

Proper 25 Year C

Woody Hannum has agreed to chair our stewardship efforts this year...I say this year, because stewardship is more than about asking for money in the Fall...It is about how we live our lives of faith. Woody and I and your vestry have been talking about that...and just Friday Woody and I met to finalize a time table, and put together a parish-wide celebratory event about which you will hear later. While he was in my office he noticed a DVD that I had on my desk...entitled *Amazing Grace*...It was sent to me free of charge by Walden Media whom I had never heard of...and inside the DVD jacket there was a brief explanation that the movie was about William Wilberforce, a British politician, philanthropist and churchman of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries who fought for the abolition of the slave trade and ultimately the abolition of slavery....and then a note from the producers that this DVD had been distributed internationally to inspire people of faith and encourage the persecuted of our world, that things can change for the better...that our efforts for the Good in fact matter.

Woody had seen the movie...and suggested that I read the book, *Bury the Chains* a more detailed account of the demise of the slave trade. It is a book about villains and heroes of the abolitionist era...and one such hero was a man named Thomas Clarkson, who entered England's Latin essay contest to make a case against the horrors of the slave trade....as he prepared for the writing of the essay, he became engrossed in his work...It became his passion...he had been given a cause greater than himself...a huge socio-economic cause because the slave trade was inextricably linked to the sugar trade, which was the largest global industry of the day....sugar was the oil of Clarkson's era.

Clarkson won the essay contest, giving him notoriety, and he traveled tirelessly all over England and in France to make the case against the buying and selling of people as slaves...he made speeches, wrote pamphlets...his life was threatened...a befriended a group of Quaker business men who had sympathy for his cause (the Quakers the only religious endorsement in the early going)...he found also a sympathetic ear in William Wilberforce who was a member of Parliament....a vital alliance.

In 1807 the slave trade was abolished....and just over twenty five years later so was slavery in all of Britain...Sometimes the mountain we are called on to move seems an impossible task...The myriad problems of our world, intractable...the ways of war and injustice and greed are so institutionalized...that many good people throw up their hands at the seemingly impossible task at hand...why try? A voice whispers in our ear;

an echo of Yeats' prophecy that, "the best lack all conviction while the worst are full of passionate intensity."

Well Luke has something to say in the matter...you remember last week Luke likened prayer and faith to a persistent widow...she who will not take no for an answer until there is justice...pray always Jesus exhorts his disciples and don't lose hope he says...this passage for our Gospel reading today is also a teaching on prayer...this passage follows immediately the one we read last week...In this passage Jesus uses a little comedy to make his point, but no less a serious point....He has two men praying in the Temple... one a Pharisee, a Jewish educated elite, and the other the despised tax collector...also a Jew, but collecting tax money for the occupying Roman government... he's a sell-out....the Pharisee thanks God that he is such an upright man...and most especially not like...the tax collector....you know the parable....the tax collector is sincerely repentant of his ways and asks God's forgiveness, and leaves the Temple "justified" as Luke puts it.... justified which means bound to the law, bound to the faith....and as we know, the law...the faith, requires us to serve outside of ourselves...to love our neighbor...to take care of each other...we are justified when we come to this awareness, bound to the faith....the Pharisee is caught up in himself, a model of self interest...the modern world a model of self interest...but this Publican has returned to the faith.

And it's in prayer that he turns....prayer the art of paying attention... the tax collector, of all people, certainly a negative image to Luke's audience...the tax collector, like the poor widow becomes the model of prayer and the faith...the two inseparable....and the model is this:...that the life of faith, acting as if this gospel vision were true....and prayer, the enlightened paying attention to our world... the prayerful faith is always discovered, encountered, apprehended in living a life of constant repentance....Now I'm not talking about self brow-beating....though sometimes it might be necessary...nor am I talking about a fearful repentance that these silly "Christian" haunted houses invoke...but I'm talking about a predisposition....a constant turning towards the will of God...a dance as it were...repentance a life long process, not a singular event....turning from time after time to the periphery...off the main view... and discovering...Ah so it is this!....a predisposition, a readiness to see as God sees, and a courage and passion to act upon what we see....and we find that readiness and courage and compassion in the community of conscience... not just the church but across religions, disciplines, ethnicities, nations, political parties...wherever there are those willing to turn and look to what God wants for God's people...we are all brothers and sisters there...

And brothers and sisters of God...we will move mountains....Thomas Clarkson and his community of conscience...proof of the pudding.... Mahatma Gandhi....Martin Luther King junior...Nelson Mandela...Theresa of Calcutta...St. Joan of Arc...How many more? all a part of enlightened community... communities that were at the ready to see and act upon the good....and changed the known world.

Dear people of God this manner of life is our stewardship.... everything we do here and most especially outside these red doors...the money we give...It all has one purpose and one purpose only...and that is to make things on earth as they are in heaven....living solely for the transformation of our world the way God sees the world....sacred, whole.... justified....Lives of repentance...turning again and again to see the light... and that takes a practice of looking at our own egos and taking account as individuals and as communities....Lives of repentance... repentance is following our bliss....enlivening our passion, living the true...that is all a part of repentance as well...It is not an ugly word....this joyful and beautiful and world changing turning towards the good of all....this turning into the very life of God...which quite simply and profoundly is the life of faith..... the life of the penitent isn't about being good....I think that is hard for us to hear in our post Calvin world...the life of the penitent is doing good.... acting out our lives in the shape of the Gospel....lives shaped by compassion and mercy that will quite literally change our world...and stop the fear that finds its way among us.

Let us, all of us, own up to our predisposition towards self...let us by the grace of God turn outward towards God's gracious commonweal waiting to become as we speak...We justified...bound to the law of God...bound to a transforming faith....Let us turn and see what God would have us do...and then lets get to work.