

We Are All Connected
Rev. Susie Putzke
Jeremiah 29:1, 4-7

In the Early 90's there was a trend that emerged (*this was before things went viral*). Today we would most certainly say it went viral. It was a game imagined by a few students at a College in Philadelphia and it was referred to as "*The Six Degrees of Kevin Bacon*." In case you haven't heard of this game, the concept is that any actor (alive or dead) can be connected to Kevin Bacon in six degrees or less.

Six degrees of separation is the idea that all people are six or fewer social connections away from each other. As a result, a chain of "friend of a friend" statements can be made to connect any two people in a maximum of six steps.

Back in the early 2000s, Kevin Bacon did a hilarious Visa check card commercial that played off the whole "Six Degrees of Kevin Bacon". In the ad, he tries to write a check, but the cashier asks for ID. Since he doesn't have it, he leaves—and comes back with a bunch of random people to prove who he is.

He goes: "Okay.... I was in a movie with an extra named Eunice, whose hairdresser, Wayne, went to Sunday school with Father O'Neill, who plays racquetball with Dr. Sanjay, who just removed the appendix of Kim, who dumped you sophomore year. So you see, we're practically brothers."

It's silly and funny—but it actually reflects a real scientific idea called the small-world effect. Basically, it's the theory that anyone on Earth is only about six social connections away from anyone else. It started with psychologist Stanley Milgram's experiments in the 1960s and has been backed up by tons of research since. More recently, studies on Facebook's massive user network found that the average degree of separation is actually closer to 4.57.

In short, we're all way more connected than we think. Even across countries, cultures, and languages, there's usually a short chain of people linking us together. And thanks to the internet and social media, those connections are even easier now. So yeah—Kevin Bacon wasn't just selling a check card. He was kind of making a point about how small the world really is.

This kind of sets the tone for how we define our neighbor. To think differently about the ways we are all connected? Today we are invited to think about our responsibility to the various communities we find ourselves in and where the lines really don't matter. If they exist at all.

Well, our friend John Wesley (founder of the Methodist Movement- a very connectional system), is known for many things as you have been hearing, as we explore this "How Is It With Your Soul" series. But one infamous quote of Wesley's was that of "The World is my Parish" meaning that he felt his responsibility was to preach the gospel and minister to all the people,

everywhere, rather than being limited to a specific church or geographic area. Rooted in his commitment to spread the gospel he embodied a broader understanding of ministry to all people and all places.

This makes United Methodists great and natural collaborators, it's in our DNA. Wesley did not feel the need for us to be exclusive or even unique in our practices but instead joyfully adopted all the things from traditions he felt were great and he gave credit freely. He did not claim that we were the way, or the one, or the best, but acknowledged that our very diversity in people and practice is what made the movement both effective and enjoyable.

Today, on World Communion Sunday, we are invited to think in a similar way to Wesley. Claiming each other in connection. Participating in a ritual that builds on our likeness not our difference. That Celebrates our uniqueness as opposed to using them as tools or wedges to create division. Wesley could acknowledge that “we can’t all think alike” but asked the question “can we not all love alike?”

In our reading today we find ourselves in a similar predicament. Our text comes in the form of a letter written by Jeremiah, one of the major prophetic voices of the Old Testament. He is writing to those exiled to Babylonia. The city is still functioning but certainly not thriving. They are under duress. Believe it or not there was a great deal of difference in opinions among the people of this time. And those with a platform to preach and speak often had contrasting motives and values. In the thick of this drama and upheaval, Jeremiah is writing a letter to those already uprooted from their home and exiled to Babylon.

In this instance many people have been forcibly pulled from where they lived and placed somewhere against their will. There are no shortages of people being uprooted from homes and families in our current contexts. People being detained, families separated, others fleeing places of war and violence and some trying to seek a better and new life elsewhere. Many of us will not be able to relate to this type of exile but we bear witness to it, in our communes, certainly in our country (in our cities) and on the news).

In not too far of a leap another form of exile can take place when you have stayed in exactly the same place, but the world around you has changed so much it almost seems unrecognizable. We can experience exile or dislocation really without ever having moved. Quite regularly if we pause to think about it, something happens in our world, our community, our professional and personal lives where we find ourselves somewhere we didn’t choose... but here we are.

