

“The Church as the Sub-Dominate, Dominate Culture”

Jeremiah 29:4–15

Rev. Seth Richardson

August 2, 2015 – Evening Sermon

I'd like to start by looking at Jeremiah 29 and I'm excited to break the bread of God's Word to conclude our Lord's Day together in God's Word. I have a few points of explanation and full disclosure before we begin. First of all, someone in Sunday school today asked me to explain the title of my sermon: “The Church as the Sub-Dominate, Dominate Culture.” I think in some ways we're all feeling this in the days in which we live. You could argue that from its inception the church has always been the remnant, the minority report, the sub-dominate culture but these days it seems that we're a bit more exposed than we have been in the past. We are feeling a little bit of the acuteness of the edge and there is a growing hostility toward Christ, His Kingdom and ultimately the church. Have you sensed that recently?

This morning we heard a message from Matthew 28, the Great Commission, about the call to make disciples. How appropriate for us to remember the simple mandate of the church, the sub-dominate culture of making disciples as the church is gathered. In this sermon we are going to talk about the mission of the church, particularly when it's scattered. It can be confusing when you hear the pastor from the pulpit say “we” and one might think are you talking about the church gathered or the church scattered. We will be talking about the church scattered.

Now I will give a few points of self-disclosure. I am unapologetically passionate. I will get emotional. One, it is my nature and after many years of teaching I have just come to accept that. Two, I have basically winnowed down my view of preaching as pleading, simply begging people to believe the Scriptures. So in this sermon I'm basically going to beg you to believe God's Word. Lastly, I'm long winded and I'll do my best to hone this thing in. My mentor encouraged me to narrow my focus for this sermon so I've narrowed it down to three points, with only five sub points each (smile) so let's begin.

Jeremiah 29:4 says [4] “*Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon:*” Israel for generations, though there were some bright spots, historically and habitually are covenant breakers, unfaithful to a God who has been kind, patient and long suffering, until the point He executes His kind judgment and discipline. He raises up Assyria and ultimately Babylon to conquer them and take them into exile. In this letter that Jeremiah is presenting while they are on their way into exile is from God, giving them instruction on how to live while in exile, how to live as the sub-dominate culture.

It is not my place to say that we, the church are in any kind of judgment. I can tell you that the Word of God is true and applicable today. If you were Israel being carried off into slavery you would naturally look around and say ‘look at what Babylon is doing to us.’ God reminds them through Jeremiah to all the exiles He has sent so the first point is as we stand today as the sub-dominate culture in the world we live in, we don't have a choice. While God is not the author of evil or sin, how do we know our current situation is a part of His sovereign decree? It is because it has come to pass. Whatever God so wills, will come to pass and though His sovereign will is mysterious, glorious and we

may not understand it, it causes us more and more to cling to His revealed will. That is our goal; to see what His Holy Scriptures are teaching us now in this context in this situation. How are we supposed to respond?

Let's look further. Here is another point from the context. If you were to read the chapter before Jeremiah 29 you would find a false prophet. This false prophet is giving a different narrative to the people of God. This prophet told them they would only be in exile for two years and Jeremiah is assuring them that there is a different story. Jeremiah tells them they will be in exile for seventy years. We as the church in a sub-dominant culture must realize this basic foundational principle. We live in a world with competing narratives. We must understand that the things happening in our culture today is happening in a broader context and it's a part of a larger narrative. We don't have time to unpack the thought process of the Western civilization post enlightenment but I would encourage you to take some cultural apologetics courses at Birmingham Theological Seminary for it's significant to understand what is happening in our culture today.

In the words of John Lennon's song 'Imagine' where he says 'Imagine a world with no religion, it's easy if you try' and you've heard that we're going to be on the right side of history, there is a sense where there is another narrative. Here are a few principles we find ourselves up against. One this is a story of a state governed collective in a utopian vision. It has been that way from the beginning. This utopian vision has believed to be empowered by humanistic endeavor, ingenuity and technology. The goal of this vision is a place where all individuals have complete autonomy, independence, a false sense of freedom and in essence is morally relative.

In part of this story there is one thing impeding that progress and that is Christian thought and morality. We should not be surprised that the immediate product of the sexual revolution of the 1960s was the legalization of abortion. We should not be surprised that the ultimate product of the sexual revolution of the historical narrative that preceded that and continues is the legalization of homosexual marriage and the redefining of the family. We need to be equipped and understand that we're talking about competing narratives but we don't hold to that story.

