

## Engaging Chatham County for Good

Jeremiah 29:4-10

June 19, 2016

Vision Series Part 1 of 2

Welcome/vision/intro

Happy Father's day! Dads, I hope that you get celebrated today in whatever ways speak your love language

and as a dad myself, I pray that we'll all continue to grow in loving our kids like their perfect Father does, whether yours are young or all grown up.

A couple of quick house-keeping things this morning before we dig into what we're talking about today

First, thanks so much for serving last week with Chatham Serves—a great Sunday!

Chatham Serves has grown and developed in so many ways over the past two years and last week's slate of projects was one of the most comprehensive and diverse set of projects we've ever had

Including one thing that I want to celebrate which was our first projects that we've done in Siler City.

We're excited about building relationships in Siler and finding ways to serve and meet needs there

And I want to thank all the project leaders who served to coordinate these projects as well as to thank Rachel Matthews who headed up the whole thing—can we give them a hand?

This is my first Sunday delivering the message in a few weeks as I was on vacation with my family

and I want to take a moment to thank Steve Tamayo who not only did his usual full-time job the twelve days I was gone

but also carried a good bit of my work as well, including giving two outstanding messages while I was away—thanks, Steve!

Several people have told me I need to be gone more often if that means Steve gets to speak more often and I told them that sounded great to me!

While I was gone, we wrapped up our time in the book of James

And in one of those messages several weeks back I shared one of my concerns about the plans we have to move into more permanent facilities

we're hoping for a permanent facility for our Pittsboro campus that we're planning on launching this fall that we won't have to set-up and tear down

and we're in the process of looking for land for our own building in Northern Chatham as well

And one of the concerns that I have is that when churches have more permanent facilities or build buildings,

one thing that sometimes happens is that it becomes a breeding ground for small, petty squabbles

Churches sometimes split about things like the color of the carpet or the types of light fixtures!

And so a couple of weeks ago during the message we took a very serious and formal vote that morning that I want to do a re-count on:

all in favor of not having petty arguments about things that don't matter as we get more permanent facilities say aye! Brilliant!

One big reason why we end up fighting over small and petty things in any area of our lives is because we're not sure what the bigger purpose is.

If we're not crystal clear as to the mission and purpose of why we're here that's bigger than just our personal preferences, we will slouch towards squabbling over our personal preferences.

But if we're connected to a larger organizing vision or purpose, what that does is it re-frames what matters and what doesn't

Because some things AREN'T at all worth fighting about BUT some conflicts and arguments we absolutely need to have

when you see a decision that we're making that might undermine our mission or vision, then absolutely please you need to speak up and cause a ruckus—some of you have no problems with that, others of you have a hard time doing that, but we need it

Getting unity and clarity around our mission and vision helps us to understand and differentiate between what matters and what doesn't

So what we're going to do this week and next week as we close out this 2016-17 year, as we get ready to vote on the budget next week

and as we are on the brink of a year that, if the Lord wills it, has potential to be the most dynamic period of impact in our community of any that we've ever had

Is I want us together to have crystal clarity around what we're here to do, why we're here, and what we're hoping and praying that God will do through us and sometimes in spite of us

To see his kingdom come and his will be done all across Chatham County and in our own lives and families and in this church as it is in heaven

To start with this week, I want to spring board off of Chatham Serves last week and I want to talk about our mission statement.

Our mission statement, which I love and was in place before I got here, is this: ***To lead all people to become authentic followers of Jesus who engage our world for good.***

*There's something about authentic following of the God of the Scriptures that generates both personal internal transformation as well as this external engagement of the world around us for good*

If we lose sight of either one of those realities, we have lost the fullness of the biblical picture of what it means to be connected with the God of the universe

About  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the way through the Old Testament we get to the book of Jeremiah and the people of Israel are in trouble. They have rejected the warnings of the prophet Jeremiah along with many years of prophets before him

And instead of returning to God, they have rejected him in many ways and as a result God has sent the Babylonians through to discipline them

Many of their people have been carried off into captivity in Babylon, some are still back in Jerusalem and the surrounding area, which is in shambles and they're trying to survive as an occupied nation and people

But in the midst of all of this, there are false prophets who are telling the people that this situation will not last

That the exiles in captivity in Babylon should not worry or get too comfortable, that God will soon do away with the Babylonians and they'll be home soon

