

sermon-9/30/07 Newport Pres. Church  
“Put Your Money Where Your Hope Is”  
Jer. 32:1-3a,6-15

In order to appreciate what Jeremiah is writing about, we need to know just a bit about the situation. Jerusalem is surrounded by Babylon. They are laying siege to the city. That sounds like a grim situation, but we, who live in modern times, can hardly comprehend just how grim. Jerusalem was basically being starved. Once their food and water ran out, they would be in a world of hurt. Cities in this situation were known to resort to cannibalism! It was horrible.

Jeremiah was in jail. He was seen as a traitor because he told his king, Zedekiah, not to rely on Egypt to help fight Babylon. Zedekiah was better off just surrendering to Nebuchadnezzar, says Jeremiah. Kings in power do not like to hear advice like that. Jeremiah was beaten and jailed.

Into this situation comes Jeremiah’s cousin Hanamel. He owned land in the family town of Anathoth. He couldn’t work the land because it was occupied by the Babylonian army. Consequently he was going broke. So, he offered it to Jeremiah. According to Leviticus, that was the proper thing to do. One never sold land to someone outside the family. Someone in the family always had the right of first refusal. That is what Hanamel meant by “the right of possession and redemption is yours” when he came to Jeremiah.

Hanamel was doing Jeremiah no favors. This was not a smart purchase. Babylon was going to defeat Judah. That land was going to be taken over by their enemies. The modern day saying, “Location, location, location” applies here. This land was in the wrong location. Only an idiot would buy the field at Anathoth. It would be like a paraplegic going out and buying an expensive pair of running shoes.

Jeremiah says, “I’ll take it.” What follows is the most detailed account of a business transaction in the whole Bible. It is fascinating to read all the details about the two copies, one sealed and one open, the weighing of the coins, and the need for witnesses. In fact, Jeremiah makes a point of saying there were lots of witnesses to this crazy transaction. He wants this bold act to be known far and wide.

Why? The answer is hope. Let me read the last verse of our text again. “For thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: Houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land.”

Jeremiah knows things are grim. He has been the biggest pessimist in the land up until this moment. That makes this act of hope all the more powerful. Things look grim, but, says Jeremiah, the final word will be God’s. That word will be a word of hope. We, or our ancestors, will live in this land again. I want them to have a vineyard when they do, so I am doing this crazy, hopeful transaction.

Jeremiah was putting his money where his hope was. He was backing up his words of hope by risking quite a bit of his precious wealth in a very public way. He was saying I trust God, and I'll prove it. I'll prove it with my pocketbook. Pretty convincing.

Like it or not, the Bible says we are called to do the same. What would that look like today? We all know the more famous examples of some rich men like Bill Gates and Warren Buffett using their wealth to do good for many, many people. Their acts of generosity are making a huge difference in our world bringing hope to seemingly hopeless situations. I applaud them.

We need stories like theirs to inspire us and to help us see that acts of hope in desperate situations are honored by God. We hear enough bad news these days. If that is all we hear, we are tempted to just give up and do nothing. It's hopeless.

Our scripture passage and some stories I am about to tell you are a counterbalance to this hopelessness. I asked the lectionary class what we might do today to spread hope. In response I received two emails with examples of lesser known men whose acts of hope, putting their money where their hope is, are changing the world.

The first is Muhammad Yunis. He is a 66 year old Bangladeshi economist who founded Grameen bank. Yunis actually believes we can create a poverty-free world. It sounds crazy, but he, too, is putting his money, and the money of his bank, where his hope is. Grameen bank gives loans to small businesses, mostly run by women, as well as housing loans. For this work Yunis was granted the 2006 Nobel Peace Prize.

Since 1977 his bank has loaned \$5.72 billion to 6.61 million borrowers, mainly impoverished women. These are collateral free loans that most banks won't touch. He has seen a repayment rate from these loans of 99%. Small businesses are not the only recipients of loans. The bank has given out 640,000 housing loans since 1984. 58% of those borrowers have crossed the poverty line since they built their home.

In 2004 Yunis started to give interest free loans to beggars. They have 85,000 beggars in the program. Already 5,000 of them have stopped begging completely. The typical loan to a beggar is \$12!

Yunis points out that 94% of the wealth in the world goes to 40% of the world's population and the remaining 6% goes to 60% of the world. Such a situation is a recipe for violence and even terrorism. Yunis believes he can make a difference and he is backing that up with courageous action, putting his money where his hope is. He is a modern day Jeremiah in my mind.

Then there is Greg Mortenson. This 49 year old man from Bozeman, Montana, is co-founder of Central Asian Institute. This institute promotes education for girls in Pakistan and Afghanistan. They have built 58 schools in rural areas of those countries where 24,00 students are educated. Most importantly, 14,000 of them are girls, a rarity in that part of the world.

Surprisingly, he has received death threats for helping Muslim children since 9/11. That has not stopped him. He says we need to educate girls to promote peace and economic development. Listen to his words. “You can hand out condoms, drop bombs, build roads, put in electricity, but until the girls are educated a society won’t change.”

Tom Brokaw, in speaking of Mortenson, says he is “one ordinary person, with the right combination of character and determination, who is really changing the world.” His acts in that violent part of the globe are Jeremiahesque in their hope.

We need to hear stories like this. They give us hope and may even inspire us to do our own little crazy, hopeful acts. Some at Newport are actually doing that right now. I could name so many people here who are stepping out in faith, putting their money or their time where their hope is. I will mention only two stories.

Those in our church led by Jack Roos have stepped into Haiti building houses for those who are desperately poor. They are assisting a mission in a country where the problems are overwhelming. Their work, and the donations we have sent for medicine and supplies, has made an incredible difference to many poor people.

Then there are those from our congregation, led by Will Winslow, who have gone to Mississippi to help those whose lives were ravaged by hurricane Katrina. All the stories we hear about the bungled relief effort from our government, the toxic mobile homes, etc. could make us just throw up our hands and give up. But we continue to send a team down there, along with many other churches. We are making a huge difference in the lives of those who are hurting. Your mission committee has put our money where our hope is, by contributing another \$1000 to the effort this coming month.

If we can all be generous in this fall’s Stewardship Campaign, we can increase our mission giving to local, national, and international causes, making concrete our hopes for a better world. Together, as a church family, we are putting our money where our hope is.

Jeremiah, Mohammad Yunis, Greg Mortenson, and even some from our own congregation are stepping out to bring hope in seemingly hopeless situations. How about you? Are you willing to be a Jeremiah in your own small way, doing something crazy for hope? Amen