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St. James' Episcopal Church, Clinton NY  
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**“They were being asked to have faith in God; that God is with them. They are being asked to trust in God, to remain faithful in spite of the trials and tribulations they may experience. Be mindful. Be prayerful.”**

Jeremiah 29: 1, 4-7

2 Timothy 2: 8-15

Luke 174: 11-19

Psalm 66: 1-11

Nesting. According to the Urban Dictionary, “nesting” can be described as the act of settling oneself into a domestic habitat, something akin to making a home for one’s self – be it a room, an apartment, or a traditional free-standing domicile. Nesting, one might say, may be seen as putting down roots; of establishing a home. Many often see this behavior as a sign or desire to settle down in one place for an extended period of time. Having been in a long-distance relationship for the better part of the past decade, Tavi and I are starting to yearn for that “togetherness in one place.” This is reflective of the fact that we have both been very mobile over the years, uprooting from each other to different parts of the country or countries, often for work or family. The time for “nesting”, per say, is approaching.

It is with this sense of “nesting” that I approach Jeremiah’s writing to the Israelites who are living in Babylon as exiles. Jeremiah is encouraging them to settle in to their new surroundings, their new environment. And that had to be a very startling message to hear. After all, they had been admonished for mingling with their neighbors when they were settled in Palestine. Do not mix with the Moabites, the Canaanites; with foreigners who worship alien gods. And they must have been hoping to hear they were returning to their own country. But, no. That is not what Jeremiah has to say to them. Instead, they are being asked to take foreigners in marriage. To find employment amongst the very people who destroyed their Temple and carried them off to strange lands. They are resident aliens now being tasked with

cohabitating and intertwining their cultural practices, with one stipulation: they must continue to worship YHWH. In other words, the Israelites are to remember who they are and to whom they belong: they are the chosen people of God. As such, they are to remain faithful to God though they are to coexist with and cohabitate among foreign people and their foreign practices. For the Israelites, this is a hard message to accept for their identity (and that is what we are talking about here) has been tied to the land and Temple for generations. Now, they must hold on to their primary identity as God's people without land or Temple as they face an uncertain future.

If I did not know better, I would be wondering if Jeremiah was not speaking to the Christian Church in the early part of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. After all, what is our Christian identity in a dominant secular world that claims this era as post-Christian? Is it tied to a particular denominational identity? Is it associated with a certain church community? Is it dependent upon theological leanings? Are any or all of these markers essential to our identity as disciples of Christ? To answer any or all of these questions, I found myself reflecting on the one healed leper who returned to Jesus in thanksgiving.

All their life, these individuals were labeled and identified as sinners, people who bore the mark of their sin, whatever it may have been, upon their body. They are known as untouchables. Yet, in the eyes of God, they are beloved children worthy of mercy, and because of this, Jesus brings healing. However, of the ten who were healed, only one—and a Samaritan at that, which further removes them from the embrace of society and religious norms – shows gratitude and appreciation for the grace bestowed upon them by God through Christ Jesus. Many were healed that day, only one offers thanksgiving to God.

God's mercy and grace is not dependent upon one's spiritual, emotional, or physical condition. It is only dependent upon one's faith and faithfulness. That is what is being asked of Israel: remain steadfast and faithful. Circumstances change. The situation is not what it once was. However, remain rooted in God's mercy for that is the road to salvation.

At the heart of Jeremiah's letter to the people living in exile is an admonition to move from a traditional worldview – one based externally on temple life and landholdings – to a re-imagined worldview – one based internally on faith and prayer. This paradigm shift is of great

magnitude. Advocating prayer, especially for those who persecuted you, is no small undertaking. It is about prayer in a multitude of forms. Prayer as praise, as thanksgiving. Pray for one's enemies. Prayers for those who hate you. What a brave new world one is being asked to imagine. One where the trappings of the past are transformed into renewed ways of being in relationship with God.

Of the ten lepers who are healed, only one returns to be in a new relationship with God. This person experiences a conversion of the heart that is not dependent upon what denomination one aligns with or what church you claim membership in. It does not even depend upon what theological leanings you subscribe to. Conversion of the heart is a spiritual matter and one we are all invited to reflect upon. Whether it is the exiles Jeremiah is speaking to or the disciples Jesus is addressing, we are invited to reexamine our identity in light of God's grace and mercy, and that may well entail reimagining our identity as followers of Christ.

Returning to the idea of nesting that I began with; you may be inclined to think it suggests permanency, something of a long duration, and that would be correct – to a point. What it truly implies is stability. The Israelites were not being asked to stay in Babylon for eternity. They were being asked to have faith in God; that God is with them. They are being asked to trust in God, to remain faithful in spite of the trials and tribulations they may experience. Be mindful. Be prayerful. That message is the same for us today. God is at work in our midst. Do not become too comfortable in your traditions. Be open to reimagining what the Spirit is doing in your midst. Be prayerful, be faithful. Do not be obstinate in your identity as a people of God. Do not cling to a particular identity for that may inhibit God's mercy and grace. Rather, be like the one who returns to Jesus with a grateful heart. Do not be like the other nine who did not return and give thanks to God. Stability lies in our faithfulness to Christ Jesus. Therefore, I pray that God's grace always precedes and follow you into good works of faith so that you return to Christ in thanksgiving and praise. Nest in Christ, who is the true rock upon which salvation depends.