

Tithe and Treat

Jeremiah 31:31-34; Luke 18:1-8

Whitefish UMC

October 17, 2010 CROP Walk Sunday

- † It's only a couple of weeks now until Halloween, when we can expect nighttime visitors knocking and yelling at our doors. They probably won't be dressed like ordinary visitors; they will be strangely dressed, shamelessly demanding, and extremely persistent.
- † These trick-or-treating visitors will be carrying on a tradition that began with the medieval practice of "souling," a time when society's most vulnerable would go door to door, persistently asking for food in return for their prayers for the dead (on All Souls' Day).
- † Like the Christmas tradition of wassailing, souling wasn't just about poor people harassing their rich neighbors for food; it had to do with overturning a social order that persistently kept some people powerless and hungry and others well-fed and powerful—even if that reversal happened only for one night.
- † The tradition of souling reminded both rich and poor of their relatedness to one another and of the fact that everyone had the potential to be an instrument of grace—whether the gift of grace came in the form of food or in the form of prayers. In a very real sense, the yearly practice reminded everyone of their call and ability to be conduits and stewards of God's gifts of life.

- † If you use your imagination freely, you can make a case that “souling” and modern trick-or-treating can be seen as variations on an ancient practice represented in this week’s parable of the “persistent widow and the unjust judge.”
- † “The widow, the representative of society's most vulnerable, persistently pounds on the unjust judge's door (in a figurative sense) demanding access to the gifts of God's free grace. In a literal sense, the widow continually pounds on the shameless judge's "face" -- an actual translation of the expression "wear me out" in Luke 18:5 -- and shames him publicly. (The situation would be akin to a having a very young trick-or-treater pound at your door all night, being too greedy/uptight/uncaring to give this child even a piece of candy, and then having to endure criticism from our neighbors over this incident.)
- † But, as with "soulers" and trick-or-treaters, the widow's actions did more than just harass and publicly shame the "judge of injustice." Her persistent actions opened the door to God's grace for both poor and rich, powerful and powerless. The poor would know the gifts that the judge had hoarded for so long; hopefully, the judge and his friends would glimpse a more life-abundant reality beyond their insulated lives of greed and fear, and maybe even remember the basic tenets of their faith.
- † And what are those fundamental principles of their beliefs? To care for the widow and the orphan, to welcome the stranger, and to help the poor—remember that Jesus spoke to his Jewish contemporaries, and these were *their* beliefs—not just those of the new covenant, of Jesus—the one written on our hearts.
- † Yet he took it one step further in his own preaching, teaching, healing, and feeding. Remember how he said that whenever a person feeds the hungry,

gives water to the thirsty, clothes the naked, heals the sick, and visits the prisoner, it's as if that person is doing the same to Jesus himself?

- † Let's return for a moment to the widow and the unjust judge in the parable. As William Herzog says, "In addition to the amazing "blows" that the widow throws, what's striking is the fact that she's doing this all by herself. **Would she have had to fight so hard and for so long if even a few people accompanied her?** What if just a few others - some of her peers and maybe even a few powerful elites - joined her in banging on the judge's door? Then, perhaps, we would have seen the formation of an entire stewarding community (a church?) - one dedicated to unveiling and sharing God's grace.
- † With such a community, perhaps the floodgates of grace would have opened with greater ease and broader impact. It's not too late to join the widow; she and her descendants continue to pray without ceasing, and to pound on the doors of injustice every day."
- † Today we *will join* the widow as we engage in our CROP Walk to raise awareness of and help eliminate hunger. We will be walking and as we walk, we will knock on the doors of our culture to remind people of those who Jesus called the "least of these, my brothers and my sisters."
- † For when we walk for them, we walk for Jesus, too. Why do we walk? Why do we support those who do? Why do we pray without ceasing even when the world seems to turn away? Because it makes a difference. It may seem like only a drop in the proverbial bucket, but we do it out of gratitude and faithfulness and yes, persistence.
- † H.G. Wells once wrote an essay on that tribe of people he called the 'goodness-sakers.' These are the folk who see something that needs doing, or see some social evil, or detect some moral shortcoming, and they stand

and wring their hands and say "For goodness sakes, why doesn't someone do something about this?" We've probably all found ourselves being 'goodness-sakers' at some time or another but our challenge is to become persistent knockers on the doors that keep people out of the grace of enough. Because how the parable turns out still depends on us.

