

2020-09-20 Seek the Welfare of the City

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Pastor Scott Austin

artisanchurch.com

[Music Intro]

[Male voice] The following is a presentation of Artisan Church in Rochester, New York.

[Voice of Pastor Scott]

OK, so, I'm going to send it over now to Tristan for today's sermon reading, and see if you recognize this biblical text.

[Voice of Tristan Wright reading Jeremiah 29:4–7]

⁴Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: ⁵Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. ⁶Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. ⁷But 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.

[Voice of Pastor Scott]

So, show of hands in the Zoom, how many of you recognize that Bible passage? Yeah, so that is a passage that contains a verse that we actually had emblazoned on the top of the doorway into our sanctuary, and you may not have read the whole of it before and seen all of the details in that passage, but you may be familiar with part of it. And, you know, I'll just say a quick word about the assumptions about family structure that are present in that text. You know, it's pretty patriarchal; you know, there's a lot of, like, "giving daughters" and "taking wives" and that kind of thing. If that makes you recoil a little bit, you're definitely not alone, because it makes *me* recoil a little bit, but what I would say is, perhaps we can draw out from that very ancient assumption about how families are structured and about the – you know, maybe there's some things implicit in that passage about the the role in value of women that we would not affirm for ourselves today, right? Maybe perhaps we can still see in that passage a picture of communities flourishing and families growing, and that looks a little differently for us today

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than it did then, thanks be to God, but I think that there's a lot of value to be found in the picture of what's happening there.

So, I guess I'll back up a little bit and tell you why I chose that passage, and the reason is that we are doing this series right now called "Community-X" and we're thinking about what it means to be a community of people and what it means to practice Artisan Church's foundational value of Community in a time when we feel like our community is really splintered and dis-integrated and broken apart and separated from itself, and from each other. And so, the biblical narrative contains these major movements that actually speak to that type of experience: one of them is the *Exodus* and one of them is the *Exile*, and these are both found in the Hebrew Bible, what we commonly call the Old Testament. And the season of exodus and exile I discussed last week, I gave a little bit of an overview, so if you're not familiar with the biblical stories that kind of go in those directions, I would encourage you to listen to last week's podcast or watch the archived video on our Facebook page of that little talk.

So, today we're thinking about exile, and perhaps you didn't really pick it up before that that whole verse about "seeking the welfare of the city, for in its welfare you will find your welfare," actually was spoken to the people by the Lord through the prophet Jeremiah during the season when they were in exile. Which is to say, that God told the people to do all of this – to plant gardens and eat what they produce, to build their families up and to seek to have them flourish – he told them all of that while they were in this season of exile, in a season of total disconnection, in a season of great loss, in a time where they had been displaced, not only from their homes and businesses, but also from their practice of worship.

Jeremiah spoke the word of the Lord to the people telling them to seek the welfare of the city in a time of complete despair. It wasn't God saying, "seek the welfare of the *holy* city," right? It wasn't, "seek the welfare of the city where you feel comfortable and where you have settled in and everything seems normal." God actually said, "Seek the welfare of the city [populated by the people who conquered you, who did great violence to you, who destroyed your families, who literally destroyed the temple, and carried you out into a strange place]." So, in that strange place with those strange people who did such great violence to you, the command is: plant gardens.

I would rather plant a weapon into somebody, I think if it were me. I would feel quite drawn, I think, against my better nature, to a violent response, but the response was actually one of nurture and growth and development. Plant gardens; eat what they produce; grow your families. As if to say both you're going to be here for a while, and also, the way that this will

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become better for you is to seek the welfare of your entire community – the community which is very far from ideal.

And so, I want to spend a few minutes talking together, such as we can – which, right now means typing some words into the Zoom chat, or if you're worshipping with us on Facebook, you can type words into the Facebook comments (I won't get to see those, but you can have a little Facebook conversation while this is going on, and that's totally fine) – and I want to think together about ways that we can seek the welfare of our city. So, obviously this is not *exactly* analogous, as we have not been conquered and carried out into this city, however, our experience in the City of Rochester right now feels very broken. It feels very disconnected, dis-integrated; it includes waves of violence, and we are all unsettled. And so, I want to think about ways that we can seek the welfare of our city, and I want to do that in a couple ways (we'll see how much time we have here).

