

“Planting Seeds of Goodness”

Wellington UCC

February 11, 2007 New Testament scripture: Luke 6: 18 - 26

This morning’s sermon title comes from words penned by Simone Weill, a Frenchwoman who converted to Christianity and showed remarkable determination, throughout her adult life, to identify with the poorest and neediest people in an era wracked by two world wars and the consequent hunger, displacement, and privation. Although she was no stranger to suffering, and while she offered harsh critiques of modern industrialism and decadence, she seemed never to nurture bitterness or intense resentment. She often urged people to “plant the seeds of pure goodness” in others.

I wanted to choose her line because honestly I’m a little rattled by the woes expressed in Luke’s gospel. Growing up as a Roman Catholic, we quite honestly weren’t so familiar with Scripture passages. St. Baptista, an Irish nun in St. Agnes parish, was legend for using the “woes” passage, slightly rewritten, to discipline a grade school class. “Woe betide ye’ if ye’ speak when I’m speakin’!” or “We betide ye’ if ye’re not tidy in the cloakroom!”

But perhaps words of caution and a bit of intimidation help us better understand the climate amongst disciples who were trying to follow Jesus and were themselves very frightened. Revisiting their fears could help us better understand the fears that dominate our times.

Jesus disciples were understandably frightened over prospects of being chosen by Jesus to help plant seeds in new places, attracting an abundance of new followers and new energy.

This morning’s beatitudes offer seeds of pure goodness, but we do well, I think, to revisit the disciples fears, to gain perspective.

Last week, Reverend Morris and Barbara England guided us through the fifth chapter of Luke’s gospel. Jesus had joined disappointed disciples on the shore. The fisher folk had spent the whole night trying to catch fish, dropping the nets, then raising them, but all night long, they raised empty nets.

Then Jesus got into one of the boats,--from the boat, he taught people who had gathered to hear him. Next, he told Simon to lower his net one more time. “Master, we toiled all last night and caught nothing,” said Simon, “but at your word I will let down the nets.”

Bonanza, - the nets were full, bursting. Peter and his companions shouted for others to help so that their nets wouldn't break. They filled two boats, and the boats were so full they began to sink. Seeing this, Simon fell at Jesus knees, saying “Depart from me, I'm a sinful man,” --his companions were likewise astonished. “Don't be afraid,” said Jesus, “henceforth you will be catching men.”

Don't be afraid.....why were these fishers so fearful. Hadn't they just made a huge haul?

The storytellers of that time, and their audiences, would recognize that the seas where fishermen toiled were a symbol for fear—a storm at sea could cause a boat to capsize; calm waters could suddenly become treacherous; some believed that evil spirits inhabited the waters. The sea was a good setting to develop a theme so essential to the gospel narrative: conquer your fear, be not afraid.

The disciples could already see that Jesus was attracting followers from many walks of life. Jesus was egalitarian, everybody in, nobody out, and the disciples knew that this could spell trouble. They lived in a society divided by sects and classes and nationalities, not to mention purity codes that deemed the sick and the lame unclean. Violating the codes, crossing the borders, was dangerous, - it could be life threatening. The disciples loved Jesus, --they could see that the borders dividing people could quickly dissolve, that people could find more that united them than that which artificially divided them, --it was in their collective interest to unite, but the Roman occupiers also knew this, the Roman occupiers and any of the indigenous people who collaborated with them, including Jewish religious leaders, knew that it was easier to maintain the status quo if people were divided: the righteous must shun the sinners, the Jews must shun the Gentiles, the Samaritans and the Jews must shun each other, the unclean must be shunned, the tax collectors must be shunned, the poor and adulterous and blind and the lame, ...keep the castes and divisions, divide and conquer, and the Roman rule could carry on.

This has a familiar ring: Hamas against Fatah, Hezbollah against Hariri, Kurds against Arabs, Shi'a against Sunni, Iranians with Persian history against Saudis, Egyptian and Jordanians with an Arab history.

Maintain divisions and the controlling interests of a superpower will be enhanced. Henry Kissinger once said, during the Iran-Iraq war: things couldn't be better, they're killing each other and using our weapons to do it.

In Jesus time, as in ours, fear was essential to maintain the national interest of the ruling power. Anyone who suggested a courage that could overcome fear was dangerous. People were jailed, tortured and crucified if they showed any challenge to the occupying Roman authorities and the Jewish leadership that collaborated with the authorities. Jesus disciples knew it was prudent to keep their heads down, stay quiet, not attract attention.

Crowds gathered. And Jesus dismissed traditional taboos and barriers, terrifying the disciples. Our narrator, in Luke's gospel, might have been in an impishly funny mood when writing the passage about Jesus assuring the disciples they wouldn't simply catch fish, they'd catch people, -- and then the extra flourish about the boats sinking from the very weight of all those symbolic fish. Sinking boats, sinking hearts, what had they gotten themselves into?

In the sixth chapter of Luke's gospel, Jesus names those whom he invites to be his disciples, and then standing on level ground, he begins to preach what we often call the Sermon on the Mount. In Luke's gospel, it's the sermon on the plain: perhaps to emphasize the lack of hierarchy, --there will be disciples, but there won't be special, exalted brokers for Jesus message.

The image of people from different walks of life, rubbing shoulders with one another, jostling one another in a crowd on a level plain, all straining to hear words that could plant the seeds of pure goodness, - this is a warm and comforting image.

I just returned from two months spent in Amman, Jordan, not so far from Sidon and Tyre, the cities mentioned in Luke's gospel. I lived amongst people afflicted with terrible fear.

