

INSTANT GRATIFICATION TAKES TOO LONG!

(sung)

Everyone born has a place at the table.

Everyone born has a place in God's heart.

Everyone born belongs, forget the label.

Glory hallelujah, glory hallelujah,

Praise the God of all!

The new heaven and new earth being created by God includes the vision of a table where everyone belongs and everyone is beloved, because for God, there are no outsiders.

And so it is good to come to table with you this morning, it is good to gather to experience a “fore taste” of the new creation, it is good to celebrate and proclaim the unlimited grace and love of our ever abiding Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer.

We enjoyed having Rev. Paul with us out in Excelsior last month as we celebrated our Reconciling Sunday. We were blessed to hear Paul’s message concerning “Coming Out as a Sacrament,” and he encouraged us to become living sacraments in our welcoming and embracing of the GLBTQ community.

Reconciling Sunday, for us, is the finale to our reconciling week, which we hold each year in October to coincide with national coming out day. “Reconciling” is the term, or code word United Methodists use to designate congregations who have gone through a process and voted to stand publicly against denominational policies of exclusion.

Excelsior United Methodist is one of 20 such faith communities in Minnesota. One part of being a reconciling congregation in our tradition involves confession and lament over the way the church has been a source of prejudice, hatred, violence, and far, far too much needless pain and suffering. Being a reconciling congregation also involves trying to stop the cycle of evil perpetuated in the past, and to go forward as agents of hospitality, love, and acceptance: to be a safe place for all who seek community. In other words, it is our intention to be vessels and channels of God's new creation.

There are times when I feel this new creation isn't happening fast enough in our congregation. I become frustrated with others who are not as passionate about justice as I am. I become disappointed when the indifference of some seems to be holding us back. I have felt hurt and insulted when I hear someone say, "I'm glad that we are a reconciling congregation, but do we have to be so public about it?" There have been times when I've even felt defeated and distraught in all this. Quite simply, I want the new order, the new way of being to break forth, and I want it right now! No more of this delayed gratification stuff! Come on, God, what's taking so long? Let's have this new creation you've been promising!

This morning, we read about the promise of the new creation from the book of Isaiah. Unlike the prophets you've been hearing from in recent weeks, Isaiah is considered to be very important, very big, very big time. In the traditional written form of the Hebrew Bible, Isaiah gets his own scroll, while Haggai, Habbakuk, and others get glommed together on a scroll.

Biblical scholarship over the past 150 years or so has revealed that there are actually three separate voices in the Book of Isaiah. First is the voice of Isaiah of Jerusalem, a prophet active in the 8th century BCE, about 740-700. There is a second poetic voice thought to be reflective of the time of coming back to Jerusalem after being in Babylonian exile, around 538 BCE. Third, and the voice we heard from today, is the perspective some 20-30 years after returning from exile. This latter voice presents a theme of God introducing a new age, an age that is discontinuous with all previous history. A New Jerusalem will be built up as part of a cosmic new creation. It promises to be a wonderful, happy, joyous place, where everyone will live long prosperous lives of peace and harmony.

No doubt, there was a great deal of comfort and hope to be found in this vision, especially for those who first received the message. They had gone through nearly a century of struggle involving the conquest of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Temple, the dwelling place of Yahweh. The center of their life and culture for five centuries had been destroyed, and several thousand people had been taken to Babylon. The return from exile was not an easy process either: those who had stayed in Jerusalem had continued life for a couple of generations. Those coming back had gone from being a few thousand to tens of thousands, and in coming back they certainly found out that the old neighborhood had changed! A prophetic vision that spoke of a kind of utopia beyond the current feelings of strife, conflict, disappointment, and meaninglessness would have found a receptive audience.

And, over time, when the new creation had not yet arrived, had not yet come to pass, patience with God started to wear thin. The notion of a Messiah who would lead the coming of a new age and bring in the new Kingdom became a vision and a message that progressively gained popularity. By the time of Jesus, with the Roman occupation having become a century old fact of life, the longing for the messiah had become a prominent desire. Delayed gratification was no longer acceptable. The people wanted the new creation and they wanted it now! There was still too much weeping and crying in Jerusalem, way too much conflict and hardship. When will the New Jerusalem be established?

