

Infinite Possibilities

2 Thess 3: 6-13, Is 65: 17-25

Nov 17, 2019

Rev. Donna Vuilleumier

2 Thess 3: 6-13

Now we command you, beloved, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, to keep away from believers who are living in idleness and not according to the tradition that they received from us. For you yourselves know how you ought to imitate us; we were not idle when we were with you, and we did not eat anyone's bread without paying for it; but with toil and labor we worked night and day, so that we might not burden any of you. This was not because we do not have that right, but in order to give you an example to imitate. For even when we were with you, we gave you this command: Anyone unwilling to work should not eat. For we hear that some of you are living in idleness, mere busybodies, not doing any work. Now such persons we command and exhort in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work quietly and to earn their own living. Brothers and sisters, do not be weary in doing what is right.

Is 65: 17-25

For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind. But be glad and rejoice forever in what I am creating; for I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy, and its people as a delight. I will rejoice in Jerusalem, and delight in my people; no more shall the sound of weeping be heard in it, or the cry of distress. No more shall there be in it an infant that lives but a few days, or an old person who does not live out a lifetime; for one who dies at a hundred years will be considered a youth, and one who falls short of a hundred will be considered accursed. They shall build houses and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit. They shall not build and another inhabit; they shall not plant and another eat; for like the days of a tree shall the days of my people be, and my chosen shall long enjoy the work of their hands. They shall not labor in vain, or bear children for calamity; for they shall be offspring blessed by the LORD—and their descendants as well. Before they call I will answer, while they are yet speaking I will hear. The wolf and the lamb shall feed together, the lion shall eat straw like the ox; but the serpent—its food shall be dust! They shall not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain, says the LORD.

The sounds of hammer and nails, of power saws and electric drills, are sounds of prayer to former President Jimmy Carter as he has worked actively and tirelessly for more than 35 years to build affordable housing for people around the world through Habitat for Humanity. He turned 95 last month yet still plans to continue to put a roof over people's heads. Faith has also led him to regularly teach Sunday school, lecture at universities and write more than 30 books. His decades of committed effort to global conflict resolution earned him the 2002 Nobel Peace Prize. When asked about his commitment to this volunteer work, he responded, "To me, faith is not just a noun, but a verb."

These words not only speak to a passion for housing those in need, they also sum up Paul's guiding words to the Thessalonians, to us, to imitate the examples set, and to not grow weary in doing what is right.

Paul's letter was to minister to a community where Christ's return was thought to be imminent, where many believed that there was nothing to do but sit back, relax and wait. Paul cautioned them that the time for Jesus to return was unknown; that they were living in a time of not-yet, so this was not a time for complacency or passive waiting, but an active waiting, a time when there was work to be done in the name of Christ, a remembrance of what they had been taught by his ministry and through his followers. Faith was to be a verb, not just a noun.

2000 years later we are still living in the time of not-yet, when faith is a verb, not just a noun. We receive the same encouragement and caution from Paul's letter and Isaiah's prophecy, that we are to do what is right without growing weary. Just as then, we live in distressing times; endless wars, strife, corruption, poverty, and injustice seem to be infinite problems, but the faith we work with and for, teaches us, reminds us, that there are also infinite possibilities. We live today while we wonder about tomorrow.

President Carter continued his response, "I have one life and one chance to make it count for something . . . I'm free to choose what that something is, and the something I've chosen is my faith. Now, my faith goes beyond theology and religion and requires considerable work and effort. My faith demands -- this is not optional -- my faith demands that I do whatever I can, wherever I am, whenever I can, for as long as I can with whatever I have to try to make a difference."

He continues to do what is right without growing weary and is a role model of active faith. Perseverance, determination and fortitude are lifelong Carter attributes, as are faith, compassion, and empathy.

To do what is right is an action, it is the Habitat for Humanity projects just as much as it is Family Promise, food pantries, donating blood, tutoring struggling students and calling out injustice wherever it is found, just as much as it is a mindset, a hopeful mindset for the future. Doing what is right without growing weary is hope, an active hope, for the day of a new heaven and a new earth, a day when the wolf and the lamb shall feed together, the lion shall eat straw like the ox, when weeping and distress shall be no more, when there are homes and food and health for all, when we will all enjoy and benefit from the work of our hands.

The work we are to do without becoming burdened or apathetic, but rather carried out with interest and enthusiasm, are the baby steps of the infinite possibilities.

A new heaven and a new earth, rich with infinite possibilities—this is the message of hope proclaimed by Isaiah. A new heaven and a new earth, with the former pain forgotten and the future joy everlasting, this vision, this hope, potent and powerful. It offers so much that humanity has hoped for, has strived for. This vision of the new heaven and the new earth is so compelling, so alluring, because it bears so little resemblance to the world in which we live.

The lamb and the wolf will one day peaceably feed together side by side, the lion will be content to eat the straw like an ox, enemies shall shake hands and banish the power to hurt or destroy one another. All of these infinite possibilities begin with transformation, with God's grace to pull humanity out of the ingrained ruts that led us to where we are and to become the new Jerusalem. Transformation, change, re-creation, is bewildering, disorienting, yet is the path to the new Jerusalem, to God's holy mountain. Transformation takes effort and time, work and hope.

Isaiah prophesied about a world that could exist, the world that God wants. Paul holds that vision up for us as a goal that we work towards.

Isaiah wrote in a time of difficulty and despair, and offered hope, reminding the people then and now, that God created heaven and earth, nature and humanity, all out of chaos. God created and continues to create, to recreate. Isaiah offers re-creation as the reality God longs for

just as much as we do, one in which all the brokenness of this world is finally overcome and even enemies can sit peacefully together, knowing there is always enough. Isaiah did not offer a world simply viewed through rose colored glasses. He offered a world where God's grace and mercy prevailed. Humanity sees the world through human abilities. Isaiah dared us to see the world through God's capabilities.

What would it really look like for the wolf and the lamb to feed together? The lamb, long a symbol of purity and sacrifice, as well as humanity - the sheep tended to by the Lord, and by Jesus the Shepherd. And the wolf, the wolf has always been a biblical symbol of treachery and cruelty. In time to come, wolf and lamb will feed peacefully side by side, brutality will be overcome by purity, malice will be tamed by mercy. The possibilities are infinite when that day does come.

Paul encourages us to be participants towards this new world, to act in the way faith teaches, to imitate what we learned from Jesus' teachings, and from disciples then, and now. One pastor recently put it this way, "People would rather debate doctrine or beliefs, or tradition or interpretation than actually do what Jesus said. It's not rocket science. Just go do it. Practice loving a difficult person or try forgiving someone. Give away some money. Tell someone thank you. Encourage a friend. Bless an enemy. Say, "I'm sorry." Worship God." You already know what to do.

By our baptism we are called to participate in the inbreaking of this new creation. By making our faith a verb as well as a noun we participate in the inbreaking of this new creation. We are to open ourselves to the grace of God who seeks to call such a world into being. We are called to be like the people of Isaiah's day who picked up the stones of the destroyed temple and helped to rebuild it as we pick up the scattered pieces of our broken world and begin to make it whole again. A new heaven and a new earth again will emerge from chaos, and God will call that good. Amen.