Presence in the Community

Date: August 15, 2026
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Series: Presence With: Our Community

We've been journeying over the last six months or so what it means to actually be people of presence. This is our vision for our church. It's spoken to me and what it actually means in my own life. And we've looked at three different facets of this, and we've gone over the first two. We've gone through presence with God, presence with one another, and now we are on to the second installation of presence in a community—what that actually looks like.

We ended last week's session on presence and community talking about the Good Samaritan by talking about how giving our life away is actually the invitation that Jesus is inviting us to—about finding our life is actually about giving it away in the first place. And he's actually trying to save the teacher of the law from his own view on what would actually give him eternal life, not just in the end, but right now in our lives.

So we're going to continue that theme a little bit today, but we're going to look back into the Old Testament. And the God of the Old Testament actually has some things in common with Jesus. Imagine that. I know it seems crazy, but there's this—

Have you ever heard the verse, Jeremiah 29:11—"For I know the plans I have for you," declares the Lord. You've heard this, right? Everybody's—you know, this is on our graduation cards and all this stuff. Now, what we usually don't think about when we have this verse, or when we write this verse down, is actually the backstory of what Israel has just come through—what's actually going on when God says this to his people.

They're in a place of intense and severe idolatry. In fact, Jeremiah talks about it as if you're cheating on God with other gods, okay? You've committed adultery—spiritual adultery—in this way. And he says, what's happened because of this: you've worshiped other gods, you're going this other direction, and the widows are suffering. There's people being taken advantage of, and there's even people that are starting to practice the evil practice—one that is forbidden—of child sacrifice. God's own people are suffering because of moral decay. It was super sick, and no one seemed to care, including the leaders of Israel.

This is where Jeremiah comes in and lets them know that God is removing his hand of protection.

[Audience response]

Yes, whatever that is. Yeah—his hand of protection from them—because they refused to change their ways. And for over 70 years—this is in verse 10—the suffering was actually only going to get worse. Or they were going into exile for 70 years. Apologize.

So these other people called the Babylonians, who were not good people at all—they were going to be God's tool. They were going to come in and actually take over, destroy the city. And you could say, how could God want that for his own people? How could that possibly be a good thing? I would probably ask that question as well.

Israel had a bunch of false prophets that were saying they're going to be okay and that nothing bad was going to happen. And Jeremiah had been preaching this—actually that bad things were going to happen. They were going to come our way, and we needed to repent and turn around. He'd been preaching it for so many years, and it was finally happening.

This is where we actually pick up in Jeremiah chapter 29. Now I'm not going to read verse 11, but we are going to read a few verses before that—verses 4 through 7—of what God instructs his people to do after the destruction has come. After they've gone away, after they've done all this thing, and they're sent into exile into Babylon, this is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says. He says to all those I carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon. He says this. He gives these commands. He says:

> *Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce.*

I like gardening. Easy enough.

> *Marry and have sons and daughters; find wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage, so that they too may have sons and daughters.*

This is inside the rule, at least, of the Babylonians who are pretty terrible people.

> *Increase in number there; do not decrease.*

Also, he says this—verse 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.*

Now, God has his own judgment for Babylon and the way that they've hurt people and the immorality there. But here's the thing: God commands his own people to actually go into this place and serve it. If you were an Israelite in that moment, this can seem really, really backwards—especially with everything that we've been through, through

Judges and all this stuff. We are away from this culture. We push back against it. We want nothing to do with it. It's immoral. We don't like it. And they're our enemies. And yet here we are, and we're called to serve it.

Now, if you were here last week, that is what we talked about—the potential of serving your enemy. Now, I don't think any of us have marched across a desert by an invading army forced to do this. But here's what I want to say: some of us are living a life that you did not choose. The job you thought you'd have. The marriage you thought you'd have. The relationships. The city you thought you'd be living in by now. The health you assumed that you would keep.

I want us to notice what God doesn't say to those people for a moment. I think what is not said in this moment is almost as powerful—and it's actually what the false prophets are saying in this moment—and I think it relates to us, so hang on here. He doesn't say, "Hold on, this is temporary, we're going to get through this." He doesn't say, "I'll have you home by spring, we're going to get over this, we're going to move on." He says seventy years. Most of you are going to die here. He says: build houses, plant gardens, have kids, get to know your neighbors, create a community, create life within this pagan nation where you've been taken captive.

