The Challenge: A Thriving City

Jeremiah 28:17, 29:4-11

Pastor Mark Kremer

About fifteen years ago my family and I went on a vacation to Chicago and Wisconsin, and one of our stops on that journey was Green Bay. We'd never been to Green Bay and we got there just as evening was coming. We had a hotel reservation, but I had no idea how to get to that hotel. So I did a very unnatural thing *(laughter)*. Yup, I hear the men laughing. I actually stopped and asked for directions. Now you know why men don't stop and ask for directions—it's because every time we do, we get bad directions. I have been more messed up by directions I got than if I would have just gone myself. But in this case we pulled into a beautiful gas station—I mean it had a lawn; it had shrubs. It was beautiful and I pulled in and parked the car, and as I got out of the car, this man comes running out of the filling station and goes, "You're from Aurora, Nebraska!" And he goes, "Yeah, I'm from Grand Island. I saw the 28-county license!" You know us Nebraskans; we know each other *(laughter)*. Come to find out, he played football for the Huskers. He'd gone on to play for the Green Bay Packers. When he got done with his career he bought this business and he opened it and he ran it. And boy, he was so excited to see us and he began to tell us all these things we ought to know about the city, and particularly about the people. He said three or four very unflattering things about Green Bay people. I won't repeat all of them—and no offense to you if you're from Wisconsin, okay? One of them he said is, "Hey, these people aren't very bright." And I kid you not, at the very moment he said that, one of his employees comes up to him and says, "Hey, boss, how do you turn on the hose to run the sprinkler?" *(laughter)*. He shook his head and he goes, "You turn the faucet where the hose is connected to the building." He just turns to me and goes, "See!" *(laughter)*. Needless to say, I told him the hotel. He says, "Oh! That's not a very nice place to stay." He says, "Come on into the store." And he goes in and there's a girl running the cash register and he says to her, "Hey, they're scheduled to stay at such-and-such a hotel. That's kind of a dump, isn't it?" And she says, "That's where I work for my other job." (Laughter) I said, "No, no no, we're fine. We're happy to stay at the hotel." He gave us great directions, helped us understand a little bit of what to see and do in Green Bay, and I think basically he said, "Enjoy a couple of days, but then get out of here because this isn't a very great place."

I haven't been back since. You know, it's one thing to be travelling and need directions in a place that you haven't been to before. It's another thing when you move to a place and you've never lived there before and you just don't know where anything is. You don't know how to navigate. You don't know who's who and what's what, and that's a very unnerving, uncomfortable feeling, if you've ever had to move.

A lot of people—a lot of God's people—down through the centuries have had that very same feeling when they find themselves living in a culture that is very unfamiliar, that's very different from what they know, from what they're comfortable in. They don't feel like they fit. They feel like strangers, like aliens in a culture. There are a lot of Christians in our own culture that are feeling that today. They don't quite know: How, as a Christian, am I supposed to live in *this* place? How do I navigate *this* culture with all that it has become in this day and age? Bryan talked about it last week—from Romans 11—just about some of the changes culturally that have happened, that things that were more in alignment with what we believe scripturally were a part of the culture a number of years ago, and now that's all changed. And just for the sake of some inter-generational understanding, those of you who are young must appreciate what it's like for people in their sixties

and seventies and eighties to live today in this culture, having known something that was so very different just a few years ago. But for all of us who engage in following Christ and seeking to live in obedience, who value the Scriptures and truth and seek to live it out, we get it and we enjoy it and it's changing our lives, but when we walk out of these doors and go to work on Monday, we too feel the strain of: How do we live it out? How do we navigate our way through our faith in this culture and place?

That has been a question that God's people have wrestled with down through the ages, and I think one of the most profound and important answers to that question is found in Jeremiah, Chapter 29. I invite you to turn in your Bibles to this Old Testament prophet this morning.

