

Salt in the City

BY AMY L. SHERMAN

In Elisha's work of mercy for stricken Jericho and Jeremiah's commitment to captured Anathoth, we glimpse God restoring cities and towns. The prophets inspire us to become "saltier" disciples, reclaiming communities through holistic, relational ministry with individuals and well-considered structural reform.

A little story about the prophet Elisha captures some important themes about how Christians should think about community engagement:

Now the people of the city said to Elisha, "The location of this city is good, as my lord sees; but the water is bad, and the land is unfruitful." He said, "Bring me a new bowl, and put salt in it." So they brought it to him. Then he went to the spring of water and threw the salt into it, and said, "Thus says the LORD, I have made this water wholesome; from now on neither death nor miscarriage shall come from it." So the water has been wholesome to this day, according to the word that Elisha spoke.

2 Kings 2:19-22

This miracle occurs in the city of Jericho. We think we know all about Jericho from our third grade Sunday School song: "Joshua fought the battle of Jericho, and the walls came a-tumbling down." Yet it is likely that our teacher did not mention that God had Joshua put a curse on Jericho after the victory:

Joshua then pronounced this oath, saying,
"Cursed before the LORD be anyone who tries

to build this city – this Jericho!
At the cost of his firstborn he shall lay its foundation,
and at the cost of his youngest he shall set up its gates!”

Joshua 6:26

As we read the narrative of Elisha in the city of Jericho, we are to see a sobering picture: a city under a curse, with a river of death flowing into it. The city’s water source was polluted and harmful, bringing sickness, death, and barrenness. In this context, Elisha performs a miracle. God tells him to throw salt in the water. God, in His mercy, then uses the salt to heal the water so that it becomes wholesome and life giving.

BECOMING SALTIER DISCIPLES

Notice the interesting way in which the town leaders, despite their city’s obvious deficiency, present the prophet with more information than simply their need. Their first remark about their home is that Jericho is “well situated.” In short, they state an asset about their community before they direct Elisha’s attention to their problem.

That kind of “asset focus” is often missing from a typical church’s view of its city. As congregations consider community ministry, we tend to think in categories of “ministry to” or “ministry in” the city, instead of “ministry with.” We see needs, but we fail to recognize the assets God already has in place – people, facilities, and neighborhood associations. But an asset-based approach is vital if congregations are to avoid paternalism and arrogance. When church leaders present parishioners only with the needs of “those people out there,” they risk emphasizing a false us-versus-them dichotomy and cultivating, inadvertently, an attitude on the part of church members that they have all the resources and answers, while those they go to serve have only problems. This inhibits mutually transforming ministry.

Nevertheless, the residents of Jericho do have a big need and they are not embarrassed to ask for help. Elisha responds quickly and decisively – or, better put, God responds mercifully and definitively through the prophet. The waters of death are transformed for good.

But note the agency of the healing. It is salt. That is not an accident. Nor is Jesus’ metaphor from Matthew 5:13 that we, his followers, are the salt of the earth.

Salt tossed into a river is by definition self-sacrificing. It hits the water and dissolves. We might say that it gives up or pours out its life.

Tim Keller, senior pastor at Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York City, has supplied a catchy phrase to serve as a tagline for the new Pew Charitable Trusts-sponsored “Christian Vision Project.” The project is inviting Evangelicals of note to reflect on Keller’s question, “How can the American church become ‘a counterculture for the common good?’” One answer is, “By becoming ‘saltier.’”

Advancing true transformation in our cities is costly work. It requires a self-giving of not just money but time and emotional energy. Because of this, too many congregations do not get engaged in work that actually moves people out of poverty – as opposed to helping them manage their hardships a little better. We are too eager to help the poor but not willing enough to know them. A saltier church moves beyond mere relief efforts to true partnership with our neighbors, working with communities to bring about transformation through holistic, relational ministry with individuals and well-considered structural reform. This challenge is difficult but doable.

INVESTING “FOOLISHLY” FOR GOD

Lawndale Community Church in inner-city Chicago has transformed several city blocks into a place of greater safety and more hope – and higher graduation rates, home ownership rates, and employment rates. The congregation is one of the jewels of the Christian Community Development Association (CCDA), whose “manual,” *Restoring At-Risk Communities: Doing It Together & Doing It Right*, is reviewed by Lissa Schwander in “Restoring Urban Communities” on pp. 89-93 of this issue. Other congregations – New City Fellowship in Chattanooga, The Church at the Neighborhood Center in Phoenix, and Sandtown New Song Church in Baltimore, to name a few – similarly have engaged their congregants with community residents in marvelous works of mercy, community development, and justice. They have established schools and job-training programs, initiated new affordable housing developments, counseled teen moms, turned gang members into entrepreneurs, and launched new minority-owned businesses.

