

## **Build Houses, Plant Gardens**

A sermon preached at  
Lendrum Mennonite Brethren Church  
Edmonton, Alberta

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by Arnie Voth

Texts: Psalm 137:1-6; Jeremiah 29:4-14

Dear Jeremiah: You may remember me. 15 years ago from this same pulpit I took the liberty of imagining you had applied to be our pastor since we were looking for one then. I imagined what the response of our Pastoral Selection team would be and addressed it to you. Unfortunately, I had to come to the imaginary conclusion that your application would have been rejected and so I wrote and read the imaginary letter of rejection on behalf of our church. I sincerely hope you have forgiven me for this impertinence, because now the tables are turned. **We** are applying to **you** for pastoral help and counsel.

I hope I can explain what I mean well enough to bridge a rather large generational gap between us – a few millennia, give or take. You see, Jeremiah, there have been and continue to be times when we would like to join your people in spirit by the waters of Edmonton and sit down and weep. (I think there is already quite enough weeping by the waters of Babylon without our tears!) Many of us are discouraged, some so much that they are simply disengaged. It seems the harder we try to build the holy temple of God that our church should be, the more we fail. The more we try to live reconciled lives of harmony of soul and spirit in a believer's community, the more conflict we seem to face. The more we try to build community, the more we are deserted. The more we seek to praise God in joy for all he has done for us, the more in the quiet of the evening we ask ourselves what it is that we are so thankful for. The harder we try to find spiritual workers, teachers and leaders, the fewer we find as the unwilling discourage the willing, as the skeptics seem to stifle the enthusiasts, and the disengaged and apathetic slowly smother the spiritual energy of the eager optimists.

Yes, Jeremiah, I know I'm exaggerating, possibly even a whole lot, but I know you'll understand because some of your prophecies were pretty strong stuff! After all, the only way most people in our time know your name is because it is used to describe over-the-top ranting and raging about some evil or another.

So, Jeremiah, do you have any counsel for us? Any words from the Lord whom you served so faithfully? The exiles in Babylon didn't ask you for your letter of advice and some of them didn't like it when they got it. But...we are ready to listen. I am ready to listen.

Yours in the Name of the Almighty God who has called us to be his people. Arnold Voth - quite unofficially on behalf of the Lendrum Mennonite Brethren Church in Edmonton.

Dear Brothers and Sisters at Lendrum, and you, Arnold. First of all, of course I've forgiven you that letter of rejection – it was only too true. I know I would have fared no better with you than I did with my own people of Israel. But I also know you would never have thrown me into an empty cistern or prison!

I have already written you the counsel you need. Weren't you listening when one of you read my letter this morning? Well, alright; you listened with your ears, but not with your heart and soul. OK, I am happy to enlarge on my own letter for you. In fact, I'm glad you asked. But before I come to you in your time, come with me back to my time and my own people.

We left them sitting by the waters of Babylon, weeping underneath their silent harps on the willow trees. Did God tell me to go lay a comforting hand on their shoulders and say, 'There, there, I feel your pain. I understand life has been cruel to you. I weep with you'?

He did not! He told me to tell them to get off their duffs and hang their handkerchiefs on the willows instead of their harps, to get busy building houses, and planting gardens. Why? They had been chosen by God and when God chooses a people or an individual or a community here on earth to be his people, He can be amazingly indifferent to their discomfort in the short term.

My people, the exiles in Babylon, just wanted to be back home in their own land. But God wanted them to be his people, a nation through whom all nations would be blessed, as he had promised Abraham and Isaac. God knew we hadn't been much of a blessing in a very long time; one wicked king after another, trying to outdo each other in idolatry and wickedness, and mostly succeeding, one stupid war after another, endless internecine squabbling and palace revolts complete with assassinations and counter-assassinations. Indeed when I myself looked back on our last 20 or 30 years in Judah, I couldn't imagine what they were weeping over by the waters of Babylon!

Before I go on, let me remind you especially of a few words of mine in the middle of that letter. "For I know the plans I have for you," declares the Lord, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you. Plans to give you hope and a future."

And what did happen to my people there in Babylon? Let me tell you. As subjects of a powerful kingdom, the most powerful kingdom in the world of that time, they were freed from their own endless lust and rivalry for power for they had none to lust after. They were also freed from the need to protect themselves from other nations for their captors were the biggest nation around for nearly all of those 70 years. What followed is remarkable and astonishing, even for me who did have some inside information that things would go well with them. They became incredibly creative and intellectually and spiritually fertile. They produced more literature about their religion than at any other time in their history.

They organized the existing books of the law, and modernized their use of the written word. Since they had no temple, they founded the synagogue, unknown to this time. It provided for multiple small communities worshipping together all over the nation instead of just in the temple a few times a year. Since they were small, no one thought about hierarchy or who would get to be High Priest – there was no hierarchy. They were just groups of people worshipping their God. The synagogue preserved the community of Jewish faith in the absence of any temple for millennia. Indeed, it was probably the foundation on which the concept of communities of believers called churches was laid. The Lord Jesus, the promised Messiah worshipped and taught in many of their synagogues. Not only did they study the Scriptures, recopy them, translate them, discuss them but they also taught them to their children diligently and faithfully. They discussed them endlessly in their informal yet regular synagogue gatherings.

