

Everyone Wants a Revolution...But No One Wants to Do the Dishes

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Scripture Passage: 2Thessalonians 3:6-13;

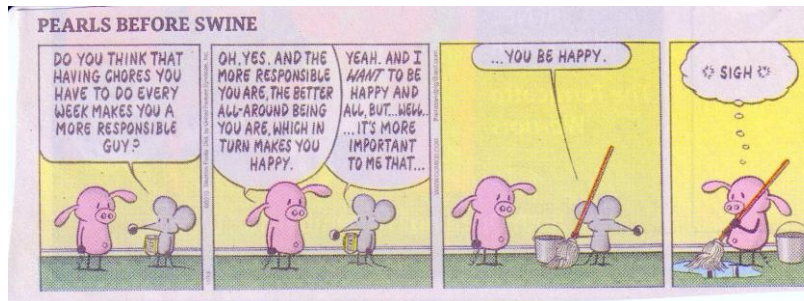
The great thing about being fifty years old is that you have lived a half century and have gotten through several ends of the world. In the nineteen-eighties it seemed we were on the edge of nuclear annihilation. In fact, Carl and I, then in our early twenties even wondered whether it was ethical to have children, destined as they were to be incinerated. Much later, at the turn of this century, we were to be thrown into the Stone Age when computers freaked out at the new "2000" date. There have been others: meteorites, comets coming, volcanoes blowing up and giving us a "nuclear winter" like atmosphere, north and south poles switching their polarities, Mayan calendars that some interpret to predict the annihilation of all human kind is 2012. There is something by about human beings that crave the horror of "end of the world scenarios." For many it is an obsession that borders on pornographic. They all have the effect of creating societal paralysis. What is the use of doing anything, building anything, loving anyone? It is all going to end anyway.

The world that the newborn church inhabited was no different. The first letter that Paul wrote to the church in Thessalonica may be the earliest piece of writing in our New Testament. This brand new church was located in the Roman Province of Macedonia. Thessalonica was a very valuable city to the Romans. It is a port critically important for military, trade and organizational reasons. It teems with the excesses of Empire. Situated in the midst of this is a small, growing group of folks who gather together to worship God, follow the one they know as Jesus and live in a counter cultural way to the people surrounding them. Love, caring and sharing will be their radical ethic. Outside observers think they are crazy at best, immoral at worst.

Paul writes the first letter to correct some misunderstandings and to encourage them in their new, difficult path as Christians. A second letter follows hot on the heels of the first. Some think Paul may not have been the author of the latter, as he quotes himself a lot which seems a little weird for letter writers, even ancient ones. Nonetheless, there is trouble in Thessalonica, that much is clear. It appears that some people have been teaching that Jesus has arrived again in the Second Coming and thus the end of the world is immanent. Besides being in error, this understanding has resulted in fear, anxiety and bad behaviour. Some people have decided to lay down their tools, put their feet up and live off of the community's largesse. A second bad behaviour which is closely related to it is busybody-ness. People are becoming busybodies. Some people are both. Both activities are acts of selfishness and hurt not only the community but the idle and the busybodies.

Paul is appalled. He reassures the church that no one knows when the end of the world will happen. He reminds them that their own tradition tells them it will take a long time, the interaction of a number of nefarious world leaders and a whole lot of other things, none of which has transpired. In the meantime, he says, get to work!!

Work. What is work within a community and who is it “for”?



“He who does not work, does not eat.” That is harsh. Well, let’s discuss first, what this passage is NOT referring to. It is not referring to welfare, unemployment benefits etc.... This tiny little reading has done more damage than can be counted in that respect. All the stories, all the gospels, all of the teachings of Jesus are about a radically open, shared table. Denying a place at the table is not what Paul is talking about. Neither is he talking about rest or Sabbath. These are Christian folk who have an entire Hebrew Scripture (Old Testament) that constantly upholds the rules around Sabbath. It is our protestant work ethic held to the dysfunctional extreme that makes us view rest as idleness.

Do your work quietly and earn a living” says Paul. The main concern was disorderliness. There was a radical practice being put into place in this new church. If you think about “order” as the practice of an entire community, the order they were setting up for themselves was based on a counter Empire ethic which preached everyone for themselves and right equals might. The new Christians stood in stark contrast to that. They were supporting each other materially and spiritually. This means everyone was to do their part so far as they are able. Each was to shoulder whatever labour they could for the common good.

St. Benedict, when setting up the Benedictine orders went darn near crazy with trying to get everyone to work together, do chores together and share. The wealthy, in particular, had difficulty with menial labour. So he came up with the Rule of St. Benedict, a series of rules designed to create “order.” Within these rules, there is a quote, “No one is excused from rendering personal service to others. No one is exempted from performing the mundane tasks of daily life. Rendering service to others is necessary to

our own fitness. Exempting someone from commonplace chores endangers them to vanity.” Everyone does the dishes, sometimes.¹

Busybodies damage the common good. Busybodies assume ownership of issues that are not in their domain. They butt in where they are not wanted and they speak with great authority about things that are none of their business. Usually the information they act on is limited or just plain false and inaccurate, but that is immaterial to them. It is the thrill of the telling and the stirring of things that is important. Both idlers and busybodies have a huge sense of entitlement. If idlers are material mooches, taking and never giving back, busybodies are spiritual mooches. The reason this passage exists today and still speaks to us is that we know we belong, at least some of the time in those two camps. Take spiritual mooching for example. Neta Pringle says that anytime someone says “Oh, the minister will tell me what the bible says” or “the congregation will do the praying that needs to happen” we fall into the practice of spiritual mooching. If you do not read your bible for yourself or do not have your own prayers to God, no one can do that for you. It is this individual practice that contributes to this, our community, practice.²

These letters are all about observing, responding, cajoling, creating a community that is joyful, that shares, that is supportive, that is caring, that challenges principalities and powers.

What might this look like at St. John’s? Well, you saw a good example of that work earlier in the service. We blessed the pastoral care team. In order to meet the needs of our aging demographic our Pastoral Care team was formed. They are matched with homebound people from the congregation and keep contact with them by phone or by visits. Elders visit at least once a year the folks on their list and some of them are trained to bring communion. I practice triage, visiting folks who are in crisis, who are in serious trouble or who are dying.

As Carol Salton, long time member and first female elder (in Halifax, possibly in Nova Scotia) died, I marvelled at the care she received. Her friend Beth visited her regularly. Her elder and the person assigned from Pastoral Care came to see her periodically. The person next to her in the Nursing Home spent nights sitting with her as she succumbed to death. I remarked to “Joy” that it was a wonderful gift she offered to Carol. She responded that she was a woman of faith and was a nurse. “You never stop being a nurse, you know,” she said. Nursing was her profession but it was also her calling from God. Caring was and is still the work that she is called to do as a Christian.

¹ Elizabeth Barrington Forney, as found in Bartlett, David Lyon, and Barbara Brown Taylor. *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary*. Year C, Volume 4. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010, p. 305.

² Neta Pringle, as found in Bartlett, David Lyon, and Barbara Brown Taylor. *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary*. Year C, Volume 4. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010, p. 304.

Creating dignity, caring, praying, personal service is work that we are never too young for and we can never retire from. No matter what condition you are in, you can always pray. As Paul might say, even if the world is ending, even if you knew that atomic bomb was going to land right next to you in your bed tomorrow night, if you are a Christian, you still have work to do in the meantime. So we'd better get to it, eh?

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