That's a pretty strange thing to say to a people that are grieving pretty hard of losing their homes right now, right? Unless you know something about what actually makes human life happy and gives it purpose. Unless you maybe know better than the very people that you created.

Four things in order to feel happy. People. This is from a podcast I was listening to by John Montgomery, but he was quoting a psychologist who talks about this. Four things that people need to be happy.

The first thing is a few close friends. This is a part of—I think, in verse 5—he actually goes over this. This is right in the text that I just read. Verse 5: rebuilding a community. It's not just people that you call close, but truly intimate friends. We ended last week about taking on someone else's affliction as if this is our own. This is when you share a deep emotional state—and a deep emotional state that's ongoing. It's not just a temporary one with somebody. This is what you do with your closest friends. When you get that promotion or when you win a really important game, you share that with people, right? You share that with your teammates. You share that with the people in your home and hopefully some friends. Gamers know what it's like to not share that emotion with anybody, right? You win a game and you're sitting there. Okay.

The second thing is this. It's a nuclear family, okay? Might be unpopular in some people's opinions today, but this is what people need to feel happy. And I'm talking about a mom, dad, brothers, sisters, their cousins, the kin, and people we do life together with—blood and even not blood—a family where we do our daily business together with and we move forward with. You actually need this stuff to actually feel happy in life. And we'll get to where we're at today and in this world we live in today.

But for now, the third thing is this. It's meaningful work. It's your vocation. I don't mean a high-paying job. I don't even mean the job that you are paid for. What we mean by this is, even at a basic level, if you feel like you're making a contribution to human life and flourishing. Okay? You have to do some work. This is in verse 5, where it talks about making gardens. Have you ever produced your own tomato before? It's like magical, by the way. I didn't get to do that this year, but it's like one of the greatest things—and you're taking that off. You feel like you did something. You produced something, right? And actually, human beings were made to live for the flourishing of other human beings and not just yourself, but for the community around you. And if you're doing something like that—if you're working, whether that's volunteer or your job—you're going to find some sense of purpose, and actually the feeling of happiness can come into that. And that could be anywhere from the medical field. That's wonderful. But it doesn't have to be saving lives. This could be stacking shelves at the grocery store. It could be scrubbing toilets. I am thankful for clean toilets, by the way. Seriously, who isn't, right? What if we didn't have people to do that? It's amazing. Thank you for the people that do this. You can find your purpose there.

And the fourth thing is this, and it's religion. And I want to say this to our—maybe our skeptical audience. But I want to say this: I'm not just talking about Christianity. I'm talking about a philosophy, okay? I subscribe to the Christian religion. I know you would hope so because I'm your pastor at this church, okay? But here's what I'm talking about is even bigger than that: a philosophy or a theology or whatever it is to make sense of life, death, and suffering. I don't think that there's a place in secular culture that actually makes sense of this, okay? You can make sense of it in several other areas, but a lot of times you have to look at life beyond death or meaning or purpose, and this is something we need to actually feel happy.

So we have four things. We have friends, we have family, we have work, and we have our religion or our philosophy there. And I want to say this: I believe that we are watching all four of these things evaporate before our eyes in our culture. And you wonder why people aren't happy.

Less than twenty years ago, the average American had 3.2 friends. Close friends. Intimate. That's what we call it—intimate. It's like Jesus had with James, John, and

Peter. Okay? Now it's 1.8 in just a matter of years. Forty percent of American adults have no confidant.

Can I say—that you guys didn't go, "Oh." It's like—but that's the problem, right? Is we become normalized. "Oh, yeah, that makes sense." Forty percent of all U.S. citizens that are living in the U.S. right now have no other person to share their emotional well-being with on a deep level. I believe that that is the highest in the world, by the way—is the United States.

Family—we're seeing, especially with the younger generation—I don't mean to point the finger at us. I still consider myself—I'm not middle-aged yet, by the way. I just found out. You're going to get yours in just a minute, okay? I am very close. Thank you for pointing that out, Jim.

Family—we're seeing, especially with the younger generation, that we cut ties faster than we ever have in history. I'm not saying that that's all wrong. I think there's some times where it's necessary, but we do it way too quick. We cut ties, we hold grudges, whatever it is—whether right or wrong—it's happening at an incredible rate in our culture.

Jobs—we want to find a passion and we want to be highly paid, and we don't look for the simplicity of serving our community even while earning a paycheck or not.

And religion—don't even get me started.