And that is only the beginning. The Babylonians treated them well. They allowed them to settle along the Chebar river, really an irrigation canal, so planting gardens was easy! They were allowed to live in communities, and not only to plant their own gardens but to carry out their own trades and professions and build their own businesses. Many became quite wealthy. Many became professionals and advisors for the Babylonians, like Daniel whose story is well known to you.

Most important of all, they were finally cured of their idolatry. In Babylon they finally learned to abhor the idols that surrounded them and whatever sins and wrongs they committed later, they never again returned to the worship of other gods and idols.

“For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you. Plans to give you a future and a hope.” God’s promise to us in Babylon is the same for you today.

So, now on to your time and your people - build houses. Yes, you read that correctly, build houses! Building a house is commitment, written in large letters. It means you are committing a lot of energy, of money, of time, of everything to that place you call your home. It means you are committed to staying in that place, in that community, in that city, in that country. I know you are surrounded by a people, by an entire civilization, that pitches tents instead of building houses. Those tents are your idols that you will have to renounce as we had to renounce ours. Oh, I know that all of you, believer and unbeliever alike build physical houses, huge ones, luxurious ones, mansions even. But that isn’t what I’m talking about. Your friends, your peers, your business associates, your fellow Canadians of all kinds pitch tents of relationships ready to break camp at the first sign of trouble, and, no surprise here, trouble does come. They pitch tents of community associations of all kinds, deserting them almost as fast as they join them.

They pitch tents of temporary sojourn in everything from families to careers and professions, to pseudo-marriage relationships to faith communities and alas even in their own personal, moral and spiritual lives.

Tent dwellers do not care about foundations, they do not care about planting anything, or even about caring for the ground on which they pitch their tents. They care nothing for their fellow tent dwellers for they will change over night. So my first word of counsel is just what I told my own people so long ago, ‘build houses’! Build them even if you seem almost alone in the middle of deserted campgrounds. Build houses of deep and solid and very visible, as visible as temples, commitments of faith and obedience to your God, my God. Build houses of the stones and bricks of deep and long lasting commitment to all your Lord gives you and places before you; whether family, or spouse, or friends, or faith community or career, or service to some or all of the above. Never mind the tent-dwellers around you – build houses on their lots when they leave. Build houses of deep and lasting and unwavering commitment to each other, you of this community. I know it is hard to build houses when you are surrounded by tent dwellers. You will be laughed at for your unbending devotion to building permanence in the form of houses by those who speak boldly of ‘keeping their options open’. Believe me, true joy and fulfillment in life consists much more of eliminating options than of expanding them. Tent dwellers will never enjoy anything beyond the dust and dirt of each new campsite. And the disappointments of the last campsite follow them wherever they go.

Plant gardens! Tent-dwellers do not plant gardens for they never stay long enough to harvest anything. So they eat the produce others have grown. Planting a garden changes your entire worldview, especially of the world immediately around you. When you have planted a garden, you come to love all that grows, and you learn to discern what it is that you do not want to grow. Nurturing the growth of even the weakest plants becomes important. Little tasks become important, for they are vital to the success of the larger garden; the preparation of the soil, the watering, the careful planting of the right seeds in the right place, and the weeding, the endless weeding; all come together in a plentiful harvest.

You ask me, “what should we plant?” Really, Arnie, I’m surprised to hear you ask it. Do you mind if I call you ‘Arnie’ – I hear everyone else does and you have appealed to me as a brother as well as a prophet. I have heard of your love of literature, of metaphor, of allegory and of layered meanings in the Scriptures; and you ask me “What should we plant?”. I am told you are quite fond of your own garden, and indeed, I’m told there is an entire gardening community in your church family. How do you decide what you plant in your own physical gardens? You plant what you want to eat and you plant what you want to see – what could be simpler? I’m sorry, that was a bit sarcastic – I’m just being Jeremiah again!

So what do you want to eat and what do you want to see in the garden of your community of saints? Let me awaken your usually very active imagination to the possibilities. The options are far more plentiful than McFayden’s seed catalogue. Do you want to enjoy the fruits of the Spirit in your fellowship, you know them well from Paul’s letter to the Galatians; love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control? Then plant them whenever and wherever you can. Do you want to see a harvest of the love and harmony that your Lord so earnestly prayed for in the Garden of Gethsemane? You remember that prayer from your many readings of it, I’m sure. “I in them and you in me. May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me.” Plant a whole garden full of the love the Lord describes in this last discourse with his disciples. Plant abundantly and lavishly – don’t worry about wasted seeds. I hope you were listening to your pastor, Carol, a few weeks ago when she talked about sowing. But at the same time, be wise in how you plant. I hear you cleverly plant marigolds next to your tomatoes to keep them free of insects and weeds. If you want love to flourish, you will also have to plant a lot of forgiveness all around every plant, or it will be choked out by the weeds of anger, resentment and bitterness very soon.

