

SERMON/DISCERNMENT REPORT 9-25-16

The Rev. David Michaud

In place of the sermon today, I will be giving a short meditation on our first lesson and then give you a report of some of the things we have learned over the past couple of weeks in our discernment cottage meetings.

First, the meditation. Today's first lesson finds our prophet Jeremiah in the midst of chaos and war. Jerusalem is under attack in 587BC by the Babylonians. The Jewish king Zedekiah is trying to fight back, but it is appearing useless. Soon he will be faced with the Babylonians invading and destroying the city, and leading the Jewish ruling class, including the civil and religious authorities into exile. The King had been holding the prophet Jeremiah under house arrest, because Jeremiah had been critical of how the King had been handling things. Jeremiah knew that he too would be among those banished from Jerusalem and held in captivity in the foreign land of Babylon.

And yet, in the midst of all this, Jeremiah foresaw that a relative of his, his nephew Hanamel, wanted to meet with him about a real estate transaction. And so Jeremiah saw Hanamel when he came to him. Hanamel proposed that Jeremiah buy a field in the kingdom of Judea in his ancestral land from his uncle Shallum. What was Jeremiah's reaction? Was it – you've got to be kidding, we've got an invasion underway and the enemy will soon take us away by force. Why would I want to invest in property that I'll never get to use and which is being taken away from our people? No, he did not say that. In fact, the invitation to buy the property Jeremiah saw as a sign from the Lord. He

said after hearing Hanamel's offer, "then I knew this was the word of the Lord."

And what did he do? While chaos was swirling around him, Jeremiah calmly conducted the real estate transition, bought the land, and did so in plain sight of the ruling class of Judea, so that all could see what he did and where he put the title to the land, in a sturdy earthenware jar that would preserve it for many years.

Why did he do this? Because God told him to do this and so he knew that with God's grace he would be back, they all would be back one day from captivity to reclaim the land, and build again houses and fields and vineyards. He invested in the future because he knew that one day they would be redeemed, one day they would return and one day they would thrive once again.

In the midst of worry, anxiety, and distress, Jeremiah dared to buy a piece of land and so invested in the future. There would be a future. He demonstrated before the Jewish leaders that in God there is hope, declaring: For thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: Houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land.

This scripture was very much in my mind as we entered into our process of discernment here at St. Peter's, for we too are facing many challenges, facing some decay in our buildings and equipment and changes in society which have hurt church attendance and involvement. It can seem at times that we are under siege.

And yet, we also know about our history, and everyone who had a chance to view our video presentation knows that challenges are nothing new to St. Peter's, and every generation in spite of challenges,

Here are the top words: History, People, Liturgy, Music, Welcoming, Beauty, Change, Fr. David, Children, Tradition, Grow, this Space. Does that resonate with anyone? These are our strengths, which draw people to this place, to this community. Words that are slightly smaller also may resonate with you are well: building, family, community, friendly, singers, bell choir. These are things we hold in our heart that makes St. Peter's special.

Now some people can't help reading the fine print, and thinking that maybe some of the smaller words are things most people don't love – I caution you that while that could be the case and only one or two people find some of those things important, it could also be that someone had an insight about something that no one had thought of before, and some of those words could be supported by others once they thought about it. Of course, you may have picked up that one of the smallest words, hanging out between Beauty, Change and faith is God – I'm not sure about that: maybe the notetakers were assuming God was in everything and so didn't include the word, or maybe we're not too good as Episcopalians about evangelism and talking about God. Or it could be that this is very telling, and we may need to identify better where God is in the people, the beauty, the liturgy and music, the tradition, etc.

Every church has its own culture, its own DNA, and this word cloud can help us identify what we value as a community.

You were also asked to dream in the cottage meetings, to consider what might be possible in our near future for St. Peter's. There were an amazing amount of ideas generated, and it occurred to the Vestry in reviewing all these many ideas this past week that while we are looking

at some capital needs, we also need to better define our mission needs and dreams, some of which we can start doing this year, some of which we need to be included in future budgets and initiatives. The Vestry has asked the Discernment Committee to identify these mission needs and dreams -- many of which came out of the cottage meeting discussions -- and to organize and to present them to the Vestry at its meeting next month, and then report to the congregation what plans there would be to implement many of these ministries and ideas.

Here are some of the underlying themes that came out of these cottage meetings when you were asked to dream about what might be possible in our future:

- Undertake mission outreach and ministry to the community
- encourage a sense of community within the parish – providing more opportunities to connect and support one another
- effective outreach to newcomers to our church
- Better marketing and advertising of St. Peter's to the congregation and the wider community
- Focus on youth and families – more programs, and do a better job at Christian formation
- Better use of the Parish House and Annex spaces during the day – moving toward possibly using the first floor of the Annex for mission outreach
- Committed, effective stewardship of our buildings
- Enhanced music programs
- Upgrade our technology

- Hire more staff to allow us to do more – consider adding an assistant priest, program administrator, other positions as we grow
- More convenient and abundant parking
- Encourage more spiritual practices, such as retreats and prayer groups.

Finally, when you were asked about our physical space, here are some of the major responses we saw:

- The physical space should help us to connect – to become one congregation and less 3 services in isolation—socially bring us all together
- Need to ask: What is the best use of our space – how can we encourage and accommodate new ministries, to have the Parish Hall be a multi-use facility? A number of suggestions were made in the different groups, which the Discernment Committee is now analyzing.
- We need to take advantage of our unique location downtown
- We need to maintain what we have and to make our space more inviting.

What I see in all of this is hope, and commitment to the future of St. Peter's. There are challenges, there are questions about how all of this will be possible. What we are doing now is investing ourselves in our future, as Jeremiah invested in the land, knowing that God would provide for the future. We had 82 people plus the Vestry participate in a cottage meeting, investing their time in these discussions, and many more who have invested time in watching the video presentation. We are doing what many generations of parishioners of St. Peter's have

done before us. Coming together to remind ourselves why we love this place, and to plan for its future. And I have to give to you a special thank you for your support and participation.

Let me conclude by saying that I wanted to report to you what we know and keep you apprised of where we are going, and I hope this has been helpful. The process is going a little slower than I would like—but I know that I can be a little impatient—and I know it's going at just the right speed that the Holy Spirit would like, and the Holy Spirit is a lot smarter than me on these things. I encourage you to talk to one another about what we're finding and keep this good energy going about our future. May we continue to ask the Spirit's guidance in our work, and please keep myself, the Vestry and the parish itself in your prayers as we continue to discern our future together as St. Peter's Church, Salisbury Parish.