

Why WE Do This
Sermon, October 23, 2016
Christian Education Sunday
Text: Jeremiah 29:4-11

Some of you may remember that last hymn (*"O Love That Wilt Not Let Me Go"*) was written by a blind man, George Matheson, a Scottish pastor. In his journal Matheson had written: *"My hymn was composed in the manse of Innellan on the evening of the 6th of June, 1882, when I was forty years of age. I was alone in the manse at that time. It was the night of my sister's marriage, and the rest of the family were staying overnight in Glasgow. Something happened to me, which was known only to myself, and which caused me the most severe mental suffering. The hymn was the fruit of that suffering."* He went on to put in the journal that he wrote all the lyrics to all the stanzas in about five minutes, almost as if the words were dictated to him.

George Matheson never actually confided what caused his "mental suffering," but those who knew him suspected the probable cause was that his sister's wedding reminded him of a bitter disappointment he experienced just before he was to have married. His fiancée, when she learned of his failing eyes and impending blindness, said, "I do not wish to be the wife of a blind preacher." And she left. Now, Matheson was an accomplished man; he had earned multiple degrees, and enjoyed a successful pastorate, all of which was pretty spectacular for a blind man in the nineteenth century. But the night of his sister's wedding he probably wondered if he would always be alone, if his life would always be so dark; literally and figuratively. It was in that dark loneliness, though, that he was given a renewed vision of the Love That Wilt NOT Let Him Go, no matter what. If anyone had cause to be discouraged, if anyone had reason to wonder "Where is God?", if anyone had difficulty seeing what was ahead of him in life, it was this blind composer.

The Jewish people were having a very difficult time seeing what was ahead for them. They had cause to be discouraged, and I'm sure many wondered "Where is God?" In our reading from Jeremiah, the context is the exile and oppression of the Jews under the Babylonians in 587 BC. These people were not where they wanted to be, they longed for what they missed, they longed to see Jerusalem, the destroyed city they loved, they longed for their homes that were no more, they missed the people they loved who were no longer there. This was not the way it was supposed to be. Many lived day to day with an aching sadness that ran down to the very core of their being. These exiled Jews lived and worked and tried to raise their children among a hard and difficult people who cared nothing for their beliefs or customs. It is in this context that God speaks through His prophet and says to His people, verse 11: "I know the plans I have for you." Other versions translate this "I know the **thoughts I think** for you." Paraphrased, it was as if God was saying, "I'm **thinking** about you."

How you ever been there, facing your difficulties, wrestling with your realities, feeling your longings and just wondering, *"Where is God? Does God care? Does He even know where I am?"* Many of you have been there; I know I have. In verse 10, God says in so many words, "After a while I will come to you." Does God know where you are? Well, He can't say "I will come to you" if He doesn't know where you are! Have you ever felt as though God lost your address? God says, "I know right where you are." God can say He knows right where they are because, verse 4 tells us, they are right where He left them ... they were where they were because God carried them there. That can be implied to mean one of two things: It can mean "I have caused you to be carried away;" OR it can mean, "I have allowed you to be carried to that place; you were headed there and I didn't interfere ... except maybe to keep it from being worse." The word "carry" can be seen in an endearing, compassionate, protecting sense ... as if they were headed in this direction, they were reaping their just desserts, they were suffering the consequences of their own bad behavior, but by protectively "carrying" them God kept things from being a whole lot worse. After all, they could have been slaughtered by the Babylonians in a genocide, but they were not; they were "carried" into exile. If we were to zoom out the lens, so to speak, and get the broader historical view of the situation, we would see these people were where they were

because they had made bad choices, they had turned from God, they had forgotten and trivialized God and ignored His good ways, and here is where they ended up.

Have you ever taken a good hard look at your place of pain and had to admit you might just be there because of your bad choices? I think all of us know that feeling of facing the person in the mirror and having to honestly admit we were in a place of difficulty and pain largely because of our bad moves. God says, "I know where you are, and I've been thinking about you." Then in verse five He says, "Now, listen, while you are there, don't waste your time wishing you were somewhere else! Don't spend your days wistfully pining, 'Oh, if only I had done that, if only I had not done this.' Don't languor in the inactivity and immobility of regret, grief and despair. No, **RIGHT NOW** ... *'build houses and settle down, plant gardens and eat what they produce, marry and have sons and daughters, find wives for your sons and husbands for your daughters, so that they too may have sons and daughters. Increase in number there; do not decrease. Also, seek the prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you, too will prosper.'*" In short, get started and work hard to bring forth another generation, a faithful generation, and **this** time do everything in your power and with the grace of God to get it right! Grow and bring forth a faithful generation right where you are.

I've mentioned this before, but I like the sign at a tree nursery that advertised, "**The Best Time To Plant a Tree ... Was 25 Years Ago.**" Then below that it read: "**The second best time to plant a tree ... is right now.**" I like that. Yes, the best time to plant, say, an apple tree would have been years ago; I could be eating its good fruit today if I had done the proper planting back then. In like manner, there are all sorts of things we could have or should have done differently in our lives decades ago, years ago, months ago ... even days ago ... things which, if we had done them or said them (or not done them or not said them) back then would be producing great and beneficial results for us in our lives today.

However ... the *second* best time to plant a tree is right now. Today. You can't go back twenty five years and plant a tree that should have been planted back then. But you can get out the shovel and start planting right now! Where you are! Don't waste time lamenting, don't squander the days in unproductive languor and sorrow over what might have been, but **RIGHT NOW** "... *build houses and settle down, plant gardens and eat what they produce, marry and have sons and daughters; find wives for your sons and husbands for your daughters, so that they too may have sons and daughters and **pray** for the place where you are while you are there, work for its prosperity ...*" Again, in short, work hard where you are, when you are, in the midst of how it is, with what you got to bring forth another generation, a faithful generation, and **this** time do everything in your power and with the grace of God to get it right! Grow and bring forth a faithful generation right where you are.

On this Christian Education Sunday, I'd like to say that, in a nutshell, **THIS** is our mission as a church. **THIS IS WHY WE DO WHAT WE DO HERE IN THIS CHURCH.** We want to help each other get planted, to grow and pray and bring forth a faithful generation right where we are, with what we have, with who we are, in the midst of how it is and be a blessing to the place where we now live.

If you are in a difficult situation, trust me on this ... God has been thinking about you. God has not turned his back on you. God is not angry with you. In fact, it is possible the pain of your place just might be a part of God's plan. His plan is that you will **grow** where you are. By the grace of God and the power of His Spirit in obedience to our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, we are to grow ourselves and we are to grow a faithful generation ... to work hard, be faithful, plant roots and grow. Don't be too quick to quit when things get difficult. Don't be too hasty to try to extract yourself out of a situation in which God has placed you. Don't be so ready to throw in the towel. Don't give up. For God says you are there, where you are, to grow and bring forth fruit.

We will not always understand God's ways. But He always promises His people a future and a hope. Like George Matheson, believe in the promises of God. Even when, and perhaps *especially* when, you have trouble seeing where you are going. God is thinking of you with a love that will not let you go. He has plans for you, He has plans for all of us, and they are plans to prosper, not to harm ... plans to give all of us a future filled with hope.