

“Becoming an Instrument”
Sermon by Pastor Tom Warren
Peace United Church of Christ
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In 1963, an American writer by the name of Kurt Vonnegut wrote a powerful little book called “Cat’s Cradle”. It was a satirical science fiction novel which dealt with all the issues that shaped late 20th century and the issues that continue to shape our world today. These issues—nuclear terror, the dangers of unconstrained science, the agenda of empirical world powers, and the role of religion in public life—made for an exciting and subversive thriller that many people have read and many people have continued to read today. While the story line in that book is compelling and the issues raised there are frightening, “Cat’s Cradle” is perhaps best known for a biblical phrase which Vonnegut conveniently used to fit the end of the world theme of this book. This phrase, which originates in parts from the book of Ecclesiastes, is the dark (and somewhat flippant) notion that we should just all eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we may die; live for today because who knows what tomorrow will bring.

Well, in a satirical science fiction book the idea of giving one’s life over to self-gratification kind of makes sense. If the world is “going to hell in a hand basket”, just enjoy yourself. Don’t worry about tomorrow. Don’t worry about others. Don’t worry about anything. Get what you can while the gettin’ is good. It is a notion which consciously, or unconsciously, much of our secular world has bought into, but it is also a notion which has crept into some of our more popular expressions of Christianity.

Traditional evangelical faith is all about the individual believing the right doctrine in order to get out of this world and into the next. Proponents of the “Prosperity Gospel” attract thousands and thousands of people all over the world with the promise that, if you get right with Jesus, then abundant wealth and prosperity will be yours. This abundant wealth and prosperity, of course, typically comes after you have given all of your money to the preacher.

Most recently, perhaps, is a new model of Christian faith which is called the “Therapeutic Christianity” model. In Therapeutic Christianity, scripture points exclusively to a goal of individual happiness and to feel good about one’s self. All of these popular notions of the Christian faith tend to be individually oriented and motivated at its baseline by an appeal to self-gratification, and while there are essences and little slivers of truth to each of these three models, they all fundamentally miss the major thrust of biblical faith, and the major thrust of biblical faith is that we work to get things right here on earth.

In our prophetic readings this morning from Amos and Micah we encountered, perhaps, one of the most critical errors that people of faith make in regards to what their relationship with God calls them to do. Amos, who speaks with the force of a sledgehammer, says this very clear condemnation of Israel’s practices in his time. He says “I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Your offerings, your animal sacrifices, your songs—they don’t mean a thing to me”, and Micah, speaking God’s word, says “With what shall I come before the Lord? Should I come with young calves, thousands of rams, rivers of oil, even my first-born child? What should I do to be faithful?” So, these prophets are saying to the Israelites, “You show up in the Temple and it’s all just for show. You are just going through the motions. That’s what you’re doing, and then you go out there into the world and you live just like the world does”. These words from the prophets were tough words back then and, of course, are tough words for us today.

This passage from Matthew is a little different in perspective and can be seen, in some ways, as a response to the critique from the prophets. We find Jesus, in this passage, as He is often found, surrounded by the crowds. These crowds are most likely the uncommitted masses of poor Jews and other people who had latched themselves onto Jesus, at least for the moment, and they are potential disciples, but they are in danger of being misled by their leaders. The scripture there says they are “harassed and helpless people who are like sheep without a shepherd”. Biblically speaking, “sheep without a shepherd” is a reference that these were people without a king. These were no count people. They had no one who was taking care of them. Kings, in ancient times, were supposed to take care of their people, and Jesus turns to his disciples and says “Look at this crowd of people. Look, the harvest is plentiful. There are lots of people who need to be saved from this mess that we have made of the world. We need a bigger team. We need more people who are going to go and save this group of people, this crowd. We need disciples who are ready to engage in God’s harvest”. In this text, the word “harvest”, I learned, is really an eschatological word. Eschatology is a word my wife told me never to say in a sermon! In the Bible, eschatology is really a reference to two little issues that are of importance. One interpretation of eschatology is events of the end of time and, more importantly, the ultimate destiny of humanity. To be engaged in eschatological work is to be engaged in the most important and ultimate destiny of humanity.

