

As I think you know, I'm a bit of a word-nerd. When I was young, I struggled to learn to read. I grew up with lots of older siblings; a couple whose IQ probably border on genius. According to my older sisters who had the responsibility of babysitting me while my mother helped my father launch his consulting engineering business, I had a fairly large vocabulary — and not THAT KIND! Growing up in a household with brainy older siblings, parents who actively encouraged all of us to read, and with books of every kind crammed onto shelves, stacked on side tables and even on the floor, one might think that I would have been a reading prodigy. But, the reality was the opposite — until my 6 ½ year old brain figured out the “code” as one sister called it, I was a verbose non-reader. Since then there has been no stopping me. And, when I say I'm a word-nerd, I mean I love getting lost in a dictionary, looking up one word after another, cross-referencing meanings, origins, synonyms, antonyms, words that trigger “rabbit trails” to other unrelated words. Even my siblings and my wife think I'm a bit of a freak in this regard.

I say all this in preface to what is my opening to today's sermon drawn from Jeremiah and God's word to the people of Judah. The people have been sent into exile to Babylon. Nebuchadnezzar had previously conquered Israel the northern Jewish kingdom. And now, had taken the people in the south whose capital was Jerusalem away into exile. Just prior to our reading this morning, we learn of false prophets telling the exiles that this wouldn't be too bad nor too long. One of these so-called prophets actually said the exiles would be returning home within two years. Needless to say, he didn't survive

much after uttering these words. God had to get all that straightened out and tells Jeremiah to bring the honest answer to the people with instructions on what they were to do.

God tells the people in exile that their stay in Babylon would be long. Through Jeremiah, God says, in effect, “settle in; make a life here in this place where I am planting you; you will be here for several generations.” And, by the way, “its welfare will be your welfare.”

That complete last phrase in our reading struck me. While we are not in exile in a foreign land, our lives are bombarded with images of lives of the rich and famous, of things and places that through clever psychology draw our desires to want that “stuff” that we don’t have and to be someplace other than where we are here and now. To a certain degree, it’s understandable. On the other hand, it can build a lot of frustration and sometimes heartache to desire that which we see, hear, and, yes, even read about.

These days when we hear the word, welfare, it’s often taken as a negative; almost a dirty word. “Welfare mothers.” “Deadbeats on welfare.” Headlines decrying how welfare is destroying America; how we cannot afford continued welfare, Etc., Etc., Etc.

So, back to my penchant for hunting down the meaning of words. What is welfare? If it’s so bad, as many folk believe, then why is God telling the people to seek it out in exile? Does this mean God is calling for the exiles (and us) to become dependent on the state?

The trusted *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* has two primary definitions of the noun and two of the adjective. The adjective describes what today many people think of when they hear the word: (1) *of or relating to, or concerned with welfare, and especially with improvements of the welfare of disadvantaged social groups; (2) receiving public welfare benefits*. You may have noticed that those adjective definitions modify the noun which has a broader set of meanings.

The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, 5<sup>th</sup> ed., first states that welfare is *health, happiness, and good fortune; well-being*. Then notes financial aid, typically by governments, to people in need. And goes on to say in the third listing to define it as: “*A state or condition of doing well; prosperous or satisfactory course or relation; exemption from evil; state with respect to well-being; as, to promote the physical or spiritual welfare of society...*”

It is the last definition that matches up with what God is saying to the people exiled to Babylon. It is also God’s word to us today. We are to seek the welfare of the community where we live. No, we’re not in exile, as I said earlier. But, our community’s welfare is where we find our welfare. Our lives should not be about isolation and tribalism. And, when we say and think about community, it is both our neighbors around us in the county as well as our commonwealth, our nation, and in the world.

When we narrow our focus to only ourselves, our family, to those who think and believe as do, we are not living as God calls us. The people of God were not exiled to like-minded people. The Babylonians worshiped idols; worshiped their king; worshiped the fertility gods of the Euphrates and Tigris rivers. It is among their enemies and that nation's welfare that God tells the people to seek their welfare. Somewhere along our history, we have come to believe that only among our own kind can we find health and prosperity.

You hear this claim in that Christians should only buy goods and services from other Christians. The same with Jews from Jews; Muslims from Muslims, etc. But, because we live in communities made up of Christians, Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, atheists, agnostics, those of other religions and the non-religious, we are to seek "a state of doing well; of being prosperous, being exempt from evil," all while being in the midst of those who don't know us, who don't particularly have our interests in mind, who may be intentionally indifferent to our welfare. And, again, here falls that last phrase from God: "for in [the larger community's] welfare, you will find your welfare."

How will we find our welfare? In working for the welfare of all our neighbors near and far. Certainly, we come at this mutual state of well-being from our Christian faith — its roots as well as its precepts and beliefs. In our efforts to promote the health and prosperity of all of society, we are assured by God that our own health and prosperity will come.

Therefore, our cooperation across the globe and in our own county to care for the earth, its land, air, and water will result in better lives for everyone. To aid those who cannot afford or do home repairs for themselves, to provide transportation to those who cannot drive or have the means to do so, to have on hand to share emergency food and clothing, perhaps even shelter to those whose lives have been impacted by fire, storm, or violence means we are working for our own welfare when we are in need. To stand in solidarity and raise our voices alongside those who are oppressed, who are vilified, who are persecuted and scorned gives witness to God in Jesus the Christ who suffered those very things. These actions also demonstrate how we endeavor to show God's love and grace for their benefit of welfare.

For you see, that is part of God's plan. By pursuing the welfare of our neighbors and our communities, we give witness to our faith in God and of God's gifts of love, grace, mercy, peace, and hope. Such effort can result in changing others' hearts and minds to join in such ongoing work in God's kin-dom.

Will we seek this welfare, so God can find?

Let us pray:

Most loving, most caring God of all creation, we are thankful for Your words that encourage us to live lives of grace, mercy, peace, hope, and love. By the power of the Holy Spirit, give us strength and wisdom to seek the well-being of our neighbors so that our welfare

may flourish and Your gifts be made visible for all the world to see. In the name of Your beloved Son, our Lord and Savior, Jesus, we pray. Amen.