

Advice for Living in Exile

Exile is no picnic, to put it mildly. Exile is usually defined as the state of being barred from one's native country, typically for political or punitive reasons. No one wants to go into exile. Yes, exile can be self-imposed. It can be a willing choice in the face of unwanted consequences. But it's safe to say that being exiled is not a choice most people would make. The prophet Jeremiah was writing to the people of Israel who had been exiled to Babylon. This was such a traumatic time that it became one of the defining points in their history. Many of the stories in the Old Testament can be understood only in light of the exile.

But we don't have to look all the way back to 600 BCE to find examples. In 1959 the Dalai Lama had to flee from his home in Tibet to India after a Tibetan uprising was severely repressed by China. In 2013 Edward Snowden, who leaked classified information from the National Security Agency, was charged with violating the Espionage Act of 1917 and theft of government property, and now lives in exile in Russia. Our own recent Lutheran history includes the formation of Seminex (Seminary-in-Exile) in 1974. You might say that First United's own history of expulsion was a case of being sent into exile.

These are cases of political or punitive reasons, but the traditional definition is not the only way to think about or experience exile. And it's more common an experience than you might think. Remy Diederich, author of *Out of Exile*, identifies seven types of exile. See if you relate to any of these:

- Emotional: depression, PTSD, anxiety disorder, panic attacks, other mental disorder
- Spiritual: bad church experience or just feeling disconnected from God
- Relational: bad marriage, divorce, estrangement from children/parents/friend, death of a loved one
- Financial: being overwhelmed by debt, being unemployed or under-employed
- Career: being in a bad fit or a dead-end job
- Health: chronic pain, terminal disease, memory loss, inability to care for oneself
- Season of life: in-between college and career, adjusting to retirement, managing old age

I don't know about you, but I can identify with at least 5 of them from various times in my life. These exile times rip us away from life as we've known it; we become strangers in a strange land, far from home – whether physically, emotionally, or spiritually. Not a pleasant place to be. The story of the person with leprosy is a fine example of this. In Jesus' time, contracting an infectious, wasting disease like leprosy meant banishment into exile – away from family, friends, work, community – to live only among fellow sufferers

What I find intriguing about this story is that the one who returns to thank Jesus for healing is a Samaritan. That means that the leper colony must have been an interfaith community – or at least an *intrafaith* one. Under normal circumstances, Jews and Samaritans wouldn't hang out with one another. Even though they shared a common religious heritage, they had disagreements about some of the finer points of belief and practice. But in their exile, those differences must not have been the barriers they were in their former lives. Ironic that loss can bring down the walls that divide us; we're able to come together in our times of grief and loss. I wonder what life would be like for the 10 who were healed. Would they continue to be companions? Or revert to the old prejudices and condemnations?

I like to believe they would retain their companionship. Because exile changes you. When you come back home, you're different. The people of Israel found that out when they were released from captivity in Babylon. Homecoming was sweet, but things were different; they were different. Exile had left its indelible mark on them - as it does on us all. Like the last verse of the reading from Margie's memorial:

“And you learn. That you really can endure. That you really are strong. And you really do have worth. And you learn. And you learn. With every failure you learn.”

But still the big question remains: what do we do when we find ourselves in exile? One of the simplest things is to name it, point to whatever is causing you distress and call it what it is. The thing about exile is you can't ignore it. I can be pretty left-brain and try to rationalize myself out of feeling whatever I don't want to feel. But I've learned that it doesn't work. And letting grief or sadness or depression go unnamed can create more problems: health, relationship, work. The autobiography of Bruce Springsteen just came out last month and one of the most publicized things about it has been his life-long battle with depression. Hopefully, his naming of his struggle will encourage others to name theirs.

Another important lesson for living in exile is to grieve, to acknowledge the impact of the loss on your life and give yourself permission to express your emotions about it. This can get tricky because often those around us want us to get over it, move on, or at least put on a happy face. Or they rationalize it. I was reminded of the song "Anatevka" from *A Fiddler on the Roof*." By their own admission, their village was nothing much. They sang: "Someone should have set a match to this place years ago. People who pass through Anatevka don't even know they've been here. What do we leave? Nothing much. Only Anatevka. Underfed, overworked Anatevka." And yet - "Where else could Sabbath be so sweet? Soon I'll be a stranger in a strange new place, Searching for an old familiar face From Anatevka." There's no minimizing or rationalizing away grief.

But – and this is a third lesson - we shouldn't grieve alone. Exile should not be a solitary place. Not that we have to constantly be with others or share our story with every person we meet. But the support of another or others or of a community is so important. In

Bruce's autobiography and in interviews, he talks about how supportive his wife has been, as one of the few who knew about his struggle until now. In this past year of our own grieving the loss of Margie and of being with Steve in his exile of grief, I've often thought about how grateful I am for a congregation that can provide that kind of accompaniment.

