

Humbled Dreamers

Joel 2: 23-32, Lk 18: 9-14

Oct 27, 2019- Stewardship Sunday

Rev. Donna Vuilleumier

Joel 2: 23-32

O children of Zion, be glad and rejoice in the LORD your God; for he has given the early rain for your vindication, he has poured down for you abundant rain, the early and the later rain, as before. The threshing floors shall be full of grain, the vats shall overflow with wine and oil. I will repay you for the years that the swarming locust has eaten, the hopper, the destroyer, and the cutter, my great army, which I sent against you. You shall eat in plenty and be satisfied, and praise the name of the LORD your God, who has dealt wondrously with you. And my people shall never again be put to shame. You shall know that I am in the midst of Israel, and that I, the LORD, am your God and there is no other. And my people shall never again be put to shame. Then afterward I will pour out my spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions. Even on the male and female slaves, in those days, I will pour out my spirit. I will show portents in the heavens and on the earth, blood and fire and columns of smoke. The sun shall be turned to darkness, and the moon to blood, before the great and terrible day of the LORD comes. Then everyone who calls on the name of the LORD shall be saved; for in Mount Zion and in Jerusalem there shall be those who escape, as the LORD has said, and among the survivors shall be those whom the LORD calls.

Lk 18: 9-14

He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt: "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, 'God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.' But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!' I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted."

Just over 500 years ago, German professor of theology, composer, priest, and monk, Martin Luther famously nailed his 95 theses to the door of the church in Wittenberg Germany, in what is considered the birth of the Protestant Reformation. His original intent had been to spark a scholarly discussion about the truth, merit, integrity and faithfulness of certain Church practices, especially the donating of money or works to the church to release souls held in purgatory as unfaithful and non-biblical. What grew from there over the next several years was a growing recognition across parts of Europe that the Church has become corrupt in many ways and had lost her true Christianity. John Calvin, Huldrych Zwingli, John Knox and many others reformed the faith to be again shaped by the foundational principles of Scripture alone, Faith alone, Grace alone, Christ alone and glory to God alone.

The Reformation ultimately led some believers to the new world where they could live a pure and faithful life. This vision, these dreams, of the Puritans became the roots of the Congregational Way, and eventually, the United Church of Christ.

But this is not just a thumbnail history lesson on the anniversary of the Reformation. It is a day to give thanks for our Puritan heritage that has brought us, and blessed us, with our celebration of Stewardship Sunday. It is a day in which we affirm the covenant of faithful *living* with faithful *giving*, the living and giving of our pledges, our time, gifts and talents for this church and community and beyond to places and people we may not even be able to imagine.

Economic theory was not a direct intention of the reformers, yet their concerns with economic practices in living a life of faith, and their views of work as sacred and humbling continues to impact us.

Martin Luther considered work a blessing ordained by God from the foundation of the world. Even in the Garden of Eden there was work to be done. It was only after the fall of Adam and Eve that work become a burden. By reclaiming work as a blessing in the Reformation, the Protestant work ethic began to take shape. John Calvin further refined this by stating that our “calling is predestined by God so that we do not heedlessly wander in life.” Our labor is a sacred duty that benefits both the individual and society as a whole through hard work, discipline and frugality.

John Robinson, the ‘spiritual father’ of the MA Bay colony taught that “possessions are useful for serving this life and should have no hold over us; they should be used with indifference; only those things that are useful for eternity should we use with affection. Wealth is a blessing of the Lord. For though we are to be able to bear poverty if God send it, yet should we rather desire riches, as a man, though he can go afoot, yet will rather choose to ride.”

While this is beginning to sound like the prosperity gospel, the belief that financial blessing and physical well-being are always the will of God, and that faith, positive speech, and donations to religious causes will increase one's material wealth, there is an important and humbling twist that Robinson taught. ‘If we have riches, we are then able to use them to minister to the poor around us.’

Our financial stewardship, our Protestant heritage, is not only a matter of faithful *living* but of faithful *giving*. How we acquire our money in ways that are ethical, just, and pleasing to God, how we regard our money for ourselves and for others, and how we manage our money for ourselves and for others is a faith-based way of living and giving.

Today we have received and blessed our pledges for the coming year, making a humble promise to the best of our ability. What each of us has pledged comes from prayerful and intentional consideration of our own differently sized threshing floors full of grain, and vats brimming, or maybe even overflowing with wine and oil.

However, we have come to this day, we have each come with visions, dreams and hopes. In the times of visioning last year and earlier this year, there were conversations about ministries and activities that have been laid aside but could be, will be, renewed, just as there were celebrations of what has continued even though it no longer looks quite the same. New ideas and goals have also emerged. Dreams abound. Visioning and dreaming can be prophetic critique and excitement for change or a quiet patience and persistence. When we dream we have virtually no borders, no limits, all can be open in front of us.

While we can dream anything, humility holds us in reality. Not a nay-saying reality, but a priorities and accurate reality. Visions and dreams are necessarily balanced by the pledges of our time, talents and treasure.

As we lift up the faithful work and legacy of our Reformation ancestors, let us think on the guidance they would offer to us today.

They would caution us to not be like the Pharisee, who does the right things but with a poor attitude that even dismisses the very people whom God loves. They would also caution us to not be like the tax collector who recognizes how dependent he is upon God for grace and mercy now and always yet fails to repent of his sinful ways. As Lutheran pastor David Lose wrote, “they would encourage us to see that this whole parable--and indeed the whole Reformation -- was and is an attempt to shift our attention from ourselves -- our piety or our passions, our faith or our failure, our glory or our shame -- to God, the God who delights in justifying the ungodly, welcoming the outcast, and healing all who are in need, and into a realm of unimaginable and unexpected grace, mercy and joy.”

We are humbled dreamers. God will use us and our many gifts in the ways that God that calls, needs and leads for the people that God loves. Amen.