

Sermon Veda Lewis
November 25, 2018
I Imagine A World

I've been sitting for a couple of weeks with today's scripture, analyzing the excerpt from Pilate's interrogation of Jesus. I had help from UCC's Sermon Seeds, which gave interpretive options I might never have considered on my own.

Jesus and his verbal aikido skills with Pilate made me consider the question of how much detail he really knew about his destiny. Did he know the script line by line or just the eminent conclusion? Was he using his last opportunity to spread the word of the Way to a curious political leader? How would we live if we knew our true destiny?

Many years ago, in college, I wrote a short story about a gal who finds a special, ornate book that is labeled such that she knows it is the story of her life. She carries it around for quite some time, afraid to open it, assuming that it tells the full story of her life, including how it ends. Finally one day, she accidentally drops the book. It falls open to the last page. She hesitantly leans over and her eyes uncontrollably go to the text, which reads... "She leaned over and picked up the book."

What a relief it can be to live in the mystery.

Reading and re-reading the passage, I realized that this was not a conversation, it was an interrogation.

Ah, shades of past Thanksgiving meals with family?
How many difficult conversations occurred over the holiday?
How many difficult conversations were avoided?

On NPR last week they interviewed several comedians recounting techniques to avoid political 'conversations' over holiday gatherings. One woman freely admitted to using children as her shield. "Hey kids, who wants to crayon?"

Sadly, years of cultural manipulation have robbed us of the confidence we once had to engage in civil discourse with people whose socio-political views are not the same as our own.

Our freedom to disagree has been hijacked by fear.

Many of us know, or are, grandparents, great aunts or uncles, or other relatives who have decided to edit ourselves for fear that we may not be as free to visit with grandchildren, great nieces and nephews and others.

What does the world lose when we move ourselves into the “conversation closet”? We may never know.

I think we all long for the world imagined by Jesus of Nazareth; a world where there is justice and peace. In that realm, we are free and skilled at living with our differences, learning from each other, finding and living on common ground.

In present day, rather than asking questions and truly listening, we, as a culture, are programmed to convince and convert others to our point of view. That point of view is often well-fed with daily doses of social media sharing and/or newsfeeds from our favorite network that shares our opinion. When we feel that conversion will not be successful, we abort from any topic that could test the limits of our ability to experience the elusive “civil discourse”.

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We hit the share button, throwing stones into the digital ocean. They can and do sometimes instigate action away from the screens, but the risk is much greater that that “share” is lost among the pile of protestations that can fill our inboxes and newsfeeds. We’re adept at taking things in, but it is important to step back and process. Step back and decide which issues you want to investigate on your own, vet the information and do what you can to reach the humans, critters or habitats under siege.

I had my own experience of just passing on something I had heard. Years ago I was attending a Circles of Eight dinner where the topic of discussion somehow turned to fracking, which was in the news. A heated “conversation” ensued. Bill Sanderson, then a member of this church and an oil developer, was the only person actively defending the practice.

In the days following the exchange, I realized that I had hardly been actively listening to “the other side”. I also realized that most of my comments came from anecdotal accounts and my environmental science gut reactions. I had not read one scientific article or even investigative report regarding fracking.

I took out one of my vintage manual typewriters and typed out a letter of apology to Bill. I put it in an envelope I crafted from a topographic map and mailed it. He really appreciated the gesture.

Since then, I try to remind myself not to opine and flagellate about issues beyond my knowledge base.

I try to ask myself the following questions before I open my mouth:

Are my words making the world a better place?

Do I want to have a conversation with someone, or convince them that I am right?

How much energy am I investing in convincing others?

What other ways could I use that energy?

Could I direct my time, talent, and tokens more directly toward the people affected by the issues I feel passionate about?

This is a bottle of olive oil from Palestine. No matter what emotion comes up when I say that, not olive oil, Palestine, I think most of you would agree that the conflict in Israel/Palestine is complex, contentious and heartbreaking. Too many have died and hate moves from one generation to the next. Justice and peace are long overdue to replace the

fear, violence and oppression that have formed through actions of governments in power, ours included.

Lately, I ask myself those questions before I talk to anyone about Israel/Palestine. There is so much that I cannot know due to the politics in this country and in the Middle East, that I see this fair trade purchase, thank you Kathy, available through serrv.org, as a small thing we can do in our household to connect to real people across the globe who are in dire need.

This bag of rice is a different reminder of how we can direct our time, talents or tokens directly to those affected by something we are passionate about. It represents a meal packet like those prepared by volunteers who arrange an event through the organization Rise Above Hunger, formerly called Stop Hunger Now.

A few years ago I joined others from FCC helping the Methodist Church in preparing 10,000 of these meals in just three hours!

The bags we prepared contained about three cups of rice, some soy protein, dried vegetables, a flavor packet and some vitamins and minerals. Each bag contains six servings. The meals are shipped to crisis situations and impoverished areas around the world.

Preparing these meals gave me a hands-on, full heart perspective on the importance of helping those who need it most. Of course, it renewed my gratitude for what I have and spurs me, like so many of us, to examine my overabundance and pare down, and in my case, replace retail therapy with alternative actions.

We all imagine the world Jesus spoke about; where fear and conflict do not overshadow our species and destroy our home. Sometimes we think that world is far away, but glimpses of it are all around us; from bags of rice, bottles of olive oil, to pollinator gardens, letters and hugs for the children of Our Children's Trust, Earth Care lobbyists, Thrift Store angels, Pastor's discretionary funds, weeders, painters, toilet cleaners. The list is long.

Finally, I ask myself.

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It's daunting to read about Jesus' life and the extraordinary focus he had to accomplish his mission on Earth. I remind myself that his story is not that of a mere mortal. Perhaps the question is not "What would Jesus do?", which often results in disappointment. Perhaps a better question would be "What was I sent here to do?" ?

Have you heard the phrase "Comparison is the thief of joy." ?

Thank God we don't know our destiny. I still have more exploring to do along the shore of the Lake of Joy and poems to write about the experience.

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