

Sermon September 25, 2016 *Is it Ever Too Late?* Cara B. Hochhalter

Jeremiah 32:1-3a,6-15 and Luke 16:19-31

It was a wonderful explosion of brainstorming into the future that happened last Sunday after church. With David Specht's expert leadership, we formed 4 groups of 7 people who were asked to imagine 10 years from now...and to speak in that way! Some of us kept having to be reminded..."Not perhaps we *could* do this, but we ARE doing this....such things as using a bus/van, some kind of Holy Vehicle to pick up people who need rides to church events!

It was an affirmation for our future with many ideas that we will be mulling over and hopefully, acting on! Thank you to those of you who participated or offered your suggestions. It is never too late...to continue to imagine!

Let us be in prayer: O God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts together, be acceptable to you, our rock and our redeemer.

Now, Jeremiah had been trying to warn his people about an impending invasion by the Babylonians...because "little Israel" was caught in the middle between the Babylonians to the north and the Egyptians who hated the Babylonians to the south....but in good times, the people did not want to listen to Jeremiah nor to make changes!

Can you hear the parallel with what David told us about our own "Long Range Planning?" He said that it is difficult to imagine change when things are going well...and he affirmed that things have been going well for our church...we think we worship pretty well, have a lot of activities going, as well as efforts towards making life better for othersBut David said, this is the best time to look at what changes may need to be made...when things are going well. Jeremiah tried to warn his people to look towards the future, too.

And in the midst of the eventual besiege from Babylon, Jeremiah found himself in captivity by King Zedekiah. Then Jeremiah has a vision that Hanamel was going to come and offer to sell him his land...and sure enough, Hanamel DID come and offer his land...and Jeremiah takes this as a sign from God so he goes ahead and buys the land , putting the deed in an earthen jar.... What do you think this sale of land and the deed to show for it represented for Jeremiah and his people? Hope...for the future. Jeremiah showed them that it was *never too late* to have hope...and to act on their imaginations for how things could be in the future.

Apparently, in Jeremiah's day, they knew that the land really belonged to God...land was Holy and theirs to care for only for a time.... Perhaps this is what the Native Peoples are doing for stretches of the Missouri River in South Dakota...caring for this part of the land into the future, knowing that oil pipelines are known to break and pollute...They are there at Standing Rock not as *protesters*, but *protectors* of something precious...something that belongs to God.

Katherine Matthews writes that "stewardship theology" is about knowing that our land, and even our possessions, are blessings that don't really belong to us...they are part of the wholeness of Creation We are only caretakers for a time.

Jeremiah bought some land and put the deed in an earthen jar....even if that land was going to be besieged. He holds in that jar, hope for the future, imagining that once again farming would take place, families would return to build homes and life would be good again. No matter what happens, the deed would represent hope for future generations.

Looking forward, instead of backward...that is our challenge and our call even today! When things look bleak...this can be very hard...but here is what I think, imagination is a form of prayer...to imagine into the future how good times could return. So the question for us today is: how can we imagine and act on goodness...whether it is land or relationships...into the future. How might we invest in a better world to come?

Now to this moral tale in the book of Luke. You may have felt a little queasy at the description of the condition of Lazarus...a poor destitute man covered in sores....contrasted with a rich man who passed by every day dressed in purple and fine linen, his stomach filled with sumptuous food. Both men die....the poor man, in his humility, goes to be with Abraham in heaven...the rich man who had ignored the poor...goes straight to "you know where!"

This parable...so powerful for us....points out the huge chasm between those very wealthy and those very poor. How they knew about the 1%, I don't know but here it is.... This parable...points out which one received favor from God and the angels...and which one was sent to hell. It is a parable full of reversals....

An African American Spiritual that goes like this:

Rich man Dives he lived so well. Dip your finger in the water, come, and cool my tongue, 'cause I'm tormented in the flame. And when he died he went straight to hell.

Dip your finger in the water, come, and cool my tongue, 'cause I'm tormented in the flame.

How insulting that the rich man in his distress in hell, begs the poor man to come and give him aid.

Now this is probably *not* a portrayal of afterlife...but is a parable for us to learn something. We must ask, with the chasm so wide....*is it ever too late* to look around and notice how we might bridge those gaps in our own time ...how to find common ground...to hold an attitude that *we are all in this together*...rich or poor, black or white, refugee or resident....how can we open our hearts in compassion?

Is it ever too late...to take notice of those around us and reach out...not in condescending ways but with respect and humility? We help each other in these acts of kindness...

Luke tells us that this parable was told to "lovers of money" so you can imagine that he was trying to wake them up...perhaps they loved their smart phones a little too much, or their lives revolved around their bank accounts, or as one commentator writes, "they loved their money more than people, their possessions more than the poor, their clothes more than compassion, and their extravagant feasts more than sharing food with the hungry."

Is it ever too late for us to reach out in sharing food and worship with people on the streets in Greenfield?...Is it ever too late for us to imagine what it would be like to be an African American and live with the prejudices that become such obstacles? Is it ever too late to adjust our attitudes towards others who suffer?

I was struck by what a beautiful woman told me last week, who comes to do foot care for the Senior Center. Her name is Oni and she is from the African Country of Ghana, I think. She is always so friendly and warm, and she told me she is deeply Christian...she is about to have her third child but plans to do foot care right up until her last week. I was talking to her about how she will care for the baby and also work. Her mother-in-law is going to help, but she said it is in times like these that she misses her home country. She said there are no nursing homes in Ghana. Elderly people live with their adult children and they just automatically care for the babies and the young children. They love doing it, she said. And then in years that follow, the elderly are cared for, too.

I thought about how separated we have become as a society....For the sake of independence, I guess, we have all been raised to go off and "do our own thing." I know that some of you are trying to form better connections in your families...we have grandparents and great-grandparents caring for children ...and perhaps in this mobile society we stay connected with skypes and chats and cell phones...but I have no idea what it would be like to live in a culture where so many relatives move in...and care for each other.

Is it ever too late to reach out and care ? In a UCC devotion this morning written by Richard Floyd, he complains about this campaign's rhetoric that has sunk to a new level of course talk, resorting to dishonest name-calling, finger-pointing and fear-mongering. He says he keeps asking himself, "Is this who we are?"

Loretta said that same thing as we talked about the racial conflicts going on...she said she wants to speak out affirming that "this is not who we are!"

Floyd quotes Abraham Lincoln who on the brink of the Civil War made an impassioned appeal to "the better angels of our nature." It is never too late to appeal to *the better angels of our nature*... Not that we hide our passion or even anger at injustice...but that we invite the grace of God, the love of Christ, the goodness of some Holy spirit...to be in our words and our actions ...as we imagine our future...together.

I will close with two quotes. One is from Audre Lorde, a 20th Century African American poet who said: "*When I dare to be powerful, to use my strength in the service of my vision, then it becomes less and less important whether I am afraid.*"

And the other is from President Barack Obama who said:

"The best way to not feel hopeless is to get up and do something. Don't wait for good things to happen to you. If you go out and make some good things happen, you will fill the world with hope, you will fill yourself with hope."

I think Jeremiah would agree....let us go out and make some good things happen!
Amen.