But, I want to start by offering a chance for you to remember and recognize and share what you are already doing, so type into the chat, what is a way that you are seeking the welfare of your city right now? And perhaps that will encourage someone else to think, *Hey, I could do that, too!* And then after that, we can maybe think about what the next ideas might be. So, think about what you do to seek the welfare of our city, and don't be ashamed if it feels like a small thing. Nobody's typing anything yet, probably because they think *Oh, the things that I do are very insignificant*. That is okay! It would be a lot more satisfying to solve the entire problem, all the problems of the world with, you know, big, triumphant acts, but that's probably not an option for most of us, so what are the little things that you're doing? Little, big, medium, anywhere in there.

All right, Kerry says, “Going to the places where the rallies and gatherings are happening early or the day before people have gathered and praying over the space.” I love that, Kerry. You know, not everybody is able to attend the rallies or the protests for a lot of different reasons, and I think maybe if you feel sympathetic to the cause but can't be part of the protests, you feel like you are ashamed of your lack of participation. That's a beautiful way of participating, as well, and there are many others, too. Sarah says, “This year I coordinated a food drive in the Irondequoit neighborhoods to donate to the community cupboard.” I love it! Love it.

Corrye: “Seek the facts and truth of the matter. Don't get caught up in the social media tidbits that are designed to press your buttons and may not be representative of the truth.” Goes on to say, “Falling into that trap prevents discourse, sows discord, and ultimately doesn't further advance a solution to the problem.” So maybe the little thing that you're doing to seek the

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welfare of the city is shutting down the social media feeds when they become streams of negativity. Wow, Sarah goes on to add to her sharing about the community food drive that they ended up donating a thousand pounds or more, so that's great!

Tristan says, "Getting our groceries from a local shop instead of a chain and ordering dinners from small, local restaurants." Yes, I also go to the small Wegmans [laughs]. I don't think that's what Tristan meant at all. Thank you for that; I don't mean to make light of that great gesture. Dan says, "Helping to design dignified housing for those left behind by our broken system of capitalism." Dan, as many of you know, is an architect and has the chance to use his skills in that way. Sarah says they're continuing that through the fall as families are in need with kids back to school, still talking about the food drive here, so Sarah is saying, "If anybody wants to learn how we did it, let me know," and I love that idea, because that seems like the kind of thing that other people can do in their own neighborhoods.

Melody's response here: "Recognizing that the violence in our city includes institutional violence and engaging by contacting officials, donating to organizations doing work to bring change." Yeah, and I think especially with something like sending a message or a phone call or an email to an official, or with donating a small amount, it feels maybe like that's just whispering into a hurricane, but when enough of us do it, it really does make a difference. Thank you for that, Melody. Kristen says, "Uplifting Black voices, listening and learning from their stories." Thank you for that.

I think I scrolled past one earlier that said, "Make a friend who is not like you." I like that idea, too. Doug says, "When I feel a big bubble of anxiety about all of this, I stop and cry out to God for justice." David says, "Supporting public education." Another vote for contacting officials in a call for justice. Ellen says, "Working as a city employee to develop public spaces in parks that are for all the people." I love that. So, there again is a vocational gesture that not all of us are in place to make, but this is a beautiful thing about being in community with each other. We all can have different roles to play. "Supporting access to affordable transportation and walkable, rideable neighborhoods." I love that as well. Kristen says, "Identifying as a white person, that open dialogue with people of color and learning their perspectives and checking in on their emotional well being." That is a nice gesture as well. "Volunteering at a homeless shelter." So do you see — any I may stop reading them, but please don't stop posting them. Just keep going in there. It's so wonderful to see this collection of actions that the Artisan Church community is taking. So right now we may feel not only the strife of current events, but also the sense that we're so spread out right now that we as a church can't make a difference. And I love this picture that we're getting here of so many of you doing these things that may seem little. They

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may be a little. They might feel meaningless or underwhelming when you just think of them as the one thing that's happening. But when you add them in together with all of the ways that we each can be seeking the welfare of our city, they begin to make a significant difference. And to me, one of the most powerful aspects of that verse is the way it closes. It says, "Seek the welfare of the city," not just because it's the right thing to do or because you might get a good feeling from making a donation or doing this or that. But because in the city's welfare you will find your welfare. And I think speaking as a person with quite significant privilege, you know, straight white male, it's very easy for those of us who have the privilege to say, "I care about these ideas even though they don't affect me directly." But I want to challenge you if you've ever said anything like that, to think about this because it actually does affect you because you are part of this community as well. And it only doesn't affect you if you choose to really disengage, and even then, you really can't get away from these broken systems. They will affect you. We seek the welfare of the city because in its welfare we find our welfare.

