

HOW TO BE THE KIND OF CHURCH THAT MAKES A DIFFERENCE¹

Jeremiah 32: 1-3, 6-15

A sermon by Thomas R. McKibbens

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I received an award a few days ago, not for myself, but for you. On behalf of the church, I accepted what is called “the Opening Doors Award” from Worcester Community Housing Resources. I want to show you the award and say a few words about it because it illustrates how a church can make a difference in the community.

I

The Worcester Community Housing Resources makes a huge difference for good in the neighborhoods of Worcester and in the lives of low to middle income families. Let’s say you are a single mother with three children and a low income, and your house is about to be foreclosed because you are behind in your payments. The WCHR enters the picture and provides her with a low-interest loan. Or let’s say you own an old apartment building in Worcester that is decaying and dirty. The WCHR enters the picture and provides low-interest funds to clean and repair that building and make it safe for its residents. Or let’s say you are single and have AIDS, and you have no family. The WCHR manages 53 single-room occupancy units, four of which are designated for individuals with AIDS. These are only a few of the programs offered by this one agency that we helped get off the ground a few years ago.

Sometimes we hear people say, “We can’t just throw money at things. We need to get out and DO ministry.” I understand that. I see the need for that. But this award represents the truth that throwing money at some things makes all the difference

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2

in the world! This ministry is not something we could get out and do ourselves. We helped start this ministry by seeding the fund with significant money.

There's more good news: this week I accepted on behalf of the church an award from the Worcester County Food Bank called "the Harvester Award," which is given to organizations that demonstrate outstanding commitment to the Food Bank's mission of feeding hungry people today while working towards creating a hunger-free community of tomorrow.

These are just two contemporary examples of how we are making a difference in this community. There are many more. Our church helped found a wonderful organization called Jericho Road Worcester, which matches the skills of our members with the needs of nonprofit agencies to improve their work of helping people in need. Our church founded Elm Park Ministries a few years ago. It sponsors an urban camping experience for inner-city youth, including many of the refugee children, who have never had a camping experience. Every Sunday our church sells grocery cards that provide funding to prevent homelessness. You use the card to buy groceries, and the grocery store contributes 5% of your purchase price to assist families at risk of homelessness. In these tight and tough economic times, we are making a difference!

And how do you measure the prayers and visits and worship experiences we provide? I don't know of any way to quantify such things. They are in the heart of the person who experiences them. And how do you measure the Bible study, the fellowship, the hospital visits, the counseling, the hymns and anthems and concerts and lectures and study groups and youth activities and laughter and hugs and tears? How do

you measure these things? I see the influence of this church reaching all over the world in wisdom received and lives inspired. How do you measure that?

II

All of that leads me to ask the question: How do we maintain the difference we make in this community and this world? How do we continue to make that difference when the crowds of the 1950's are no longer with us? How do we do that when the economy crashes against us like a tsunami?

I want to use a story from the book of Jeremiah as a kind of template in answering that question. It is a story about a risky real estate deal. Jeremiah the prophet was well aware that the Babylonian army was coming like a gathering storm from the north. Meanwhile, Jeremiah's cousin had put a For Sale sign up in front of a piece of property that was right in the path of the oncoming Babylonian army. It had been on the market for quite a while without even a nibble, and the chances of anyone buying that property given its location in the path of an invading army was just about zero!

Except for one thing: Jeremiah's cousin figured Jeremiah was an old fool—a pretty good preacher but not much of a businessman. He thought, I'll just dump this property on Jeremiah. And sure enough, Jeremiah agreed to buy that land for a fair price. His cousin must have been stunned.

Then the story gets even more stunning. Jeremiah placed the bill of sale in an earthenware jar and buried it—the safe deposit box of his day. He wanted that bill of sale to be protected for a long time. No matter what would happen when the invading army came through, he was investing in the belief that someday either he or his

descendents would dig up that earthenware jar with the bill of sale in it and claim that land for themselves. Then he makes an announcement for all to hear: *For thus says the Lord of Hosts, the God of Israel: Houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land.* Some way, some day, he was saying, the Lord will return us to this land and we will reclaim it.

Was he just an old fool? Or was he a person of deep faith? He invested in property that he would likely never claim for himself. It would be claimed for his descendents. He committed himself to the future, believing that in God's good time his people would reclaim the land.

III

We are the heirs of a great tradition. When you join this church, you become part of that tradition. This church has faced great challenges before, just as Jeremiah was facing a great challenge before him. And just as Jeremiah invested in the future, so has this church.

In 1937, a disastrous fire destroyed the FBC building that stood on Ionic Avenue in Worcester. The pastor, the Rev. Thomas Roy, was in Worcester, England at the time, where he was scheduled to preach at the Baptist church there. When he arrived at the church in England, a cablegram was waiting for him. It was from the Treasurer, Mr. E.C. Gilman, telling him that fire had completely destroyed his church. Dr. Roy's cabled reply is now a classic part of the history of this church: "At the heart of a great disaster will be found an equally great opportunity and challenge."

When Dr. Roy returned to Worcester and stood to preach at the worship service being held in a borrowed sanctuary, he greeted his congregation by saying, "You and I

are not going to sit together this morning, or at any time in the future, and create the material for a new book of Lamentations.”

This church has never resorted to writing lamentations, and it is not going to start now. The church that makes a difference in the world does not succumb to fear of an invading army of economic challenges any more than Jeremiah succumbed to fear of the invading army of Persia or any more than this congregation succumbed to an army of flames that destroyed their building.

Instead, like Jeremiah, we invest in the future! Some people might call this a stewardship sermon; I call it a commitment sermon. Is the gospel we proclaim worth proclaiming in the next generation? Are the neighborhood ministries we support worth our best efforts? Do our children deserve the ministry of this church long after we are gone? Does this city deserve a strong and resolute congregation on the corner of Park and Salisbury? Does this state and nation need a clear call to the principles on which we stand: a thoughtful and open-minded theology, a radical welcome to all, soul liberty, separation of church and state, democratic church polity, biblical literacy, and spiritual growth? Do the beautiful and moving worship experiences we have in this place need to continue?

These values do not come free! They come at sacrifice, sometimes great sacrifice. We are facing an economic tsunami. That tsunami is sweeping over every church of every denomination. But before us today is the story of Jeremiah’s real estate deal. To the world he looked like an old fool, but he was demonstrating something powerful for us. By investing in that land he was saying: invest in the future, build up the

church, sacrifice for God's reign of justice and peace. Invest in and prepare the ground for the future.

I know there are some in our congregation who simply cannot pledge what they have in the past. I recognize that. But I am convinced that there are many who, with genuine sacrifice, will joyfully increase their pledge for 2012 because they know how important this church is. This church makes a difference in our lives and in the life of this city. Show the world that God's spirit is alive and well in this place. The future of our church, the future of our community, the future of our world is not pre-determined; the future hangs in the balance. And God calls on us to invest in the future.

IV

No matter what the cost, no matter what the risk, no matter what the bad news of the day, let us quietly determine that we will do whatever it takes to invest in the future of this church so that 100 years from now the congregation of FBC Worcester will look back on our generation and say, "On the eve of our 200th anniversary, and in the path of an economic recession, that congregation in Worcester pulled together and did what it took to enable future generations to celebrate the 300th anniversary of FBC Worcester!"