

Psalm 137

By the rivers of Babylon— there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion. On the willows there we hung up our harps. For there our captors asked us for songs, and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying, ‘Sing us one of the songs of Zion!’

How could we sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land? If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand wither! Let my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth, if I do not remember you, if I do not set Jerusalem above my highest joy.

Remember, O Lord, against the Edomites the day of Jerusalem’s fall, how they said, ‘Tear it down! Tear it down! Down to its foundations!’ O daughter Babylon, you devastator! Happy shall they be who pay you back what you have done to us! Happy shall they be who take your little ones and dash them against the rock!

“A Word to the Wise is Superfluous”

Ethan Frome, by Edith Wharton

Rev. Charles Schuster

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I want to thank the Dawson sisters. They’ve been singing these songs all morning, for three services, and they have one more to sing, and their voices were good to start with, and I think they’ve gotten better, even, if you can imagine. Thank you, mother and daughter.

I try to convey to the younger clergy who have been on the staff and who are currently on the staff, important tips of what I have learned from the mistakes I have made. Like, take down the Advent banner that says “Unto us a child is born” when there’s a wedding in the sanctuary in December. Like, don’t use potato dough bread for Communion because it swells up in your mouth, and it’s not wise to joke about the last time we dropped a baby when there’s a couple talking to you about having a baptism. Today has been the last chance that I’ve had, the final words of wisdom to Reverend Everhart, who’s not in this service. I would have asked her to be in this service, but she’s doing Crosswalk. She’s been in the other two services, she’s heard this twice. This sermon is delivered to her. I’m at Annual Conference next week, and Ray Miller’s preaching, and she’s preaching the week after that, and then she’ll be moving to Central City. What could I say to her, I wondered? And to Joel?

There’s a fundamental thought that I think she needs to hear. It’s this. We are aliens in our culture, as Christians, we are resident aliens. Now, that’s not original with me. Will Willemon, Stanley Hauerwas, they wrote a book entitled *Resident Aliens*, but it’s not original with them, because they got it from Jesus, in the Sermon on the Mount, where basically, Jesus says, we don’t have the need to be different, but if the Gospel is to be believed and lived, we will be, because it shows us the world as a place where what makes sense to everybody else may not make sense to God. Because Jesus was not crucified for saying and doing what added up to everyone. People are crucified for following the Gospel that runs often counter to the prevailing culture. We live in the world, but we do not live of it. Here are some words to the wise.

First of all, Pam will notice Central City, which is where she's going, is a strange place. It has these casinos, and the church is one that says it's the oldest Methodist church in the Conference. Now, Joel's father Ross, his church is Golden and Ross Kershaw says the Golden First Church is the oldest church in the Rocky Mountain Conference, and there's been no end to the conversation in the hallways between Joel and Pam about that. So I won't get into that. But it's in the mountains, and mountain towns are just different. There's no cell phone service, there's no Internet, there's no e-mail, they don't even have a Sonic Drive-in there. It's not even civilized. The place is peculiar. Reminds me of the Israelites in exile. A time when they were taken out of their country, out of Jerusalem, out of the way by the Babylonians, and then these words as one of the poets, in Babylon, in exile. Pray to God. It became a Psalm, we heard it today. "By the waters of Babylon, we have sat down and wept. How do we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?" The place was peculiar. It wasn't home.

A few years ago there was a letter written to Ann Landers, "Dear Ann, I am employed at a very large nursing home. One of our residents here lost her dentures. And she took a pillowcase, and she crept into the rooms of the other residents late at night while they were asleep, and she picked up every pair of false teeth from the water glasses, and then returned to her room and tried them all out until she found one that fit her. Then she went back into the rooms and put the dentures back, but they were all mixed up. And the next morning everyone was walking around the place with overbites and underslung jaws, complaining their teeth didn't fit. How do we straighten this mess out?"

