

“Fiery Ordeal?”

New London UMC

Sunday, May 17, 2020

I Peter 4:12-14; 5:6-11 *NRSV*

Rev. Joyce Rich

“Are these the ‘end times’?” That’s a popular question. Perhaps you’ve been wondering the same thing in the months and months that the main news stories around the world have centered on devastating storms, wildfires, floods, droughts, locusts, earthquakes, killer giant hornets, and pandemic. Is God’s “good creation” coming apart at the seams? Are we headed toward a global heat wave that will set the world on fire? Or a colossal flood that will consume all the land? Or a new Ice Age? Or will our universe just disappear in some black hole we can’t even see? Do thoughts like these stoke your fears?

Or do you fear something more immediate, more in your face – or in your wallet? Is your fear that you won’t be able to pay your bills this month, or next month, or the month after that? Or do you fear that the price of groceries will continue to spike up, up, up? Or that your business, or more businesses, will close? Or that virtual classrooms will become the only classrooms? Or that sports stadiums will no longer be filled with fans? Or that you won’t be able to see a play or a concert in person? Or that we will not be able to sing together as a congregation? Or that the walls of your home are closing in on you?

These days we don’t have to dig too deeply to find something to worry about, to wonder about, or be anxious about, because there are a lot of “unknowns” when we try to picture the future. It is hard for us to focus on “what to do” now when we don’t have a good idea of “what will happen” later. But trust me when I say this: there are endless webinars available (morning, noon, afternoon, and night) that are looking for people to register NOW to hear their “experts” share their best guess on how to plan for the future. . . . Yes, I said “their best guess” – because they don’t KNOW what to expect next. None of us do! So instead of listening to someone tell me, “of course it all depends on YOUR context,” I’ve decided that it is a better use of my time to simply deal with the present situation, and determine how to improve what we’re trying to get done NOW; because we’re probably going to have to continue doing a lot of things from a distance for some time to come. . . . And I think our greatest fear is that social distancing is here to stay. That we will continue to avoid crowds of people – not because we’re claustrophobic, but because we’re convinced that it is always going to be “unhealthy” to be near so many people.

But being with other people is what the body of Christ does to BE HEALTHY. It is the gathering of all our diverse parts, of all of God’s many different children, that makes for a healthy and vibrant church body. Our being in relationship with one another is how we embody God’s love, and how we go about following Christ. We are all about the messy holiness of our life together as we support one another through all our joys and concerns,

twists and turns, crisis points and peaceful passages, miffs and tiffs, reconciliations and estrangements, endings and new beginnings. That's just how the children of God roll. So when I was reading a biblical commentary on our passage from First Peter this week, I was particularly struck by something that Gordon McClellan wrote about connectionality and separation. He said:

it helps to note that perhaps the greatest form of violence the devil can render is to separate people from one another – that is, for people to forget or abandon this notion of our connectionality, of being united with all Christians around the world in our struggles, triumphs, joys, and fears. So to forget would be to sever the most important tie that binds people of faith together in the commitment to love one another as Christ loved.

(p. 536, Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary; Year A, Volume 2)

That commentary was written over ten years ago, well before most of the world had to engage in the great social experiment of being locked down in social isolation – but it speaks to our situation today. And the First Letter of Peter was written almost two thousand years ago – but it sounds like a letter that could have been written this week:

Cast all your anxiety on [God], because he cares for you. . . . you know that your brothers and sisters in all the world are undergoing the same kinds of suffering. And after you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, support, strengthen, and establish you.

(1 Peter 5:7, 9b-10 NRSV)

Friends, the God of ALL grace can handle not just ALL of our anxieties, our fears, our frustrations with what we are going through – but also what ALL of our sisters and brothers around the world are going through! And even though many things have changed, and we can no longer do some things in the same ways we were used to doing them, God will support us in making the changes we need to make. God will restore our weary spirits and strengthen us to face the future with hope, to sharpen our vision to see new possibilities before us, to lead us in the way to new life, and to unite us in love.

This isn't like another car commercial telling us, "we're all in this together." This is the nature and being of the God of all grace who looks at each one of us and says, "I know you're suffering. Why don't you let me carry that load of anxiety for you? I'm very concerned about you, and about all of your brothers and sisters. I love you and want to help you. Let me light the way as we move forward together." . . . Isn't that what God offers to us? That there is no end to the time that God wants to spend with us. There is no end to the love that God has for us. There is no limit to the grace that God provides for us. . . . If we just accept what God is already offering to us, to everyone.

Thanks be to God! Amen.