

**Sermon 100916a**  
**The Thankful Ten Percent**

I want to warn you that I am probably going to offend some of you this morning. We begin our readings this morning with the prophet Jeremiah who offended lots of people. Jeremiah lived during the seventh century B.C., and these were troubled times. Jeremiah's ministry began during the reign of Josiah, the last faithful king of Judah. Josiah was killed at the battle of Carchemish, and things in Judah went rapidly downhill after that. Under Josiah's sons, Judah went into a period of political, social, financial, and spiritual decay. Sounds familiar, but we'll get to that later.

God punished the people of Judah for their wicked ways, and Jeremiah lived through several deportations of Judeans to Babylon. The last of these deportations saw a large number of Judeans taken into exile in Babylon in 586 B.C. Our Old Testament reading from the Book of Jeremiah is part of a letter of encouragement to the Jews held in captivity in Babylon. Babylon was a city filled with pagan gods, but Nebuchadnezzar gave the Jews freedom within the city to live relatively normal lives.

*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; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters;... God was telling the Jews that they should get used to the reality that they were going to be in exile for a long time. The false prophets among*

them had told them that they would be returning home soon, but this was not the case. Many of the captives were skilled craftsmen and professionals, and they had the opportunity to be active and fruitful. God never condones sloth and always wants his people to be productive... *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.* This is reminiscent of Jesus' words from John 17: *My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one. They are not of the world, even as I am not of it. Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth.* Jesus was clearly speaking of the way his disciples were to live on earth even though they were citizens of the Kingdom of Heaven. The Jews in exile were living in a land filled with pagan gods, but God was calling his people to be instruments of peace in a secular culture. As I read the Word of God to Jeremiah, I thought about how our situation in the United States today is much like the Jews of the seventh century B.C. We may not be in exile physically in a foreign country, but I have no doubt that, as Christians, we are in spiritual exile in the midst of a secular culture.

In 1976 Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon, who were then professors at Duke Divinity School, wrote a book titled *Resident Aliens*. In that book they compared the Jews of the exile to today's Christians saying that both are resident aliens living in the midst of an alien culture. In his Letter to the

Philippians St. Paul said: *But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ...* The Jews in Babylon knew what it meant to live as strangers in a strange land, and how important it was to gather in God's name, "to tell the story, and to sing Zion's songs in a land that didn't know Zion's God."

Quoting from *Resident Aliens*: "A colony is a beachhead, an outpost, an island of one culture in the middle of another, a place where the values of home are reiterated and passed on to the young, a place where the distinctive language and life-style of the resident aliens are lovingly nurtured and reinforced... The church is a colony, an island of one culture in the middle of another." Let's first talk a little about the culture and then the church as a colony.

Remember what I said earlier that under Josiah's sons, Judah went into a period of political, social, financial, and spiritual decay. As I look around me, I think that pretty much describes where the United States is today. Financially, the national debt is now over 19 trillion dollars, and we now have 45 million of our citizens living in poverty, that is an annual income of \$24,000 or less for a family of four or \$12,000 or less for a single person. Our government now spends over 1 trillion dollars per year on welfare, and the share of prime-age men in the labor force has been steadily declining.

Now we are coming to the part of the sermon that will be offensive to some of you. My apologies in advance. If you don't think that this country is in political decay, just look at the current presidential race, or the race to the bottom as

some have called it. Romans 13 says: *For the one in authority is God's servant for your good.* It is hard to see that in either one of the presidential candidates. I don't know how much the race for the presidency is costing this year, but according to the *New York Times* In 2012, campaign filings show, a total of \$6.3 billion was spent on the races for president and for Congress.

Socially, the family in the US is on the decline with 25% of our population living alone. The percentage of children living at home with two married parents has fallen from 73% in 1960 to 46% in 2014. We have redefined gender in the United States. If you are not happy with the gender that God gave you at birth, you can change it. We are now legally bound to recognize the gender that a person says they identify with. From Genesis 1: *So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.* Our Supreme Court has also redefined marriage. Jesus said in Matthew 19: *"Haven't you read," he replied, "that at the beginning the Creator 'made them male and female,' and said, 'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh'? So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate."*

The national numbers of violent crime are down, but in some of our major metropolitan areas the murder rate is off the charts. 25 percent of our high school students use illegal drugs, and there is an epidemic of heroin addiction all over the country. Deaths from heroin overdoses increased by 40% between

2012 and 2013. Also alarming is that more than 22 veterans commit suicide every day.

Spiritually, the number of Americans with no religious affiliation is increasing rapidly. Weekly church attendance is at a low. The national Episcopal Church is in a steady decline. The church's domestic U.S. membership dropped 2.7 percent from a reported 1,866,758 members in 2013 to 1,817,004 in 2014, a loss of 49,794 persons. Attendance took an even steeper hit, with the average number of Sunday worshipers dropping from 623,691 in 2013 to 600,411 in 2014, a decline of 23,280 persons in the pews, down 3.7 percent. 69 Episcopal Churches actually closed the doors last year.

