

“Pay It Forward!”

Genesis 12:1-4
Jeremiah 32:1-15

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Sermon preached by
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Maybe you've heard of it! It's called *“Pay It Forward”* and besides being the title of a movie which came out a couple of years ago, it's a profound idea which says that in **GRATITUDE** for all the blessings of life...in **THANKSGIVING** for gifts such as: family...home...church...community...friends...food to eat...clothes to wear...air to breathe...water to drink...blessings both material AND spiritual -- in other words, in **GRATITUDE** and **THANKSGIVING** for the bounty of blessings that have come from our Heavenly Father, we need to pass those blessings **ON** to future generations so that they **TOO** can know the blessings of life...the blessings that come from the God from whom **ALL** blessings flow.

Now, when you stop and think about it, it goes without saying that **ALL** of us “build on foundations we did not lay; drink from wells we did not dig; eat from harvests we did not sow.” It is the faithfulness and the foresight of **PREVIOUS GENERATIONS** that have laid those foundations...dug those wells...and sowed those seeds which we now enjoy. **THEIR FAITHFULNESS** sustains and enriches **US TODAY**. And we are grateful...profoundly grateful. Much of who I am today has come, in large part, because it has been passed **ON** to me by those who have come **BEFORE** me and whose faithfulness has sustained me in my generations. My parents...my grandparents...my teachers...my church...my community – they have **ALL** played a vitally important role in passing the blessings of life along to me. I have **BUILT** on them, **YES!** It is true. I have taken what I received and **DEVELOPED** it, no doubt. And you have too! But it was that **LEGACY** that was given to me by those who came before me and loved me and cared enough about me to pass their blessings along to me that has made me much of who and what I am today. And I am **GRATEFUL**...grateful to **THEM**...and grateful to **GOD**.

But here's the question. How do I **EXPRESS** that gratitude? How do I say “Thank You!” to my parents, both of whom are gone...or my **GRANDPARENTS**...or to the **COMMUNITY** that helped raise me...to Miss Henry, my first grade teacher...or Miss Powell who taught me in the 8th grade. How do I express **GRATITUDE** to Wentz Miller who pastored me when I was a child and helped me understand so **MUCH** about the joy of being a Christian and a part of the church? How do I say **THANK YOU** to Sunday School teachers such as Mary Lou Lacy and Charlie Hollandsworth and Henry Reed...and people like Stan and Libby Cobb and Bill and Carolyn Franck and Fred and Betty Hammil who gave so generously of both their time and their money to make the church that I grew up in such a wonderful place to learn what it meant to be a beloved “child of God.” How do I ever say “**THANK YOU!**” and express my **GRATITUDE** to all of them? How can I **EVER** “pay them back” for all they have given to me and done **FOR** me to make me who I am?

Well, the **TRUTH** of the matter, of course, is that I **CAN'T!** They are all **GONE** from this life. I can't “pay it back.” All I can do is “**PAY IT FORWARD!**”

And that is **PRECISELY** what the Prophet Jeremiah does in the 32nd chapter of the book that carries his name. In gratitude and faithfulness to the Lord God Almighty who had called him and blessed him **WITH** life and **IN** life, Jeremiah makes a bold and dramatic statement which “**PAYS IT FORWARD**” and buys into the future of Israel when Israel's future looked dismal indeed.

So here's how the story goes. The Kingdom of Judah was on its last leg. The capital city, Jerusalem, was under siege...surrounded by the Babylonian army under King Nebuchadnezzar. The destruction of not only Jerusalem, but Israel/Judah itself seemed imminent.

Jeremiah, the prophet, was being held prisoner in the courtyard of the royal palace. His king, Zedekiah, was angry with Jeremiah for predicting that Jerusalem would fall to Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonians as a punishment for the peoples' sins and lack of faithfulness to the Yahweh God of Israel.

Now, under those circumstances, property values in Judah were very low...especially in the unprotected countryside. No doubt, the Babylonian army had already overrun much of the land, destroying the crops and buildings, and stealing anything that had any value at all. It could also be safely assumed, I think, that the conquering Babylonians would feel little or no obligations to honor existing land deeds or property claims.

Since cash was more portable to fleeing refugees, those who owned land would have been glad to sell quickly. And yet, who but a FOOL would BUY property under such dismal and ominous circumstances? Well Jeremiah, for one!

Jeremiah's cousin, Hanamel, offered Jeremiah a field in his hometown of Anathoth, property that was ALREADY in the hands of the Babylonians. In those days, when anyone wanted to sell a piece of property, for whatever reason, the Jewish law required that the closest relative to the seller must be contacted and given the first option on purchasing the property...so as to keep the property within the family. But for Jeremiah to have taken Hanamel up on his offer and bought such a worthless piece of land under such negative conditions would surely have been a foolish thing to do. And yet, that's EXACTLY what Jeremiah did...NOT so much because he had always wanted to be a land owner and saw this as a chance to make a killing in the midst of a depressed real estate market...but because he wanted to make a STATEMENT...a statement that would "PAY IT FORWARD" and express HIS faith in GOD'S faithfulness for his people Israel...even in the midst of desperate times.

