

The Park Road Pulpit

Sermons from Park Road Baptist Church

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Good Deeds and the Good Life

Jeremiah 29.4-7; Luke 24.44-53

Russ Dean, May 28, 2006



About fifteen years ago Amy's father gave us the deed to a small, wooded plot of land in Laurens County, South Carolina. Four children inherited Daddy B's and Ma Polly's estate, most of which consisted of the land which had been the family dairy farm. These several hundred acres of mostly undeveloped land straddle the semi-rural road on which Amy was raised, and Pop wanted the third of his three children to have a small piece of limited road-front property. I will always believe there was a bit of hopeful bribery in his gift – that with a deed in hand, his youngest daughter might actually be persuaded to come home from her prodigal wanderings and join the rest of the family, building where every good Jacks should, and that is right there on A.B. Jacks Road!

Now, it's just three and a half acres, but the ownership of property is an exciting thing.¹ As I was preparing these words, I took out the survey just to look again at "our land." Though Amy and I know the chances of us ever building and living in dear old "Sugar Flat," are slim (at best), and though we have now undoubtedly paid considerably more in property taxes than the actual property is worth, this matters not. James Jacks' action represented the good deed of a good deed. As with a similar bequest to his other two children, it came with the sincere prayer that his children would use this deed to fashion for themselves a good life.

¹ As if we can actually own a piece of this earth! But this illusion is so powerful it has been at the heart of many, maybe even most, of the serious disputes in the history of humankind!

So it was with the gift of the city, thousands of years ago, to the human creature – struggling in that stage of our development to survive the harshness of a life lived essentially alone, in a nomadic and agrarian environment. If, as the writer of the book of James indicates, *every good and perfect gift is from above* (James 1.17), there is no doubt that “city living” was the good deed of a good deed – God’s sincere prayer that God’s children would use this deed to fashion for themselves a good life.

Several years ago Amy’s brother and sister in law were coming to town to keep the boys for us. We forgot that we were inviting them to brave the frenzy of Queen City traffic during the final weekend of the Wachovia Golf Championship, just down the road. When they – finally! – neared the church, an exasperated voiced on the other end of the line declared adamantly to his sister, “If I lived in Charlotte, the very first thing I would do would be to move!”

But traffic and noise and crime and chaos and poverty and violence were not the original identifying marks of city life. Quite the opposite is the case. A wandering people were required to fend for themselves against a host of unforeseen enemies. There was the unpredictable nature of “nature” itself – hurricanes, floods, drought, and fire. And there was the more predictable nature of “human-nature” – the guy next door or the rival tribe or the bordering nation who was quite willing to take of yours what was not rightfully his. For people accustomed to fighting “tooth and claw” for ever single meal, and always sleeping with one eye open, the city became a true gift from God. City life provided security, as fortified walls gave protection from neighboring enemies. City life provided economic development, as a commerce of bartering and mutually-beneficial enterprise was allowed to thrive. City life also engendered a sense of identity, as people began to

think of themselves as represented by, and representative of, the place which provided their security. And most importantly, for our purposes today, city life also created an unprecedented notion of community. When people are free from worrying about eating their next meal and seeing the next sunrise, they are free to consider sharing, not bartering or selling, but just sharing what they have with the neighbor across the street.

Such is the genius of the city, which has now evolved for several thousand years. And our American cities perhaps displayed this genius best as they were designed before the Second World War. Our cities fostered a sense of security and identity and community. But with a rising standard of living (which provided people with “disposable income”), advances in various technologies (especially in travel), and the city planning that began to take place in the 1950’s, our cities lost some of what had been most beneficial to the human creature. In an article entitled “Designing the City,” Norman Bendroth outlines some of the changes that came to us in the suburbanization of America (the creating of suburbs) in the 50’s 60’s and 70’s:

New construction became highly segmented. Following the design model of those years, shopping centers were put in one location, housing pods in another, and office parks in yet another. A matrix of collector roads connected these developments. Ironically, adjacency didn’t necessarily mean accessibility. For instance, a homeowner living 50 yards from a shopping center might still have to get into a car, drive a mile to the exit of the subdivision, drive another half a mile on the collector road to the shopping center, park and walk to the store. What might have been a pleasant five-minute walk down a tree-lined street became a trek that used gasoline, required a roadway and took up space for parking.²

Such suburban design, as you can quickly see, separates people. Most of us live in neighborhoods with people who are almost identical to us in terms of education, socio-economic status, race, and a general career track.

² Norman B. Bendroth, “Designing the City,” in “The Christian Century,” June 20-27, 2001, p.14.