I don't believe that there is any question that, like the Judah of Jeremiah's day, our country is in the midst of political, social, financial, and spiritual decay. But is the church a beachhead, an outpost, an island of one culture in the middle of another? Looking at the national Episcopal Church and for that matter all of the mainline protestant churches, the answer is "hardly." The culture of 21<sup>st</sup> century America is defining the theology of the Episcopal Church. We have bishops supporting what they call "transgender rights" where birth gender does not determine which bathroom or locker room a person may use. The Episcopal Church has approved gay marriage. Our new Presiding Bishop, Michael Curry is leading what he calls the Jesus Movement, yet he supports same-sex marriage in spite of what Jesus says. Believe it or not, this is probably not the worst of the spiritual decay.

I am reluctant to discuss the next subject with you, but I think that you need to hear this. I want to read you an article from the October 6 *New York Times*. "An 'Evolving' Episcopal Church Invites Back a Controversial Sculpture: Edwina Sandys had seen this before: the 250-pound bronze statue of a bare-breasted woman on a translucent acrylic cross being installed in the Cathedral Church of St. John the Divine.

This time around, however, she does not expect to see something else she had seen before: the statue being packed up after a call from a ranking church official telling her it had to go.

That happened the first time "Christa," Ms. Sandys's sculpture of a crucified woman, was shown at the cathedral in Manhattan during Holy Week in 1984.

A controversy erupted, complete with hate mail attacking it as blasphemous.

Overruling the dean of the cathedral at the time, the suffragan bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of New York called the statue "theologically and historically indefensible" and ordered Ms. Sandys to take it away.

This time, it is being installed on the altar in the Chapel of St. Saviour as the centerpiece of "The Christa Project: Manifesting Divine Bodies," an exhibition of more than 50 contemporary works that interpret — or reinterpret — the symbolism associated with the image of Jesus."

Times have changed, Ms. Sandys said on Monday as the statue arrived at the cathedral, swaddled in the kind of dark gray blankets that movers wrap around furniture. "And this time, the bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of New York,

Andrew M. L. Dietsche, wrote an article for the cathedral's booklet — an approving article. "In an evolving, growing, learning church," he wrote, "we may be ready to see 'Christa' not only as a work of art but as an object of devotion, over our altar, with all of the challenges that may come with that for many visitors to the cathedral, or indeed, perhaps for all of us." This apostasy is endorsed by the Bishop of New York. I haven't heard anything from Michael Curry, the leader of the Jesus Movement, but I pray that he will speak out. If the church is to be an outpost in the midst of an alien culture, some drastic changes need to take place

The mission statement of the cathedral is revealing. **The Cathedral Church of Saint John the Divine, the mother church of the Episcopal Diocese of New York and the Seat of its Bishop, is chartered as a house of prayer for all people and a unifying center of intellectual light and leadership. It serves the many diverse people of our Diocese, City, Nation and World through an array of liturgical, cultural and civic events; pastoral, educational and community outreach activities; and maintains the preservation of the great architectural and historic site that is its legacy.** No mention of Jesus or the Gospel in that mission statement. That is New York City. This is St. Philip's, Palestine, Texas: **To be an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual faith; lived out in our prayers, presence, and talents; to proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ.**

In today's Epistle St. Paul says: *Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, a descendant of David-- that is my gospel...* It was a young Jewish male, Jesus of Nazareth, who died upon the Cross. By His bodily Resurrection He proved Himself to be the Christ. That is THE Gospel. Paul goes on to tell us what it means to be a disciple. *If we have died with him, we will also live with him; if we endure, we will also reign with him; if we deny him, he will also deny us; if we are faithless, he remains faithful-- for he cannot deny himself.*

I pray that at least St. Philip's will be an outpost in the midst of an alien culture and maybe even in the midst of an "evolving" church. We have committed to defining our faith as outlined in the Creeds and Historical Documents found in the *Book of Common Prayer*, and as affirmed by the worldwide Anglican Communion which emphasizes the Holy Scriptures as the primary authority and guide for individual faith and practice. We worship based on traditional Anglican theology, liturgy and the Christian Sacraments.

In our Gospel reading Jesus heals ten lepers, but only one returns to thank him. *Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice. He prostrated himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him. Jesus told him: Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well.* I pray that we will be resident aliens and part of the thankful and faithful ten percent. The Greek word *eucharist* means literally thanksgiving, and that is what we are about to do. We will remember Jesus' death, proclaim his Resurrection, and await his coming in glory. We give thanks that

God has given us the means to live as citizens of His Kingdom and as resident aliens in a fallen world. Amen.