

## “Keeping Your Balance”

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Isaiah 65:17-25

Luke 20:45-21:6

[The LORD said,]

‘... be glad and rejoice for ever in what I am creating;  
for I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy,  
and its people as a delight.’

Isaiah 65:18

Let us pray... O God,

The world is reeling from crisis to crisis.

Help us to keep our balance. Help us to keep our faith.

And may we be ready to help others to do this, too. Amen

The Gospel lesson speaks about the Temple culture of Jesus’ day;

We get a glimpse of some of the characters involved  
and a snapshot of life there back then.

The scribes were a kind of religious expert, or ‘teachers of the Law’,  
associated with interpreting and writing about the scriptures.

And from this passage we learn they were prone  
to long-winded prayers – and devoured widows’ pensions.

It so happens a widow is also represented in this story

and her appearance is in contrast with richer people  
making donations to the Temple at the time of offering.

Then, there is a description of the Temple’s structure itself.

Magnificently adorned with gems and gifts dedicated to God,  
it’s an ancient tourist attraction as well as a pilgrimage site.

Yet, Jesus predicts that ‘not one stone will be left upon another’.

Fortunately, Jesus’ words did not literally or completely come to pass –  
for the supporting wall of the Temple mercifully survived  
the Roman army’s suppression of the Jewish Revolt  
around 70 AD (CE).

And the Western Wall continues to bring visitors, worshipers,  
tourists, and pilgrims - bearing witness to this remnant  
of Israel’s ancient glory and future hope  
for God’s enduring mercy and abiding love.

Willard, 2

A few years back,

I used to meet with the pastor of Faith UCC of Clearwater  
at a local coffeeshop for fellowship and just to talk.

And I remember he made the dire prediction that  
mainline Christianity was on its way out.

Christianity itself would survive,

but only by making drastic and far-reaching changes.

He has since moved on –

but his church is still there having made some of those changes.

They are ‘open and affirming’;

and they have embraced the Stillspeaking initiative

as well as the new theological perspectives

of Living the Questions for ‘meaningful worship’ and  
purposeful mission.

They even started a preschool that has grown to

more than 130 children over the past 5 years.

On their website,

they have this opening statement:

‘Many are hungering for an authentic spirituality

that is intellectually honest and at home in a scientific era.’

The time is at hand

for interpreting our time and for sharing our understanding

of how God is still speaking and what God is asking of us.

Christianity is in need of reform to meet the challenges of a new era –

and it goes without saying that the same is true for Islam

and I suspect for Judaism, too.

But we can only speak for ourselves as Christians

in reclaiming the Good News from extremism that –

for far too long, has dominated the discussion.

Jesus Christ preached about the Kingdom of God

as a beloved community that welcomes/saves anyone/everyone.

And I believe that means accepting God’s acceptance of us –

forgiving ourselves, believing in ourselves,

turning away from what is unworthy in ourselves.

And not just for individual transformation,

but to help others do the same as our grateful response to God

through Christ who calls us into beloved community.

Willard, p.3

The Jewish Testament lesson comes from the closing chapters of what is called Third Isaiah, which addressed the second generation of those who had returned from exile and were still living in a land desolated and disorganized.

Imagine the people of Iraq amidst the rubble of cities ruined by war or the people of our own inner city neighborhoods struggling just to make it, slowly picking up the pieces.

It is in the midst of such a wasteland that The One Who Is God speaks through the Prophet Isaiah, saying,  
'For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth;  
the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind.'

Isa. 65:17

'No more shall there be in it an infant that lives but a few days,  
or an old person who does not live out a lifetime...' Isa. 65:20a

And God promises that this will be a practical vision of peace on earth:

'They shall build houses and inhabit them;  
they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit.

They shall not build and another inhabit;  
they shall not plant and another eat;  
for like the days of a tree shall the days of my people be,  
and my chosen shall long enjoy the work of their hands.

They shall not labour in vain, or bear children for calamity;  
for they shall be offspring blessed by the Lord—  
and their descendants as well.'