Let me just set the stage a little bit of what we're going to read. If you remember last year at this time we were studying the book of Amos. Amos was a prophet to Israel and to Judah who told the people of God that if they didn't begin to live righteously, that God was going to bring judgment on them as a people. They were selfish. They were greedy. They didn't care for the poor, the widow, the orphan or the immigrants. And the fact of the matter is: they did not heed the words of Amos or any other prophet for that matter. And so, just prior to our text this morning in Jeremiah 29, the last of Israel, Judah, has been conquered by Babylon and the city has been destroyed—the city of Jerusalem has been destroyed. There's nothing left. It's ruined. And many of the people have been carried off hundreds of miles back to Babylon to live in exile. And now they are strangers in a strange land, not there even of their own free will, but they're in this very pagan, godless and broken culture, and their question is, "What are we supposed to do now?"

In chapter 28, Hananiah, a prophet, came and proposed to speak on God's behalf, and what Hananiah's message to the exiles was, "Don't unpack your bags. God's going to deliver us immediately, really soon. Just hang tight, because in less than two years the bond of Babylon is going to be broken and He's taking us back home and everything will be good." But God sent Jeremiah, the prophet, to say to Hananiah, "Hananiah, you lie. That is not My message. You lied and you deceived My people, and your life is over because you proposed to speak for me and did not." So in the very last verse of chapter 28 it says:

> **So Hananiah the prophet died in the same year in the seventh month.**
>
> (*NASB, Jeremiah 28:17)

So that wasn't true, but the question still remains—how are we supposed to live? What are we supposed to do in this strange place, this strange culture where we are? God sends the answer through Jeremiah the prophet by way of a letter to these exiles, and we pick it up in verse 4 of Jeremiah 29.

> **Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon, 'Build houses and live in *them*; and plant gardens and eat their produce. Take wives and become the fathers of sons and daughters, and take wives for your sons and give your daughters to husbands, that they may bear sons and daughters; and multiply there and do not decrease.'** (Vs. 4-6)

This becomes the cultural mandate of God to His people in the culture in which they are planted. Let's look at each of these three first pieces of the mandate. The first is to **build houses and live in them**. Now think about this for just a minute. You have been taken prisoner to a foreign land. You don't want to be there. You don't intend to stay there any longer than you have to. This is not

home. But what did God say to His people? He said, "Build houses and live in them." What is He saying? He's saying, "Put your roots down here. I called you here. Stay here for the long term. This is about investing in this place where I have placed you."

If you're only going to stay in a place for a short time, you rent an apartment or a home. If you think you might be there for a while and you just need to make sure you don't lose money, you might buy a house that can be easily resold. But when you build a house, you're making a long term commitment to the place, to that location, to that city. And that's exactly what God is saying, "I want you to put your roots down and make a commitment here to this place, not be looking for something else, but be committed and focused here." Not only did I think that did something for God's people, in terms of their own attitude, in terms of their own approach to life by making that commitment, but I think it sent a powerful word to the culture they lived in: These people are here to stay; they are investing in our community; they want to be a part of this place.

Not only that, he says in the second half of verse 5, they were to **plant gardens and eat the produce**. The garden here would not be just our vegetable garden, but it would have included orchards and vineyards, things that would take a number of years even to mature and bear fruit. What he's saying here is, "Make a living here. Provide for yourselves; work. Don't be a burden to other people, but make a living; invest yourself and do something productive here in this place—perhaps even have something, produce something, that would be of benefit to those around you. Again, it would have been very tempting—think about it—you've been captured, you've been taken against your will hundreds of miles to another place—it would be very easy to say, "Hey, you brought me here; you take care of me. It's not my problem. I didn't want to be here." God says, "No, I want you to provide for yourself, plant gardens, go to work, make a living here." In verse 6, the third part of this mandate says:

> **'Take wives and become the fathers of sons and daughters, and take wives for your sons and give your daughters to husbands, that they may bear sons and daughters; and multiply there and do not decrease.'**

The family was an essential element of the life of God's people and again, if you are a prisoner in a foreign land, you don't necessarily feel like raising a family in this place. This isn't home. You envision having kids back on the home place that your ancestors had developed and built up over centuries. "Let's not have kids. Let's not get married. Let's just sort of hunker down and wait this thing out." God says, "No, make a life. Have families." The family was primarily to perpetuate the people of God.

