

Courage to Live

Founder's Day Sunday

October 14, 2012

Sermon by Rev. Damaris D. Whittaker

On this beautiful Sunday, we celebrate 380 years of being here in the midst of this wonderful historic city. If it was possible for any of us to interview some of the first settlers, I'm sure they would say - who would have thought it? Who would have thought this city would become what it is today? Or, perhaps they would say - we certainly believed this was possible through the grace of God.

Looking back, we romanticize about the experiences of leaving behind all that we previously knew: Leaving behind our home to go elsewhere to start anew. A new life - new possibilities! How exciting.

But as one might imagine, the courage that takes to make such a decision is one that many of us have never been able to muster. To go from the familiar to the unknown, and to build a new life, is scary enough to say the least.

We are always hearing that human beings are generally afraid of change. In my opinion, it is not change that we most fear, rather the notion of losing what we care about, what we value, and consider essential to who and what we are.

The Gospel lesson this morning, presents us with the story of a young man who comes to Jesus with a question: "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" Clearly through the scriptural passage, we can see that this is a young man who has tried to live a life following at least the commandments that he has known since he was a child. So, why the question?

It is evident that he is in need of something deeper. Perhaps something is not quite right, or complete about his life. He is struggling with a deeper hunger, one that is dictating that perhaps there is more to life than just doing what is expected of him. There is a yearning to come to Jesus. Some have called this young man a seeker or someone equivalent to an un-churched person. But, what if this morning, there are seekers among us, who feel there is something more than merrily doing just what is expected of them, more than just doing what we have always done? Then, perhaps the search is not to physically move to a new territory and restart anew, but rather to enter a new place in the journey of faith - a place where limitations of the known could be broken to give way to new horizons and elevated, thus heightened points of arrival in our relationship with God.

"What must I do to inherit eternal life" asked the rich man. And he received a response that was unusual and unexpected. He is instructed to **go, sell, give, come and follow**. **To go and sell** his possessions, to give away his wealth, but to give it to the poor, implied is the importance of sharing in the hardships, and need of one's fellow human being that is the requirement of life in the kingdom of God. Perhaps this is not at all about money, but instead, identity - how we relate to God and to one another.

To come and follow - here is an invitation for discipleship - to be free from everything that may hold him bound. All of the things that perhaps possessed him.

Clearly, to leave that which we have grown accustomed to; be it riches, comfort, social status, power, or privileges, is a painful move. Yet, it is often in losing that we gain, it is perhaps in making this move that we discover grace, blessings and purpose.

As we celebrate our history today, we may have an opinion of those who came before us, to be people who were set in their practices and beliefs. The way we often adhere to certain traditions, one would think this is because of the resolve of our founders.

However, I have a different view or perspective about those founders, dreamers, and settlers that arrived here 380 years ago. In my humble opinion, they were revolutionaries; risk takers, people who were willing to “go, sell, come and follow God.” People who embraced change!

Thomas Hooker, delivered a sermon called: *The Danger of Desertion*.

In which, he stated:

This is our day of atonement. This present day is ours. We have nothing to do with tomorrow. We are at odds with God, and this is the day of our reconciliation. This is the day wherein we are to make our peace with our God! Let us labour, therefore, to prevail with God... Would you have the gospel kept with these lazy wishes? Oh, no, no! Arise! Arise from off your downy beds, and fall down upon your knees, and entreat God to leave his gospel to you and to your posterity! Shall we, by our sins, disinherit our infants and posterity of such a blessing? Shall we bereave them of the gospel, which is, or should be, the life of their lives, and so have them brought up in superstition? No, no! Lord, we cannot abide this. Oh, give us neither wealth nor any other blessing but thy gospel! This is our plea, Lord. And when we have found God, then let us bring him home to our houses, and there retain him, that so he may be our God, and the God of our posterity. We will cry, 'Lord, have mercy upon us'. Oh, my beloved, carry God home with you I Lay hold on him. Let him not go. And let him be a father to you, and to your posterity!"

My father told me the story of the day he turned 60 years old. He got up in the morning, went to the bathroom as he always does; but that particular day, he took a serious look at himself in the mirror. As if for the first time, he saw all of the wrinkles on his face and gray hair on his head, and asked the man in the mirror, “What happened to you?” Because his image was not consistent with how he felt and saw himself in his mind.

Is it possible that if the founders were able to see us today, they might ask the same question to us? “What happen to you?” Have you lost passion for the Gospel and God’s presence?

As I thought about the founders of this Church and this beautiful City, as I reflect upon this excerpt of Thomas Hooker’s sermon, I could not help but to think about the thousands of immigrants (from just about all the nations in the world) who are now residents of the City of Hartford. Those, who like our founders, made the decision to perhaps, leave family, mother or father, sister or brothers: People who gave up many valuable things and left behind such wonderful memories, but placed their faith to find Grace and hope in a new place.

If Jesus was to propose the same to us today, in a time when many have too much and too many have not enough, what would be our response to the invitation of Jesus? Would we consider letting go of those things that perhaps possess us, with the faith that we will acquire more in return through God’s will?

The founders of this church and this City left many things perhaps valuable to them, with the hope of freedom and justice. Today we are a testimony of their courage to live. However, this morning there are deeper questions to consider.

- Do we have the courage to assess the possibilities?
- Courage to see the potential?
- Courage to open our hearts to this generation?
- Courage to take the next step towards a new day?

Courage to answer Jesus invitation, and perhaps as Thomas Hooker, stated “Oh, give us neither wealth nor any other blessing but thy Gospel! This is our plea, Lord. And when we have found God, then let us bring him home to our houses, and there retain him, that so he may be our God, and the God of our posterity.”

Do we have courage to live God’s purpose for this our time?

May God lead us in this journey of faith. May God’s grace fill our hearts with the desire to serve, and may God’s spirit give us the vision to acknowledge those who came before us, and the strength to re-think our own lives. Listen to the call and follow with joy. Amen.