

“In What Will We Dare to Invest?”

In what will we dare to invest? Friends – in person and at a physical distance, the Spirit of God (that is, fathomless Love) has gathered us together on this first Sunday after crossing the threshold of the fall equinox and the sixteenth of twenty-four Sundays in the long, green, growing season of Ordinary Time in the circle of our church year. As we enter now into an extended moment of reflection, let’s each wonder: in what will I dare to invest my time, energy, effort, care? In what will I invest my very self? Let us pray: Spirit of God, empower us with serenity to accept the things that are not within our power to change, with courage to change the things we can, and with wisdom to discern the one from the other. Amen.

The prophet Jeremiah and the apostle Paul both speak to the faithful, hope-nurturing action of investment. To invest is to commit or make use of something for future benefits. Indeed, we demonstrate to ourselves and others where our strongest commitments lie by investing our time, energy, effort, and care. Where are you most invested? Where are we most invested as a congregation? Let’s invite the prophet Jeremiah and the apostle Paul to be traveling companions to us as we consider our investments.

“How dare you prophesy the way you do?” Zedekiah, king of Judah, demanded of Jeremiah just before imprisoning Jeremiah (Jer. 32:3). In the biblical testaments and in the Christian story as it continues to unfold in our day, to be prophetic is to speak truth to the face of power. Under the rule of King Nebuchadnezzar, the Babylonian army had surrounded and besieged Jerusalem, the capital of the kingdom of Judah. Jeremiah had advised King Zedekiah to surrender to Babylon as the one way to possibly come out of the situation alive. Far from heeding or even considering Jeremiah’s prophecy, Zedekiah sought to silence the prophet as a political enemy. They were already trapped by the Babylonian army and confined within the city walls of Jerusalem. By imprisoning Jeremiah, the king confined the prophet in an additional way.

Zedekiah invested his power in the move to imprison Jeremiah for the future benefit of the prophet's silence. Spoiler alert: the king did not gain the expected returns on his investment.

Scholars have noted that the rest of the story in today's reading form Jeremiah seems fairly unrealistic. How could Jeremiah's cousin Hanamel (coming from outside the city walls) have penetrated the surrounding Babylonian army to arrive safely to visit Jeremiah in prison? And how could Jeremiah have exercised such autonomy from within the confines of prison – accessing his personal wealth, signing, and transmitting a deed of purchase? If Jeremiah did make those efforts during his time of imprisonment, then he invested his money, effort, and hope in a vision of caring for land – a vision predicated on the possibility of release from imprisonment by his king and occupation by the Babylonian army.

Investing oneself (one's time, energy, effort, care) is a life-affirming action because it is done in with hope and expectation of future benefits. A Minnesota Correctional Facility stands within the Bayport city limits, just short of a mile from where we are gathered for worship today at People's Park. 1,172 men currently reside in the facility. I came across better news that I had anticipated on the Department of Corrections website. I read the following: *“The role of MCF-Stillwater in the DOC is to provide men with educational, vocational, and industrial programming opportunities during incarceration. Educational programs include adult basic education, literacy, and general educational development (GED). Certificate programs include computer careers and higher education including degree programs. Vocational programs include carpentry, welding, machining, boiler operation, and electrician. Through MINNCOR Industries, men have the opportunity to work in subcontract assembly and packaging, canteen fulfillment, and warehousing/delivery services. Stillwater also provides transitional life skills, behavioral change, and restorative justice programming.*

The goal of all programming is to provide the opportunity for change in their lives and the skills needed for a successful transition back into society.”

(<https://mn.gov/doc/facilities/stillwater/>)

I find it hopeful that the Department of Corrections supports incarcerated persons as they dare to invest effort into building skills for transitioning and reintegrating into society. When I interviewed for my position as pastor of our congregation, I was intrigued and energized by hearing about our church’s participation in the Prison Poetry Project. Several of our members invest time and energy into the dissemination of poems written by our incarcerated neighbors. These several volunteers print poems, cut them into strips, and stuff them into small bubblegum machine capsules to be distributed as messages of resilience to the wider community. Perhaps an incarcerated person creating beauty by engaging in the art of poetry is a hope-filled investment somewhat akin to Jeremiah paying for and signing the deed for a plot of land from his cell in prison. Both investments seem to carry a message that there is more life and growth yet ahead.

I wonder, in what will you dare to invest your time, energy, effort, care? In what will you invest your very self? Nineteenth century Swiss philosopher Henri-Frédéric Amiel once wrote these words as a reminder for the ages: *“Life is short. We do not have too much time to gladden the hearts of those who travel the way with us. Be swift to love and make haste to be kind.”* In what particular ways will you embody love and kindness during your lifetime?

Compared with today’s reading from Jeremiah, with its narrative grounded in concrete details of a real estate transaction, the reading from Apostle Paul’s first letter to Timothy is filled with soaring rhetoric that has persuaded and encouraged followers of Jesus both in the first century CE and for generations to follow. How do Paul’s words speak to you about opportunities to invest yourself? We heard,

“Warn those who are blessed with this world’s goods not to look down on other people. They are not to put their hope in wealth, for it is uncertain. Instead, they are to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with all that we need for our enjoyment. Tell them they are to do good and be wealthy in good works. They are to be generous and willing to share. In this way, they’ll create a treasure for the future, and guarantee the only life that is real.” (1 Tim. 6:17-19)

It can feel natural for any of us to look down on other people or to look up to other people – to assume ourselves to be very different in our capacities to do good works based on the gulf between our social locations (that is, the known locations in which race, gender, class, and other social constructs have placed us in our society). But the Apostle Paul encourages us to co-operate, valuing what each one brings to the present moment of opportunity to invest ourselves in good. Again, he wrote, *“They are to be generous and willing to share. In this way, they’ll create a treasure for the future, and guarantee the only life that is real.”* What a vital example the Prison Poetry Project provides of mutual generosity and willingness to share in the creation of treasure and real life.

Have you ever or recently stepped outside your comfort zone and discovered a new form of treasure that was truly hope-filled and life that was more real? Did you choose to invest yourself in that hope-filled treasure and that real life?

May we each find ourselves confidently ready to answer King Zedekiah’s challenge: how do we dare do the good we do? Because fathomless love reminds us time and again that we are each capable of making a loving impact by investing ourselves for the greater good as our return on our time, energy, effort – of our very selves invested.

I invite you to close your eyes (if you are willing to do so and feel comfortable) to hear these words from Apostle Paul, our ancestor in faith, encouraging us along the way. Paul wrote,

“As one dedicated to God, strive to be a person of integrity and piety, filled with faith and love, patience, and gentleness. Run the great race of faith. Take firm hold of the everlasting life to which you were called.” (1 Timothy 6: 11-12a)

Friends in Christ, let us dare to invest ourselves in the work of Love, because Love is counting on us. Amen!

Rev. Clare Gromoll
People’s Congregational Church (Bayport, MN)
September 25, 2022 (16th Sunday in Ordinary Time)
Jeremiah 32: 1-3a, 6-15, 1 Timothy 6: 6-19