And all of a sudden we look and we're like, well, why aren't we happy? We're doing the things that we think are going to make us happy, and we're going to chase all these things down. We're going to get happy because we're searching after the wrong things.

I remember my wife telling me—she spent a year in Kenya—and she says the happiest person she ever saw was a guy that wore—he actually, not by choice, but he wore someone else's clothing that were like knit together. Didn't have all of his teeth, but he would wave at everybody and he found a community there. She said that was the happiest guy I ever saw. He didn't have anything. It's because I think sometimes we look and we look and we look for things that are going to make us fulfilled and we look for things that are going to make us happy—and we've believed the pagan culture.

I think one of the primary factors of this, by the way, is individualism. Is it good or bad?

[Audience response]

Someone said yes. Let's go with that. No—like, you are an individual. Your fingerprints cannot be replicated. You are here and you are here for a purpose and God sees you as an individual. But I will say that that can go too far. We can have an extreme view of individualism. And when we get to this point, it actually doesn't become individualism at all. It actually just becomes entirely selfish. All four of the things that were up here on the screen—okay: friends, family, meaningful work, and your religion—it requires something of you, and it requires you to give up of yourself. And that is blasphemy in a culture that worships the self. It worships this extreme view of individualism. I mean, it's as simple as life becoming so self-centered and so selfish that we can't see beyond our own little world sometimes. And this is where we are born, we are raised, we see it on the television, we see it on YouTube, we see it every day, sometimes played out in our very lives—and we are like indoctrinated in this way of living.

Let me tell you something: this is nothing new. We're just experiencing it on an overwhelming level.

Let me just say—there's a—let's look at this picture for a moment. A man sitting by himself under a tree over a city. Someday I'll probably go over this story in detail, and we'll even do a series over this, but for now I want us to take a look at this picture, and I want us to understand that there is a book about a prophet. So first off, we just talked about a prophet who was telling us—pushing us into exile, and being pushed into exile into Babylon. There is another prophet in the Bible, and his name is Jonah. And this is Jonah.

And what do we know about the story of Jonah? Well, he was swallowed by this huge fish—and that's two verses, okay, in four chapters of the Bible—and that's what you know about the book of Jonah, right? It's about a man who's so self-centered that he would rather die than watch a city receive the grace of God. And again, someday I'll explain it. It actually makes sense when you think more about it. The Ninevites were terrible people. They were awful. They did horrible things, and he refused to forgive them. And he sits there with God, and he overlooks the city, and God is trying to offer grace to this city, and Jonah resists.

And we're going to read the last two verses of the entire book of Jonah. By the way, I want you to realize that this is where the book of Jonah—it's where it ends. There's nothing after this. Let's read it together.

> *But the Lord said, "You have been concerned about this plant…"*

There's a plant that was giving him shade from the sun. God actually sent a worm and kills it. Jonah's very angry with him. So he says:

> *"You have been concerned about this plant, though you did not tend it or make it grow. It sprang up overnight and died overnight. And should I not have concern for the great city of Nineveh, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left—and also many animals?"*

End of the book.

Why is it the end of the book, though? We want some resolution here. God—Jonah, for crying out loud, say something, right? And I think the author intentionally ends the book here as if to offer this: this is us.

Here's the thing I want us to focus on—not necessarily on why Jonah was angry at the city, but what is happening right here in these verses. Here's a man who's concerned about the little leaf that was giving him shade, and he's super angry about it, and he could care less about all this city out there. And God is gently—I can't—it actually makes me upset a little bit with you, Lord, with how gentle you are with this man. This is your prophet, and he doesn't care about them, and he's just like, look, I want to save you. But can't you see where your heart is? Can't you see how far we've gone—that you care so much about your little shelter and your little life that you care nothing about this huge city that's about to lose its entire soul?

And when I first read this story—you know, focusing on the whale, right—thinking Jonah's a hero, like he made it out of the whale and he was spit out and he was going to preach to this city and save it. When you read the story, you're like, Jonah's kind of a villain, right? Like he goes and doesn't want to preach, doesn't say the right things because he hates them. And what I've realized more and more is that Jonah is not a hero or a villain, but he is a human being in desperate need of salvation. He's in desperate need of grace for himself—to recognize that we're all in the same boat in the sense that we need God's grace. We need his love to actually overcome our selfish hearts. I need it in my life. And God is ever so gently trying to save him.