These “salty” congregations share at least two characteristics. First, they have refused to give up on their cities. The depressing (and usually one-sided) news that flows from city to suburbs can make us despair of the possibility for city renewal. But there are no God-forsaken

These “salty” congregations have refused to give up on their cities. The depressing (and usually one-sided) news that flows from city to suburbs can make us despair of the possibility for city renewal. But there are no God-forsaken places.

places. As community developers Noel Castellanos and Mark R. Gornik have observed in their important commentary on Jeremiah 32, God sometimes calls us to make what appear to the world as foolish investments.[†] God issues a very strange command to Jeremiah, telling him to buy a field in Anathoth, on the northern outskirts of Jerusalem. The command bewilders Jeremiah, for this piece of real estate lies behind enemy lines!

The Babylonian armies have laid siege to Jerusalem, and Anathoth is filled with mourning. Yet God orders Jeremiah to buy the land, to execute studiously and publicly all the legal protocols accompanying the purchase, and then put the deed “in an earthenware jar, in order that [it] will last a long time” (Jeremiah 32:14). The prophet faithfully obeys, but he doesn’t understand why God would call him to such a foolish investment. Who spends money to buy property you cannot access, property that lies in the enemy’s territory?

In mercy, God gives Jeremiah an explanation for the strange command. God reminds Jeremiah that the Babylonian invasion is the judgment upon the people of Israel that God had warned them about. But God wants the people to know that the time of judgment will not last forever. God promises a future redemption and foretells a day when feasts and weddings will sound again in the fields of Anathoth (Jeremiah 32:26-44). So, the Lord asks Jeremiah to make a publicly noticeable investment in a place that others have given up as lost. By doing so, Jeremiah makes tangible God’s future promise to reclaim and restore.

God is still in the reclamation business. Though impoverished neighborhoods in our cities are “behind enemy lines” – Satan has a grip on them through drugs, crime, injustice, and despair – God has not forsaken this territory, and neither should the Church. The kingdom of God is breaking into the Anathoths of our land. God has used congregations as those mentioned above to do just this, but additional “foolish” investors are needed. The Church is not allowed to give up on the city.

TASTING GOD’S KINGDOM

Another characteristic of salty congregations is that they provide a foretaste of shalom, the peace of God’s kingdom. They are notable for their vision. They have a model in mind for the change they seek in this broken world. We are meant to glimpse this model in the story of Elisha in Jericho – a city cursed with a river of death running through it, but miraculously transformed by God’s salt into a city where a river of life burbles. In the restored Jericho we have a foretaste of the New Jerusalem graced with “the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city” (Revelation 22:1-2a).

Offering people a foretaste of the consummated kingdom marked Jesus’ ministry, and it should mark the Church’s as well. Jesus often selected Old Testament “preview” passages (like Isaiah 61) that spoke of the “coming attraction” of the new heavens and the new earth, and then announced, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing” (Luke 4:21). And to the critical Pharisees he interpreted his miracles, “If it is by the finger of God that I cast out the demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you” (Luke 11:20). It was as though Jesus, through his miracles, reached

forward into the fully consummated Kingdom and yanked a foretaste of it back into the present. You can imagine Jesus looking at Bartimaeus and saying, “Friend, in the consummated Kingdom, there is no blindness; so today I give you your sight.” Or to Lazarus, “Brother, in the New Jerusalem, there is no death; so I say to you: ‘Up out of the grave!’”

The kingdom of God has begun; Jesus inaugurated it. It is *now*, but it is also *not yet*. We patiently long in our still-broken world for its full consummation. But while we wait, it is the task of the Church—Christ’s Body—to continue to proclaim the good news of the kingdom and, through our actions, to give people foretastes of it. “Urban ministry” is nothing less than laboring with our neighbors in the kingdom works of justice, love, and healing, to the end that our cities might grow to look more like the New City.

NOTE

† Noel Castellanos and Mark R. Gornik, “How to Start a Christian Community Development Ministry,” in *Restoring At-Risk Communities: Doing it Together and Doing it Right*, edited by John Perkins (Baker Books, 1995), 211-236. They discuss Jeremiah 32 on pp. 217-218.



AMY L. SHERMAN

is Senior Fellow at the Sagamore Institute for Policy Research, where she directs the Center on Faith in Communities (www.CenteronFIC.org) in Charlottesville, Virginia.