



## *“Urban Renewal”*

Jeremiah 29:4-11; Acts 16:9-15; Revelation 21:1-5

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Fifth Sunday after Easter

When I was twelve years old, my family moved from the wide-open spaces and sunny skies of eastern Washington to gritty, industrial, smoggy gray, urban Dayton, Ohio. Dayton was then a manufacturing center filled with factories and good jobs along with other not so pleasant urban realities.

My father was the minister of a thriving congregation in a declining neighborhood just blocks from downtown Dayton. I watched my parents adjust to and become committed to that neighborhood and its people. The congregation was determined to stay and make a difference. I experienced firsthand the difference God’s good news embodied in God’s people makes in the lives of ordinary and desperate people.

I recall great joy when a Mrs. Goggins and her two teenage daughters became part of that family of God. Mr. Goggins worked but drank most of his paycheck. He became an object of intense intercessory prayer. Their house was near shambles. We only imagined what went on inside. One of the girls, Doris, and I became friends. She didn’t say much but she always met me at the front gate and never invited me in. Doris and her sister Gloria married well and escaped the cycle of violence and alcohol in which they grew up.

Our family lived in a nearby neighborhood of blue-collar workers. Our parents wanted us to get out and do better, but somehow I came to love that sometimes harsh urban environment and the people who lived there.

That’s why, I suppose, when I arrived in seminary I was interested in urban ministry. It was the late sixties, and white flight was draining urban centers of social stability, businesses and steady jobs, leaving poverty, urban blight and social ills that haunt urban America still.

My first ministry job was youth minister in an ethnic church on the North Side of Chicago. Two of my classmates were engaged in ministry on the North Side. Ray was a pastor in Edgewater and Jim in Logan Square. We spent long lunches talking about ministry in the city and how Christians might somehow reverse the social decay of the inner city or at least alleviate some of its worst consequences.

Ray stayed in Edgewater for twenty years and along the way became an international leader in urban ministry. He’s back in Seattle, his hometown, but still engaged in urban ministry as leader of a university devoted to international urban ministry. Jim went on to become an urban sociologist and theologian and has devoted his life as a Christian scholar to urban ministry.

To my surprise and with no small amount of guilt, I went from urban Chicago to serve a congregation in rural eastern Washington. However, it didn’t take me long to figure out

**Plymouth Church**  
**Sermon 9 May 2010**

that many of the same social issues touch declining rural communities – only the forms are different.

Years later, again to my surprise, I found myself serving a congregation in downtown Boston. It was very different urban experience than we talked about back in seminary. More than 100,000 people, mostly middle class, live in downtown Boston. Our congregation reflected that demographic. However, for a number of reasons, the congregation seemed disinterested in Boston. They thought the world was their parish.

My mission there was to lead the church to reengagement with our city. We created partnerships with a black church, a multicultural urban seminary, and a multicultural urban study center and began to be a powerful force in urban Boston.

During those years, I discovered what my seminary friend Ray called a “theology of place.” It’s something every congregation needs to develop. God calls us to be the church and to minister here – not there. And we are here – not there – for a reason. God has something to say and do here – not there. It’s why we’re here, not there.

Again, to my surprise, after a decade of exile in the suburbs, I find myself back in the city, and not just any city. New York is in many ways the most significant city on earth. Brooklyn, our borough, is a large urban center of remarkable diversity, enormous challenge, and thrilling opportunities.

Here in this place we are becoming a new Plymouth Church, a new urban church, called by God to be here, not there, and commissioned to be the church and do God’s work here – and now. We are in the process of figuring how to be that urban church and how to do God’s work in our city and borough.

The three lessons for today can help us focus and just shape our vision for Plymouth, the new urban church.

Acts 16 marks a turning point in the story of early Christianity and the history of the world. Just a few chapters earlier, Luke, the author of Acts, reports that persecution scattered the Christians and some of them ended up in Antioch.

Antioch was a port city north of Israel on the Mediterranean Sea in territory that is now southern Turkey. The population of Antioch was half a million. It was a magnet for immigration and, consequently, was multicultural. Ethnic groups lived in separate neighborhoods sometimes divided by walls.

