

**The Church and the Salvation of the City**  
**A Sermon by Louise Westfall**  
**Fairmount Presbyterian Church**  
**Cleveland Heights, Ohio**  
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**Text: Jeremiah 32:13, 6-15**

Rise up! Believe. Those were the watchwords last Tuesday evening at the Jake when a sell-out crowd watched the Tribe come from behind to beat Detroit and all but seal a playoff berth. The perfect late-summer evening was magic, served up with cold beer and hot hitting. The sea of red-bedecked fans rose up in wave after wave around the entire stadium. There was laughter and energy and strangers high-fiving. “Takes me back to the way it was in the 90s,” more than one person around me commented. I’m sure there were some Tigers fans present, but that night, people from Lakewood and Parma and Shaker Heights and Chagrin Falls were from one city. We were all there together, united by common purpose. Believe in Cleveland!

Off the diamond, outside the arena, it’s much harder. The summer exploded in street violence that killed a tiny girl caught in crossfire, a woman in town to see a show, a man minding his business on his own front porch. Our city continues to lead the nation in number of children living in poverty: “the poorest city in America.” Jobs that provide a middle-class income are hard to come by. The city is as divided by race and socio-economics as by the Cuyahoga River. The “brain drain” phenomenon wicks some of the brightest potential away from Cleveland to growth areas in the South and West. You’ve read the statistics too, which simply confirm the obvious: the “city of hope” as Cleveland was known at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century is in need of a fresh infusion of it today.

What caught my attention about the lectionary reading from Jeremiah was its contemporary tone and relevance as we consider how our city can be saved. Invest in it!—is the divine edict we find here. Put your money in a city that’s already lost. What’s up with that? A little background: Jeremiah was called by God as a young man to speak God’s truth to the nation. The word, however, was not a pleasant or easy one: the nation had renounced God’s justice and was in serious need of reform. Interestingly, the sin is described in economic terms: those in power have oppressed the poor, making it impossible for them even to buy shoes for their feet or build a roof over their heads. They have forgotten the cause of the needy, and treated the widow and the orphan with indifference. Jeremiah prophesied that God would judge their faithlessness through the capture of the capital city by Babylon, the ancient version of the axis of evil. His repeated pronouncement drew such a hostile reaction from the King that Jeremiah was thrown into prison—even as Babylonian armies surrounded the city, intending to starve it into submission. In fact, Babylon did conquer Israel, destroyed the temple in Jerusalem, and sent most of its

inhabitants into exile. Which makes Jeremiah's dramatic decision to buy land in the threatened city all the more curious. Listen for God's word to the church in the reading from the book of the prophet Jeremiah, in the 32<sup>nd</sup> chapter, at the first verse. [JEREMIAH 32:1-3, 6-15]

Recently, the regional body of Presbyterian churches closed two Cleveland churches—congregations once vibrant and effective that had dwindled in membership to the point that they were no longer viable. Everything was done decently and in order, with studies and commissions and so on, and the actual vote hardly created a ripple. But our parish associate, the Rev. Missy Shiverick, could not preside over the death of these churches without a murmur. She has served a number of urban churches, as well as heading the justice ministry of the presbytery. She knows there are at least a dozen more Presbyterian congregations at risk—congregations that are worshiping, visiting the sick, caring for the poor, teaching children, witnessing to God's presence in their communities, but ones that struggle to pay the bills. So Missy convened a meeting of these urban churches, a presbytery staff person, and pastors of inner ring suburban congregations to listen and learn. What we heard was story after story of congregations on the front lines of human need and suffering, providing significant ministry on a shoestring budget, understaffed, underfunded, and often overwhelmed. One pastor told of having to choose between needed upkeep on their historic building or hiring a counselor to meet with the numbers of mentally ill persons released from institutions who depend on that church for their very survival. That pastor has never earned more than the presbytery-mandated minimum salary, about one-third of mine, as a basis for comparison.

The plight of the urban churches mirrors the reality of a troubled city core vacated by institutions, and attention that has shifted in ever-widening circles to the suburbs. One option for church growth after all is to move where the people are—and this has been the response of many. Fairmount is different. We were founded here on this corner of Cleveland Heights as a neighborhood church, but with a metropolitan vision, concerned with the welfare of our city and determined to “make a difference” in ways that will help it grow and thrive. Cleveland Heights—as an inner ring eastern suburb-- might be thought of as a microcosm of the city, in terms of changing demographics. As everyone who knows real estate knows, it's all about location, location, location. Poised as we are at the gateway to University Circle, blessed with tremendous resources and social capital, Fairmount has the potential to make a substantial impact on Cleveland's renaissance.

