

Years ago, there was a gentleman who served on the Building and Grounds Committee at the church I was serving. In his work of caring for the building and grounds, there were often times when things were out of his control. Situations would arise in which he couldn't please everybody. He had a saying for those times. If something wasn't quite right, but it was beyond his control to fix it, he'd say, “It's not a perfect world.”

That was his way of telling us we were going have to live with something that wasn't exactly what we wanted. At first, it struck me as a little dismissive and maybe a bit obnoxious, but I came to love that saying. Sometimes, that's all you can say. In life, we have to live with imperfection, with things not being the way we want them to be.

To this day, when I find myself in a less than optimal situation, I picture Steve saying those words: It's not a perfect world. I find it a bit of a stress reliever to just accept that reality and get on with life. In fact, you may recall that in the creation story in Genesis, God looked upon everything God had made. The text says, “And indeed, it was very good.” Even God recognized that the world God created was very good, but it wasn't perfect.

There is a more eloquent way of saying this that you all know. It's referred to as The Serenity Prayer. The short version of the serenity prayer has three parts. It starts with, “God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change.” That's a way of acknowledging there are things about ourselves or about our world we'd like to change, but we can't. We just have to live with the fact that it's not a perfect world. “God, give me serenity, give me peace in the face of those things I just have to live with.”

The second part of the prayer is: “God grant me the courage to change the things I can.” There are things about ourselves and about the world that can change and ought to be changed. So, “God, give me the courage to try to bring about the kind of changes you desire.”

“God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can,” and thirdly, “wisdom to know the difference.” The third part of the prayer is really important. “God, help me to know which things I should try to change and what are the imperfections, in myself and in the world, I just need to find a way to live with.”

It seems to me, this is exactly the kind of clarity Jeremiah offered the nation of Israel in our reading this morning. The king and queen, the elders and priests, the court officials and leaders of Jerusalem, the artisans and smiths, were deported and found themselves in foreign territory. They were exiles living in Babylon.

They couldn't have imagined a worse situation, being hundreds of miles from their homeland, in an unfamiliar landscape. They were among the very people that destroyed their city and deported them. In this foreign land, they were outnumbered. They were vulnerable, and too many, it appeared their God abandoned them.

The exiles found themselves in what must have seemed the most unfair and unjust situation imaginable. What do you do in such a situation? The instinct would be to resist. You fight. You protest. No doubt, some of them had escape on their minds. How do I break free from this place and get back to Jerusalem?

But in his letter, Jeremiah indicated God had a plan. God would bring the nation back to Jerusalem, but the exile will last for 70 years. It was God's doing. There was nothing they could do to change that. No amount of resistance and protest would make any difference.

Then, Jeremiah says something that had to have come as a shock. He wrote, "Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Take 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."

Those in Babylonian captivity would have recognized those words as a promise God made to their ancestors. When the Hebrew people escaped slavery in Egypt, God promised them a land where they could build homes, a land flowing with milk and honey, a land where they could be fruitful and multiply.

Jeremiah was saying if they settle-in and invest themselves in their new surroundings, they will receive those same blessings of God. It wouldn't be perfect. It's not a perfect world. They'd rather be in Jerusalem. They'd rather have access to the Temple, and be among their own people. But God would care for them and provide for them in their new reality, in a place they never would have expected, in foreign territory.

I think that's a message for us, because, in a way, we are all in foreign territory. After well over two years of pandemic, we are in a different place than we used to be. We're all dealing with stuff we don't want to deal with. Politically, the

landscape is very different than it once was. I think a lot of us feel more vulnerable than we once did.

For me, church life feels a bit like foreign territory. It's no longer about everyone gathering in one room on Sunday morning. My seminary trained me for where the church was twenty years ago, not for where it is today. The church is in a new place, and if Jeremiah's words apply, the message is for us to make ourselves at home in this new place.

Don't spend your time complaining and wishing you were somewhere else. Instead, build houses and plant gardens. Like the exiles in Babylon would have done, hold onto your identity, but invest yourself in where you are now. Adapt your habits to the new situation. Commit yourself to the ministry, even if it feels foreign. The church will never be perfect. It's not a perfect world, but God's blessings won't dry up just because we've entered foreign territory.

Some of us have been exiled from the life we used to know and find ourselves in foreign territory in our personal lives. Dealing with cancer in the family might be like finding ourselves in foreign territory. For others, suddenly being alone is foreign territory as they deal with the sadness and pain of divorce. I can imagine, following the death of the love-of-one's-life, the whole world can feel like foreign territory. If Jeremiah is right, God's blessings and the abundance of life God desires for us are just as available to us in those circumstances as they ever were.

I may have mentioned this before. When I graduated college, I lived in Colorado for a time. I worked part-time for an organization that assisted wheelchair-bound people to live independently. I had a client whose legs were paralyzed and one of his arms was partially impaired. The only help he needed, to live independently, was in transferring in and out of bed.

He was roughly the same age as me, in his early twenties. One night, he told me about his accident. He was on the University of Colorado ski team. One day, he was racing down the mountain and crashed into a tree. After he described it, he said this. He said, "This might be hard to believe, but in a way, being paralyzed was the best thing that ever happened to me." He said, "Because of that accident, I learned what's really important in life. My whole attitude has changed. My relationships with my family and friends are so much better than they were." He said, "My life is a lot harder now, but I'm a much happier person than I was before."

That conversation has always stayed with me, because it was incredible to me that he didn't spend his time complaining and feeling sorry for himself, although I'm sure he had those moments, understandably so. But he decided to make a life

for himself in the midst of it all. He threw himself into his new situation. It wasn't perfect, but it was incredibly blessed.

Lastly, Jeremiah writes, "Seek the peace of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its peace you will find your peace." That had to be the hardest thing, to pray for the peace and well-being of Babylon. Psalm 22 instructs: *Pray for the peace of Jerusalem: "May they prosper who love you. Peace be within your walls, and security within your towers."*

The message seems to be, somehow and some way God's peace can be found in the worst of situations. In fact, this may be a clue as to what Jesus meant in John 14:27 – "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid."

The Hebrew word for peace is shalom. Shalom can be translated as peace, but it also means well-being. It also means wholeness. Maybe that's the peace Christ offers: wholeness in the midst of our struggles, wholeness as we cope with a very imperfect world, wholeness in the most unexpected places.

Wherever you are on life's journey, peace be with you. Shalom!