Do you want to see the fruits and smell the flowers of changed lives in your community? Then plant a garden of mutual encouragement and inspiration to spiritual growth and maturity. And don’t forget once again to plant forgiveness liberally around these plants – they need that protection.

Do you want to see a harvest of children joyfully praising God, learning to know Him and follow Him, growing up into robust enthusiastic disciples of the Son of God? Then plant an abundance of encouragement, support, assistance and affirmation of those whom God has called to teach and nurture them. You cannot plant too much of these.

In some ways I know this kind of planting is more difficult than the planting of physical seeds in real dirt in your garden. The beginning and the end points of the process are harder to recognize. When you go out into your garden in May, you know where the dirt is, you know where you want to run your roto-tiller, you have labeled packages of seeds that you place in the ground according to the instructions in the package; potatoes spaced about two feet apart and buried four inches deep; carrots scattered as best as you can so they end up being about inch apart and barely covered with a bit of earth. It's a lot harder to recognize the discouragement in the face of your newest teacher in a crowded church foyer and then to plant the seeds of encouragement and joyful rededication to the work of making disciples of young children. It is harder still to remember that conversation about your brothers and sisters in your Lord laced with sarcasm, sneering and gossip plants only weeds that someone else will have to pull out; usually with considerable damage to the growing plants of righteousness.

Again a crowded foyer makes it even harder to recognize these events before they happen. There are more differences. No one walks into your garden and pulls up what you have planted. Well, OK then, squirrels excepted! So I know that much of the discouragement, the apathy, the disengagement begins when you have planted a garden and others seem to be destroying it!

Let me remind you again of my words to the exiles "For I know the plans I have for you," declares the Lord, "Plans to prosper you and not to harm you. Plans to give you hope and a future."

Yes, gardens require work, they require regular work, dedicated work, focused work, daily work, and sometimes seemingly futile work. They need watering. They need constant care, not just a passing by every few weeks or months when you feel like it. Delicate plants require sheltering from the rude winds. Overly aggressive plants need to be contained. Weeds need to be removed again and again. And often you must replant when nothing has grown, or when what has grown is destroyed by hail or carelessly trodden on by an indifferent passerby, or even by yourself.

So in order to grow the larger garden that is a people called of God, you must plant an abundance of patience, forgiveness and endurance in your own garden. Patience because you may have to replant and replant and replant again. Forgiveness because if you cannot forgive wholeheartedly, unconditionally and totally when someone steps on what you have planted, you will never get around to replanting.

I mentioned earlier that when God calls a people to be his people, he can be amazingly indifferent to their short term distress. Or I should say he can *seem* to be amazingly indifferent to their short term distress. He is not. Never forget; "I know the plans I have for you, plans to prosper you and not to harm you. Plans to give you a future and a hope." For the forlorn exiles, His larger plan was to build a people, a nation through whom all people would be blessed. They needed the exile to regain their focus on who they were.

God loves you in Lendrum just as dearly as he did the exiles. It is through you and faith communities like you that all nations will be blessed or should be blessed. It is through you that peace and reconciliation are to be proclaimed throughout all the world. I trust you have not forgotten your mission.

How will you be the salt for a civilization of tent dwellers, if you have not learned to build houses yourselves? Be thankful it's hard to build houses in your world – you will be that much better at the trade. Be thankful it is hard to grow a garden. How will you bring peace to a very troubled world if you cannot grow a garden of peace among yourselves.

How will you preach the message of reconciliation to a strife torn world if you cannot grow a garden of it in your own community? How will you invite a sick world into the redeeming love of God, if you have not grown a garden of it in your own backyard? How will you seek reconciliation for others if you have not first learned to grow forgiveness and reconciliation in your own garden, if you have not had the discipline of having to plant, over and over and over again and yet again, another crop of pardon and forgiveness?

“For I know the plans I have for you, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you a future and a hope.”

As you build your houses of commitments and plant your gardens, you will experience a transformation. When you have carefully nurtured the plants in your garden, the tender shoots of gentleness and goodness, the fragrant flowers of joy, raised in the shelter of a robust God-breathed love of one another, when you have patiently helped others nurture their own gardens, then you will hear the voice of your God ever more clearly. Then you will recognize the first sprouts of weeds in your own garden and the unfeeling words of sarcasm and cynicism will be pulled up before they are heard. You will recognize the first shoots of bitterness, rage and anger and quickly pull them out before they over-run your carefully planted flowers of kindness and compassion. Best of all, you will find ever more and more new plants to grow in the garden of your life.

The exiles in Babylon wept not only because they had lost a homeland, but because they felt that they would never again hear the voice of their God. After passing on God’s command to build houses and plant gardens and have families, I also passed on the most reassuring words in my whole letter. “You will seek me and find me, when you seek me with all your hearts.” They did and they did.

May God prosper you as you build houses and plant gardens in Lendrum. Yours in the Name of the one God we serve, Jeremiah.