In response to these false prophets, Jeremiah writes a letter from Jerusalem to the exiles in Babylon to give them a very different word from the Lord

And in the process, he's going to help us to understand what it means for us to be a church community that engages our world for good

If you've got a Bible, turn with me to Jeremiah 29, if not on screen/if no Bible get a free one

***4 This is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says to all those I carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: 5 "Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce... 7 Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper."***

When I was in kindergarten my dad who was in the Navy was sent to a several month training program in Norfolk, Virginia

And since he was going to be gone for several months, my mom pulled me out of kindergarten and we all moved down together and lived in a hotel for a couple of months

Now we were a military family so just about every move we knew was going to be somewhat temporary—meaning usually around 3 years.

And what that usually meant was that as soon as we landed somewhere, we jumped right into a local church community and into our neighborhoods and tried to make each place a home as quickly as we could

But in this case, since we knew it was just going to be a couple of months, we didn't do any of those things.

We knew we were only going to be there a short period of time so we didn't invest ourselves in a church or the local area at all—we were just passing through and we knew it

When you know that you're just passing through a place, you have a different mentality about your relationship with it than when you know you're going to be there for a while

In the first part of this passage, Jeremiah is speaking to the permanence of the situation of the exiles

there are false prophets saying don't get too comfortable, you're not going to be here for a while! They're encouraging a mentality that's just sort of passing through

But Jeremiah here is saying the exact opposite--he's encouraging the people to put down roots to build houses, settle down, plant gardens, make you're going to stay there for a while

There are a couple of crucial principles in this little verse that aren't just for the people of Israel in this situation but are for us as well.

### **1. God has put you here.**

In Jeremiah the people of Israel have been carried off into exile into Babylon and it looks like it's all just the mindless machinations of superpowers that rise and fall and military conquest and dominance

Babylon was steamrolling all the nations of the middle east at the time, and it looked like Israel was just the next one on the list

But throughout Jeremiah, God is insistent that HE's the one that's raising up Babylon as an instrument of his work, in particular to discipline his people in the midst of their rebellion

And so here in this letter, the Lord says through Jeremiah to seek the prosperity of the city where God has carried them into exile.

God is the one who has put them there in that city in Babylon, he is sovereignly at work in determining their location, he has put them there on purpose

And this is in keeping with the biblical theme of God's sovereignty over the times and positioning of people throughout all of time and history, over all people for all time

Wherever we are, in whatever time we're in existence on this planet, the Scripture declares that God has put you and me and the people of Israel in Jeremiah's time right there on purpose, for his purposes

And so this morning, whether you are here because your family has been in this area for generations or because you moved to town in the past few weeks

What the Scriptures declare is that God is at work and in control over our times and places, that God positions us on purpose for his purposes.

For some of you, being here is a dream come true, you love it here and you want to stay forever

For others of you, being here is kind of a puzzle or even a disappointment

you're not exactly sure you want to be here, maybe you ended up here in spite of yourself

maybe you've been here a long time and you're wanting a change, maybe you got transferred here because of a job situation or maybe even being here was your second or third or fourth-level option when other more desirable things didn't work out

And how we tend to think about this as 21<sup>st</sup> century Americans is that we're here for very earthly reasons:

my job took me here or I was ready to retire and this is where the grandkids lived or I grew up here and just kind of stayed here

But the Scriptures say that over all those things, there is a God who is in charge and who is in control.

The Israelites are in Babylon because God has sent them there. Part of them re-embracing God also includes re-embracing their mission and work there in Babylon

You are here, in this community, in this place, because God has brought you here.

However you got here, whatever earthly reasons you might ascribe to it, God was and still is bigger and over all of them

Which isn't to say that you might not be moved or brought somewhere else, but for now, for however long God sees fit, you are here, in this place.

And that leads us to our second principle: **2. If God has put you here, then he has something for you to do here.**

The Israelites are in exile in Babylon because they have neglected God and chased after other gods

The first part of their work in Babylon is to return to God himself  
that the people would turn from their false gods and idols that did not deliver them or help them when they were threatened militarily and re-embrace the true God

For some of you, this is exactly why God has put you here, too:  
that you might come to God for the first time or come back to him after a long time away

And if you think that might be part of what you're doing here in Chatham County and here this morning, then we celebrate that and say welcome! We're delighted that you're here.