Ever been in a place where everybody wore their own teeth? How do you sing the Lord's song when your teeth don't fit? Richard Lischer in his novel *Open Secrets* writes about a place. It was not far from the confluence of the Mississippi and Missouri rivers. The Missouri shows brown. The Mississippi foams yellow. "The two make a big river the color of cream soda." Before you romanticize the river, you should "see and smell its twenty-three miles of interceptor sewers and pump stations that retrieve raw waste pumped into the river."..... And then "you have to squint like an Impressionist artist, or frame the scene with your hands to block out its ugliness." Some places, Edith Wharton describes the town of Starkfield as a town of which it is said, "The smart ones got away."

Peculiar, some of the places. What do we do when we're put in a peculiar place? Well, as Christians, we know what to do. We are put in peculiar places for the purpose of transforming them. When you join the church now, somebody asks you the question, "Will you support the church with you prayers, your presence, your gifts, and your service?" and then they say, "Will you work with us to transform the world?" Our job is to transform the world. We are put in our places for a purpose. We are appointed to our places. Some of us are appointed by bishops to our places. The rest of us are appointed by a much higher source. We are put in our places by God. There's a reason why we're all put here. If we can figure that out, then we look at the strangeness of our place, and then we begin to see our assignment. And the point at which we start. If it's a new school we're in, we know there's a lot for us to learn. But we also know there's a lot to give to the institution that's trying to teach us. It could be a nursing home, and our job is to help

sort out the randomized teeth. It could be a new job, and our job is to figure, our task is to figure a way to do it better than it's ever been done. It could be a new grandchild, and then we figure a way to afflict as many people as possible with pictures and stories, so the world will know the greatest baby, the most beautiful baby that has ever been born, has been born. We all have been given an appointment.

This coming week, at Annual Conference in Grand Junction, they will read the appointments, where all of the clergy have been sent, put, and when they read your name you have to stand up, and then the people who are sitting around you stand up, and they put their hands on you, and then there is the longest prayer that ever gets prayed. Prayed by a DS who tries to outdo the previous DS who prayed for his or her district. And I've always wondered if that prayer is to help the preachers deal with the places we've been sent, or if that prayer is prayed for the places we're sent, for whom the bishop turns us loose. I'm never sure. We are residents, all of us, but we are aliens. We are present, but we are not of the world. We discover what needs to be done, and we set out to do it. Pam is going to Central City, a strange place, but all places are peculiar, and we are put and appointed, and our job is to transform our places. If it's an ugly place, then we work to create beauty. If the climate is severe, then we work to create a warmth of spirit. If there are great lapses of culture, then we organize a parade or teach a dance or sing the Lord's song by the waters of Babylon. We're appointed by God to the places we're put, and our job is to transform them. Little by little, one step at a time, wherever we are.

But it is not just to the places that we're sent and put. It's also to people, and sometimes people are a problem. Four churches ago, I worked with a custodian who was really good at his job, cleaning up the church. The pews on a Sunday morning were so polished that when people sat down, they slid in. The tile on the floor was so shiny you could look down and see your face looking up at you. The problem was, he was very proud of the church. He said the only problem with the church is the people who come, and mess it up. We had to fire him.

Edith Wharton describes the people of Starkfield. "I had been struck," she said, "by the contrast between the vitality of the climate and the deadness of the people. After the December snows were over, the blazing blue sky poured down torrents of light and air on the white landscape, and it gave back an intense glitter. One would have supposed that such an atmosphere must quicken the emotions, as well as the blood, but it seemed to produce no change except that of retarding still more the sluggish pulse of the people of Starkfield." It's the people. It's the Babylonians, demanding that we sing our songs of faith, meantime they've got us put in prison, wearing chains. How do we deal with the people in the places we've been put?

Pam is being appointed to St. James Church. That's interesting. I wondered about the name of the church - is it named after some former church member, or present church member, who gave them a lot of money? Is that why his name was James? Or was the church named for the New Testament book, the Epistle of James? Martin Luther didn't like the Epistle of James, called it "the straw Epistle" because it primarily emphasized the importance of deeds. "Faith without works is dead," and Martin Luther thought the

important thing was faith. Was the church named after the disciple James, and Jesus with his friends on the way to stop in a Samaritan city, they looked for a place to stay and the innkeeper wouldn't let them stay there because they were Jews, and it was James then who told Jesus. "Call down fire from Heaven, burn up this place." Jesus then called James and from that time on he was called the Son of Thunder. Was that the name of the church? People are a problem.

