

Do Not Be Weary in Doing What Is Right

Preached FCCW, November 17, 2019

2 Thessalonians 3:6-13 and Luke 21:5-19

A Boston born and raised comedian named Steve Sweeney is known for his jokes about the pessimistic way New Englanders look at life. Like, if one New Englander says “Isn’t it a beautiful day?” you can count on another one coming back with a remark like, “Well, don’t get too used to it, there won’t be many more like this for a while.”

We usually think of Jesus as being as optimistic as they come. He was always there with an uplifting word for the hopeless. In his most famous teaching-the Beatitudes-he goes down a list of the worst human experiences imaginable-poverty, grief, and persecution, to name a few. And for each tragic circumstance, he invites us to look beyond the present to a better and blessed future.

On at least one occasion, though, it was the disciples who were seeing silver linings, while Jesus seemed uncharacteristically pessimistic. During a stroll through the streets of Jerusalem some of them gaping and gabbing like awestruck tourists about the glories of the Temple. Jesus interrupted their conversation to say, “Enjoy it while you can. Its days are numbered! Pretty soon there will be nothing there but a pile of rubble.” And before they knew it Jesus was talking about wars, insurrections, earthquakes, famines and plagues. He even warned them about how they would be hated, treated like criminals and persecuted for being his disciples. Their very families would turn against them. Some of them would even be put to death. They would be tempted to listen to false prophets who would try to lead them astray from the path they had walked with Jesus.

They listened to all the doom and gloom, maybe waiting for Jesus to drop a hint about how these tragedies would be transformed into blessings. But this time the closest thing to hopeful advice and a happy ending that Jesus had to offer was this: By your endurance, Jesus said, you will save your souls. By *their endurance*? *That’s* what would save them? No miraculous antidotes for misery this time? In just a few days though, they would understand that Jesus wasn’t being pessimistic about their future, or exaggerating the importance of their response to what lay ahead. By week’s end Jesus was arrested, tried and crucified, and the endurance he had said would be the only way to save their souls would be put to the test.

By the time Luke had put pen to paper and recorded this conversation for all time in his version of the Gospel, it is most likely that the dark events Jesus foretold had come to pass. A Roman legion under the command of General Titus sacked Jerusalem after a lengthy siege. His troops looted and burned the Temple. To this day, all that remains of the Temple at which the disciples marveled is the single wall known today as the Western, or Wailing Wall.

And by the time that Paul's Second Letter to the Christians in Thessalonica was written, believers were surviving by their endurance in the face of persecutions directed against them. Those faithful followers, were encouraged to endure the difficulties they faced and "not grow weary in doing what was right." Some of them though, saw in the destruction of the Temple, and in the hostility they faced as followers of Christ, a fulfillment of the prophecies Jesus made to his disciples that long-ago day in the shadow of the Temple. And they understood the fulfillment of those prophecies to be signs that the time of Jesus' Second Coming and the dawning of God's Kingdom on Earth must be right around the corner. Rather than resolving to endure and not grow weary in doing what was right, they took the signs that Jesus was about to return, as an excuse to withdraw from their share of the work of changing the world.

When Paul warned the Thessalonians to avoid believers "who were living in idleness and not according to the traditions that they received" he very likely was not talking about lazy freeloaders who took advantage of the church's generosity. It is more probable that he was directly referencing those believers inside the church who had grown weary in doing right and were leaving the work of ministry to others. One of the most tragically misinterpreted lines of scripture is Paul's command that "anyone unwilling to work should not eat." That one short verse has been used-even by Christians- as a way to blame the poor for their condition and to excuse themselves from working to end poverty. The "work" Paul was talking about people avoiding was not the labor of providing for their own need of food and shelter, but the work of teaching the Good News of Jesus and living the compassion, justice and peace that he modeled for us.

Jesus never promised that faith would shield us from conflict or hardship. If anything, he promised just the opposite. That following him and "doing right" *would invite* trouble and sacrifice! He did say that our response should not be retreating into a shell, but using those events as opportunities to witness to the grace of God revealed in Jesus.

What does it look like for us in the church today to live faithfully as witnesses to Jesus and testifiers to grace when life is not all shining Temples and sunny skies? What endurance is required of us to fulfill the words of our own Mission Statement, which includes preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ, rendering loving service towards this community and the world; and striving for righteousness, justice and peace?

Our mission statement is a call to work together in the work of righteousness. And working for righteousness means working to help this world *as it is*, to resemble more the world God *intends for it to be*. The work of righteousness can be exhausting, because it is like overtime work. It asks us to go above and beyond the work that we do for personal benefit and to work for others; to work for justice, for things that don't benefit us directly. The extra work of being the church *can* seem burdensome from time to time. Ok, maybe most of the time. We can easily be wearied in the doing of this work and find ourselves listening to the voice inside that tempts us to let God find someone to take our place.

Ultimately, only God can make a New Creation out of our broken and hurting world. That is true. But it is equally true that in ways we don't fully comprehend, God's work of rebirthing the world is connected to our own individual rebirth into new creations in Christ. If we believe in that vision of a future where the wolf and the lamb lie down together; a world where plenty for all means scarcity for none; are we then not bound to make present choices that bring a little bit of that promised tomorrow into today's reality?

President Jimmy Carter, who at the age of 95 and in precarious health, remains an example of faithful endurance in living his faith, and shows little sign of growing weary in doing what is right, has shared the motivation for his endurance: "I have one life and one chance to make it count for something...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."

When we are asked to consider where we fit in the ministry and mission of this church-as we will be asked to do today in our meeting following worship-may we not let the weariness that inevitably accompanies service to others, prevent us from offering our time and talents where they are most needed.

May we not allow pessimistic expectations of the effort required by service to rob us of the blessing promised to those who hunger and thirst to see God's will be done. And, may we choose to endure in doing whatever is right, whenever, wherever and for as long as we can.

Copyright 2019 Raymond Medeiros