

The Best Laid Plans....

[Texts - Jeremiah 29:4-14; Mark 6:31-44]

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This morning's Scripture readings reinforce that old adage, "The best laid plans of mice and men often go awry." The people of Israel are *planning* on Divine intervention to provide them a quick release from their exile in Babylon. But the prophet Jeremiah tells them that they'd better plan on hanging-around those Hanging Gardens for at least a couple generations. He suggests that rather than sitting and sulking and waiting to be "saved", that the Israelites devote themselves to discovering some of the positive opportunities that their current situation offers. And that rather than contentiously clashing with their surrounding culture, they could learn from it; while also teaching those Babylonians about their *own* culture, and about their abiding trust in the promises of the Holy One.

In our New Testament reading, Jesus and his disciples are *planning* a well-deserved break from the demanding duties of their ministry. Yet when a huge crowd shows-up at their supposedly "undisclosed location", Jesus gladly allows those plans to change. Rather than a relaxing respite for him and his disciples, Jesus sees a tremendous opportunity to feed the minds and spirits and the bodies of a great multitude of people. So even though the best laid plans of mice and men and *messiahs* may go awry, the Divine Promise to strengthen and sustain us - throughout our lives - remains absolutely unshakable.

The theme of this year's Stewardship Drive is "Trust in the Promise". It derives from that message the Holy One has for the exiled Israelites: "For surely I know the plans I have for you," says the Holy One, "plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope." In other words, regardless of the changing and challenging circumstances that Life brings us, you and I and all God's children can rest-assured that Divine love and grace will never forsake us. This doesn't mean that our lives are laid-out before us like a labyrinth. It means that when we are laid-low by Life's troubles and tragedies,

problems and perplexities, we can still hold on to the Divine Promise that the Holy One will help and guide and sustain us.

I'm one of those people who basically "grew up" in the Church. From Sunday School, to Confirmation Classes, to Church Camp Counselor, through College and Seminary, all the way to Ordained Ministry, my life followed what seemed like a clear and straight path. However, in 1989, when I finally acknowledged that I am not "straight", I was essentially exiled from the practice of ministry in the Lutheran Church. I had no idea what lay ahead of me. My basic Life "plan" was to just find a job, and try to pick up the pieces. My undergraduate degree in Social Sciences helped me land a position providing residential supports for people with developmental disabilities, Oddly enough, it was *me* who ended up receiving tremendous support - and acceptance - from them. At a time when it felt like my life was unraveling and adrift, I was thrown a lifeline of hope and affirmation that truly was *Divine!* And oddly enough, in this "secular" setting, these wonderful people recognized and reaffirmed my God-given gifts for ministry.

Many of the people who received our services, as well as many of my coworkers and I, didn't exactly "fit in" with many religious organizations. Yet we all had our spiritual needs, questions, and longings. Since I had been an ordained minister, I soon became a kind of unofficial chaplain for the people with whom I worked. I could still perform weddings and funerals, which I did. People felt comfortable talking with me about their problems, their faith, their fears, their relationships, their hopes and dreams. And in time, this broken ex-minister received from *them* the deep healing that I needed in order to make peace with my life's strange and winding path.

Those beautiful people helped me "Trust in the Promise!" To truly believe that Divine compassion and grace, along with all of God's good gifts, are absolutely irrevocable! And they also encouraged me to discover something else: that there are communities of *Faith* which are as kind and compassionate, open, and affirming as that group of people who had helped rescue and redeem my life. Imagine my joy,

when circumstances eventually led me back to pastoral ministry in a denomination, and a congregation, where people with diverse backgrounds and beliefs, sexual orientations and social standings are equally affirmed and warmly welcomed!

In 2004, when I arrived at Brecksville United Church of Christ, I still felt a bit tentative in regard to re-embracing my role as a parish pastor. I had served two terrific Interim positions in Lakewood, but the idea of serving as a settled pastor in a somewhat conservative suburban setting, seemed a little unsettling! And in 2004, members of Brecksville United Church of Christ seemed a bit tentative in regards to embracing *any* pastor. Over the previous 10 years, there had been 9 pastors in that pulpit [which is why I'm standing down here]! With each pastoral change, the congregation took a hit in membership, morale, and monetary support. And now this congregation was taking a chance, by calling an openly gay pastor. What could possibly go wrong?Eleven years later, it looks like a lot of things actually went right!

“For surely I know the plans I have for you,” says the Holy One, “plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope.”

The best laid plans of mice and men may often go awry. However, the perfect plans of the Holy One will always find fulfillment, and will bring forth amazing fruit. As you and I move together into BUCC's 200th year of ministry, we are in the wonderful position of carrying forward a faith tradition which warmly welcomes and affirms *all* people! And as long as we remain open to Christ's call to feed the minds and spirits and bodies of all those who are hungering and searching, we will continue to be blessed, and to be a blessing to others. We may not know what the future will bring, but we can certainly trust in the promise of God's ever-abiding love and grace.