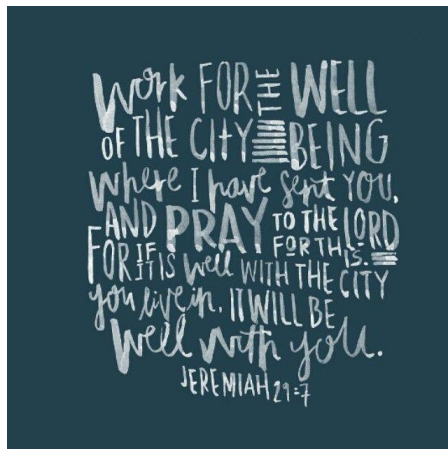


## THRIVING IN EXILE



*The guest preacher for August 26<sup>th</sup> was Dr. Bernie Adeney-Risakotta who is Professor of Religion and Social Science and founding director of the Indonesian Consortium for Religious Studies (ICRS) at Gadjah Mada University in Yogyakarta, Indonesia. He also teaches at Duta Wacana Christian University (DWCU) and Muhammadiyah University Yogyakarta. ICRS is the first and only consortium in the world, of Muslim, Christian and secular universities, for studying the impact of religions on society. From 1982 until 1991, he taught at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley and has since lived and worked in Indonesia. His wife, Dr. Farsijana Adeney-Risakotta, also teaches at DWCU and has served as head of the Indonesian Women's Coalition in their province—a predominantly Muslim group that seeks to empower women and children. Bernie and Farsijana are Presbyterian Mission Co-Workers, supported in their work by PCUSA.*



### **Scripture:**

### **Psalm 137**

<sup>1</sup>By the rivers of Babylon— there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion. <sup>2</sup>On the willows there we hung up our harps. <sup>3</sup>For there our captors asked us for songs, and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying, “Sing us one of the songs of Zion!”

<sup>4</sup>How could we sing the LORD’s song in a foreign land? <sup>5</sup>If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand wither! <sup>6</sup>Let my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth, if I do not remember you, if I do not set Jerusalem above my highest joy.

<sup>7</sup>Remember, O LORD, against the Edomites the day of Jerusalem’s fall, how they said, “Tear it down! Tear it down! Down to its foundations!” <sup>8</sup>O daughter Babylon, you devastator! Happy shall they be who pay you back what you have done to us! <sup>9</sup>Happy shall they be who take your little ones and dash them against the rock!

### **Jeremiah 29:4-7**

<sup>4</sup>Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon:

<sup>5</sup>Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. <sup>6</sup>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. <sup>7</sup>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.

**This is the Word of the Lord! Thanks be to God!**



Good morning!

The second scripture reading is from Jeremiah 29 and it's a very famous passage. It's the letter from Jeremiah to the exiles. We earlier heard Psalm 137

and some of you, no doubt, winced at the end of the passage. It's one of the most horrible passages in scripture, but at the same time it's also one of the most beautiful, one of the great Psalms of lament. It's a

psalm that expresses the true feelings that someone has. It's not true doctrinally, it's not true ethically, but it's true emotionally. It's what someone really felt who was facing exile.

## JEREMIAH

In the passage that we have from Jeremiah is a letter to the exiles. It's a letter to these people who have been taken prisoner from having high positions in society, had become slaves and have been taken from Jerusalem into Babylon and were in deep grief.

So this is just a part from this letter from Jeremiah to the exiles.

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, plant gardens and eat what they produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; then give your daughters in marriage, multiply there and do not decrease, 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.

Farsijana and I are very happy to be with you. Our home base is in Berkeley, CA so we are close by and we're here for a few months before we go back to Indonesia. We don't feel very much like exile. I don't know if many of you in Santa Rosa feel like you are in exile. But I think this passage has something very profound to say to all of us.

What does it mean to be in exile?

In a sense it means that you have a home but you're not in it. You have a place where you feel like you belong, but for some reason you cannot be there. You are in exile.

Usually there is some sense of coercion or even violence in exile. Usually it's not the same as being an immigrant where you choose to go from one place to another. They were forced.

Exile is a state of mind. It's a way of feeling; it's a way of thinking. It's also a physical reality but it's even deeper: a sense of alienation, a sense of being lost, of being not in your own home even if you are in your own home.

