

Current Thoughts

from Dwight's corner

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Jeremiah is not a prophet I have spent a lot of time with, but over the last few years I have had increasing empathy and deeper appreciation for his words. The letter to the Exiles (**Jeremiah** 29) seems to be especially relevant to the situation of the church in America. Essentially God says, "You are in Exile—live it!" I am especially drawn to verse 7: *Seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper.*

This suggests that living and ministering faithfully in a hostile situation includes seeking and praying for the peace and prosperity of those among whom we live. Of course we all know that the Hebrew notion of "peace" includes much more than the absence of violence—it means wholeness, security and well-being.

Could Jeremiah have said anything more offensive to the Exiles? I do note that there are false prophets at work preaching a message exactly opposite of Jeremiah's. Who do you suppose people preferred hear? Jeremiah has the audacity to tell a people who have been defeated in battle, whose Temple has been destroyed, whose way of life has been erased, who have been carried to a foreign, hostile, pagan city that they should rise up and be a blessing for that city all the time they live there.

The natural inclination would be to close ranks, circle the wagons, hunker down in resistance and hurl curses at our captors. However, God says: "Live the life to which I have called you (don't compromise your faith), but bless the place where you live." I guess we shouldn't be surprised. The notion to bless others goes all the way back to the call of Abraham.

I don't want to overstate the notion of churches being in hostile settings, but want to emphasize the idea of "blessing the place where we live." A church should be a blessing to the community it inhabits (whether hostile or not). If Jeremiah could tell the Exiles to bless the city of their captors, can we be excused to do anything less?

During our Staff Retreat last week when we reviewed 2007, we celebrated six churches for notable progress in their ministry during 2007. Those churches included: Oak Park Avenue Baptist Church (Berwyn IL), Elliott Avenue Baptist Church (Springfield IL), First Baptist Church (Macomb IL), Cairo Baptist Church (Cairo IL), Bethel Baptist Church (Columbia MO), and Shalom—City of Peace (Florissant MO). Each of those churches has unique ministries. But there was one common factor that I noticed in them. All six of them have intentional ministries to their community—outside the walls of their church. They are a blessing to their "city."

And this is only the tip of the iceberg. I hear stories of churches that provide lunches and meeting places for high school students; volunteer chaplains to local hospitals and police

departments; safe after school programs for children; block parties; meeting places for senior citizen clubs; special care after disasters; Saturday car care for single mothers; refreshments for public school teacher lounges; appreciation dinners and special services of blessing for community emergency and safety workers; commissioning services for public workers; and on, and on.

They are not all wealthy churches. And they are not all big city churches. Each of them has answered God's call to "bless the city" where they live. They go outside the walls of their church. They see those who live around them—young and old, rich and poor, red and yellow, black and white. And they pray and work for their prosperity. They are a blessing.

The point is not busy-ness. The goal is faithfulness to God who has redeemed us in Jesus Christ and put us in this place.