We believe in a world that was created by a good, gracious and holy God who is Creator, Sustainer and Redeemer. He created a world, planted a garden and placed His image bearer to be a co-regent and to co-reign with Him and His creation, to be fruitful and multiply. The image bearer was to flourish and have dominion over His creation. It is sin and disbelief that is outright rebelliousness that has torn that world asunder. Now man stands alienated from a creation that is cursed, from his fellow man and even from himself because fundamentally he is alienated from God, but God in His grace and covenant commitment to His people enacts a plan of redemption, a plan of rescue, bringing about the glorious coming of King Jesus and His Kingdom. Through His life, death, resurrection and ascension and now intercession has ushered in a New Kingdom to rescue and restore all that which is His and will one day bring it to consummation where He will enjoy eternity with His bride, the new Jerusalem. He will usher in the new heavens and earth and life will be the way it ought to be.

This story of creation, fall, restoration and consummation has to be particularly now as the church is the sub-dominant yet most influential force in the world, the axis as to which we revolve around, that all of our life hinges on this one narrative. One author says that the significance of your life is determined by the story in which you believe you

are a part of. If you imagine that all the elements of your life are planets all these planets have to come around the orbit of this One narrative that Christ is King and He is bringing about His Kingdom. That is the story that we hold to yet we live in a world with competitive narratives.

Now let's look at the specific instructions that God gives Israel as exiles in Jeremiah 29. Jeremiah 29:5–6 says [5] *Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat their produce.* [6] *Take 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.* Notice these simple instructions. It is to continue in the two fundamental tenants/vocations of life – work and the family.

I think the reasons are varied. The first reason that He would tell Israel this is because they had to eat. There is an incredible motivation to work and it's called hunger. God has graciously and sovereignly designed work so that we might make a living, not a killing but a living. It also had more than our sustenance in mind. Work and family is the primary vocation that God had established in the world to bring the two channels of both His sustaining and redemptive grace into the world.

I would like to make a side note here. It's amazing that the world we live in with the sexual confusion that it's ironic that one, the literal name of Babylon is the city of confusion but secondly one of the things they were supposed to do is continue with their marriages and families. Recently I heard a report from a recent medical ministry trip where a family in our church took their entire family of seven to go on this trip. At the end of this mission's trip where God used to bring many to Christ, as they were debriefing the students shared what was most influential and impactful from their trip. Many of them who grew up in broken homes in the midst of a college life of sexual anarchy, mentioned seeing not a perfect but a gracious and Godly marriage and of watching a family serve God together. It's ironic that in the midst of the church being in a sub-dominant culture, God is calling us to our marriages. Do you see how brightly they shine in this world today?

Let's first take up this idea of work. First, why would God call them to work? We see that it's God design in the garden. The intention of life the way it ought to be was man was placed in the garden to both keep and cultivate it. Keep has the idea of stewardship and cultivate means to make better. So they were to continue with the cultural mandate, with their original purposes. I would argue, why is that we continue in our vocations in the midst of this perverse and broken world? It is because nobody has ever changed the world in their spare time.

William Wilburforce got up to do one singular purpose and that was to bring about good governments. Just recently five Supreme Court justices clocked in one morning and when they clocked out that afternoon they had changed the world forever by voting to legalize homosexual marriages. The reality is that the primary products that you will produce will be at work. The people and institutions that you have the greatest opportunity to influence is between 9 to 5, spending 50, 60 to 70 hours a week with them. Surely God has greater purposes than bringing home the bacon. Some are underemployed and unemployed and I pray that God would move to provide faithful in good work but we know God has created us to work and that at the output of our life is the opportunity we have to both wield the Gospel to shape institutions and individuals.

Secondly, He calls them to multiply. He says 'don't decrease.' There are several reasons here why I believe He has called them into exile for seventy years. Some scholars would say there is symbolic meaning in the number seventy, an eschatological meaning. I believe there is legitimacy to all of that, but to me the most straightforward answer is to be in exile for seventy years which is equivalent to a generation. Now some who go into exile will come back to Israel, but for the most part it is the time to raise up the next generation and we see that pattern throughout the Scriptures as well. He did it when they were in the wilderness and because of His covenant faithfulness He would raise up the next generation. So we see this emphasis on the next generation.

I don't believe this is hoping that the next generation will pull through for us and I don't believe at all that God is calling you to throw in the towel and just hope that the next generation will get us through. I do believe He is calling our acute attention in these days to develop the next generation. I heard one pastor say any vision of cultural change that is this side of a hundred years might be near sided. I heard a missionary from Japan explain his ministry strategy at a mission's conference and it included his great grandchildren.

