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SERMON TITLE: "Your Testimony: The Work of FPCD since 2013"

SCRIPTURE: Jeremiah 29:1-7, 11-12

DATE: July 8, 2018

Check out the service at www.fpcd.org.

READ Jeremiah 29:1-7, 11-12 and Philippians 2:12-16

2n the past few years churches have fallen on hard times. Many churches have decreased in size or closed. Membership in our denomination over the past twenty years has declined 43 percent. At times in Church history there has been ebbs. Faith declines, the Church becomes less vibrant; morality in the nation declines. Then the Holy Spirit comes in with a strong Wind and restores the Church.

Some examples are the Great Awakenings in the 1700s into early 1900s, the Azusa Street revival, the Jesus People revival in the 1970s, and others. These revivals had positive moral effects. These revivals go all the way back to biblical times when national decline ultimately led to a God initiative of restoration for the Israelites.

In Jeremiah's time, there was great loss of faith. Israel and Judah had divided and were vulnerable. At that time three surrounding kingdoms competed for dominance: Assyria, Babylonia, and Egypt. Judah's and Israel's land was right in the middle; the road connecting the three. Both Israel and Judah fell. At the time of our Scripture, the people had been carried off to live in Babylon.

This was devastating. But Jeremiah, the Prophet, the spokesperson for God sent the people a message from God. It is a very positive message. It says despite the displacement, even though they feel great loss, do not circle the wagons. Hear the story. READ Jeremiah 29:1-7, 11-12

In case you are young and have not studied about western expansionism in this nation, people traveling in wagons together, in order to defend themselves circled the wagons and took a defensive stance. God was saying, "You are going to be there for at least a generation. Yes, you have been conquered, but let's not circle the wagons. Rather, bless the city in which you reside."

Our culture has drifted farther away from the beliefs of the Church. Theologians recently have used the term "the Church in exile." Because the culture has changed, the Church lives in spiritually foreign territory. This has distressed the Church and causes it to want to "circle the wagons," to be defensive, to disengage with the culture.

But God says, "Never fear. Have hope. Bless your city and pray for it." That's the message today, just as it was for ancient Israel. Let's look at the work FPCD has done to take this mandate to heart. You may be surprised by our fruit.

We began to gain spiritual strength through Conversations with God on Wednesday nights. Lectio divina is an ancient spiritual discipline that allows for the Holy Spirit to speak through this prayerful approach to Bible stories. Hearing them together helped us to see our own stories in those stories. Several of you told the stories in worship.

Sometimes we had whole groups—once we told Abraham's story with twelve people. We started putting the storytelling and music together and had concerts. We started asking people outside the church to join us and we became more diverse. *That diversity gave us a richness of insight and ways of doing things.* We all bring our cultural experiences with us and understanding each other and seeing our commonalities begins to break down divisions.

Perhaps that is why God wanted the Israelites to be involved in the community of Babylon. His plan all along is for all of us to embrace one another in all our variety.

The first few years we held our festivals in house. We invited others but were drawing mostly other church people. So Andrew Dittman, choir director at the time said, "How can we do this in a public place?" Early in 2013 we began planning our first Festival of Hope. *His dream came true.*

Marna B. had dreamed of having an open house here, inviting all the non-profits in town to set up tables so people know what kind of resources our city has. We did that in the park. *Her dream came true.*

Some suggested doing old fashioned games in the park for kids—hoola hoop and whiffle ball and bounce houses. We decided to raise money for Duncanville Outreach Ministry. We decided to invite some local restaurants to sell food. All of that came to be.

We had the goal of bringing together families for a feel-good afternoon in the park to bless our diverse community. *Our dreams came true because God is at work in you, enabling you to will and to work for his good pleasure.*

We didn't stop. We invited the high school choir to sing with our choir. That meant parents would come. We centered stories around "neighbor helping neighbor." Perhaps that would inspire caring in this community.

We needed city buy-in, so we held a luncheon at the Lion's Club building for known city leaders (after finding out who they were!). Amazingly they came. We heard there was some dissension in Duncanville and people were looking for solutions to the division.

But perhaps they came because we reached out and invited them. How often does the church invite its community leaders to a free luncheon?

The first Festival of Hope in October 2013 drew a diverse crowd of about 800-1,000. The mayor proclaimed it Duncanville Outreach Ministry and we raised \$52,000+ for that organization.

The weather prediction was terrible—70 percent chance of rain. People said, "Did you buy weather insurance? What are you going to do when it rains?" "We'll pray," I told one man named Ken.

It looked bad at noon, but by 3:00, the sun came out and it looked like a Norman Rockwell painting! I received this text from that man that evening: "Ginger, great event. It is 8:45 pm and the storm is just beginning as you asked in your prayer. I am impressed."

The next week my phone was ringing off the wall. We were invited to lead a community conversation for city leaders. We led "Community Conversations" for thirty plus leaders, many of whom had not even been able to sit in a room with one another for months.

We found that people loved their city. They told stories about its history. We told Bible stories that had to do with getting along and how to solve conflicts. This was a diverse group of very qualified people who were learning to listen to one another.

God's church, if we are willing to take a risk, can be a catalyst for conversation.

The next year we held a second Festival of Hope, joined by two other churches, Centro Familiar Cristiano and Trinity Nazarene. This time not only the high school choir sang, but also a local children's choir. We were expanding.

We were asked to lead a second Community Conversation with these words, "There's got to be more than economics. You are a pastor. Isn't there more?" I said,

"There is." Using the book of Nehemiah, we talked about rebuilding a city through a God-given vision. Our elders facilitated table discussions.

We did a concert that fall centered around the story of Nehemiah and Matthew Lee initiated the Duncanville Community Choir. After he left, we hired Nyadia.

In 2016 our vision grew. We invited nine other Duncanville churches to join us in a concert to tell the story of Good Friday at Shine Performance Hall at Duncanville High School. Ten pastors told the story. Dub's cross was taken to that public space. The Community Choir grew to 58 people, along with a 24 piece orchestra. Nyadia directed. *You did this, because you took a risk on God's mandate to bless your community and God made you fruitful.*

Working together was so exhilarating for the pastors that we decided to do another festival that same year the week before the 2016 national elections. *What motivated us was the realization that we can make a difference and impact our community by simply having the intention of blessing them.*

Community in Unity had the purpose of showing unity. The Duncanville Police Department totally embraced "shoot hoops with the police" to build relations with the community. The choir included singers from other churches, the community, the high school choir, a Hispanic praise band, children, and the Dallas police choir.

The Bible stories centered around unity, with pastors for all denominations telling stories and testimonies. They washed each other's feet, including the Police Chief and mayor. This expression stunned the audience.

Nothing was more exhilarating than the giant unity circle which wove around the park. The circle grew, engulfing everyone. The circle came to them, drawing us in.

We gave Duncanville hope that neighbors really can be neighbors, even though we are different and that we do not have to be divided. In the Lord, the dividing walls are broken down. In 2017, we held a Community Conversation on Unity.

Perhaps you are disturbed by all the division and rhetoric in our nation. If we listen to God, He provides a way through, when we do not see it. This is your testimony today. *You are shining like stars, FPCD, in a time when the nation sorely needs your example.* (Phil 2:15)

AMEN