

## **Sermon on Jeremiah 29: 1-14 Baptism & Stewardship**

Sisters and brothers,  
what all the stories and readings, what all we do and say in this service today, have in common, is one thing: they are all about caring.  
Caring for others, caring for places, caring about how to act and react.

First of all there was this story of Jesus caring for his followers – even after his death:

Jesus coming back to his disciples and showing himself to them, giving them guidance on how to live, how to carry on, and how to spread the Good News; Jesus telling his disciples to baptise those who believe and by doing so keep his memory alive... and Jesus promising always to be with them – to care for them.

Then there is Samuel whom we have baptised today.

We have promised to care for him and his family, to include them in our care, to surround them with a community of love and forgiveness and to be there for them when they need us.

That is the baptism part of this Sunday.

The other aspect today is of course: it is a stewardship Sunday, too.

Many of us promised to care for this church and its people on the day when we became church members.

“Will you faithfully participate in the church’s ministries by your prayers, your presence, your gifts and your service?” we were asked. And “I will”, so many of us responded.

But it is not only those who are members here, it is all those who come on Sundays, who enjoy worship and the community, who enjoy singing and praying and celebrating... It is all of us who are asked today to consider our care for Peace Church in terms of coming regularly, praying faithfully for others, supporting each other, supporting the church with our time and our talents, and giving financial contributions as regularly as we possibly can.

How much do you care for this place and the people in it?

This is a very serious question asked in stewardship season every autumn.

These are already three aspects of care.

If you remember, the reading that followed Samuel’s baptism was this remarkable letter of Jeremiah’s written to the people in exile in Babylon. This letter encouraging them to care – even in captivity, even for this foreign place in a hostile society... A fourth aspect of care.

And a fifth? The fifth is this story of Jesus caring for these sick men who nobody was supposed to get close to, because they were so terribly ill.

Jesus cared so much that he healed them. All ten!

One of them came back and thanked Jesus later on. One of them came back and took care to say thank you. One out of ten.

I’d so much like to hope that the other nine hadn’t completely forgotten what Jesus had been and done for them. I prefer to imagine that from that moment in

which Jesus cared for them, they started caring for others and living changed lives – healed as they were...

This Sunday bears so many aspects of care, as you can see. And the one I would like to draw our attention to most, is the care expressed in Jeremiah's letter for his people in exile.

This text offers the most beautiful images of care...

Just listen to them again:

**5 Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce.**

**6 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.**

**7 But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.**

Build and live, plant and eat, have families, raise children. Multiply and “seek the welfare of the city” – care!

Care for this place you live in...

That is more easily said than done.

But let me start at the beginning...

Jeremiah was a lonely voice in a time of great darkness. He was a prophet.

He was the voice of God, who wanted to speak through him.

Jeremiah knew he had to be in touch with those in exile, who had been put in chains and led away to a hostile land. And he wrote this beautiful letter, that ends with the most comforting sentences a believer can hear from his or her God:

**11 For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the LORD, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope.**

**12 Then when you call upon me and come and pray to me, I will hear you.**

**13 When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart,**

**14 I will let you find me, says the LORD.**

Those whom the letter was for were full of despair and hopelessness, whenever they allowed themselves to remember what had happened.

They could see no way out, no tomorrow, no future, no more happiness...

In those days of brutal warfare between the small country Israel and the superpower Babylon, many of the Israelites had been deported; dragged from their country and forced to settle far from home.

Cheap labour they were meant to be.

And weakened and terrified as they were, there was not likely to be a rebellion.

Intimidated and frightened as they were, they wouldn't dare rise up against their oppressors.

So the Babylonians did not scatter them across their huge empire, but allowed them to settle together.

And there - in exile - they tried hard to care... to care to remember the past, to care for their people, to care about their faith and keeping it going. They tried to behave as calmly as possible, to keep their heads down and keep out of everyday Babylonian life and reality.

They cried a lot. They lamented. They sang sad songs... And some of them couldn't help it : they were literally heartbroken.