It's interesting, this past week our membership committee met, and they're planning the All-Church Picnic, which will be held on a Sunday, after the worship services, the 23rd of August. We were debating whether we ought to have a dunk tank at the All-Church Picnic, and it costs some money, pretty significant money, and it's a lot of work, you've got to fill the thing, and then you've got to empty it and take it down. There was a lot of talk about whether we ought to have a dunk tank, and it was decided that we would have a dunk tank. The committee is made up of staff members and church members, and we were speculating as to who gets to sit in the chair and have people throw balls at a target so that the person in the chair would get put into the water. And the staff members, we were all thinking of church members we could dunk, and the church members, why, they were all thinking of staff members who could be targets for getting wet. People are a problem.

Anthony Demello talks about an old man who owned an antique and curio shop, and a tourist came in and sat down. The old man and the tourist were visiting, and the tourist said to the old man, "What do you think is the strangest thing you have here in the shop?" and the old guy thought about all the things in the shop, the antiques and curios, the stuffed animals, the shrunken heads, the mounted fish, the deer heads. He turned to the tourist and said, "The strangest thing in this shop, without any doubt, is myself." People are strange. And the problem, they can be wherever they are, which is usually where we're put. But there is a word to the wise, and it's been a word that we've heard for years. "Make disciples of Jesus Christ," we've been told. When people are a problem, when people are peculiar, make disciples of Jesus Christ.

But I think there is a word to the wise that is more wise than that. I'd give it to Pam, I take it myself, I speak it to you. When people are a problem, when we've been put in a place where the people are a problem, what can we do? The only thing we can do, the best we can ever think to do, is to be a disciple of Jesus Christ. Because we cannot convert. There is no way we can control someone else and what they think. Christianity calls us to be disciples. When people are a problem, it's time to be a disciple of Jesus. We're called by God as Christian people to be Christ to each other. I can't make someone else a disciple, they will have to choose it. But I can be a disciple. I can participate with people by being a disciple of the one who saw all people as God's people. Disciples teach what the teacher taught. Disciples are called to do what the teacher did. It means being Christian. It means living the lifestyle. It means reaching out to those beyond the reach of most, and offering a hand to those who could use a lift. It means finding value in those who are considered of little worth. It means bringing encouragement to those who are considered lost causes. It means finding something positive when people are positive

there's nothing positive. It means using our minds to ask questions when people think all the answers have been found. That's what it means.

Pat Crenshaw is a comedian. She said, "One of the greatest temptations is to throw in the towel, to quit on life. It's the temptation to give up, give in, and give out. It's the temptation to sit down and become passive and bored. It's the temptation to become a spectator rather than a participant." She goes on to say, "God gave us two ends. One to think with, and one to sit on, and our success depends on which one we use the most." And then she said, "Heads, you win. Tails, you lose." Disciples use their heads, always thinking, always hoping. To be a disciple of Jesus Christ is to go where there's danger. To do what is necessary. To face death without fear, and to live life with anticipation.

The Vietnamese theologian Thich Nhat Hanh said, "The true miracle is not to walk on water, but to walk on the earth." To be disciples is to walk on the earth the way he did, and to see on the earth the things he saw, and for him no place to lay his head, a prophet without honor in his own home town. We are resident aliens, disciples of Jesus, and people are a problem, and we are put with people to participate with the problem until we and they can solve it. A word to the wise: If the place we're put is peculiar, transform it. If the people where we're put are a problem, be a disciple to them. All of us are put in our places with people. Some of us are put where we are by a bishop. The rest of us are appointed by God. A word to the wise: to Pam Everhart, to Central City, to Saint James Church, it's an awesome responsibility. She can do it, and she will do it well. And so, with God's help, will we.