(It's no wonder we don't know how to care for the poor – they are no longer our neighbors, whose kids play with our kids. The truth is, because we're so separated from "them," most of us simply have no understanding of what it even means to be poor. And it's not that suburbs have created poverty in the city. Jesus said *the poor you will always have with you* (Mark 14.7). It's just a question of how we will respond to them. And if the poor are a nameless, faceless mass living far from us, we are much less likely to provide assistance to them, than if they are the Joneses living next door, and little Johnny needs a pair of shoes for school.)

Suburbs require more self-sufficiency. Suburban life has made it a requirement for each family to have at least one car. And, gone is the day of the mill-village, with company-provided housing that gave so many of the working poor, including my own grandparents, their start in life.

This segmented design also requires the expenditure of more and more resources to maintain the infrastructure of that design, such as water and sewer systems, roads and bridges. Because no one can disagree that getting to your job is non-negotiable, spending to maintain the infrastructure we have created becomes a priority which outstrips other important community tasks, such as educating our children. (I'm not suggesting that people should have to walk to their jobs. I'm only saying that, in part, because of the design of our cities, and the sprawl that continues to overtake us, it is less and less practical for anyone to do so. This is just one example of the ways that decisions to design cities as we have, has made a significant impact on our urban life.) Such design decisions also take a largely-unrecognized toll on the environment and on our non-renewable resources, because instead of using available city-space and renovating, new suburbs stretch farther and farther from the city, turning forests and fields into roads and parking lots, and making individual transportation (and grid lock and road rage) an inevitable feature of city life.

I'm certainly no urban planner or city developer, so you may take issue with the direction of the sermon to this point. But it seems an inescapable reality to me that in cities across the U.S., as the people of means have chosen to claim our independence, and to express that independence and affluence in a more isolated, and more isolating, lifestyle (we may not even be aware that this is happening to us), our cities have withered under a crumbling torrent of troubles. The securities that city living originally provided are lost as those with means move to take care only of themselves, and with the absence of their resources, our cities have imploded in a barrage of crime and chaos.

In the sixth century before Jesus, the city of Jerusalem was attacked and destroyed by an overwhelming Babylonian army. All of the best and the brightest of Israel were carried off, in chains, to live in exile on the banks of a foreign river. The prophet, Jeremiah, consoled his people: "even here, God is with us." "Even here, in the midst of a foreign people, an unknown language, a strange religion," Jeremiah urged the people: "*Seek the welfare of the city. For in the welfare of the city is our welfare*" (29.7).

For many Americans, today, their own cities have become foreign wastelands, filled with people of unknown tongues and strange world-views. But I believe the words of the ancient prophet are still true today: *In the welfare of the city is our welfare*. If Charlotte were to implode in chaos and despair, what would happen? To your jobs? To your homes? To your security? We have segregated our lives from the lives of the people of our own city, and we need to be reminded that *their welfare is our welfare*.

As he stood before his disciples, to leave them alone in this world, Jesus had a final word of instruction to them: "*Stay here in the city until you have been clothed with*

power from on high” (Luke 24.49). I wonder if Jesus would not say the same thing to us, today? Jesus, who stood on the edge of the great city of Jerusalem and wept over it – for it had abandoned the promise that it held, the promise of good life for all its inhabitants (Matthew 23.37-39). Jesus wept over his great city because Jerusalem had forsaken its calling to the covenant of God. That is, it had failed to remember why it was blessed.

The covenant with God was the heart of Israel’s life. I believe it is at the heart of all human life that is lived to the fullest. God said to our forebear Abram: “*I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great... so that you will be a blessing*” (Genesis 12.1-2).

It can be said, perhaps as never before in the history of our world: “God has made of us a great nation.” The question is: what will we do with our prosperity? Will we flee to the suburbs, elect officials who promise to take care of us, to lower our taxes, protect our jobs, fund our schools? Or will we *stay in the city until we have been clothed with the power of covenant*? This is the power from on high which comes to all who recognize that it is not just our responsibility, as people of means, but it is our right, our generous God-given privilege to take care of the city.

I hope that we will stay in the city and fight for the rights of the poor and the oppressed who find their homes there, who still look to the city for their security, who still, and always, look to those who have the power and the prosperity to provide for their needs.

Let us *stay in the city – seek the welfare of the city* – that God may clothe us with a power we have yet to fully know – that power which will come to our great city when

all of God's children have known the blessing of the good deed, and who are experiencing the fullness of the good life.

May it be so!