A couple weeks ago—a week and a half ago—I told you your time was coming. You thought you were going to make fun of me because I was up here. Well, there's something set up in my notes. It's not that big of a deal. I remember having a conversation with a lady who runs a gym, and I'm sitting there waiting for Jim because he's always late getting to the gym. And so I'm sitting there twiddling my thumbs going, okay, like, wasting my time here. But we're watching, and we come over and we're watching the update on the Spokane fires for a moment. And what she said next—I felt it. She said, "It's days like this that make me happy to live where I live. It makes me grateful to be over here and not over there."

I remember nodding in agreement and thinking of my new house, my family, my dogs. And I think that that's not a bad response, by the way. That's totally normal. We can breathe and recognize that it's a normal response to thank God that disaster hasn't stricken us. But I want to say this: is that all my responses? Is that where this ends? Is that the only thing I leave in the moment—is feeling grateful that it wasn't me? Or is there something else there?

See, here in our story of Jeremiah, we see that the people of Israel thought of themselves as separate from the culture around them. They thought of themselves as God's people and God showing them. In this moment, he switches something up. He actually shows them that you're not just separate from these people. You have become these people—and they actually are the same people as you. Why would you send us into the secular culture?

Here's what I want to say: I think a lot of times that I get this thing in my mind where it's like, thank God—and, you know, God help whoever's out there. And we can have two ways of thinking about this. And I think that the primary one needs to come back—we'll come back to this in a minute—but it comes back to how do we do what God is actually commanding us to do on how to set life up.

And I want to say this: I think there's a ton of ways to help. I think that every single person—every individual in here, okay—is gifted in a way. If you want to read what that's like, go read Romans 12. There's a whole list of giftedness. But I would say don't be trapped by that. Sometimes we're like, well, what's my spiritual gift or what's my gift? I would say this: I am one of the worst—my wife will attest to this; she's right there—one of the worst listeners in the history of the world, okay? Don't laugh, okay? This is serious business. I am. I'm terrible. Like, I will try to be listening to someone, and there could be a fly in the room. It doesn't matter. No fly. Pretend fly. And I'm somehow not paying attention. But I will say this: sometimes God uses our least gifted area in order to actually show us that he's there with us and moving. But we have to show up.

A couple things about listening. I think one of the ways that everybody can actually contribute to everything that's going on—fire or no fire—being present in a community, being present with each other, is we can learn to listen. I don't mean feeling like you are hearing somebody. Hearing and listening are two different things.

But here's a quote that I got from this. I'm going to share a number of quotes, actually. But trauma is not what happens when you face suffering. That's not trauma. Trauma—lots of people experience suffering, they experience it, and they're okay. They get through it, right? Trauma is what happens when you face suffering alone.

Robert Stolorow says this. He says:

> *Trauma is when severe emotional pain cannot find a relational home in which it can be held.*

One more time on that one. I need some reaction out of you guys.

> *Trauma is when severe emotional pain cannot find a relational home in which it can be held.*

Yeah, it's better. But here's the thing: we are looking for a place to feel like home—not just a physical building, but to feel like, hey, we're not alone in this. We talked about that this morning in one of our classes—just like, I don't know how to solve—people come to me and they'll sit, and the best thing I can do is sit with them because I don't know how to solve their problems, but at least maybe they won't feel alone afterwards. And that's solving a huge part of the problem of our culture right now. People feel alone to face life by themselves.

And what we see here is that we think that listening is hearing and all this stuff. We confuse these things. But Tom Muha has five levels of communication. And the first thing is cliché. First level of communication is cliché. And this has to do with sharing and listening as well. Cliché is like, "How's it going?" It's what you all say. It's lies, right? Okay, it's lies. It's cliché.

The second one is facts. How's the weather? Good. Somewhere over there, right? Or what have you been up to?

The third level. Okay, so we have cliché. We have facts. The third level is opinions. When you get to the third level of communication, we're getting a little bit more personal now, right? Who do you think is going to win the Super Bowl this year? Neither team from last year because, you know, neither one deserved to be there in the first place, right? And definitely not the Raiders. All right. Opinion.

The fourth level is feeling. Okay, now we're getting somewhere. How are you—really? Not just like, how is it going, but how are you? I'm sad. I'm grateful. I'm experiencing this extreme loss in life. Or, hey, I just got this promotion. Let me join with you. We don't want to feel alone in any of those emotions, by the way.