So, Jesus is talking on one level about harvesting people for their ultimate destiny for the ultimate purpose in life and, contrary to popular opinion, our ultimate destiny in life is not self-gratification, or getting into heaven, or even the pursuit of happiness. Our ultimate destiny in life, according to the gospel narrative, is to build up God’s kingdom right here on Earth or, as Micah puts it, “to do justice, to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God”.

Now, we are told every single day, through a variety of images, about how to find meaning in our lives. We are told every single day about how to find happiness in our lives and it is always through things. It is always through self-gratification. It is always through consumerism. What is ironic about that consistent marketing message is that we know on some fundamental level that it does not give us happiness because we can never have enough. So, the message of scripture is always forcing us to grapple with how we find meaning in our lives because I would submit to you that our culture is dying for meaning. We are dying to find purpose in our lives beyond the day-to-day struggles of making a living; yet, the only message that we can continue to get is that you find meaning and you find fulfillment in life by having yet another thing. The Bible doesn’t say that. The Bible, in fact, says something very different. So, the question for people of faith in this day is how we ask people of faith moved from being well-intentioned believers to being engaged and empowered disciples. That is to say, how do we become instruments of God’s reign here on earth, how do we become builders of God’s kingdom, and how do we become convicted of our faith.

To walk down that road of grappling with those questions, it seems to me that what we need to do is to become clear on what God intends for the earth and its people. What is it that God is trying to do here on planet Earth because God is not encouraging us to find a way to get out? God is not encouraging us to find a way to get to heaven. That is God’s business and we have no control over it, but God, through scripture, has been telling us, however, that we have to find purpose here on Earth, and our purpose, as followers of Jesus, is to make God’s kingdom come to life right here, so we have to think, study and grapple with that question. What, in fact, is God trying to do here, and how can we be co-creators in that process?

A second question that we must grapple with is how we become clear and sober minded about the current status of life on Earth. How far gone are we here on Earth? How do we take the hard and honest look at our situation here on this planet? The fact of the matter is that it is very difficult to take an honest look at our world because we are struggling as the human family to

keep it together. We have to become clear-eyed and sober about the struggles that we face—in our individual lives, in our faith life as a community and in our community life as part of the world.

Third, we, as individuals and as a community of faith must begin to engage in a process of discernment. What is it that God is calling us to do? Where are we to engage in this kingdom building? We must spend time thinking, discerning and feeling for God's spirit that is moving us out into the world. This process, which is no easy task (Discernment is never easy.), requires that we be radically honest about ourselves, about the world, and about our understanding of God, so there is much work to do.

One of the things that is happening in our world today is that the old order that churches like ours used to be a part of is crumbling and has been crumbling for some time, and it is even a time of panic.

Yesterday, I was at the Board of Directors meeting for John's River Valley Camp which is one of our beloved summer camps for our children. They are running out of money. They are running out of children. The institutions that used to support that summer camp are crumbling right before our eyes. It is scary for those who have been shaped by these institutions. Things are crumbling right in front of our eyes. What they demand is not despair. What they demand is a radical reversioning of the church, of its call to the world, of what God is demanding of us, and God is demanding that we become people convicted by the gospel—not people who like it or people who have always been a part of the church, but people who are newly convicted by a vision for the world that is going to turn things upside down, and that is hard work because "eating, drinking and being merry, for we may die" is a statement of despair. It is a statement that there is nothing left to live for.

As Christians, people who follow Jesus, we believe that there is God's kingdom to live for and that the church can be that engine. If we are convicted, if we are bold, if we are filled with courage and if we are unapologetic about our faith, we can go out into the world and say that Jesus Christ has shown us the way to live, to build up the kingdom, to build up communities of peace and justice so we can straighten out this world. It is the call of the church, and it has always been the call of the church. What we need to do as Christ's church in 2014 is get courageous, get recommitted, get fearless about our faith and talk to people about it.

Our call has never been easy, and our call at this moment in history is perhaps harder than ever, but God is with us. God is our strength. God will lead us if we are listening. If we are discerning, if we are reaching out, and if we are convicted, God will help us create a new day. What that does is it gives our lives meaning—meaning to live, meaning to celebrate each moment, meaning to rejoice in the community of faith that is gathered here and that is bold with our intentions and our commitments, so we rejoice today in the gospel that calls us to transform the world here and now. Thanks be to God. Amen.