



FIRST
PRESBYTERIAN
CHURCH
SPARTANBURG

this way forward

THE BLESSINGS OF THE SAINTS AND THE POWER OF MATH

Jeremiah 32:14-15

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Dr. Thomas E. Evans

Last week's tragedy, an act of vile hatred in Pittsburgh, has rubbed raw a skin-deep dread in the hearts of Jews throughout the country and the world. History has demonstrated humankind's propensity to extreme prejudice and violence toward Israel. It was heartening to see a strong turn out from First Presbyterian and the whole community at the temple last Sunday night to show our support.

But over the past few months and years there has been a growing sense of unease in our country, a mistrust of one another that erupts in extreme prejudice. Tied to our upcoming election cycle, everyone is hoping that somehow we can set a new tone for our political discourse, that in turn can heal our country.

While these acts of violence aren't new, they have exposed a sense of waywardness and the lack of hope that has carried us in times past.

As people of faith we are called to leadership. We are called to chart a way forward that will bring peace and healing.

But the unease can almost be measured by the stock market fluctuations, exposing uncertainty in the hearts of Americans about what the future holds, not only for any given company, but for America itself.

What then are we called to do as people of God...

Invest.

Invest in the future.

Double down - despite the odds – and let it all ride on the Kingdom of God.

It was in much worse times than this that God's servant set the example. It was not fear of the future that was worrying Israel. It was the tragedy

and terror of the present. All the horrors prophesied had come to pass.

...The fertile land had been sown with salt.

...Their families had been exiled to Babylon.

...The walls of Jerusalem crumbled.

...The temple desecrated.

...Their land was squarely in the hands of the enemy.

...Israel was no longer a sovereign nation but a vassal of Babylon.

And it was at that most improbable point that Jeremiah decided to buy a field in the land of Anathoth!

Imagine that Spartanburg, indeed the whole country, had been taken over by a foreign power and that your family had been exiled to that land and then your cousin, you know the cousin I am talking about; the one you would not lend a nickel to because he simply can't be trusted! That cousin comes to you with an offer to sell a plot of family land. You would be crazy, absolutely crazy to buy it!

But that is exactly what Jeremiah did!

And he did so at God's command. The Lord instructed him to place the deed in an earthenware jar to protect it. To protect it so that it would be secured as God declared,

...in order that they may last for a long time.

For thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: Houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land.

Jeremiah's investment was a sign to the Israelite people that he had confidence in God's future. He believed God's promise to restore Israel and he was willing to put his money where his mouth was to prove it. He did not expect restoration anytime soon but, nevertheless, his confidence gave others hope during the most difficult years.

His confidence was not in Israel, nor in Babylon turning their hearts. It was in the power and love of God.

That is where you and I must place our trust and we must exercise that same confidence in God's future. For it will be the Spirit of God that will turn us around. We must work hard. Very hard.

The transformation will come from God. As Paul tells us,

He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your righteousness.

You and I are called to plant the seeds of righteousness. And everyone knows such work can be backbreaking and infuriating. You don't know which seeds are going to sprout, so you have to plant as many as possible. God's greatest blessings are often beyond our intentions.

Paul traveled thousands of miles to raise funds for the Jerusalem church. He suffered great hardship for this purpose. He wrote letters filled with challenges and sent messengers ahead of him – all to pave the way for this church. But what do you and I know of this church today? Nothing. Absolutely nothing.

Clearly God multiplied the seeds which Paul planted, and the most lasting fruit is not the funds he raised, but the hearts he turned through those letters. The very ones we still read today – a legacy lasting thousands of years. Paul planted the seeds but then it was out of his hands and the Lord provided the growth.

Our church endowment also serves as a stake in the ground – planting our hope in God's future. Because people believed decades ago that God would be using this congregation to do his work, they gave a portion, bought a plot of land, if you will, to let you and I know, that those in generations past trust us. Even though they do not know us, they trust us because we are servants of the Lord's work.

Because of this, our work has multiplied, our ability to do our work today is not only supported by you, but by the Saints who have gone before us. That whole cloud of witnesses is with us, part of us, even though they are not here on earth. As we believe in Communion, we are all present together at his holy table, partaking of this feast of love.

Some of those who have given have been blessed with significant wealth and have shared it generously. But it does not take great wealth. Anyone can bless others for the future; no matter how much money you have; it is not a privilege for wealthy but an act of the faithful. And Jeremiah is a perfect example.

Our endowment has roughly an average spend rate of 4% with a compounded growth over the years of 7%. If you were to invest \$10,000 in The 1843 Fund, in 200 years it would have produced \$4.1 million of ministry with a remaining balance of \$3.2 million!

The amount of kingdom work that the church could do is mindboggling when that is joined with others doing the same! We could truly turn this town around!!!

Investing in the future is like planting a tree. Think of the beautiful trees we have on this campus – some perhaps 150 years old. Years ago, someone who would never see the full growth of these majestic trees invested their time and energy to plant it. But that was not the end of it. It took the following generations to water it, to weed it, to heal it, and feed it.

Today, not only do we have the beauty of this Sanctuary but the grounds themselves are God's Sanctuary – a testament to the beauty of the Lord's creative power and the faith of someone long ago.

Even though the endowment has a key role to play for our future, more than anything God calls us to invest in others.

Jesus invested his time, his energy, his very life in his disciples. He walked with them, taught them, challenged them, loved them. He had all the power

in the world to simply do his mission on his own. But he chose to invest in others. And, like that land in Anathoth, the ones he chose according to the world's measure did not seem a wise investment.

Over the course of years he changed them. He forged these disconnected, unimportant, voiceless tax collectors, fishermen, and more into the 12 people that have done more to change the world than any other group in history.

Rabbi Yossi is a great example of someone who has invested in others. He gathers a group of clergy every month at the New China restaurant. He plays the host, provides the topic, and, of course, the entertainment with his endless puns. But he is also a source of wisdom for me.

Whenever I am dealing with a thorny issue from the Hebrew scriptures, I look to him for insight. We Christians have had these texts for 2,000 years but I always feel like a Neophyte whenever I learn about the texts from a Rabbi.

Many of you were at the prayer service at the Temple last Saturday night. The reason you saw a dozen pastors at the Temple the day after the shooting is because of Yossi. Because of his friendship, his investment in the community, in cooperation, and his investment in others.

That is our call. To invest in others so that we might dispel ignorance and speak out against hatred. Let us build this place into God's beloved Kingdom by investing in one another in the name of our Lord.

Amen.