line for the 100-yard dash. At the gun they all started out, not

exactly in a dash, but with a relish to run the race to the finish and win.

All, that is, except one boy who stumbled on the asphalt, tumbled over a couple of times and began to cry. The other eight heard the boy cry. They slowed down and paused. Then they all turned around and went back. Every one of them. One girl with Down's syndrome bent down and kissed him and said, "This will make it better." Then all nine linked arms and walked together to the finish line.

They still talk about that story today. Why? Because deep down we know this one thing: What matters in this life is more than winning for yourself. What truly matters in this life is helping others win, even if it means slowing yourself down and changing your course.

The church's course has been changed. And maybe our individual courses have been changed too. But we can still help others win. And whether we are in exile or not, when others win, we win too.

The church is in a different place, and maybe we are in different places individually than we had imagined. But God is still with us, and we'll be okay.