I am not saying to stop praying for revival. Pray that God would send His Spirit and before this week is done there would be transformation in our world and in our nation. Pray consistently and constantly, Lord Jesus, come quickly; but Jesus if You tarry, please just come. Whether His Kingdom comes quickly or slowly, we believe His will will be done on earth as it is in heaven, and this is the promise that we hold. While we pray for an immediate movement of the Gospel, please pray fervently for the Festival of Hope that is coming August 14 through the 16, 2015 and that we would see immediate transformation in our city.

It seems that God's normative way is to develop the next generation. In the midst of exile, being the minority and the remnant, God raises out of His grace and faithfulness because of His covenant the next generation. Why is that? We know He does this out of faithfulness but if we were to speak in human terms and the natural progression of parenting of the covenant family raised in a local church, could it be that God uses the church and family when they are in the sub-dominant position in the culture in the midst of evil create a longing for righteousness among His people that rubs off on our children. In the midst of opposition to the Gospel does it create a winsomeness, a thoughtfulness and a tact that our children witness? As our worldly powers seem to wane could it be that God is giving us this dependence upon His Word and His Spirit that somehow our children are watching? Could God be creating in us a new humility that will be the soil in which our children will grow?

When Israel is in exile, if we were to study the product of exile that we see in the life of Israel, in essence you would see three classes of people. Some of these people would come into exile and God would bring them out and they would span the 70 years. Some would be raised up in the midst of that context. In the midst of exile God would raise up Ezra, Nehemiah, Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, Abednego and Esther. Think of all those heroes of the faith. What did exile produce in them? It produced unwavering and steadfast commitment to the truth of God's Word and love for God. It is ironic that God would raise these people to a platform using them redemptively and to find favor under pagan authorities. Every one of them, when they had that platform, cashed it in. When

the time came they took a risk for the sake of God to stand for His truth and God used each one of them redemptively in His covenant plan of grace.

There were two other classes of people that came out of exile. The historian Josephus tells us that there were some who in fact became wealthy in exile. Exile produced an opportunity for them to flourish financially and they prospered. When the decree came that they could go home, they chose to stay in the land of confusion than to return to the land of rest. They had so cozied up to the culture that it was better for them to stay than to go. They had been assimilated to the world's view. It afforded them such a lifestyle that their hopes were so deep in them that they couldn't return.

Then there was a third class. In some ways I think this is the class of modern day Israel that we have seen throughout the last 2,000 years. Only the minority of Israel returned and most of them would be scattered throughout most the Middle East and Mesopotamia. This class would live in the cloister of these small communities and their one goal was to hold onto the nostalgic relics of their ancient religion. Over time they would become more moralistic, denying the Messiah, becoming legalistic and ultimately and completely isolationists having no regard to the world around them. In fact, for some of those who did return in about 150 to 200 years, there would be a group fearing God's wrath/discipline again they would hedge the law. Their very name means separatists. They became Pharisees.

When we think about what we want God to do in us, through us and through our children, who do you want to be? Let's continue in Jeremiah. Jeremiah 29:7 says *[7] But 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.* Basically Coach Jeremiah is saying to the people, you need to get some jobs, plant a garden and then get married and have lots of children. They like it so far. Then your children need to get married and have children. Then seek the welfare of the city. They didn't like this. They just invaded our countries, destroyed our cities and temple. Our whole social and religious identity is gone Coach. They are taking us away from the Promised Land as slaves and you want us to seek their welfare? Seek their welfare and not only that, pray for them.

Do you see the radical nature of the grace of God? What kind of God is this, that He would wish for the well-being of His enemies and pray for the flourishing of those who sought to kill them? God will not be mocked for He will have His justice. What kind of God can execute both His justice and His kind mercy and then call us to love our enemies? Do you know why I believe this? Yes it is because the Bible says it but we were once His enemies so I know He is the kind of God that would seek the well-being of His enemies and their flourishing. We were the ones who ignored, were apathetic or had animosity toward the Gospel. We were dead in our sins. When we were enemies Christ died for us. The church is the sub-dominant culture but the most influential people in the world, the people of God, are to incarnate the Gospel to the world, to make manifest this kind of grace that both holds to truth and executes justice but at the same time loves deeply with a sacrificial love.