And then, one day, came this letter from Jeremiah.

A sign of life from home.

A message - so clear:

Don't allow yourselves to fall into despair.

Don't fall silent.

Don't withdraw...

Care!

Try to live in this foreign country.

Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce; get married and give birth to children.

Support the place that your complicated life story has brought you to.

Pray for the people you have to live among, and do know:

if they are fine, you will be fine, too.

Do whatever you can that you and others can be happy and live together in peace. Care!

If Jeremiah walked down Frauenlobstrasse today and dropped in on our Sunday worship, he'd certainly say something similar:

Build houses, create homes, get a roof over your head and invite others to stay.

Make yourselves useful. Contribute to the quality of life in this church, in this city, in this country. Care for the place you live in.

And never forget that the world can always become a better place, as soon as people care – and especially care in community....

He would also tell us to have children and raise them carefully and responsibly, baptise them, as we baptised Samuel, and promise their families to support them. He may want to tell us that we should always be aware that each child born and raised is a confirmation of the hope that this earth will stay a place worth living in.

Jeremiah would insist on us working for mutual understanding in this church, for better living conditions in this city and for peace in this world.

And he would tell us never to let go of hope.

“There will always be difficulties. Life is never easy”, he might say. “And often you will be discouraged, frightened or frustrated. But you can keep going! All of you. You can contribute to the changing of things – just care and be part of it all, and there will be hope!

There is always the chance of a better life on earth. Believe me.  
 And don't withdraw into exile – inner or outer exile.  
 Don't just live in your small private world, but connect your personal little dreams with God's great vision for the future of humankind. Join the community of believers, find people who share your hopes and your faith and work together with them. Offer your time and talents, and bring forth changes that an individual could not even dream of achieving on his or her own.  
 Join forces and show solidarity with those who need you.  
 Support the place you live in. Care for it.  
 Because in its well-being, you will find your well-being.”

“Believe me”, Jeremiah might say today, “God needs you in this church and in this city. God needs you in this country. God needs you for his world.  
 You can make a difference, if you just do what Jesus has taught you to.  
 Follow him, care and heal and help and save. You can do it.”

And if we then looked at the prophet in doubt and disbelief, he would probably say: “Just believe...”

“It is your faith that has made you well...” Jesus said to the man who'd come back to him and thanked him for healing...

It can be our faith that makes us well –  
 Jeremiah would possibly use exactly the same sentence and he would want to show us where we can find God in today's world.  
 Maybe not only or always in the big issues, but in so many small ways in our everyday world:  
 a Bible for a prisoner, a visa after weeks of fear, a smile in a crowded U-Bahn, a child brought for baptism, a caring community, clothes for newborn babies, support when you look for an apartment, welcome when you are new, translations when you don't yet know the language, explanation of a strange bureaucracy or school system, babysitters in a country where you don't have any family, godparents of a different nationality for your child, strange food tasted for the first time...a winter coat when the first snow falls, Christmas Eve in the home of a family that you have only known for a couple of weeks...  
 God's signs are small... and different... and sometimes a little crazy...  
 But they are here. They happen right here among us. They happen when people care.

What we of course need is to be open to see them.  
 Respect them for what they are.  
 ... not overlook them.  
 But let them happen.  
 And make them happen.

What we can do, is:  
 Care for others.  
 Be close to them.  
 Support and heal them.

Care –  
and when you do so, remember this picture of the tree on your bulletin...  
Hope, friends, love, trust and freedom...

Care for people and give them hope.  
Care, so they can find friends.  
Care, so they can experience love.  
Care, and others can trust.  
Care, and others will feel free.

Care, -  
and our children – including Samuel whose baptism it is today -  
will grow up in a church and in a world in which God is constantly speaking to  
them and to us:

**I know the plans I have for you, (...), plans for your welfare and not for  
harm, to give you a future with hope.**

**12 Then when you call upon me and come and pray to me, I will hear  
you.**

**13 When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your  
heart,**

**14 I will let you find me.**

Amen.