We believe that God has a date with you here in Chatham County, and we pray and hope that we might be a part of creating a context for that date to happen

Returning to God for the Israelites and for us means that they and we will embrace that God is the one who has put us here

And a huge part of returning to God and trusting in God is that we will re-embrace the work of being God's people by being a people who bless those around them

To seek the peace and prosperity of the place where God has put us is part of what it means for us to BE God's people

Several months ago I was meeting with someone who had been on staff at another local church and she was talking about how hard it was to get the church to face outwardly towards the community

And her summary statement about the mentality of the church was this: if it didn't happen inside the building, they weren't interested in it

Everything that the church did and everything that needed to matter to the church had to happen inside those walls

My friends, that's when a church starts to die. Churches die when they become institutions instead of missions.

Institutions run like a bureaucracy, where the sole purpose of it is to keep the thing going and everyone has their little fiefdom and nobody better mess with it because it makes me feel good about myself to have it

But when a church remembers that we are here on God's mission to seek the peace of our community around us, then we're actually doing what God has called us to do

When a church's whole identity becomes the building it becomes an institution—at that point, go ahead and start the clock, it's just a matter of time before that church dies.

But when a church is on God's mission of blessing and serving the community and a building is one of many resources used for that mission, then life the life of God is flowing in it and through it to keep it alive and vibrant

Because a building a blessing, it is a resource—and in the Scriptures, we are never blessed in this life as an end in and of itself. We are always blessed to be a blessing

We are never meant to be a cul-de-sac of blessing, hoarding it all up for ourselves and acquiring as much as we can

We are always meant to be a conduit of blessing, passing along gifts of grace freely and even recklessly at times with great joy because we are connected to and know the source of every good gift

And this isn't just an individual call, it's something that we are supposed to do TOGETHER

Remember that the default pronoun and understanding of the Scriptures is not "YOU" singular but "Y'ALL" together! Further proof that God likes Southerner's better!

The call here to God's people as a community is to BE God's people in community: "Y'all, seek the shalom of the city"—we've talked about this word shalom before

Shalom is translated peace but it's a huge, vast word that means wholeness, wellness, flourishing in every possible way: relationally, emotionally, financially, politically, spiritually

Now think about receiving this letter if you're Joe or Josephine Israelite and you're in captivity in Babylon,

Into this strange, stinky city full of people who are your enemies who mock you as just another poor group of suckers who have been captured by their mighty armies

MY first thought about this place just might not be "How can I bless and serve this community?" I might have other choice things to say and think about this place!

But Jeremiah boldly writes this: all of the people of Judah, both in exile and back home, have been over-run by our enemies because of our disobedience to God

So the call on all of us is to return: for God to be our God and for us to be His people

And what it means to return to God and to be his people is that we worship God, and put away all these other gods that have tripped us up

they're worthless anyway, they didn't and couldn't save us or deliver us from the Babylonians, we were foolish to pursue them, let's ditch these other stupid, useless gods

AND what it means to be God's people is that we are to love our neighbor as ourselves. EVEN if our neighbor turns out to be someone who happens to be our enemies, the Babylonians.

See, in the midst of this crazy, ridiculous letter from Jeremiah to the exiles, imbedded in it is some really, really, really good news that all of us will need to hold onto at some point and that some of you might need to hear right now:

God is still God, even when you're in exile in Babylon. God is still God, and God is still good, even when we're in exile, in hard places, in difficult seasons of our lives

God is still God and you're still his people, and God is still pursuing you, still coming after you, still eager to love you and bless you,

even if you're in exile or captivity, EVEN IF you're in exile and captivity or in a difficult season of life because of something stupid or rebellious that YOU did!

And what it means to be God's people is that we are on the receiving end of infinite love and grace and mercy that forgives us even after we do some of the dumb things that we do

And from that place of realizing and receiving and embracing and resting in and knowing that incredible, immense love, comes this incredible, immense command:

What it means to BE God's people is to be a people who seek the blessing and shalom and flourishing of our community, even if it's filled with people that we don't particularly like.

And my friends, the call to you individually and to us as a church is the same thing:

we have been put here as God's people to facilitate the shalom and the flourishing of this place [**put map up on ppt**]

We are here to bless this map. That's part of what it means to be God's people, that's part of how we embrace and express our identity as people who worship and follow this God.