And how do we work, navigate, be a faithful witness in this context? I don’t want to rush to an answer here because I think the questions of this text are probably more important than the answer. Within this context of exile, the context laid out in our reading or our current experiences... We all have likely had the experience of dislocation, the feeling of being left out, the sense of not belonging.

Now nobody's present situations define their whole future, but if we think about the places we find ourselves now. To think about what it means to be where we are. To live where we are with hope for a future! Not a future that denies our past but a future that learns from it.

Jeremiah and I are kindred spirits, in the sense that he leaned a little to the dramatic side of things. Often dramatizing the word of God to make his point or get the attention of the listeners. In this text he put his energy towards helping those who felt dislocated and out of place to "seek the welfare of the city around them."

I don't think Jeremiah's message to "seek the welfare of the city around them" is the one they would have chosen to hear. A message more of peace than retaliation. He's also not saying that God's going to bring them back (which I trust they hoped to hear). He is not urging them to resist or fight back (which might have felt easier), but instead, inviting them to seek the welfare of the city. To make the best of their situation stating that "what is good for those around them will be good for them too."

I trust we have all found ourselves in a place we didn't choose. A place of dislocation. Maybe you were there some time ago. Maybe you feel you are there today. And Jeremiah's words (*though needing a bit of unpacking*) can be helpful to us today. Jeremiah is saying. God is not just where you have been, God is also with you here and now. You can be faithful now. You can be good citizens here.

There are too many examples in our history where people didn't seek the welfare of their community. Those communities, or congregations often end up shrinking or dissolving. These are the stories that some seem to think would be helpful to have our kids unlearn, but there is real danger in telling only our stories, real danger in waiting for more people to "like us" to walk in our doors as opposed to seeking the welfare of the communes we are in. This is not an America first form of leadership...but a "we all do better when we all do better" mentality. Now the line most quoted from this text was not read today. It is found in vs. 11. "Surely I know the plans for you," declares the Lord, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future."

Now at first glance and often at first use this text is misused. When it is used correctly (how Jeremiah intended). You are plural. For I know the plans I have for you all. Not a plan for one, but for all. God wants all the good things for all of us, not just some. We have gotten lost in a loop in which we don't always recognize our neighbors. We sometimes lose sight of the good God wants for ALL of us, not just some. And this work of connection, hope in divisive times is something we need to cultivate. That the welfare of others is that of our own. And again, not in a money or power game but in one in which love is our currency. The love in which all are worthy.

We have gotten a bit lost in our desire to seek comfort over connection. The challenge in both contexts (biblical and our own) is to practice connection over comfort. Discomfort can at its best help us to see one another. It can both challenge and encourage us to create community beyond the perimeter of the people who think and look like us. We can't just speak Love first we have to practice it. We can't just plant seeds and then walk away. We have to know how the way we practice care for each other inside these walls impacts the people outside of these walls in ways we won't always know and see. Our text today says, "Build hopes, settle down, grow your families, establish roots. Plant gardens, eat. Use this time to increase your faith and enhance your relationship with God," Jeremiah says.

In The book "To Change The World," by James Davidson Hunter he writes "For Jeremiah, exile did not mean that God has abandoned Israel. Rather, exile was the place where God was at Work. And boy oh boy God must be busy! We are ALL going to do better not in spite of the things that make us unique, but because of all them.

We receive gentle reminders from God in this text that say;
"when you call upon me, I will hear you.
You don't have to be in the temple, to pray to me, everywhere I will hear you.
When you seek me you will find me."

So as we go from this place, let us remember what God told the exiles in Babylon: "Seek the welfare of the city... for in its welfare, you will find your own." In other words we're in this together. Whether across the street or across the globe, our well-being is bound up in one another. On this World Communion Sunday, we join hands, spiritually and symbolically, with sisters and brothers around the world, sharing one Table, one Bread, one Christ. God is not limited by geography or language or borders. God is here. God is there. And through God, we are all connected. One family. One beloved person that spans the whole world. So let's live like it. Let's build, plant, bless, and pray, not just for ourselves, but for the good of all. Because when the world flourishes, we do too.