So, I don't know how much response we'll get to this. If this kind of falls flat, we'll just conclude the whole time here. But I'm especially interested in hearing something that you could imagine starting new. Maybe something that somebody else just said in the chat is something you're thinking, "Oh I can do that, too. I'm going to do that, too." But mostly what I'm thinking about is, what is the next step you're considering? Because I think a lot of the power of this kind of movement comes from persistence, right? Don't stop with what you've already done or what we have already done as a community. Remember the words of the late Ruth Bader Ginsburg. She said, "Generally, change in our society is incremental. Real change, enduring change happens one step at a time." So maybe you'd be willing to share something in the chat that you're thinking of trying to do, something you intend to do. Something you hope to do.

Mike is a teacher and says, "I've posted this verse above the door in my public school classroom. The marching orders for social studies classroom," [laughs] part of the mission statement of the department at his school. "I've just called it a Jewish saying." Does anybody have something that you—I know this is maybe a little frightening to try to share because it feels like it's committing to it, but what something you want or intend, or plan to do? Maybe you are still thinking it through. There's a good one. Tristan says, "I plan to sign up as a poll worker for the elections." That's something that we can all do, well, maybe not all of us, but something that many of us could do. Along those lines, I think the census is still looking for workers and that's definitely something that affects the welfare of our city—having its residents be counted. So that's another thing you can sign up to do, if you need extra work especially. Del says, "Next step is inviting more of my classmates to join me." Love it. If you're in another community beyond Artisan, you can invite people in that community to participate in this type

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of work. Jean says, "RAIHN has asked for volunteers to do laundry for protesters." Wow, what a neat idea. Jean, if you're willing would you type your email address into the chat so that people who might want to know more about that could contact you. Doug says, "Planning to resume volunteering safely." So, maybe some of the things that you do to seek the welfare of the city have had the pause button pushed and you haven't been able to do them. And so you can either replace those for a time, or maybe you can reach out to those organizations and say, "Are you ready for me yet?" Again, you know, look within yourself to see if you're comfortable first, of course. Yeah.

Anybody else want to share something that you are looking forward to trying? I love that. Cheryl serial just typed in, "I used to pray every time I heard sirens, or saw a young child out on their own, or heard shots fired in our neighborhood. I didn't even notice I had stopped until now, so I will start again." Wow, thank you for sharing that, Cheryl. Scott says, "Read tough books, and watch tough documentaries, and engage with people who disagree with me more." Hmm. Working directly and intentionally to have your assumptions about the world challenged, sounds like. That's really good. Sarah says, "Phone banking for political candidates who are working for change." I happen to be signed up for a phone banking training on Wednesday evening [laughs]. I will tell you more about that in another setting. Yes, we see people joining in and saying, "Yes, me too," on some of these things, love it. Oh Denise, what a beautiful idea: "Send cards to those who are isolated during this time, especially people in nursing homes." I love that. I have received some cards from people over the last couple of months and they have meant so much to me. I think it's a great idea to pay it forward. I think I might do that, too, is what I'm trying to say. Del says, "Acknowledge that life involves a bit of risk and choose to move in kindness anyway." Wow. Again, I'm going to stop reading them out loud but please keep typing them into the chat. I can't wait to go check on Facebook and see what people are typing into the Facebook chat right now.

It's really an encouragement to me to see how each of you, as part of the Artisan Church community, are seeking the welfare of the Rochester community. We have always wanted to be a church that's placed its roots down here in this place, in this city, and we do love our city. Lord knows there are enormous challenges that we're facing—things that feel way too big for us to do. Let us not shy away from those but let us not allow those huge things to prevent us from doing the small and medium-sized things. Seek the welfare of the city when you feel like you're in a time of exile, because in its welfare we will find our welfare.

Amen.

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[End of sermon]

[Male voice] For more information, visit us at [ArtisanChurch.com](https://www.ArtisanChurch.com).