Remember a couple of years ago in our family series, Bryan said that one of the primary purposes of the family is to perpetuate the kingdom of God from generation to generation. That's exactly what God is saying: Continue to perpetuate the kingdom. Grow and multiply. Grow in influence; grow in numbers. But I think also implied is: enjoy life *here*. A family is fun. He's talking about celebratory moments—getting married, having children, having grandchildren. Celebrate; rejoice; enjoy. Now that's a great mandate. It had to be surprising to them because they were looking for a quick and easy escape. But God says, "Settle in; put down roots; make a living; make a life here." "Okay God, we got it, we'll do that." "Oh, and just one more thing—one more thing I want you to do while you're here." Verse 7:

> **'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 have welfare.'**

Some of your translations may have the word *peace*. It's that word *shalom* that we looked at in Amos last year. Shalom, or peace, is not just the absence of conflict. Shalom is the idea of flourishing—that physically, emotionally, socially and spiritually—everything is working together. Everything is flourishing. The totality of life is in right relationship with God and with each other. And what did He tell His people to do here in this pagan, godless place but to seek the flourishing of that culture, that community. That word...**seek** means to actively be engaged in bringing it to pass. Actively involve yourself in helping this culture, this place, flourish. Shalom is the value system and the culture of the kingdom of God. In the kingdom of God, in the kingdom of heaven, everything is flourishing. Where Jesus reins, absolutely everything flourishes. And the mandate from God to His people was to bring a taste of that flourishing to the place where I have called you.

Interestingly, this cultural mandate to God's people has really marked the Jewish people throughout history. In many ways they have obeyed this, except perhaps for the spiritual element of that, because they have been rebelling against God themselves. But wherever you see a Jewish population, in any numbers at all, you see a city that flourishes. They seek to be involved and engage and make the place where they live better. It comes directly from this cultural mandate that God gave them. But more than that, he says, "I want you to pray for the city where I have called you. Pray for it." I think that falls very much in line with what Jesus told His disciples they should pray in the Lord's prayer—what we call the Lord's Prayer. "Thy kingdom, God, come. Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." How is God's will and His kingdom in heaven? It's perfect. It's shalom. And the prayer is, "God, bring that shalom to this place. Make that flourishing that is true of the kingdom of heaven a reality here in this culture, in this city." And then, very interesting the last phrase of verse 7:

> **…for in its flourishing you will flourish.**

In other words, if we don't obey this mandate to seek the flourishing of the place where we're planted, we will not flourish. To the degree that we seek to cause the community, the culture that we live in to flourish, that will be the degree to which we will ourselves flourish. That's what God said to His people. There's a linkage between the flourishing of the community where God's people are and their own flourishing. I think that plays out very true historically. I think wherever God's people have invested and sought to make a place better, that whole area has gotten better, and the church has flourished and grown. God's people have flourished. Where people have run away, people have left, people have not invested, the city or the culture has deteriorated and the church has shriveled. God's people have shriveled and diminished. So God is speaking the truth. We'll talk a little bit more in just a minute about the application of that for us, but verse 8:

> **"For thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, 'Do not let your prophets who are in your midst and your diviners deceive you, and do not listen to the dreams which they dream. For they prophesy falsely to you in My name; I have not sent them,' declares the Lord. "For thus says the LORD, 'When seventy years have been completed for Babylon, I will visit you and fulfill My good word to you, and bring you back to this place. For I know the plans that I have for you,' declares the Lord, 'plans for welfare and not for calamity to give you a future and a hope.'**
>
> (Vs. 8-11)