Isa. 65:21-23

To build safe places to live in, to grow food and have enough to eat –  
to have meaningful work that allows people to have these things  
and a peaceful world to raise a family, too.

This is God's plan though we have a role to play in finding a way  
to organize and provide opportunities to overcome and prevent  
homelessness and hunger.

The Villages are isolated from much of what is going on in the world,  
but the creativity and resources that are here  
can be brought to bear on what is going on  
out beyond our gates.

Willard, p.4

We can become a staging area for renewal.

We can make a difference for the better.

We are a blend of conservatives and progressives,  
who can be united in responding to the needs of our time  
by first recognizing them, then asking ourselves  
what can we do as our grateful response  
for what God through Christ has already done for us.

As a congregation of the UCC, we must find a balance  
between spiritual rebirth and social action,  
between personal renewal and building up the Kingdom.

I am convinced that we as a congregation can help set an example  
for Christian churches seeking their way into the future.

We are not just 'open and affirming',  
we are 'open and growing' as Ben New said the other day.  
For our gay sisters & brothers provide us with a courageous example  
for what it means for any of us to truly be ourselves  
as individuals and as a gathered community of faith.

And that this is what it means  
when we talk about 'being born again'.

And this is true as it has always been through Christ the Liberator  
teaching forgiveness, promoting creativity,  
bridging differences,  
and showing active concern for individuals and society –  
and these days, the environment, too.

In the process of facilitating forgiveness and acceptance,  
others will enter this cycle of forgiving and accepting  
and fulfilling the two greatest commandments:  
Love God & love others as you would love & be loved yourself –  
to do unto others as God has done for you.

It is the widow's mite – the individual  
who can make a difference in the world,  
whose work God through Christ will prosper –  
the individual balanced by God's providence.

So, let us keep setting goals reaching inward and outward  
to be continually renewed in ways we haven't even yet imagined.

Amen

*Our lesson from the Jewish Testament today is from Isaiah 65:17-25  
which anticipates a future that is bountiful and balanced  
as a vision of true justice and lasting peace...*

17 For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth;  
the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind.

18 But be glad and rejoice for ever in what I am creating;  
for I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy,  
and its people as a delight.

19 I will rejoice in Jerusalem, and delight in my people;  
no more shall the sound of weeping be heard in it,  
or the cry of distress.

20 No more shall there be in it an infant that lives but a few days,  
or an old person who does not live out a lifetime;  
for one who dies at a hundred years  
will be considered a youth,  
and one who falls short of a hundred  
will be considered accursed.

21 They shall build houses and inhabit them;  
they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit.

22 They shall not build and another inhabit;  
they shall not plant and another eat;  
for like the days of a tree shall the days of my people be,  
and my chosen shall long enjoy the work of their hands.

23 They shall not labour in vain, or bear children for calamity;  
for they shall be offspring blessed by the Lord—  
and their descendants as well.

24 Before they call I will answer,  
while they are yet speaking I will hear.

25 The wolf and the lamb shall feed together,  
the lion shall eat straw like the ox;  
but the serpent—its food shall be dust!

They shall not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain,  
says the LORD.

Luke 20:45-21:6

45 In the hearing of all the people he said to the disciples,

46 'Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes,  
and love to be greeted with respect in the market-places,  
and to have the best seats in the synagogues  
and places of honour at banquets.

47 They devour widows' houses  
and for the sake of appearance say long prayers.

They will receive the greater condemnation.'

21 He looked up and saw

rich people putting their gifts into the treasury;

2 he also saw a poor widow put in two small copper coins.

3 He said,

'Truly I tell you,

this poor widow has put in more than all of them;

4 for all of them have contributed out of their abundance,

but she out of her poverty has put in all she had to live on.'

5 When some were speaking about the temple,

how it was adorned with beautiful stones

and gifts dedicated to God, he said,

6 'As for these things that you see, the days will come  
when not one stone will be left upon another;

all will be thrown down.'