

18 Pentecost
Christ and Grace
Robin Teasley

Jeremiah 29:1, 4-7
October 13, 2019

Luke 17:11-19

This past Thursday, when Jill arrived at church, as she drove up the front drive she noticed a sleeping bag on the steps of the front door. She drove around the circle to get a closer look and determined that there was a body, a person in the sleeping bag. After some discussion, we decided to wait a bit before calling the police. Another parishioner, upon arriving at church, saw the person getting up and out of the sleeping bag. A woman. She put on an additional shirt, gathered her things and left.

This is the second time we've encountered a person resting on our property. A few weeks ago a man was napping on the concrete out under the pavilion. This was one of those 97 degree days and though the concrete was hard, it was cool and shaded. There's always a first reaction of concern that the person might be in medical distress, or even dead. Then we struggle with whether or not to call the police. With the man napping in the pavilion, we did call. They quietly asked the man to move along, and he did. What comes to my mind after these events is a question. What do we say about a man or a woman who have nowhere to be, so they come to a church and sleep on concrete pavilions and steps?

I think this is an important question to ponder. More important, I am certain, than just about any other argument or complaint or criticism we are hearing (or saying ourselves) these days. After thinking about and praying for the woman who probably spent the night on our church doorstep, and after pondering it all for awhile, I began to envision a shelter for the homeless here in Petersburg. In fact, I pictured it in our unused classrooms downstairs, with new bathrooms with showers and a place for cots for both men and women. I share this with you knowing it sounds impossible; I was almost afraid to voice it. For those of you who knew Lucy Dorr, of blessed memory, you remember her passion for the homeless, and her vision for Petersburg.

When I read the passage from Jeremiah for this morning one line stood out. "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." And I began to wonder if we've thought much about that. When I answered God's call to come to Christ and Grace, foremost in my mind was that Petersburg is a city where a church might do some mighty work in God's name and I was excited by that prospect. So here we are, in Petersburg, a city where many people are living in exile conditions, where shootings happen on a daily basis, and people line up at the Hope Center five days a week for lunch.

The past two Wednesdays a group of us have served lunch to the Hope Center guests. They come in tired and hungry, laughing or in a bad mood. They are talkative, wanting to share their stories or they are silent loner types; they are grateful for it all, or very picky eaters. They come in with friends or family or all alone. Most are kind and there are always a few tricksters. They are a lot like the rest of us.

Those of us who go there wish the kitchen were cleaner, wish the staff were not so strict, and yet, the ministry of preparing and serving the food creates a fellowship among us that bubbles up and

over and onto the guests who come through the serving line. We plan to serve about 75 people and some weeks it's not that many, but we always make sure there is plenty of food in case they are so hungry that they need seconds. If they want seconds they have to wait 45 minutes and keep their trays to use again. If you are hungry, you wait patiently because those are the rules.

If you have worshiped at Christ and Grace a long time, then you may remember that The Rev. Boston Lackey was instrumental in creating Downtown Churches United – an organization of many local churches of all denominations committed to caring for the poor in Petersburg. The main work of DCU is concentrated at the Hope Center and our pledge dollars at Christ and Grace continue to support this holy work. Whether it's serving lunches, financially supporting the food pantry, or helping with utility bills for those in need, your pledges enable us to seek the welfare of the city of Petersburg.

I wonder what we could do, what it would look like, if more of us pledged, or if more of us increased our pledges. I wonder what we could do, what it would look like, if more of us were able to give some of our time, not only at the Hope Center, but also at other places in the city in need of some mercy and grace.

In our Gospel text we heard the brief yet pointed story of Jesus healing the ten lepers. Jesus healed them all, nine Jews and one Samaritan. All in all there were ten men in need of healing, and Jesus was not concerned with their religion or what part of town they lived in. He just healed them all. I suspect Jesus knew that not all would return to give thanks, but he healed them anyway.

This is what it looks like when we are Shining Our Light. It looks like a community of faith that worships and studies and serves together, creating bonds of love that bubble up and over and onto those around us. We have been given so much and have been called to return to God with thanks and praise out of the abundance of our time, talent, and treasure. We come here because we know we will be loved, we will be safe, we will be accepted and cared for. Somehow, our two visitors, one at the pavilion and one on the front doorstep, knew that this was a place of safety, they knew something perhaps, of how we care for those in need, seeking the welfare of the city of Petersburg.

I have a vision, and I hope you do too. Next week you will have an opportunity to write down the ways you hope to see Christ and Grace shine its light. Perhaps we can share with one another the visions God has given each of us. They might be really big and far off on the horizon, or they might be nearer and more immediately attainable. But if we don't share our visions and hopes with one another, we will never know what God might be dreaming for Christ and Grace and for the city around us. Thankfulness and generosity - they set God's vision into action, bringing light into the world.

Amen.