God said, "Don't listen to people who want to tell you that you should do something different than what I have just laid out for you. Don't listen to people who dream dreams of something different or want to give you a different message. This is what I am calling you to do. This is your mandate

for living in the culture you find yourself. And just know this, that at just the right moment, I will come and take you back to the place that you came from. I'm going to watch out for you. I know the plans I have for you. They are plans for good, but in the meantime, until those plans are fully realized, don't sit around waiting for it to happen, doing nothing. Involve yourself, and when the time is right I will fulfill My promise to you."

Now I would say that, just as in Jeremiah's day, there is no small number of people who would give us other messages than this mandate, as it relates to how we are to interact with the culture. One of the ones down through history has been, "Hey, the end is coming. Hunker down and wait for Jesus to come back." I did a Google search on "End of the world predictions." You ought to try it. Hundreds of predictions of the world's end; they go all the way back to before Christ and every single sort of major, you know, half millennium, millennium, just brought another round of these predictions. At times there were riots; people left their homes; people traveled to Jerusalem to wait for Jesus to appear on the Mount of Olives—that was back in 999! People like Christopher Columbus, even Jonathan Edwards, Charles Wesley, all had predictions about the end of the world, and yet here we sit. Don't be caught up in all of those things. You know, I grew up in the 70's, when prophesy was really a big thing. There were conferences and videos and books, and Jesus was coming back, and a lot of people really got into that, speculating—when is it going to happen, who is the anti-Christ—and were so distracted by that, they did nothing. My grandparents came to Christ sort of late in life and they really got caught up in the prophesy thing, and they had gold under their bed and, you know, all this stuff. They had endless readings and books and radio programs they listened to. They never did a thing, not even in their own family, to build the kingdom of God. They just sat and hunkered down and waited, and ultimately died of old age.

There's the other prophets who would say, "Look out, there's really bad, scary, evil people among us. Fear them; hate them!" That doesn't sound like the mandate, does it? "Protect yourself, you know, buy up all the guns in the world and build up a bunker and put a fence around your house and get ready to shoot anybody that comes close! It's going to be chaotic around here!" That doesn't sound like God's mandate, does it? For some, they would say, "You know, the culture is a lost cause...a lost cause. We just as well be a part of the church, stay at church as much as we can, get in the cloister, enjoy each other, build a fortress, because that's just an absolute lost cause out there." There are people that always want the church to develop their social life and have things—I mean for goodness sakes, we enjoy Saturday, Sunday so much, can we come back on Monday and Tuesday and Wednesday and Thursday and Friday? I mean, can we just live here? This is so comfortable! This is so nice!" That doesn't sound like the mandate.

No, God's message to His people consistently, through the centuries, has been, "Invest yourself in the place where I have planted you. Put your roots down. Make a living. Provide for yourself and others. Multiply; grow in influence, and seek to bring a taste of the kingdom to the place where you are planted." What would that look like for us at this particular point in our journey, in our culture? Let me just mention a couple of things that come to mind. What if we—many of us—decided to pursue our talents and take them to the absolute highest level possible and sought to be used by God to be placed in positions of influence where the culture is shaped? You see, the culture that we live in is not the conglomerate of the beliefs of all the individuals—no, there are institutions that are given tremendous culture-shaping, forming, power. The movie industry, the music industry, the entertainment industry, the media, law, business, advertising—those are the institutions and places that are shaping the culture, and I believe that much of the cultural mess that we are in today is because the Church, over the last century, has failed to obey this mandate to be in the places that shape the culture. What kind of a culture do you think you have if there are no Christians there to

shape it? If the best and brightest minds are not at the best and brightest universities and at the New York Times and in making the kinds of films that hit the Marcus Theaters in our own community, then what do you expect will happen? God has called us to be a part of shaping the culture by using our talents and abilities, and for those who are gifted and talented to be in places of influence to shape the culture for generations to come. That may be God's call on your life, and that's more than: just go get a job and make a nice living and go to church. That's a powerful call on your life, and it will require a long-term commitment to living your faith and sharing your faith and using your talents and abilities to help reshape the message of the culture…but what a call!