We are called into this ***virtuous cycle of shalom***:

It starts with our reception of grace: we are objects of grace and forgiveness, recipients of mercy

Jesus has come to a world full of people who are in exile and who are separated from God by virtue of the sin in our hearts

And he has come and lived and taught us the way of shalom, the way of flourishing  
and then he goes to the cross and he brings full shalom between us and God by dying for every mixed motive, every little lie, every little jealous or ugly thought you've had this week

Jesus takes all of that on himself and forgive it, so that we might have full access to God and peace with God

We are granted this access and granted this reconciliation with God and as recipients of such tremendous grace, we are called be agents of grace and shalom

As we experience this individually, we're also called to build ***communities of worship and shalom***, called to build communities where grace and mercy and forgiveness that are offered to us from God

Are worked out in real-time in our relationships with one another  
We call that church.

One of the things that we believe a church is to be is a greenhouse for human flourishing  
as the grace and mercy and power of God goes to work in each of us individually and in our corporate life together where we experience and express that shalom in real-time, in real situations, in real conflicts and in the midst of real needs

Some of you know John and Kathy Duszynski, Kathy has been very involved here for the past three years or so, John I don't think would call himself a Christian, certainly not terribly interested in church

They've had just about the worst 6-9 months that you can imagine. John was diagnosed with a very aggressive form of cancer and has been deteriorating rapidly.

Over these past six months, we've had wave after wave of people visit and stop by and bring meals and pray and pray and pray for and with them to the point where John now gladly enters into prayers for his health

Several weeks ago, he had a majorly invasive surgery in an effort to save his life and it's been emotionally and physically exhausting for them both.

But at some point in the past couple of weeks, someone from our church stopped by and noticed that yard was getting over-run and there were some dead trees around the house and driveway

They talked to Ernie Lane, Kathy's small group leader

and Ernie gathered a group of guys together from the small group as well as from other parts of the church to go over there

and about 6 of them put in an afternoon of cutting down trees and trimming bushes and competing in feats of strength

The way that Kathy tells the story is that she came home from the grocery store and there were all these guys in her front yard, several of whom had never met Kathy or John

And John came out, the whole family was there, there were tears in their eyes, and they talked chainsaws and yard work and they met some of the guys they hadn't met before

And in a season of their lives that has been marked with pain and hospital visits and sickness and fear and anxiety

This small group of guys came and brought shalom—order, peace, blessing, grace, love—to a home that desperately needed it

That's just one picture of the dozens and dozens of instances of people caring for each other here in the past twelve months:

people being prayed for and cared for and listened to and loved and helped and job-finding and challenged and shaped by the Lord

That's the church as a worshiping greenhouse of human flourishing, a place where we're all experiencing the grace of God together and then sharing it with one another freely and gladly

THIS is the kind of church we want to be! A community participating in the virtuous cycle of shalom freely given and then freely expressed to one another

In the next few months, if God wills it, we will put a campus hosting a 3<sup>rd</sup> service down in Pittsboro.

If that goes well and if God blesses that site and this one, we will put another campus or church in Siler City in a few years.

The prayer and the purpose behind all of that is that we might build greenhouses of human flourishing all across Chatham County as God's grace is met, experienced, and expressed internally as a community

But as wonderful as that is, the greenhouse is not all that the church is

The church is not only a greenhouse but also a launch-pad for shalom to the broader community

Or put maybe a better way, the church is a garden hose from which pours out men and women who are saturated with the love of God and delivers it all across the county with great joy to bring the living water of Jesus Christ to the entire county

Last week for Chatham Serves a group of our kids who are involved in kids choir did what they often do which is go to a local nursing home and sing for the residents

And two of mine went and told me the story that when they told one woman what church they were from, she lit up:

“Chatham Church? You guys built our front porch two years ago! That was one of the best things that ever happened to me!”

And she went on to tell the kids and residents that we’d come out and built her and her husband a ramp and a little porch that they just loved

and if it’s the project that I’m thinking it might have been, one of them was wheelchair-bound and the whole place was in really bad shape

And my guess is that ramp and porch meant that they were finally able to get outside and enjoy fresh air anytime they wanted and not just when they were headed to the doctor’s office

And she went on to say that one of them had a stroke and now there she was in the nursing home requiring a ongoing care

but she said that her house had been demolished but she had demanded that they leave that front porch up—it was one of the best gifts she’d ever received

And now there our kids were again, touching her life again with music delivered by our very cute kids.