## EXILE AND ALIENATION

I think exile and alienation are normal part of everyday life, not just because millions and millions of people around the world are in exile, are immigrants, forced out of their homes, but also it's normal for all of us.

Probably it's a normal part of being a teenager to feel alienated and in exile, to feel like you don't know

who you are or where you are going and to feel separated from others around you.

It's also, I think, quite common in older people. If you are recently retired, you may feel in exile. Who are you if you are not a professional, if you're not working full time as it's called? There is often a sense of loss, a sense of homelessness.

It's a common response also to loss, to tragedy, to disaster. Who are you when your home burns down or you're forced out of your own neighborhood? Who are you when your husband or your wife, your spouse dies before you do?

Exile and alienation are not sins, they're not wrong; they are a normal part of our human existence.

## HOW DO WE RESPOND?

The question we face, though, is always: How do we respond? How do we respond to that feeling of alienation or lostness, of not knowing where you are?

**Victor Frankel was a Jew who survived a few concentration camps during World War II and did not only survive, he thrived. He wrote a lot of every deep themes out of that experience. One thing he wrote is that between stimulus and response, there is a space. In that space is our freedom to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom.**

So there is a stimulus: exile, tragedy, alienation, pain, suffering, and then there is our response. How do we respond? And he said that in the middle there's a space. Because we are human beings, we have a space where we can choose. We can decide how we will respond. There is not just one way to respond; there is not only one way to respond but there are many right ways to respond. It depends on the situation. Sometimes it's right to return to your place of exile, or to resist your exile, or to reject it, or to reform it, or to revolt, or to embrace it. There is a word in Indonesian pasrah which means submit it to God. Submit it to God when something comes that you cannot accept. Part of the process of healing is to accept it as from God.

Frankel said also, **“When we are no longer able to change a situation, we are challenged to change ourselves.”**

When we are no longer able to change the situation, our challenge is to change ourselves, to change how we respond.

## INDONESIA

Farsijana and I are working in Indonesia, the largest Muslim country in the world. There are now more people who are Muslims in the world than the combined population of China and the United States.

**The future of our world depends greatly on what will be the future of the relationship between Muslims and non-Muslims, especially Christians, as the largest religious group in the world.**

Farsijana is working with Muslim villagers, mainly, who feel like they are in exile because of the rapid pace of social change, economic change, political change; they are bewildered. Often they have lost their land, they are facing rapid urbanization, globalization. They do not know what is happening. Farsijana is trying to find a space, a space for grace, a space where they can respond to change in positive ways without hatred and without deep wounding. One of the goals is to help Muslims and Christians work together because when Christians and Muslims work together they are much more able to handle and face their common problems than when they are in opposition to each other.

### WORK IN THE UNIVERSITIES

Farsijana teaches in the university as well as working in the villages, but my primary work is in the universities. Many Muslims in Indonesia feel like they are under attack. They feel like the world is against them. They hear all the anti-Islamic rhetoric coming from Europe and the United States and they feel like somehow that the west is trying to destroy them. Sometimes they feel like they are losing their identity because they are modern people who value democracy and human rights and many of the things that we value but they feel like they are labeled as something bad. Now for many of them there is a sense of fear, withdrawal, hatred, some even move towards violence. So in Indonesia we are working to try to find a space where we can bring together faculty and students from Muslim, Christian and secular universities to work together to address our common problems.

In the passage from Jeremiah, there are at least four ways in which he advises them to find a space to work for healing in the midst of exile. The first one is maybe the most startling, the most surprising, the most shocking: his statement that it is God who sent them into exile. In verse four, it says, “Thus says the

Lord of Host, the God of Israel, to all the exiles, whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon.” This is a shock. When something terrible happens to you, is it possible to say that God is behind it? Well that’s a complicated question. I can’t answer it, but I can say that there is a sense in which we can say that God is working in it. God is working in it, and in this case, Jeremiah says that God has sent them into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon.

### BACK INJURY

I remember a year or so ago I was riding my bicycle up a volcano. Actually it was this volcano. (Bernie held up a photo in a book.) This is a book I just published. If any of you are interested, you can hear more about it in the Rose Room after the service.

But I was riding my bicycle up this volcano and I fell and I hurt my back. I tried to just live through it, get past it, get past the pain, but it just kept getting worse and worse. So finally I went into the hospital and I was in the hospital for about a week, and during that time I just had excruciating pain, pain that I had never experienced before in my life. I was really feeling confused, alienated, uncertain. Who was I? I’m supposed to be strong, riding my bicycle up the mountain, and here I am, just totally unable to move, not even able to lie on my back without pain.