In Luke's Gospel (and in Matthew and Mark as well), Jesus' coming to Jerusalem is a significant point in the narrative. Earlier on Jesus is teaching and doing his thing in Galilee and at a certain juncture, he sets "his face to go to Jerusalem." (The plot thickens: is Jesus going there to establish the New Jerusalem?) Teaching and healing continues as Jesus and his entourage make their way to Jerusalem. There is the triumphal entry into the city. (The plot thickens even more: is this the arrival of the new creation, the New Jerusalem?) Next there are a couple of chapters of Jesus teaching in the Temple, followed by the passion and resurrection stories that follow. Today's reading from Luke comes from the end of the "teaching in the Temple" section.

Jesus has just predicted the destruction of the temple, and described the strife and conflict that will be signs of the eminent demise of Jerusalem. He then turns to his followers and tells them of the coming persecutions they will experience.

If we remember that the Gospel of Luke and The Acts of the Apostles were written by the same author, and that these books were meant to be a two volume set, we can see that Jesus' predictions in Luke 21 seem to be exactly what happens to the disciples in the book of Acts: they are frequently hauled before the powers that be-sometimes in synagogues, sometimes civil authorities. They do end up having opportunities to testify, to give testimony concerning their faith. They are often rejected and hated, even by their own family members. So one way we could understand Jesus' speech as foreshadowing in the greater narrative of Luke-Acts.

Another point of speculation is that perhaps the Lukan community, that particular group of Jesus followers in the 9th decade of the 1st century, was experiencing these types of pressures and persecutions themselves. Jesus' words were meant to encourage them in their present situation. It probably was not an easy time to be a community of faith. There had to have been times when they just wanted Jesus to return to establish the New Kingdom, the New Creation, the New Jerusalem. Living with delayed gratification would have lost its appeal eventually, and on their worst days they probably just wanted the new creation and they wanted it now!

The ending of the text does offer a word of consolation and hope. After all the persecution, "not a hair of your head will perish. By your endurance you will gain your souls." NRSV

I like the NIV translation of the last verse, Luke 21:19, better than the NRSV. "By standing firm, you will gain life."

But even the notion of endurance, or especially standing firm, doesn't seem quite right. They seem a little passive to me. The image of just being in one place and holding on for dear life comes to mind. The other not so appealing image for me is the poster you used to see in the 1970's and 80's: a kitten or kittens hanging on with their front paws, dangling over the empty space below. The caption was, "Hang in there, baby!" For me, that poster oozed "cheesiness" and even to some degree trivialized struggles people could be going through. Yes, kittens are cute and cuddly, but they can't possibly be the solution to the existential angst of the human condition!or maybe they are.

Anyway, I like the word "perseverance" better than endurance or standing firm. For me it speaks of continuing on the journey, of continually trying to follow the way of love and compassion, continually trying to make the loving or compassionate choice, in spite of hardship and persecution. I'm not talking about denying one has been hurt or wounded, nor am I saying that one allows others to continue to abuse, hurt, and manipulate-physically, emotionally, or spiritually. Rather, perseverance is an acknowledgement of the adversity and difficulty, and continuing on as followers of Jesus the Christ, in spite of the cost.

Jesus' words from Luke 21 were meant to be words of consolation and hope to early Christians. By your perseverance, you will gain life. The question is, can they be words of consolation and hope for us?

As I was preparing this message, I was thinking about you and praying for you. You, O beloved community! I won't even pretend that I can speak for anyone else, nor can I

truly know the experience of another, but my speculation is, that many of you have more than a nodding acquaintance with persecution. You indeed know what it's like to be hated, rejected, and betrayed. You have had opportunities to give testimony about who you most authentically are, with mixed results. And, thanks be to God, you have found a safe community here, where God's love and grace are expressed as they most authentically are: unlimited and available to all, not hoarded and parceled out according to some twisted set of standards and regulations.

But life in community, any community, has its adversities and challenges as well as its blessings, and we can forget that through it all, God continues to work and the New Creation continues to break forth. The relationship, or the partnership, if you will, that we have begun to forge as separate and yet connected congregations is but one sign of God's work in our midst. Even when delayed gratification gets old and worn out, God continues to invite us, urge us, even gently pushes us into a future in which the New Creation is continually breaking forth.

God bless you. God bless your congregational meeting today, as you continue to discern and make decisions about being God's people at 3100 Park Avenue South. May your endurance and perseverance give life to you and to all of those around you. Amen.