That can happen, not only in the grand scale, but it can happen even within local industries and businesses and local governments. There are people within our own church who have a vision to change the industry they're in, to reflect a kingdom perspective, to reflect the flourishing that God wants. More power to you if that's your calling! Live it out! In other ways, perhaps, we're called to not just shape the culture but to help fix the brokenness of the culture. It's another way that God might call us to live out this mandate. You know, God did not call us as His people just to be critics of the culture, but to be problem-solvers and creators. So instead of wringing our hands at drug abuse, sexual abuse, child neglect, homelessness, poverty, unemployment, laziness—whatever you want to pick on that's wrong with the culture—let me ask you the question: When was the last you woke up in the middle of the night—God inspiring you—to come up with a solution to those problems? Why isn't it God's people that are at the forefront of coming up with solutions to cultural and societal problems? I think that's exactly what God has called us to do, to live out this cultural mandate.

And finally, would it not be true, perhaps, that we're to be a part of healing the brokenness—the fabric that's torn in society—of an individual, on a relational, level, that we're involved with people who are broken and hurting, and we seek to restore them; we seek to give them a taste of the love of God, the character of God, the vision and plan that God has for their life? And we can introduce them to the King who can make that happen for them? And we walk alongside them to help bring healing to their brokenness. You see, because the culture is broken, there's a lot of healing that needs to be done. It is the gospel that informs our vision to shape the culture. It is the gospel that informs our solutions to the problems of the culture. It is the gospel that has the power to heal individuals who have been wounded and destroyed by the culture. And that is our mandate, and it always has been—for God's people.

We are here at a place and a moment in time and in history for a reason. God planted us here. We are in a capital city. We are in a city with multiple educational organizations. We are at a place of influence in our state and region. And God has allowed us, as His people, to live here in this place for this time, and not just here—wherever we go. In fact, we have the opportunity like never before for global influence. There are people, hundreds of us that travel around the world for business, that are engaged in all sorts of things. We have an opportunity to bring that flourishing that we have experienced through the righteousness of Christ to wherever we go, to whoever we touch. And I must say in closing, that really this is primarily about relationships. It's not about powering up. It's not about producing some abstract cultural good. It's all about relationships. It's all about us relating rightly to the people all around us, being involved in a personal, relational way, because that's where real influence takes place. It takes place in the context of relationship.

There have been events in the past year in our own city where a lot of people were alarmed by some of the decisions being made, and there were several things that immediately came to mind: Why are there not more Christians involved in the decision-making? Why have we not engaged for the long-

term, for the good of the community, so we're there in those moments where important decisions are being made? And secondly, why do we not have relationships with the people who are here? Why do we not know these people? Why are they not our friends? Why do we not have influence? Why are we left to shout from the sideline a message that nobody can really hear or understand? This is our mandate. This is our calling as God's people, to fully engage, to seek the flourishing of the community—spiritually, rightly related to God, socially, emotionally, physically. It's a holistic view—God sees the whole thing together—and the gospel is front and center in all of it. There is tremendous power when we are willing to invest our time in the lives of people and bring influence and healing to them.

