

THE THIRD PLACE
JEREMIAH 29: 4-7
OCTOBER 13 AND 14, 2018

I didn't go to church anywhere growing up. When I was invited by a friend to a Presbyterian Church ... my first real exposure to any kind of religion; and I chose to be confirmed in that church when I was 17. Two years later, I moved from home, and for the next 10 years ... from about 19 to 29, I was, what some now are calling, a religiously unaffiliated person. I was a "None" --- not a "nun" (far from it), a "none." I was a person who, if I had been polled about my religious affiliation in a national survey, would have claimed "no religious affiliation."

In 1989, the American Religious Identification Survey showed that 8% of the American population were "nones". Twenty years later, in 2009 that number doubled -- 16% of the American population responded to the survey as "NONES." Today, that percentage has increased to 26% -- simplistically, that's one in every four people we may know who have no religious affiliation. Think about that ... one in four.

The number of "nones" has risen significantly over past years. There's a cultural shift taking place -- technology is changing faster than we can keep up, social media is changing how we relate to one another. More and more people are "spiritual but not religious."

The great paradox of our age is that while the need for the gospel has seldom been greater, the relevance of the church to the culture at large has seldom been less.

But, even so, I believe people are still yearning deeply for authentic community in which they can explore their questions about belief and spirituality and religion with others who will listen, who are willing to wrestle with hard questions, and who will readily seek to understand.

Presenting the Good News of God in Christ Jesus in this postmodern culture is going to take much more than merely finding and implementing the latest marketing scheme, offering the latest study, or changing worship practices.

We don't have to shrug off our heritage, our tradition, or even our liturgy, and we don't have to add another ministry to the plethora of ministries, already overflowing on all our plates, but we may need to change how we relate to the world in order to be a light to the world.

Jeremiah 29 does indeed paint an incredible picture of a people called to love God in the context of a changing culture that is not their own.

"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."

Jeremiah was speaking to the people of Israel who were being exiled to Babylon. Jeremiah is trying to set the record straight because some other prophets have been giving bad information to the people of Israel, falsely telling them that they will only be in Babylon for two years.

Jeremiah knows the people will be in Babylon longer -- 70 years to be exact. So he tells the people of Israel to settle in, build homes, get married...ultimately the message is *be a blessing to Babylon*. Being a blessing to the people around them is supposed to be the whole mission of Israel as a nation. Jeremiah's message reminds them that their mission doesn't stop just because they are living in a different culture.

So while they were in Babylon, they weren't to isolate themselves, they weren't to withdraw into an enclave of faithful communities that avoid the wider culture.

Neither does he advocate coercing the Babylonians into worshipping God through force or manipulation. Instead, Jeremiah provokes the Israelites to engage the community around them, seeking the peace and prosperity of the Babylonians and even praying for their enemies.

It seems to me that the key to effective and lasting ministry in any culture, is that those who *are* religiously affiliated must recognize the uniqueness of the culture around them and, seek ways we might create space to build authentic relationships within our ever-changing culture.

We need to move out of our four walls, and move out into our communities. We need to meet people, just as Jesus met them at the 21st century wells we learned about last week; we need meet people, not to proposition them or to sell them the Gospel -- people today are already confronted with nearly 5,000 enticements and advertisements every single day.

Sharing the Good News today requires us to find new ways, new places to develop relationships of trust through conversation and listening.

In her book *Ancient Faith, Future Mission*, Stephanie Spellers offers some sound advice for those of us, who wish to effectively continue God's mission in the 21st century. She writes:

"We start by creating some common ground where we can sit down and learn the language and culture of the people we are seeking to serve; listen to their questions; understand their concerns; and then begin to share with them the story of Christ. As we serve, listen and proclaim, so the possibility of church is born: a community formed by the impact of the story of Christ and the witness of his church." We need to be in the third places of people's lives.

Third places is a term coined by sociologist Ray Oldenburg and refers to places where people spend time between home ('first' place) and work ('second' place). They're locations where people gather to exchange ideas,

and build relationships. Third places have been called the “living room” of society.

The most effective third places for building real community seem to be physical places where people can easily and routinely connect with each other: parks, recreation centers, hairdressers, gyms and even fast-food restaurants. Our Tuesday morning Coffee and Conversation is a “third place.” One of my colleagues has established a “third place” in a local bar where mostly “nones” gather for theology on tap. “Third places” sometimes just naturally develop as we interact with our kid’s friends, or see the same people in the same places, at the same times.

“Third places” provide space (safe space) in which, authentic Christian community *might* emerge, but if we take this risk of connecting with folks, and our primary expectation and goal is filling pews for worship, then we may want to re-think its purpose.

The goal of “third place” ministry is not recruitment, but relationship building, and it can only be done by creating space for fragile relationships to sprout, and the possibility of those relationships being nurtured over time. Third places are about helping us better understand what God is up to in the lives of people in the community.

When we meet folks in the “third place,” when we invite a group to gather together, when we create space where questioning is ok, doubts are welcomed, and opinions are honored, I believe we’ll be surprised at the unique opportunities God will give us to connect with people in a

way, we have never imagined possible. We may even bear witness to the possibility of authentic, Christian community developing.

It takes intentional structuring of our ministries and our lives to push ourselves out from our Christian bubbles and into places where we can interact with the “nones” of our communities. Rather than expect the “nones” to come to us and to navigate our Christian culture, we have to go to those “third places”. Jesus spent so much of his time, out of the synagogue, creating places and spaces for relationships to develop.

We need to move from where we’re comfortable in our well organized ministry spaces and be pushed into spaces where we can actually get to know those who Jesus wants to call to himself.

No matter the size or culture of our community, there are opportunities to create third places, places where we can interact and become friends without pressure, letting the natural love of Christ flow out of us and over those whom He loves.

If we Christians are to reflect the image of Christ, then perhaps we’re to craft our “third places” to reflect an image of the Kingdom – hoping that those we share a cup of coffee, a smile and a conversation will catch a glimpse of the reflection.

Let us pray: Lord, help us to seek out third places. Help us to be intentional, to be present and to be willing to listen

and create space for new relationships to develop, and in so doing, by your grace, create authentic Christian community in spaces and places we could never have imagined, but that you know are possible. Amen.