- † During the Nazi occupation of Paris, a husky storm trooper stepped into a subway car and tripped headlong over the umbrella of a little old lady sitting next to the door. After picking himself up, the bruised Nazi launched into a tirade of abuse, then bolted from the car at the next station.
- † When he was gone, the passengers burst into spontaneous applause for the little old woman. "I know it isn't much," she said, graciously accepting the compliments, "but he's the sixth one I've brought down today!" I have no idea if that story is true but it illustrates the point. It doesn't matter who we are or where we are, we have a part to play in helping turn the world into the kingdom of God that Jesus told us was within us and before us.
- † You've noticed that these three weeks in October focus on stewardship, gratitude, and mission. You are hearing the stories of what it means to respond in gratitude for all that we have been given by God. I confess that when I was younger, I would hear these testimonies and models of faithfulness and be both inspired and a little annoyed at the same time.
- † I often heard the stories, and I thought: "Well that's nice, but it doesn't apply to me. I'm too busy, too young, too financially strapped, too...whatever." Our challenge today is to see ourselves not only in the stories of members of our church and their faithfulness, but also in Jesus' parable.

- † Where is your place in the story? If you were to look in the mirror this very moment, God's mirror, who would you see? The persistent widow or the unjust judge?
- † A few years ago, the film "Hotel Rwanda" won several awards. There is a scene in it which haunts me still. You remember that Hotel Rwanda is about the madness in 1994 in which the Hutu majority tried to wipe out the Tutsi people. Paul is the Hutu manager of a luxury hotel who vows to protect his Tutsi wife and family but who ends up hearing the persistent knock of injustice and shelters many Tutsi's in his hotel.
- † Eventually western news outlets report the violence that is consuming the nation, and Paul begins to hope that when people know what is going on, they will respond with help. But one cynical western reporter says something like: "More likely, people will see the footage, say 'isn't that horrible?' and then go right on with their dinners."
- † I remember feeling such guilt when hearing that line, because it was certainly true for me. Now it doesn't help people to feel guilty, nor does it help us. It does help when we let God turn our shame into action. God wants what the widow wants. And God wants us, too.
- † As Robert Dunham says, "Maybe the good news in this story for the non-outcasts - for the rest of us - is that God is like the widow - unrelenting, persistent, assertive. God hasn't given up on us, even when we have acted as though we "neither feared God nor had respect for people." So maybe there's hope, not only for the widows and orphans and sojourners of this world, but for us.
- † Maybe there is hope that we will tend to the shame we feel and allow it to break through our resistance and press us to open doors to those who knock persistently; maybe there is hope that we will hear their pleas at last and use

our voices and our power to help shape relief and reconciliation and fairness in this world. Maybe there is hope for us. I believe there is. More importantly, I believe God believes there is.

- † Remember little Nelson in the joke from last Sunday, the little boy who wanted to be God for Halloween so that people would give him one tenth of their candy? I told that story to a couple of my colleagues at the Board of Ordained Ministry this week. One of them said, “You could call it Tithe or Treat!”
- † But I’d like to suggest that it’s not an either/or situation, but a both/and one. **Tithe AND Treat.** When we give, we receive even more. It’s, well, a treat.
- † "Behold," says Jesus, "I stand at the door and knock." Maybe today we'll open the door. Maybe. And what a good day that would be...for everyone!
- † Lord, let that day come. Let it begin with today. Let’s get walking, praying, and singing. Amen.

Sources:

Rev. Robert Dunham, “Whose Persistence?” <http://day1.org>

Tanya Barnett and Tom Wilson, “Grace and Gratitude,” stewardship email from Bill Mullette-Bauer, Oregon/Idaha annual conference.

Rev. Marianne Niesen, St. Paul’s United Methodist Church, 2009.