Just to illustrate that last point—about having a healing influence in society—we want you to listen to this story of a young woman from our church who found a relationship with another person here, someone who has walked beside her and helped her begin to flourish for the first time in her life. It is a beautiful illustration of someone investing themselves and seeking the flourishing of the city. Take a listen:

"I'm thirty years old today. How can this be my life? All the abuse—sexual, physical, mental—from the hands of my family and even from myself. All the guilt, shame, regret. I'm so tired, living in a past I can't change. I hate myself. I have no friends, no family support. I'm so stupid, worthless, ugly, fat, unlovable. I know it's true. I hear it from everybody. Since childhood I suffered from clinical depression and generalized anxiety, OCD, abandonment issues, and been on about every pill you could think of to cure my aching, stop the flashbacks of abuse, and try to find some sense of normalcy. I have been hospitalized for depression and attempted suicide, but just came out with more pills. Nothing has ever stayed the same for long. I mean, I went through four elementary schools, three junior highs, four high schools, four colleges, two foster homes, two group homes, two lock-up facilities, and I've lived in over twenty-five apartments or houses, just since I went out on my own at seventeen. I never even unpacked all my boxes when I would move, and not once did I hang anything on the walls. I was afraid to forgive and forget because I was afraid that forgiving would just tell the people that hurt me the things they did were okay. I was so lonely. I couldn't seem to fill the empty space I had in my heart.

After being asked over and over, I found myself sitting right here in Lincoln Berean on a Saturday night for the first time. It had been twenty years since I had been in a church. I couldn't tell you what the message was on because I cried through the entire sermon. At the end when Pastor Bryan said, "I know there are many of you out there right now who are hurting and in despair, and have basically given up," I looked up and I felt like he was talking just to me. It was like he knew me, and I could almost hear the desperate cry behind his voice that was pleading with me to listen, that he had found the answer and wanted to share it with me. And for the first time in years, I did not feel singled out or judged amongst all these people. I felt an overwhelming sense of comfort, almost like being home. I remember wishing I could just sit there all night.

This was the beginning of my ongoing journey with God. I started to go every week, almost feeling off-balance if I'd miss. In the weeks following, Pastor Bryan talked about forgiveness and how it's not for them; it's for you. And I was so ready to let go of all of it. I was ready to forgive the people that had hurt me, but most of all myself. And it really opened my heart up and the walls started coming down. I wanted to be more involved in

the church, because I loved the way I felt when I was there. And I saw in the bulletin that they needed some volunteers, so I met with a lady from church and I would have never thought that one person could have such an impact on my life. We started a friendship that, to this day, I could never replace. She was not just interested in me, but in my whole journey. And I felt so comfortable and safe with her. I told her my whole story and just waited for her to run away like most had done. She didn't see me as broken, but more hurt and misguided, and she took me right under her wing and said my past was my past. She was such a constant in my life from that point forward, calling to say hi, lunches, helping me find things to do in the church, helping me with my resume so I could get a job. She believed in me and loved me, until I could believe in and love myself. Thanks to this new job and the church helping with the deposit, I was able to get into an apartment in a good area of town that was clean and had enough room where my kids could stay with me—such little things to some, but I can't express how just these simple things completely changed my life.

I'm now thirty-two. I'm still on my journey with God, going to Berean. I'm so glad that someone decided that I was worthy, told me God loved me, and saw that I had something to offer. I am now married to a wonderful, loving man who is also on this journey with me. I hear so often people say that one person can't make a difference, and I used to believe this too. I know now that one person with a heart big enough to share, and with the time to give, can change a life. It's really true. I am living proof.

Even I can make a difference, bringing about the flourishing for individuals, neighborhoods, perhaps even for a whole culture. This is our mandate. This is the way that God wants us to engage in the place where He has planted us. We have heard over and over again from community leaders that the single greatest need is not more money; it is people who are willing to invest just as in this story—one person investing and coming alongside another individual or family for the long haul, for friendship, for guidance, for help, just to walk the journey with them. We want to continue to invite many of you to be a part of that. In the bulletin, or the Loop, this week you'll see next Sunday morning, both at 9:00 and 10:45 there's an informational meeting about how you can get involved in those kinds of relationships out in our community to seek to heal its very fabric.

Father, may we respond to this mandate as You would want us to, each one of us individually and collectively as Your people. We pray it in Jesus' name, Amen.

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