We are called to this opportunity by our tradition: both the history of this particular church, as well as our Judeo-Christian heritage. The Bible continually calls the faith community to seek justice for all, but especially those who are oppressed, to care for those in need, to pay attention to its most vulnerable

members. *Seek the welfare of the city* Jeremiah urged as the Lord's prophet. *...for in its welfare you will find your welfare*—an important reminder of how closely intertwined are the fortunes of the entire metropolitan region, regardless of which particular community we live in. And in others words from the prophetic tradition used in this morning's call to worship, we are given the beautiful image of the faith community as "the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in." To take compassionate steps to repair the gaping tears in the social fabric of our city, to make our neighborhoods safe and life-enhancing, seems to me to be holy work, and part of our calling. Such a calling was the impetus behind the intentional efforts to integrate this congregation back in 1964—the first church in the Heights where African Americans and whites could worship together under one roof. In an extensive interview with *Cleveland* magazine in 1988, then-pastor Hank Andersen described church's engagement in social issues as a means of strengthening their spiritual life: *People get satiated with materialism and their real selves get dulled and stifled and submerged. . . I want [the church] to show them that life can be so much richer, so much better, so much more fulfilling and fun with God. [Cleveland magazine, July 1988, p. 80]*

The Protestant Inner City Ministry headed by the Rev. Mel Brenkus and underwritten by Fairmount assisted multiple churches to connect poor people to needed social services—and a shot at a better life. Project Renewal which ministers to mentally and physically challenged adults, many of whom live alone; the Open Doors program which provides an outstanding learning environment here at the church for Roxboro Middle School youth Monday through Friday in those critical after-school hours; Heights Youth Club, offering a similar educational after-school program for young people ages 6-18 in the renovated space of another closed Presbyterian church: each of these initiatives is this faith community's response to seek the welfare of the city in particular ways appropriate to its time. Or think of John and Peg Zitzner's vision of a public charter school of excellence where urban youth receive superior education and development that will put them on track to get a college education. E-Prep School is one more way to invest in the city, out of a conviction that this is what God wants us to do. And it's what you want to do. The visioning exercises we did last year showed that you want your church engaged in mission; you identified the part of our mission statement that says we seek "to make a difference in the world" as of primary importance. If we act together, led by God, I believe Fairmount can provide collective leadership towards helping our region achieve its economic, spiritual and community potential.

Over the past year, I've spent time talking with Fairmount members and community leaders about how we might do this. It's clear from these discussions that there is room at the table for spiritual leadership, for leveraging not only our material resources but our spiritual

ideals to influence decision-makers to work for the good of the metropolitan region. At their heart, realities such as racism, violence, the gap between rich and poor, are spiritual matters. We have a gospel that counters human greed and self-centeredness with what Jesus called “abundant life.” The spiritual transformation evident when people are in relationship with God and one another can become a compelling witness to the “disarmed truth and unconditional love” that changes the world. That’s good news!—and a powerful antidote to the bad news that seems to paralyze our city with fear and even worse, with resignation. Of course we need to do more than bring people together to talk, but we have something important to contribute to those conversations that can move them from talk into effective action.

We will need to focus our energies around a few projects where we can have maximum impact rather than a scattershot approach that lacks depth. And our goal should not be to replace the market system but to harness the market system on behalf of social justice. The world is moving toward a new form of capitalism—one that honors the value of markets while working to make sure that market incentives are lined up with social realities. At Weatherhead they call this “Business for a Better World” –the recognition that an honorable job is the foundation of economic justice and that markets can provide honorable jobs. Subsidized micro-credit is an example of a way by which we can effectively supplement market incentives with donated money to create opportunity where before there was none.

A dear church member who is also a friend teased me a little about the topic of today’s sermon: “Hmmmmmmm, think you can tell how to save the city in 15 minutes???” Well, no. But I keep thinking about Jeremiah, in prison, his city imperiled by destructive forces outside his control, who bought a plot of trouble, a down payment on the day when homes and businesses and schools and faith communities would once again thrive in the city. Did you notice what a public show he made of executing the sale—signing copies of the deed, securing them where they would be preserved for a long time? Jeremiah wanted his investment to be seen as an act of hope, a symbol of faith in the assurance of things not seen—yet. We don’t know yet what form our redemptive action might take. I can see a corps of committed church men and women lending their expertise to minority businesses, perhaps to a program providing social and spiritual support for the diverse work forces that are emerging; perhaps to a loan program that will allow those with small dreams to build them into large enterprises. I can see new partnerships with urban Presbyterian congregations: sharing our people resources and building bridges between city and suburb. A recently-retired Fairmount physician told me just this week he was interested in volunteering his medical skills in an underserved area; An at-home mom wonders if she could use her accounting ability to assist poor people set up a household budget—and these are just two examples of many ways our congregation might lead a coordinated effort at

urban revitalization. I can see us sponsoring a community forum on regionalism. A starting point could be the formation of a task force on regional leadership that will consider and recommend a course of action for the Session to approve. We can't do this without broad participation by the congregation. It sounds daunting, and it is. But the Church of Jesus Christ has never been limited to what seems expedient, convenient, and do-able. God's vision is so much larger!—God will not stop working until it is on earth as it is in heaven, until the new city is established—a place of peace, where everyone enjoys the goodness of the life God intends for all. Hard even to imagine. Here is what I can imagine: a congregation that is so vitally engaged will grow—numerically and spiritually. So take this bit of encouragement from St. Francis of Assisi: *Start by doing what's necessary, then what's possible, and suddenly you'll be doing the impossible.* (Maybe that's how he got to be a saint.)

Rise up, people of God! Believe. And then let's take our belief to the city, and discover how the impossible gets done.

NOW TO THE ONE WHO BY THE POWER AT WORK WITHIN US IS ABLE TO DO ABUNDANTLY MORE THAN ALL WE ASK OR IMAGINE, TO GOD BE GLORY IN THE CHURCH FOREVERMORE!  
AMEN.

**The Rev. Louise F. Westfall D.Min., Pastor**