"So I BOUGHT the field from Hanamel and weighed out the money to him: the price of seventeen pieces of silver. (Jer. 32:9)

You see, Jeremiah's purchase of the land was a CONCRETE EXPRESSION of his faith in God's word. And far from being FOOLISH, it was a DEMONSTRATION of Jeremiah's confidence in the future of Israel. It was a DEMONSTRATION of his faith that the pompous little king from Babylon would NOT have the last word, but that GOD...the Lord God of his ancestors Abraham, Isaac and Jacob...would once again rule over the land of Israel and restore the fortunes of God's chosen people.

Now, lest you think that Jeremiah was some blindly optimistic "Pollyanna" who only saw the world through rose colored glasses, let me assure you, that was NOT the case! Far from it! Jeremiah was WELL AWARE of the ominous situation that was before both him and his fellow Jews. He was WELL AWARE of the fact that tiny Judah would indeed fall to the power and might of Babylon and that he and the king and many of his fellow citizens would be carried off into captivity in a far country. Which is PRECISELY what happened. But he was ALSO able to see BEYOND that present dark moment into the bright future when God would once again RESTORE Israel. And it was that BRIGHT FUTURE that Jeremiah was investing in...PRECISELY BECAUSE of his unswerving faith in God's promise: *"For thus says the Lord of hosts, the God Almighty of Israel: Houses and fields and vineyards shall ONCE AGAIN be brought forth upon this land."* (Jer. 32:15)

In other words, Jeremiah was **buying into the future**. He was "PAYING FORWARD" his faith that Israel HAD a future. He was, in essence, passing on to those who would come AFTER him the firm and sure conviction that the people would once again inhabit the land and that God would be in the midst of them.

All of which reminds me of the story of an elderly man which is found in the Jewish Talmud. It seems that someone saw an old man planting a carob tree one day...a tree that was well-known to be one of slowest growing trees in the Middle East. The other person laughed at the old man. *"You foolish old man,"* the observer said. *"Don't you know how long it takes before the carob tree produces fruit?"*

"Of course I do!" replied the old man. *"It takes 70 years for the carob to bear fruit."*

"And you expect to live that long? Old man, you'll be long gone and forgotten before this tree bears fruit!"

But the old man smiled a simple smile and replied, *“Young man, I didn’t find the world desolate when I entered it and I will not leave it desolate when I am gone. As MY ancestors planted for me before I was born, so also do I plant for those who will come after me.”*

“So also do I plant for those who will come after me!” THAT, my friends, is EXACTLY what is meant by **“PAY IT FORWARD!”** Surely it is what we ALL need to do in thanksgiving for the blessings that have come our way.

“PAY IT FORWARD!”

“PLANT for those who come after us!”

“INVEST in the future!”

“Allow your FAITHFULNESS to sustain the generations!”

Surely it was done for all of us...both within our own individual families...as WELL as within this family of faith we call First United Presbyterian Church. In gratitude and thanksgiving, there is no way we can pay it back. We can only **“PAY IT FORWARD!”** by making sure the ministry and mission of this church CONTINUES to thrive and grow, not only THIS year - and NEXT year, but the year after that...and the year after that...and the year after that...and the year after that...so that this congregation...this church...might CONTINUE to be, as our VISION STATEMENT so eloquently puts it:

*“a vibrant, vital center of Christian faith and practice where Jesus Christ is personally known,
where people’s need are truly met,
from which people are sent:
scattered in effective ministry and mission –
in the home, the marketplace, the community, and the world.”* (1998 Vision Statement, 1st UPC)

Good friends, this beautiful building...this sanctuary...this pulpit...these pews...this carpet...these lights...this organ...this communion table...this cross...these hymnbooks...those choir robes...these flowers – they’ve ALL been given to us by the faithfulness of previous generations who loved God and loved the church and who, in effect, have loved US enough to pass it on to us, trusting that we will care for all these many gifts...develop them and use them...and pass them along to those who would come after US...even as they have been passed on TO us. We gather here each Sunday morning...for worship...for Sunday school classes...for fellowship and sharing and caring and support. We gather here to celebrate marriages, to baptize babies, to be comforted in the loss of our loved ones. **“PAY IT FORWARD!”** simply asks that we offer to those who come AFTER us nothing less than what was given to US by those who came BEFORE us.

Through the hard work...the resourcefulness...the ingenuity...and the faithfulness of not only our OWN generations, but of PREVIOUS generations as well, God has given many of us in this community of faith a standard of living and a level of wealth UNPARALLELED in human history. We can’t “pay it back.” We can only **“PAY IT FORWARD!”** as we use it & enjoy it to be sure, but as we also share it and pass it on to those whose lives WE want to a part of blessing even as OUR lives have been blessed. Because isn’t that PRECISELY why God blesses us to begin with? Remember what God said to Abraham, our ancestor in the faith, 100 generations ago? Is any different today than it was then? *“I will richly bless you so that you may BE A RICH BLESSING!”*

To be sure, *“we DO build on foundations we did not lay; drink from wells we did not dig; and eat from harvests we did not sow.”* We cannot “pay it back.” We can only **“PAY IT FORWARD!”** into today...tomorrow...next year...and the year after that...and the year after that...and the year after that! It is the faithfulness which sustains the generations...AND which insures the successful future of first United Presbyterian Church...a church that gives!

So may God move within our **HEARTS** and within our **LIVES** (and perhaps even MORE SPECIFICALLY within our **WALLETS** and **POCKETBOOKS**) to make it so for ALL who would come after us – TODAY...TOMORROW...and through ALL the days that lie ahead!

To GOD be the glory, both now and forever more! Amen!

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