Sermon: Treasure in Clay Jars

(Preached by the Rev. Paul Wu, at St. Giles, Ottawa, September 27, 2025)

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable to you. O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

For most people, a real estate transaction is likely the biggest investment decision one gets to make in their lives, and regrettably not all are in that privileged position to do so.

I read with interest a recent article on CBC, speculating whether now is a good time to jump into the real estate market for the first time home buyers. I don't envy those having to make that decision in this current climate. It's no secret that price of properties across Canada have skyrocketed since COVID, making it increasingly difficult if not out right impossible for first time home buyers to participate in.

Gone were the days that one can afford to buy a house with a modest middle class income. Gone were the days when the cost of servicing owning a home, would cost roughly 1/3 of one's monthly pay. It is now more likely taking 1/2 or 2/3 of one's income. Gone were the days when one could reasonable expect to own the first home before the age of 30; it is more likely pushing 40 by now. But still, the sky-high price of real estate have experienced a bit of a dip, due to a host of factors such as interest rate, uncertainty due to tariff imposed by the United States,overbuilding of tiny-size condos in the GTA, slowing economy, climbing unemployment… etc.

Yet the article in CBC also cited the long term upward trend of property valuation, and clearly exhibited a bias in encouraging first time buyers to not wait, to jump in even if future is uncertain, for by waiting to time the market near a low, one might miss the boat altogether. Like I said, I don't envy those having to make those decisions in a critical point of their lives. I sympathize even more those who feel such decisions are just too far out of reach, or having all but given up the dream.

In our Scripture reading today, Prophet Jeremiah bought a field. It seemed to be a simple real estate transaction, but with a profound theological implication.

He bought a field in the dying days of Judah, in the tenth year of King Zedekiah, while Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon had his army literally camped outside of Jerusalem. He bought a field while in prison, for prophesying the fall of Jerusalem by the hand of Nebuchadnezzar, as part of God's punishment of the nation. He bought a field not because he wanted to, but because God told him to.

There is a tried and true saying in world of real estate, a mantra that is no stranger to us. I am referring to 'location, location, location', which emphasizes a property's geographical position as the most crucial determinant of its value, its desirability and the potential for profit. Well, the location of that field in question was in Anathoth, a Levitical city of sanctuary in the tribal territory of Benjamin, about 3 miles north of Jerusalem. It may have once occupied a prime real estate location, but given the invading armies and all, Anathoth was most likely in a literal ruin; given the invading armies and all, that field in question was, for all intent and purpose, worthless.

Jeremiah came to this 'great' opportunity to buy a worthless field from his cousin Hanamel, citing Jeremiah's status as kinsman redeemer with the right of redemption. It is a bit of an archaic concept to us, but a foundational one for Israel ever since its inception.

In God's promise to Israel, the so-called Promised Land, land was allotted to the twelve tribes in a predetermined fashion, and further divided amongst various families. The division of land was not really equal as some tribes were allotted bigger portion, and certain territories were naturally more fertile than others. However, to ensure this blessing from God will always remain, a certain code was written into the Law of Moses, specifically in Leviticus 25 and 27, outlining the role of a male kinsman-redeemer, having the privilege and responsibility to act on behalf of a relative who was in trouble, danger, or need. The story that illustrated most clearly such concept was in the book of Ruth, where Boaz acted as the kinsman-redeemer by marring Ruth and buying a field, thus restoring the family line of Elimelech and Naomi.

In the case of Jeremiah, no marriage was required. The role of a kinsman-redeemer was exercised through buying a worthless field. It should be noted this was not a scenario of buying a distressed property at a bargain basement deal, and hoping to flip it at a much higher price down the line. The right of redemption accorded Jeremiah the use of the land until the next Jubilee, which was supposed to occur in a set interval of every fifty years. After the year of Jubilee, the land in question would revert back to its original and rightful owner. In the meantime, the prospect of using this field, given the invading Babylonian armies and all, was effectively nil.

In essence, Jeremiah had gotten into a terrible rotten deal, and he paid a top-dollar for it, or seventeen shekels of silver. Why? Why would God instruct Jeremiah to conduct in such a crazy real estate transaction?

This would not be the first nor the last time the Bible records a significant real estate transaction. In Genesis 23, Abraham bought land for the burial of his wife Sarah. It served as a downpayment for the family burial site in the future, also as a symbolic root for this stranger in a foreign land. In 1 Kings 21, King Ahab and Queen Jezebel conspired to acquire / steal a vineyard owned by Naboth the Jezreelite. The plot was ultimately foiled by the Prophet Elijah, and led to a short-lived repentance of the king. In Matthew 27, chief priests and elders bought a potter's field for the burial of aliens, using Judas' 'blood money' of thirty piece of silver, the sum he was paid and later tried to return for betraying Jesus. In Acts 5, Ananias and Sapphira sold property and underreported their earnings in a ill-fated attempt to cheat the Apostles and the early church. That did not go well for them. In all cases, real estate transactions described in the Scripture seem to be never neutral; they either advanced a blessing or bestowed a curse. In all cases, there were always lessons to be learned.

So what lesson is to be gleamed from Jeremiah buying a field in Anathoth? The very public and collaborative nature of this transaction gives us a clue. A number of people were involved in this transaction: the two principal parties of Jeremiah and Hanamel, and Baruch acting as the personal secretary of the prophet. The presence of Judeans sitting in the court of the guard acted as witnesses to the proceeding, and whispers to the action of this crazy prophet buying a worthless field.

Furthermore, the title deeds of this purchase, both the seal deed and the open deed, were to be symbolically put into a earthenware jar (a jar of clay), in order to ensure its longevity. Speaking on behalf of Jeremiah, and on behalf of God, Baruch was to deliver this message of the Lord, in verse 15: "*For thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: Houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land.*"

It is a political message, intending to convey a simple fact that in the midst of total chaos, in the midst of a siege in Jerusalem that would last for the better part of three years; in the midst of a total collapse of political and religious institutions; in the midst of an unimaginable developing nightmare that would see inhabitants of that city resorting to cannibalism just to stay alive; in the midst of total darkness and sheer hopelessness, there preserved in that clay jar is a message of light and of hope.

There in that clay jar is the hope there will come a day when houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought. There will come a day joy and laughter will return in earnest. There will come a day when life will not only be bearable but is to be lived to the fullest. There will come a day this treasure in clay jars is re-interpreted by the Apostle Paul as God at work in all of us, "*though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day. For our slight, momentary affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure, because we look not at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen, for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal.*" (2 Corinthians 4:16-18)

Don't you just love Paul's writing? There is always something that is slightly beyond but not out of our reach. Something we can latch onto, that grounds us yet propels us to glory. Sometimes I find myself chewing on his words for hours, not fully grasping but enjoying every minutes of it.

But what do all these mean for us as a community of faith today? The story of Jeremiah reminds us that God exists even in hopeless situations, that God's grace occurs in unusual places and sometimes in contrarian forms.

What will congregations and presbyteries' hopeful act be today? Will we invest in real property to build affordable housing for our society's least of these? (Something that I am working towards as I convene the Presbytery Taskforce on that empty lot in Barrhaven.) Will the Church's investment be more social—such as starting an addiction recovery program for lives that seem to have no future; or supporting food banks to alleviate to some degrees those facing food insecurity?

Whatever the form, faithful readers of Jeremiah are called to find collaborative, public, and prophetic actions that speak of hope in hopelessness, as this treasure in clay jars we hold and hope to share.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. **Amen**.