# Congregational-Presbyterian Church

 **“Home”**

**Jeremiah 50:17-20**

**August 25, 2019**

Today we conclude our summer series with the prophet Jeremiah. It is a hard book with its continual focus on the people’s disobedience and God’s discipline. Yet, there is sprinkled throughout the book glimmers of hope and expectation for a better future. The enemy has won the battle for Jerusalem, the people are in captivity, and all seems lost, but God is not done. His is the last word. I invite you to turn with me to Jeremiah 50:17-20

The Israelites are like sheep that have been scattered by lions. First the king of Assyria ate them up. Then King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon cracked their bones. Therefore, this is what the Lord of Heaven’s Armies, the God of Israel, says: “Now I will punish the king of Babylon and his land, just as I punished the king of Assyria. And I will bring Israel home again to its own land, to feed in the fields of Carmel and Bashan, and to be satisfied once more in the hill country of Ephraim and Gilead. In those days,” says the Lord, “no sin will be found in Israel or in Judah, for I will forgive the remnant I preserve.”

 The people of God are like sheep that have been scattered by lions. They have been driven from their homes and find themselves isolated and powerless. They have been scattered physically. They have also been scattered spiritually, living in a pagan land where there is no temple in which they can worship their God.

 In his book, “The Great Divorce,” C. S. Lewis gives us an image of hell, depicting it as an endless great town with millions and millions of houses where everybody is constantly moving farther and farther away from each other because they can’t stand to be near each other. Their self-centeredness, jealousy, possessiveness and manipulativeness causes this scattering. Instead of caring for others they love only themselves, becoming more and more self-absorbed. Already scattered spiritually from God, they scatter relationally as well.

 To be scattered spiritually and relationally is hell on earth. God created us to be in relationship with himself, to be at home with him, and when we’re not there is an emptiness, a void, within us that we may not understand but which nevertheless causes us to look for ways to fill it. But no amount of worldly pleasure or achievement can do the job, and we continue living with the uneasy sense that all is not right. Similarly, when we find ourselves drifting relationally, without true friends and people who love us as we are, even in spite of who we are, we experience a relational homelessness.

 What God promises his spiritually and relationally scattered people is a home. It is a home in which we are united spiritually with one another by the Holy Spirit who lives in us, by our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ who we are committed to following, and by the Father who we worship together. We call this spiritual home the Christian community, and where that community gathers we call it the church. Who we are here together, as Congregational-Presbyterian Church, is a place where people can come home and live their relationship with God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. In him, we are one.

 It is also a home in which we are united relationally as a family. The homeland of the Israelites was described in our text using four physical locations, each of which would have been well-known and precious to those scattered far from their home. Similarly, let me briefly mention four relational dynamics that characterize our church as home.

First, we recognize the value of each person. We affirm that each one of us is created by a loving God in order to be loved by him and others, and we appreciate what each person brings to the family. Second, we are responsive to the needs of others. We recognize that we all have needs of various kinds, and we want this family, this home, to be a place where people can have their needs addressed, whether they be physical, spiritual or emotional. Third, we are sensitive to each other. We are willing to get outside ourselves, so to speak, so that we may stand with the one who rejoices as well as the one who mourns. Fourth, we seek to live in harmony with one another. While there will certainly be things that we don’t all agree about, disagreement will not be allowed to erode our fundamental unity. We will not allow our personal pride to deny others the right to be of a different opinion. The only exception to this fourth relational dynamic is when the disagreement is over the fundamentals of our faith. In order to be united as a family living together in this church we call our home, we first must be united spiritually. Only then can we fully recognize the value of each person, be responsive to the needs of others, practice sensitivity, and live in harmony.

Finally, what makes our church a home for those who have been scattered is forgiveness. “I will forgive,” says the Lord, speaking of those he will bring home. Note, he does not say that they will come home and then have to prove themselves worthy of forgiveness. No, it is the very fact that they have been forgiven that enables them to join their fellow family members. Do you remember the story Jesus told of the Prodigal Son who demanded his inheritance from his father and left home? He went to a far off country – he scattered – where he spent all his money. Poor, friendless, isolated, lonely, and alienated in a foreign land, he came to his senses and decided to head home. He went with a speech prepared, ready to tell his father that he knew he did not deserve to be a son again, but desired only to be like one of his father’s servants. And while the son is still far off, the father sees him, runs to him, throws his arms around him, and calls him “son.” He has already been forgiven! No criticism, no “I told you so,” no “You are dirty and smelly. Go get cleaned up and then we will discuss what’s next for you.” Forgiveness is not something you and I must earn in order to be a part of this family, in order for this to be our home. Forgiveness is the basis of our family, of our home. We are a forgiven people, learning how to live the life of the forgiven as we love one another with God’s kind of love, a love that values us, that responds to our needs, that is sensitive to us, and brings us together in harmony.