Jeremiah says seek the shalom of your community. Jesus agrees: love your neighbor.

When we do that, we are participating in the eternal and holy work of sowing seeds of shalom, and when you sow seeds recklessly enough and joyfully enough, you never know what might sprout up out of the ground

Over the next 4 years, if our eyes are open and we’re praying, we’re going to be discovering all sorts of ways that our community is in need of the energy and power of shalom

And one of the primary questions we need to be asking as a church if God allows us to move into PBO and Siler City is simply:

if God has put us here, where do we need to be seeking the peace of this part of the county?

How is God positioning us to be a part of his work of bringing grace and mercy and comfort and renewal and blessing to every corner of Chatham County?

How will that re-shape what Chatham Serves looks like over the next four years?

What kinds of partnerships will God call us to enter into in order to seek the shalom of Chatham County both with other churches and with groups and organizations that want nothing to do with religion but who have a shared desire to see good things happen in our community?

What if over the next number of years we built buildings that were designed not just for our comfort and convenience but for the shalom of Chatham County?

What if the express purpose of our church buildings across Chatham County was to further the peace and blessing of as many people in our community as we could possibly bless?

Here's one way that might look:

there are dozens of small non-profits in Chatham County doing outstanding work all around the county who have no office space—a few of them are people right here in this church.

What if we could partner with those organizations by eventually build buildings that had plenty of extra space for local non-profits to get out of their living rooms at home and office at Chatham Community Church for free or very minimal cost?

If our goal was to further the shalom of Chatham County with a building and not just build a building for us, how would that change the floor plan?

Oh, that sounds very nice and noble, doesn't it? Well then here's the real question: what if that costs us extra money?

Are we willing to take OUR MONEY and put it where our mouth is--to spend our money for the building spaces that we don't ever use as a church but that further the shalom of the city?

I was tempted to say all in favor say "AYE" here but I think too many of you aren't so sure you're ready for that vote, so we'll wait on it!

That's just one way that this might play out and that's just me talking out loud, it might not look exactly like that

I'm just trying to help us to take the principle or concept of being a Launchpad and a garden hose of shalom to our community and help us to see how we might apply it as we move forward as a church

There's this great little line that gets squeezed in here that I want to look at as a springboard to our take-home for this week

In these verses God tells them not only to seek the shalom of the place where God has put them, he also tells them to pray to God tells the people of Israel to pray to him to bless the city where they're in exile!

Why does God need the people to pray to him to do this? If he wants to bless the city, why not just bless it without their asking?

One, it changes US to pray, right? If you want to hold a grudge against someone, one of the things that you should NOT do is pray for God to bless them.

It's very hard to pray blessing on someone for days and weeks and still hold a nasty edgey grudge

These people are going to spend over 70 years in exile in this city. Do you know what will happen to their hearts if they spend the next 70 years angry and bitter at the city where they live?

They will leave there miserable and toxic people.

But secondly, there's this thing that we see in the very beginning of the Bible that runs all throughout the Scriptures:

when God creates human beings, he gives them authority, dominion over what God has created

It's a borrowed authority, and it's just on loan, and we'll be held responsible for how we use that authority and that power, but it's real nonetheless

So when people made in God's image whom God has given authority over pray, it matters.

There's even a spiritual authority that image-bearers have that affects and shapes things here on earth and in heaven when we pray

So here is this week's take-home straight from this passage.

This week I want to invite us into the virtuous cycle of shalom: ***pray for the shalom of our community.***

As you're driving around, as you're pulling into your neighborhood, every home, every man, woman, child, every construction site, every worker on that site

as you read something in a list serve or on the chat-list, pray for the shalom of our community

And maybe ask the question: where are the shalom gaps in our community? Where are the places where people aren't flourishing, where life isn't happening?

Where people are angry or oppressed or in need or acting foolishly or there are broken relationships or broken systems or broken bodies or broken minds that need tending to?

And I want to encourage you as you're praying for the shalom of our community and likely seeing places where there are gaps and needs

to ask the question: God, ***what do you want me to do about this?*** You've put me here on purpose, what do you want me to do here?

And two to ask God on behalf of all of us: God, ***what do you want US to do about this?***

You've put Chatham Community Church here in this community for such a time as this: to seek the shalom of this community—and if you start to get an answer, let me know what you're hearing

Because engaging our world for good and seeking the shalom of Chatham County, that's what we're here to do.