I grew to know a small group of Iraqi refugees living in Jordan who decided that, for the sake of the children in their community, they would ask a Jordanian priest to let them rehab three rooms in the basement of his church, rooms in almost total disrepair, to form classrooms for their children to study. Over the course of two months, I watched the project flourish and during my last weeks in Jordan I was especially delighted when the priest decided to hire a teacher. The children were learning music, needlepoint, drawing, math and English under her competent care. I asked the teacher, Suha, a little bit about her past and learned that UNICEF had hired her, after the U.S. invasion, to work with children whose parents had been imprisoned. Some of these children were themselves held in prisons. Nada soon became persona non grata, in Baghdad, because she was reporting on conditions inside the prison. Her home was attacked. Her parents were killed. She had to flee for her life. Shortly after she arrived, alone, in Amman, a car hit her and she was on crutches for four months. "Did anyone help you?" I asked, knowing that she lived alone in Amman. She said no, she was afraid to talk with anyone. I had grown anxious that I wasn't understanding all that she was telling me. "Suha, wait just a few minutes," I pleaded with her, "let me ask Laith next door to translate for us." Her eyes widened in alarm. "LA!" No! She assured me that she couldn't trust anyone, not even Christians in the building where I lived who sent their children to the school which had just hired her. She had already been beaten badly while in Baghdad by armed men who entered her home. She felt sure that she was being followed in Amman. I found out about an inexpensive apartment in another neighborhood, an apartment above a single mom raising two children who was a friend of mine. The mom is a Shi'a woman. Suha's mother was Christian, her father Sunni. She couldn't risk living above a Shi'a woman.

She is trapped, frightened, hemmed in, --and the circle is tightening. I thought of the luxury we have, here, where we may have our differences but we don't fear for our lives.

To whom much is given, much is expected.

But in this morning's chapter, Luke's gospel does elevate as "honorable," those who, under occupation, don't enter the ranks of the "well off," the privileged or prestigious, --in fact, Jesus seems to be subtly urging people not to collaborate at all. Those who collaborate with the occupiers might become power brokers, they might earn income or receive housing or be appointed as local leaders. Jesus looks at the poor, the outcast, the needy, and says that they are the honorable ones, --they haven't colluded with the occupiers or those who impose a violent caste system upon others. They haven't left a heavy imprint on the earth, these simple ones.

And so the question, what does it mean, in our time, to be "blessed," to be honorable?

How can we withdraw our collaboration with occupying and imperial forces, powers that destroy countries and even destroy the biodiversity and sustainability of our very planet, our mother hearth. What would draw people to that level, egalitarian plain where Jesus words could plant the seeds of pure goodness?

I have another story from my recent trip.

Staying at the small hotel that has been a hub for so many people interested in planting seeds of goodness were a father and his son, 4 ½ year old Omar and his father. Omar and his father were in a ten passenger car outside of Mosul when a U.S. soldier, frightened by an explosion, opened fire on the car. The car immediately went up in flames, --Omar's father managed to plunge into the car and drag Omar out, but people held him back when he tried to pull his wife out of the flames. It's impossible. Omar's father watched his wife burn, then traveled to a hospital for treatment while his son, Omar, badly burned and disfigured, was taken to another hospital. The father can't control his bladder, at night, but otherwise is recovering, physically. The son, Omar, has two fused fingers on each hand, - half of his head and neck are badly burned, his ear nearly destroyed, but his eyes were not harmed and his spirits are bright and full of energy. Omar, blessedly, can smile and laugh from a deep place. When you walk into the room, after being gone for a day, he throws out his arms and says, "Hi!" eager to play hide and seek. He was especially fond of one of our friends. Every time he saw our friend, Bob, he would speed across the room, jump into his arms, and kiss his face and neck. "Bob! Bob!" The word bob in Arabic means door, and little Omar found particular glee in calling his new friend by the

name “Bob!” As it happens, this man lost his four and a half year old son in a tragic swimming accident, many years ago. “Blessed are you that weep now, for one day you shall laugh.”

The children lay themselves down like little bridges, pulling us toward our own beatitude, beyond the woeful conditions that divide us. They plant the seeds of pure goodness, by their very being.

I often think the peace movement is like a little child, just learning to walk. We stumble, tumble over, start over, barely able to communicate. Compared to the massive goliath of several millennia dedicated to war, destruction, torture, unspeakable violence, wreckage and waste, how blest it is to choose that peace movement, childlike in its readiness to run into the arms of the other. Let us never deny ourselves such embraces. The waters of trust may yet help even the most distressed to once again laugh from a deep place.

And perhaps there’s even room for alignment with the military thinkers. I’m deeply challenged by the implications of an article in the February 7, 2007 issue of the New York Times. The article cites an assessment made by the Defense Department regarding best ways to support reconstruction in Iraq. According to a recent classified study, “violence in Baghdad drops significantly when the quality of life improves for Iraqi citizens.” The study found that a two percent increase in job satisfaction among Iraqis in Baghdad correlated to a 30 percent decline in attacks on allied forces and a 17 percent decrease in civilian deaths from sectarian violence.

There’s still time to align ourselves with mother earth...occupied by a foreign presence which is choking her to death

Instead of insisting that we dominate the land whose resources would allow us to continue guzzling fossil fuels as though there were no tomorrow, suppose we learned a new way, insisted on kindness toward that parched part of the earth, and poured our resources into watering the great needs presenting themselves in our time.

The beatitudes and the woes in this sermon on the plain calls us beyond separation, beyond “good guys” and “bad guys” and into that level plain where we stand together, thirsting to plant the seeds of pure goodness most

especially in the parched places, most especially amongst those who feel they can no longer laugh, most especially in nonviolent resistance to war.