And the fifth level? The fifth level is transparency. Hard to get to this level with anybody, by the way. Not just how are you, but who you are—this is what the essence of my identity actually is—and where you actually get to see somebody. And we talked about this again in class, and Ty Gibson goes over this over and over again: it is to be fully known and fully loved. It's the desire of every single person's heart in here—to be

seen for who you really are and still have people not walk away from you.

Now that's hard for some of us because we've been wounded or we've never been there or our wiring's different. But even with our closest friends, what we find—what we often do—is we're editing or holding back even just a little bit. This is an invitation to lean into that fear and actually go to that next level of communication with someone, right?

John Peck says this. He says:

> *There can be no vulnerability without risk.*

One more time:

> *There can be no vulnerability without risk.*

You're handing somebody—when you're being vulnerable—it's literally to take your heart out and to hand it to somebody. That's scary because you know what it's like to have somebody abuse that. Don't stop doing it anyway.

> *There can be no vulnerability without risk. There can be no community without vulnerability. And there can be no peace—and there can be no life—without community.*

It is the very essence of what makes us human beings, as Ian talked about earlier today.

We got the chance to serve on Sunday morning, and I remember the first few hours it was just trying to figure out where to send people, and I was a little worried. I remember towards the end my wife had come out and had handed me a couple of ladies who—let's just say one of them was using colorful language and she was excited. She was very excited in the wrong way, right? And she had a bit of an accent, and she says, "Who's going to pay for all this? You don't know the damage," blah, blah, blah. Just absolutely word vomit, right? And I remember walking her around for at least an hour and a half to these different stations, and just sitting there and listening. I did it for once, okay? But I remember listening and being with her, and she came in so furious. And I remember the moment my shift was getting over, and I rolled up my apron, and I said, there's one more person I have to visit. And I went over to them, and I knelt beside them, and I said, hey, look, I have to go, but here's the next steps and where you're going. And she had tears coming down her face. And she goes, "You're making me cry."

And I know what that feeling is. It's because this woman came in there feeling completely alone. Who was going to pay for this? Who was going to do all this? And did she have all of her needs met? No. The woman's house burned down. But she found some people where she didn't feel alone in the battle anymore. And I believe that that—this is where church can shine better than anywhere else. This church can shine better than anywhere. I believe it to my core. When we show up and we do these things—and I don't think it's just showing up to disasters like the fire. I don't think it's not doing that. It absolutely is. But it's changing the culture within here to go, God, I'm rejecting the values that my culture has taught me and I'm going to accept yours. This is actual life for me. The values here—even in this thing of friends, family, and being vulnerable and listening and being together and accepting what's going to make us happy and what's going to make us flourish as a community—they have to be adopted by you and me. This is not about Pastor Jake. It's not about Pastor David. It's not about the church leadership. It is about us as individuals accepting this together.

Now I can share a verse. Jeremiah 29:11. After all this desolation and everything bad that has happened, they're sent into exile. None of their dreams are happening anymore. He says:

> *"For I know the plans I have for you… plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future."*

Again, we've read that on graduation cards. We read this as an inspirational quote. But this is a message to a people that had lost their way. They had lost their hopes and dreams. They put it into false things, and God was recentering them through some pretty crazy methods.

I don't think God is just asking us to rebuild a building or a home for people. That is one avenue, and we should show up, and we should be a part of that. But it leads to something far greater as he's rebuilding and reshaping the lonely and destitute world, and he's giving it life again—and he can use us. What it starts with is us.

Let's pray to him.

Jesus, there is a lonely world out there. But Lord, to be honest with you, I think there's a lonely world in here. How many times have I heard from people that we just—we've come to this place and we're so welcoming and we're so—it's wonderful. I love this church. I love being a part of it. But at some point we have to get to the deeper aspect of what life is actually about and care for one another. And that takes a sacrifice from our own life that takes out what we want to do. It takes out our agenda, Lord. And I think you designed it that way. Pray that you create in us a new heart, Lord—not one of stone like the culture that has taught us to be a certain way, but Lord, one of

softness, one of flesh, as you said, that beats with love for you, for ourselves, for our common people around. And Lord, teach us how to have presence in a community by being present ourselves. Thank you for your example that you've given to us. And Lord, I thank you for the opportunity that is at our feet right now. And I know one of the ways that we can connect with other people better is by serving together. What better thing that we could do? Thank you, Lord. Help us to continue to lean into this, to forgive, and to take another risk of vulnerability. Pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen.