

Seek the Welfare
[Jeremiah 29:1, 4-7; 31:31-33](#)
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Have you ever experienced a more negative presidential campaign season? The political landscape is bleak. We could say we live in a time of political exile. It's unfamiliar terrain. And it's gloomy. Most people I talk with are discouraged about the upcoming election. Many say they don't like either candidate. Many people speak with hate about one or both. The talk is about the lesser of evils. ("Evils," mind you. We're talking about our future President...)

At first there was a lot of humor and making fun of the candidates over these past months. Next came disbelief: people couldn't believe what was happening. Then as primary election results, conventions, and endorsements solidified the two candidates, reality set in. There was resignation, and people said, "It has really come to this." Many folks experience a sense of futility. Some say they won't even vote.

Statements in the media have been unkind; some have been outright demeaning of women and minorities. People are quick to list charges against both candidates. Some of this conversation is only natural in a two-party system, as Election Day approaches. People hurry home to watch the debates on television. We find ourselves expecting a catfight, where people seem to think they can say anything. We have come to accept speakers interrupting one another. It's rather appalling, the lack of decorum and civility. We have heard many more criticisms lashed out than policies described. I know I have entered into the negativity too. It's hard to be hopeful about our country at such a time as this.

And so Jeremiah's words speak to me in a new way this fall. They are not just about biblical times on the other side of the world. They make me consider what I can do to "seek the welfare" of our country through this time of hatred and polarization.

The landscape of life was very bleak in the days of Jeremiah. For 28 chapters, Jeremiah warned of doom. Then the city of Jerusalem was destroyed, and its people were dragged off into exile in Babylon. The people understood their fate to have been determined by their own sin: they had ignored God and had fostered delusional political and economic policies. In chapter 29, Jeremiah writes to these people living among their conquerors in a foreign land, and gives surprising advice in today's lesson. You might think the prophet would console the people. But actually, he says: Build houses and live in them. Take wives and have children. "And 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."

God wants the people to get on with life and make the best of their situation. God wants the people to have families and seek the welfare of their new communities...even in the midst of an enemy culture where they landed in exile.

We find ourselves living in a time of exile—in society and as individuals. We may feel alienated and estranged.

I wonder what it means to seek the welfare of our country at this time. I suppose it means, from now until November 8, to do what we can, not to inflame the emotions of our neighbors with whom we disagree. I suppose it means to stay informed and to work for what we feel is right and best for the welfare of our nation. As people of faith, I know we must be kind and respectful in our use of language and avoid attacking either candidate.

And then, whoever wins this election is going to leave a huge number of people angry, not just disappointed, but angry. How will we move on? How will we make the best of the situation? We have to remember that in our democracy, it is the people who elect the president—well, not exactly, with the Electoral College, but still we have ourselves, the American people, to hold responsible for the election results. And then we have to live together. I hope we can work together for the welfare of all people, in spite of our differences.

Perhaps thinking Christians can actually have an impact on the political climate of our country. Jeremiah writes a letter and has God tell the ancient Israelites that they need to keep their faith in exile. They need to live by God's commandments and do whatever they can to make life good. And this is what we need to do too: obey God's rule in our lives and work for the good of all. Complaining once the election is over probably won't do much good. Perhaps as people of faith, we can exercise some influence on the secular culture. Perhaps we can model rational discourse. Perhaps we can work for change in the areas where compromise between parties is possible. Hopefully our disagreements can be civil and maybe even constructive.

The Christian perspective is always to stand up for what we think God wants us to do, but to think first of the well being of those around us. We are called to have hope even in a bleak political time. We are called to work for a way forward, even when the left and right are at such odds that there appears to be only impasse. Walter Brueggemann says of this passage in Jeremiah,

"We are called to put on the new self in Jesus Christ. We are called to have hope in the future that God has for us. God has not abandoned us and we must NOT abandon God" (<https://thinkandletthink.com/2011/04/03/sermon-on-jeremiah-291-9/>).

"God is ready for us to call on God. By living into God's reality, by seeking God with our whole hearts, by practicing justice and loving kindness, we will find God. We are called to live into a community where the well being of those around us becomes more important to us than ourselves" (<https://www.bibleodyssey.org/en/passages/main-articles/new-covenant-jer-31.aspx>).

We are called to rise above the ugliness of this election season. We are called to model to our children what we may not always see in the media: respect, fairness, and willingness to dialogue, taking turns to speak one at a time. It is our own fault as a nation if we cannot

work together for good. I invite you to consider what it means for you to "Seek the welfare of the city" in our political climate this month.

I chose a photo of Washington, D.C. for the cover of our bulletin—a city that represents our nation. But instead of choosing a picture of the White House, a center of power and controversy, I've chosen the Lincoln Memorial. Lincoln led the nation through the War Between the States—a terrible time of disagreement and bloodshed. In the Memorial is engraved Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address. It ends with these powerful words:

With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in, to bind up the nation's wounds, to care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow and his orphan, to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations

(https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abraham_Lincoln%27s_second_inaugural_address).

We need to be about the business of "binding up the nation's wounds." To seek the welfare of our country will mean to exercise patience and kindness.

When I was in college in Washington, D.C., a group of us went by bus to a poor neighborhood to help children with their homework after school once a week. At the time, I had had no idea that there was such poverty in America, especially in the nation's capital. My college, American University, was in NW Washington, where the embassies were. But in the heart of D. C. there were broken down apartment buildings and many children without much future. We were studying about American culture that term. I had a taste of a part of America I had never seen before. I had to ask myself, "What does it mean to seek the welfare of the city?"

On an individual level, to seek the welfare of others is about caring and being considerate. Diana has shared a favorite children's book, called *How Full is Your Bucket?* Jim and I attended a couples' group last week, and we used this book for a program. (It's not just for children!) Each of us has an invisible bucket. When our bucket is full, we feel great. When it's empty we feel awful. What we say to one another, or how we act, influences how full or empty our buckets are. For instance, when someone appreciates your work and gives you a compliment, that is like filling your bucket. When someone criticizes you, it's like the person has dipped into your bucket and taken away your good feelings. We should be about filling people's buckets—our own and others'.

We do that by paying attention to others' needs and doing considerate things. How nice it is to receive a hot meal when you are sick. Or how good it feels to have someone invite you to a party or out to lunch. How special it is simply to be noticed and appreciated. If we want to seek the welfare of others, we need to put aside judgment, and be generous with smiles and encouragement. We need to extend favors and kindness.

Jeremiah gave the people good advice about living in a new culture. He told the people to seek the welfare of the city, and *their* welfare would benefit too. Love is reciprocal! You may know the old song by Malvina Reynolds, "Magic Penny":

Love is something if you give it away, give it away, give it away,

Love is something if you give it away
You end up having more.

It's just like a magic penny,
Hold it tight and you won't have any.
Lend it, spend it, and you'll have so many
They'll roll all over the floor.

Love is something if you give it away,...
You end up having more (<http://people.wku.edu/charles.smith/MALVINA/mr101.htm>).

It's a very basic principle we learn, hopefully, when we are very young. We do unto others as we would have them do unto us. We treat people well and seek their welfare, just as we hope others will do the same for us.

It shouldn't be so hard to do because the God of love is with us. Jeremiah even says God has made a new covenant of unconditional love. God has written the new covenant on our hearts. The people in Babylon in exile didn't have their temple any more, but they still had their God, who wanted only the best for them. This is God's promise: to be as close as a heartbeat. To be present even in times of political unrest and social upheaval. To be present at times of loneliness and depression and grief. God asks us to be partners and work together for good. I pray that we will seek the welfare of our country and the welfare of our relationships with a spirit of generosity and kindness.