

Does God Speak Through the Church Anymore?
Jeremiah 32: 1-3a, 6-15
September 30, 2007

Are you a financial risk-taker? I must admit I am not anymore. When I was very young, just started in my business career, I was persuaded by a stock broker to write naked call options. The year was 1981. If you have ever ventured into this risky area of investing you know the downside. We were betting that the stock would go up in price. But in this investment the stock price did not increase and my broker traded in and out of positions until I sustained a loss of about \$18,000. That was a lot of money to me, but I was able to recover most of it. Over the years I regained my tolerance for risk and I used to maintain a small portfolio of common stocks that I would make modest gains with in the late 1990s. I spent a lot of time studying individual companies, analyzing their profitability through both fundamental and technical analyses, often graphing their stock price movement. I would frequently try to time the market and I had some modest successes. But times have changed. I am 50 years old, have little time to watch the market, and I have now been convinced that *asset allocation* is the proper approach as Katie and I approach retirement in the next twenty years. Now we spread around the risks with a mixture of mutual funds. Our financial investments are quite conservative avoiding risks spread across stock and bond funds.

Betting on the future, that is, taking financial risks, is something I don't do anymore. I don't concern myself with buying low and selling high. But how about our risk-taking on spiritual matters? Do we as the church speak for God when we play it safe? Are we prophetic when we play it safe and hedge our bets? Does God call us to

take risks in this enterprise of making disciples and in changing the world to align with God's reign?

Jeremiah brings us a strange word today. This text is the classic dumb real estate play. Instead of swamp land, instead of ocean front property in Arizona, Jeremiah chooses to buy a piece of land that no one in his right mind would buy. Jeremiah is in jail as the Babylonians are invading the country of Judah. The year is 588 BCE and in about a year the Temple will be destroyed and the people of Judah dragged off to Babylon to live in exile. They would not return for another three generations, for another fifty years. The land is absolutely desolate and worthless. So in the midst of all of this, in painstaking detail, we have a description of a real estate transaction. Seventeen shekels of silver are weighed. Real estate documents are prepared. Finally the transaction with his family member is completed and the executed deed is placed in a safe place for a very long time. Jeremiah has done this as a sign that God will once again sometime in the distant future plant gardens and homes in Judah for God's people. Now would you do this deal? Of course not – it's crazy! Jeremiah will be long dead by the time anyone returns to this town. And what will it be worth then?

You know the history of God's people is one of unlikely, even crazy things happening to prove that anything is possible with God. What are the chances of a nation being born of two one-hundred-year-old people through the womb of a woman that everyone thought was barren? Or what are the odds that a small youth with a slingshot taking striking down a giant? Who'd bet that a stuttering man could lead a slave people across a desert for 40 years into a land flowing with milk and honey? Or what are the odds that a poor criminal could change the world by a sacrificial act of suffering on a

cross? Who would have thought that an emergent, illegal community could found the largest faith community in the world?

Crazy, risky things have happened in the name of God at Bering as well. Bering Memorial UMC had the audacity to believe that it could make a difference in the lives of those suffering with HIV/AIDS. Now we somehow believe that we can make a difference in fighting for civil rights for GLBT people. We trust to bet in a future in which GLBT people can be ordained in the UMC. We trust to bet in a future for the rights of marriage. Every once in a while those bets might pay off. Like when the U.S. Congress pass a hate crime bill to protect GLBT people from violent crime. Just this past week San Diego Mayor Jerry Sanders (a republican no less) changed his view to allow for gay marriage. Sixty-two percent of his constituents oppose that view. But Mr. Sanders didn't do the popular thing. He didn't do the politically expedient thing. He did what he said was the right thing in the name of social justice and equality. For you see he could not look his lesbian daughter or members of his staff in the eye in good conscience and tell them that their love relationships were any less sacred than his own marriage to his wife. It is out of this kind of courage – out of conscience – that God's justice emerges.

So we are writing petitions for full inclusion to the General Conference of the United Methodist Church. These will be delivered by the end of October. Some might say this is like buying property in an exiled land. But I believe it is the right thing. And some day, hopefully not too far off, we will unseal that deed so that we can again enter a land promised by God in which all of God's children share freedom and blessings. Let me close with you today with a poem:

*There was a very cautious man
Who never laughed or played;
He never risked, he never tried,
He never sang or prayed.
And when he one day passed away
His insurance was denied;
For since he never really lived,
They claimed he never died!*

May our shared life as a people be filled with crazy transactions based on nothing more than the promise that in God's time that they will be fulfilled. May we purchase the promised land with our efforts today, even if we never get to live in it. For I am convinced that there will come a day when God will deliver on God's promise of justice, freedom and fulfillment for all God's children.