

Meadowbrook Congregational Church – Outdoor Worship, Sunday, August 13, 2023

SERMON SERIES

*Making Our Garden Grow*

SERMON TITLE

“In This Together” (Jeremiah 29:5-7)

Rev. Joel K. Boyd

Today, we continue our summer Sermon series inspired by the findings and recommendations of our Long-range Planning Ministry Team at Meadowbrook. Each week we’ve been exploring how the Bible speaks into the areas identified by our Long-range team, including the 4 top categories the team believes to impact the future health of our local church. First, we considered Openness to Change and last week we explored the importance of Increasing Attendance and Participation. This morning, we prayerfully consider what our Forecasted Financial Status speaks to us, how we may grow in our understanding of it, and what it calls for us to do in response. Of course, this has a lot to do with Stewardship, the way we share of our time, treasure, and talents; in particular, what our past and present may say about our future. What I will not get into are specific numbers or things best addressed by those with financial expertise (note the absence of graphs and excel files behind me). That is not the focus of this message. Rather, the focus is on the importance of our mindfulness to trends, what they teach us about ourselves and our community, and how we, all of us, are in this together. After all, remember that a forecast is simply that; it’s what the best information and interpretation of relevant data and trends reveal to us. *It* is not the future, but a heads up about where things have been or may be going. In other words, the data is important and we need to respond to it, but *we* are the future and what we do together is most important, especially in how our actions communicate who we are as a church to our community.

In our passage from Jeremiah, we witness how seeking the welfare of our community is linked to the welfare of our local church. By blessing the needs of those around us we will in turn be blessed into the future.

Jeremiah writes to the exiled leaders in Babylon to share the Lord’s prophecy. They’re encouraged to plant roots where and when they are and to care for the community they are now in. While restoration is promised and will come, Jeremiah encourages the exiles to bless the community as it is now, tending to its needs and bringing about *shalom*.

If you read around this passage, you'll see that there are those around Jeremiah that are asking folks to avoid this faithful, long-term work. Instead, they just want to get back to Jerusalem, back to the way things were or to what they want.

To help guide us, we turn to the original Hebrew word *shalom*, found many places in the Bible, including here. Some English translations render it as “welfare,” as our NRSV pew Bibles do at Meadowbrook; others render it as “prosperity” or “peace.” Scholars show that *shalom* means much more than a superficial understanding of peace or of what we may think of as happiness in American culture. Remember that the Bible is comprised of many books written over thousands of years in different cultures, all of which were very distinct from the American culture of today. Rather than rest and relaxation, or even simple enjoyment or contentment, *shalom* is about true, lasting peace, something which arises from people being gathered in community in ways which actively seek out God's call to justice, mercy, and compassion. True peace is more than words and significantly more than well wishes; it is work; it is doing the work through times of change. While individuals certainly participate in it, *shalom* has more to do with how our actions combine and bring about meaningful action in the world together as a collective body, or in our case, as the local church. In other words, *shalom* is a peace we participate in together, completeness and wholeness we acknowledge and bless, welfare we mutually tend to, and a thriving we continually work towards co-creating for and with one another and out of love for God. We're literally in it together. There's no other way for it to happen.

Part of knowing where we are and what needs to be done comes in assessing our circumstances. No doubt you do this in your families, careers, and in any number of other organizations you serve in living out your beliefs in the world. People research, pray, plan, and then act on the information they've received and what it tells them. This is what our Long-range Planning Ministry Team did over the last year and will continue to do in conversation with our Advisory Council, Boards, Ministry Teams, staff, and the congregation at large. Such prayerful study is what led us to the categories and recommendations brought forward by the Long-range team. Among this study, various trends in our

local church were researched and discussed, including trends in area churches, other congregational churches in Southeast Michigan and in the US, as well as trends noted research organizations, the interfaith community, government, and academia.

Study of our own data and trends at Meadowbrook communicate a pattern of decreased attendance and giving over decades; something which our church shares in common with many American churches, especially in the Protestant mainline. I expect this is not surprising to most if not all of you, based on your own experience and what has been reported in the news and social media. There are many things behind these trends, but a deep dive on them is beyond the scope of our time this morning. Certainly, they'll be the kinds of things we discuss more in time as we grow in our education and understanding. The more we know, the less afraid we are, and the more we can come together to take action.

That all said, it is worth noting that we have lived through a worldwide pandemic just recently. We also have continued to live in what many consider to be a toxic national political climate, where people do not come together or listen all that well to one another, let alone behave well. Add to this the meteoric rise of technology and an exceptionally fast-changing culture, friends, and we easily see how much is really going on in our daily lives as individuals, families, and as communities. These things definitely represent at least some of what is behind the trends we see.

The decline in attendance, participation, and in giving as shown by our data and trends will have an impact in the future if we do not do something about it together. And rather than to respond in fear, I believe the church is called to place greater trust in God and in itself. We remind ourselves that trends, being just trends, only give us an idea about what is happening and may happen. Important as this is, it is our education on data and trends that is paramount to our revitalization as a church, as is our faithful response to the data and trends. Again, it is what we do together that matters most.

Jeremiah shares God's call to relevant, faithful, presence, with the exiles in Babylon, when people felt lost, defeated, and held a deep longing to return to what they knew, what they remembered. God called

on the exiles to adapt to their current circumstances and to acknowledge the changes already going on around them. They were in a new place, a new time, a new culture, and with new people. But God called them to flourish where they were, to increase their presence and witness, and to tend to the needs of the community around them. In doing this, Jeremiah prophesies, they will bring about their own *shalom*, their own flourishing and peace. Friends, in the days and weeks ahead, may we be willing to educate ourselves about our community's needs, what good info we have from our own study, and how we can take faithful action as a local church.

Jesus calls us to carry our crosses and to cross great barriers to welcome and love one another. We follow a Savior who calls on us to make great sacrifice but we do not do it alone. Our welfare is within the welfare of our own community, and we are all in this together.

AMEN.