What do I mean when I say incarnate the Gospel? It's what we see that Jesus did. The Word became flesh and dwelt among us. We beheld His glory. He was full of grace and truth. What did the incarnation do? In essence it took the abstract ideas of grace and truth and fleshed them out and expressed them in real people. The incarnation does this;

it combines a theology of ‘for’ – for the lost, for the nations, for the poor, for the church, for our city, for the marginalized – to the theology of ‘with’ that Christ came to earth and dwelt among us. To be honest, it’s a lot easier for me to be ‘for’ than ‘with.’ I can be for the lost all day long.

Notice what He says at the end of Jeremiah 29:7, *for in its welfare you will find your welfare*. I don’t think this is referring to the character movement in the corporate world about ten years ago. It was in response to the Enron scandal. This movement basically said, seek people’s welfare for in it you’ll find your welfare. In essence it was that character was good customer service. What goes around comes around. High character quality in your business is ultimately good for your bottom line. I don’t think that is what He is talking about here. I don’t think we can be people of character in front of our customers and live like hell the rest of the time.

I think what He is saying here is basically go into exile and be good citizens. Seek their welfare and do what’s right. Stand firm in the truth but don’t do anything stupid. The Gospel is offensive enough so you don’t have to be. This idea of seeking their welfare I think has to do with our welfare and their welfare being intertwined. How do we live in such a way where there are believers and non-believers where we’re seeking their welfare and it benefits us collectively? I thought about policies and common and redemptive grace issues.

I know this might be a challenge for us but the thing that I thought about most was my boyhood, my childhood, growing up in a small town in Alabama. I can’t preach a sermon without mentioning Leroy, Alabama. This town had about 495 people when I was growing up. I remember when a neighbor’s house was on fire and pretty much the whole community came out, not with buckets and all. My parents divorced when I was about 12 years old and the first Christmas was pretty tough. I had this distinct memory of Christmas morning where people brought presents to our home, some believers and some non-believers, so we could have Christmas. It wasn’t until about 10 or 15 years later that I realized those were church people and then people from the community. When I was a kid we didn’t have those categories. We had a K–12 school. We all went to the same church and the same school. I played football on the same field that my dad played football. I grew up in the home that my mom grew up in.

I didn’t have categories of church people, school people and work people. They were just all people and we were all connected. We were all seeking the welfare of each other. I realize we live in a metropolitan city of over a million people and that will be a bit challenging. I think it will cause us to think intentionally, creatively and might cause us to forego some things so that we can more and more interweave our life with people so that we can live in and among the lost. This is so that we might have an influence for the sake of Christ because ultimately our welfare is in their welfare that we are to love these people.

In conclusion, let’s get back to Jeremiah 29:10–14 that says [10] *“For thus says the LORD: When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will visit you, and I will fulfill to you my promise and bring you back to this place. [11] For I know the plans I have for you, declares the LORD, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope. [12] Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will hear you. [13] You will seek me and find me, when you seek me with all your heart. [14] I will be found by you, declares the LORD, and I will restore your fortunes and gather you*

*from all the nations and all the places where I have driven you, declares the LORD, and I will bring you back to the place from which I sent you into exile.”*

Why would God call us to live in faith as the sub-dominate culture, as the most influential institution, the most influential gathering of His people? We are powerless except in the power of Christ, the Holy Spirit and His Word so why would God call us to be the sub-dominate culture in this world? It is so that when the smoke clears and the day is over we will see that there is only One Hero to the story. When every tongue, tribe and nation gather around the throne of Christ and cry ‘who is worthy to take and break the seals’ all of our eyes will be focused upon the Lamb and there He is. We won’t look back on that day and think about how wise, talented and crafty we were. We will collectively worship King Jesus and say “God You did it.” By Your blood people from every tribe and nation have been ransomed and together we worship the King of Kings. Every tongue will confess and every knee will bow that Christ is Lord of Lords. He will be exalted and reign forever! Amen!

Why has God called us to live this way, in this context? I can’t tell you the specifics but I know it is for Him to receive all the honor and glory. Let’s pray. Take a moment to ask God whether He would come quickly or slowly to come Lord Jesus. Take a moment and long and yearn for righteousness. Take a moment to beseech God on behalf of our city, our nation, your family and friends that the Gospel of grace would rescue them from their sins. Take a moment and ask.

Prayer:

King Jesus, we praise You for You O Lord are the Almighty and Your ways are far above ours. You are inscrutable and beyond our finding out lest You have come to us and filled Yourself. Thank You for that grace. May we never forget that we are mere recipients of grace. Help us to love deeply and sacrificially. Help us make disciples even to the end of the world, even to the end of the age. Help us to live, serve and care in and among the lost and most of all may You be honored and glorified, in Christ’s Name, Amen.