Christianity in Antioch soon mirrored the city. Luke reports that the church staff was very multicultural. Simeon was a black African. Lucius was Roman. Barnabus was a Palestinian Jew and Saul, known to us as Paul, was a Hellenistic Jew. Palestinian and Hellenistic Jews were distinct groups who often didn’t get along, but in Antioch something happened.

The walls that divided people literally and figuratively came tumbling down. God was creating a new people, a new urban people. One consequence was a new world strategy. The church in Antioch sent Saul and Barnabus to other urban centers where they planted new communities of Christian faith. Cities are always centers of influence and power. The Christians figured the best way to change the world was through strategic urban centers of influence.

Later, Paul and his associates found themselves in Troas, a city on the Aegean Sea. They planned to head north, but the spirit of Jesus prevented them. In a dream, Paul saw a Macedonian (northern Greece today) who asked Paul to come over to Macedonia.

Paul understood the dream to be the voice of God and they sailed immediately to Macedonia. They proceeded to Philippi, the leading city in the province. After starting a church, they went to the provincial capital, Thessalonica. From there they went to Athens,

the intellectual and cultural center of the ancient world. Then they proceeded to Corinth, the capital of Greece. In each case, they started a church in the heart of the center of power of an Empire. The book of Acts ends in Rome, the home of a healthy Christian church in the shadow of the Emperor's palace.

In every one of those churches, the old walls that divide fell. Paul, at his best, can write, "in Christ there is no longer Jew or Gentile, slave or free, Roman or barbarian, male or female, but in Christ all are one." He also writes that the cross of Christ smashes all those old walls that divide. A social and spiritual dynamic was born that changed the world.

If nothing else, Acts describes a God who is interested in and committed to urban centers. God loves people, and masses of people stir God's heart. God has a vested interest in the city.

Paul's strategic insight about urban centers was not new. The prophet Jeremiah, centuries earlier, wrote from one significant city, Jerusalem, to another, Babylon. Babylon was at the time the capital of an Empire that ruled much of the world.

Jeremiah wrote to exiles in Babylon. They were victims of a losing war, exported from Israel to Babylon where they served as cheap labor for the Empire. They were living in the heart of a beast that had destroyed their nation and culture. Babylon was the enemy, a hated enemy.

The prophet's message is counterintuitive and revolutionary. Listen to verse 7, "Seek the welfare of the city to which I sent you. Build houses, plant gardens, raise families and settle down." It seems the presence of God's people in a dark and evil city makes a difference. Moreover, it seems God is committed to Babylon! God commands his people to work for the welfare of their new city.

Then Jeremiah writes those famous words, often taken out of context, which have brought comfort to people in pain for centuries, "I know the plans I have for you. Plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future and a hope."

God's vision of the world is very different from ours. God does not see the world as divided into friends and enemies, but seeks the welfare of all people – and commands us to do the same. God desires the presence of God's people in the great urban centers of the world. It makes a difference.

It's not easy to be God's people in the city. Jeremiah knows that full well. Earlier in his prophecy, he rather dramatically asks a rhetorical question: "Look around the city and take note, search the streets and see if you can find one person who acts justly and seeks truth." If not, then be one and convince others to join you. The moral level of the city will rise!

God is committed to urban renewal. The prophet Isaiah sees a future in which cities are quite different. Then, he writes (Isaiah 65), there will be universal health care and plenty of food for everyone. Home ownership will be universal and jobs plentiful. All weeping will cease because the causes of tears will be eliminated.

The prophet John, author of Revelation, joins Isaiah's vision. "A new city is coming from God," he writes. "In this new urban community, weeping will be no more. In the center of the new city (chapter 22) will be a garden with rivers flowing through them. The leaves of the trees are for the healing of the nations." What a city and what a world.

That is God's dream for Brooklyn and New York City. God seeks the welfare of this city and calls us join that dream. God calls us to continue to form a community of faith in which people are as concerned, perhaps more concerned, for children who cannot read as they are their own children who can. We will be as concerned for violence in homes and the streets as we are for the peace of our own neighborhood. Christ's people care

**Plymouth Church**  
**Sermon 9 May 2010**

about sex trafficking and sweatshops because we seek the welfare of the city and all its people.

God calls us to be the Church of Christ and to make a difference here and now. “Seek the welfare of the city to which I have called you.” That is the word of the Lord!

Amen.

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