And because we're a community of faith, we can also find hope in the midst of loss. In the book of Lamentations, Jeremiah wrote that even though Jerusalem had been destroyed, God was still faithful. In our reading today, Jeremiah brought God's word that they should make their home in that foreign land. We may not choose to be in the place we find ourselves, but we can make ourselves at home, and find comfort in the fact that God is with us and will speak to us in the midst of our darkness for however long we must remain.

And we do expect to return home – not to the exact place we were before. But we will return to feeling “at home” again – although there's no timetable for our sojourn in exile. But as the prophets of Israel promised return to those ancient exiles, so they speak to us.

“Comfort, O comfort my people, says our God.”

“A voice cries out: ‘Clear a path through the wilderness for YHWH. Make a straight road through the desert for our God, who will feed the flock like a shepherd, gathering up the lambs and gently leading the mother sheep.’” And “Hear the word of YHWH:

Do not be afraid, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine.

When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they will not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you will not be burned, and the flame will not consume you.” “Comfort, O comfort my people, says our God.”

This is our promise, too.

Finally, as incongruous as it sounds, we set our intention on being grateful. The 10th leper expressed his gratitude for his homecoming – his return from the exile of disease and disconnect. Hopefully he continued to remember his deliverance and so could be grateful even in the next time of exile. As the prophet Habakkuk wrote:

Even though the fig tree has no buds, the vines bear no harvest, the olive oil yield fails, and the fields produce no food; though the sheep vanish from the fold and there are no cattle in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in YHWH; I will exult in God of my salvation.

Today we are grateful for Margie Jang. Although the exile created by her death continues, especially for Steve, still we give thanks. For all the gifts she brought to this world, for the memories we hold dear, for the homecoming she has now entered, and for the spirit of love which surrounds her. It is the same spirit that surrounds us, too - in both our exiles and our homecomings. And is our greatest reason for gratitude.

Amen

Jeremiah 29:1; 4-7

In a letter to the exiles in Babylon, Jeremiah sent a message from God that they were to make their homes in that foreign land. They were to seek the welfare of Babylon. In doing so they would advance their own welfare. This advice countered the traditional view that only in Jerusalem's temple in their own homeland could the exiles worship and serve God. It conveys a message for our time as we struggle with the implications of a global threat to peace and reconciliation among people of many religious and cultural traditions.

It is written . . .

Jeremiah sent a letter from Jerusalem to the surviving elders among the exiles, to the priests, the prophets, and all the people Nebuchadnezzar had deported. It said:
Thus says YHWH Omnipotent, the God of Israel, to all the exiles I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: Build houses to live in. Plant gardens and eat what they grow. Marry and raise daughters and sons. Find wives for your sons and husbands for your daughters, that they may bear daughters and sons. Multiply while you are there. Do not decrease. Rather seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have exiled you. Pray to YHWH for it, for if it prospers, you will prosper.

“You Learn” by Jorge Luis Borges

From the memorial service for Margie Jang on November 21, 2015

After a while you learn
The subtle difference
Between holding a hand
And chaining a soul.
And you learn
That love doesn't mean leaning
And company doesn't mean security.
And you begin to learn
That kisses aren't compromises
And presents aren't promises.
And you begin to accept your defeats
With your head up and your eyes ahead
With the grace of a woman or man
Not the grief of a child.
And you learn to build all your loads on today
Because tomorrow's ground is too uncertain for plans
And futures have a way of falling down in midflight.

After a while you learn
That even sunshine burns if you ask too much.
So you plant your own garden
And decorate your own soul
Instead of waiting for someone to buy you flowers.
And you learn
That you really can endure
That you really are strong
And you really do have worth.
And you learn.
And you learn.
With every failure you learn.

LUKE 17:11-19

Why was the Samaritan allowed to be part of the group, when Samaritans themselves were outcast by the Jewish community? Could it be that barriers between us fall when we are united in sickness or tragedy?

It is written . . .

On the way to Jerusalem Jesus passed along the borders of Samaria and Galilee. As he entered a village, ten people with leprosy approached him. Keeping their distance, they called out, saying, “Jesus, Rabbi, have pity on us!”

When Jesus saw them, he responded, “Go and show yourselves to the priests.”

As they were going, they were healed. One of them, realizing what had happened, came back, praising God in a loud voice, then fell down at the feet of Jesus and spoke his praises. This individual was a Samaritan.

Then Jesus asked, “Weren’t all ten made whole? Where are the other nine? Was there no one to return and give thanks except this foreigner?”

Then Jesus said to the Samaritan, “Stand up and go your way; your faith has saved you.”