My son, Peter, who lives in Berlin, wrote me a letter and he said, “Dad, how can this thing that has happened to you be the very best thing in the world that could have happened to you?” I had a hard time getting my mind around the question. How can this thing that has happened to you be the very best thing in the world that could have happened to you? Maybe that’s a little like saying God sent them from Jerusalem to Babylon, into exile. If God sent them, perhaps it was the very best thing that could have happened to them.

### A DIFFERENT WAY TO RESPOND

Our natural response is to mourn, to feel despair, and even to hate – hate the Babylonians who put you there. Hate those who set fires. Jeremiah’s letter suggests a different way to respond.

His second step says build houses, plant gardens, eat what they produce. In other words, work; work to make your situation better, building, planting, eating, cooking. You have to cook, right, if you eat. Work to make the situation you’re in better, to make it more beautiful, to make it more safe, to make it better for you.

The third step is in the next verse. He says, grow, increase, do not decrease, do not fade away, do not

give up, take wives and have sons and daughters, multiply there and do not decrease. It reminds me of a song from Bob Dylan where he says, "He who is not busy being born is busy dying." He who is not busy being born is busy dying. How do we work to make our situation better?

The fourth step is: "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."

**You know if we seek the welfare of our community, the place where God has put us, it's not an act of sacrifice. We're not just helping the poor because if the people we help flourish, we will flourish. If we make friends it will be good not only for them but also for us. Seeking the welfare of the city is for our own good.**

When Farsijana, my wife, was doing her doctoral research in a village in North Maluccas, Indonesia was thrown into turmoil because there was the fall of the authoritarian Suarto and there was the institution of democratic reforms and decentralized power. Nobody knew what was happening, and as a result, political and economic tensions that had been around for a long time but suppressed by force, all came to the surface and lots of conflicts broke out.

Farsijana was doing research in a Muslim village in North Moluccas and she was staying with the leader of the mosque there. There were a lot of tensions in the Moluccas and we thought that that area would not have any because Christians and Muslims had lived there together for millennia in peace with one another.

### **OM DIN**

But Om Din, the mosque leader and head of the family she was living with, knew some things that I didn't know. He said, "But Bernie, don't worry about your wife. I will take care of her and I would die before I would allow anything bad to happen to her." He would die. Isn't that a little over-dramatic? But I appreciated the sentiment and much more so when Farsijana had to leave the village because her computer broke down; she was in danger of losing her data. While she was out of the village, violence broke out between Christians and Muslims in the area. Christians whose homes had been burned attacked this village and they burned it to the ground.

Farsijana lost all of her possessions and Om Din lost his home and he and his family had to flee to another island for their own safety. While they were on the other island, he was put on trial for having had a Christian in his home who might have been a spy. His sons joined the jihad to fight to regain their land from the Christians who had taken it over. Finally at the end, when they got their land back, the Christians were driven out. One of Farsijana's relatives was killed and in the time that followed, there was a big question about what was going to happen. The jihadists who had land, regained their land, but there were a lot of them who joined who didn't have any land and they wanted to take over the land of the Christians. But Om Din and other Muslim leaders were very wise and they said, "This belongs to our brothers and sisters who are Christians." And they defended the land and made it possible for the Christians to come back and retake their land and return from their exile. Om Din and his other leaders were seeking the welfare of the whole community, not just the welfare of the Muslims.

### **GOD PUT ME WHERE I AM**

We all face stimulus, tragedy, things that make us angry, that make us hate, like the psalmist who expressed his hatred so horribly at the end of the psalm that we read. I wonder if any of you feel like you are in exile. You feel abandoned, alone, displaced.

One response, it's not the only one, is to say God has sent me into exile. God has put me where I am. What can I do? I can work to make it better. I can work to bring reconciliation, justice, peace with my neighbors, I can create beauty in this place. I can reproduce, I can grow.

Who are the children or the old people whom God has sent you to care for? Who are the ones that you can nourish, defend, love and give life to? How can you seek the welfare of the city, including those Babylonians, the people you feel threatened by that are different from you? Seek what is good for them because if they flourish, you will flourish, too.

This is the Word of the Lord.



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