

October 11, 2009

Thanksgiving Sunday
Scarboro United Church
Calgary AB

Rev. J. Paul Mullen

Read: Joel 2:21-27 • Psalm 126 • 1 Timothy 2:1-7 • Matthew 6:25-33

"Living Thanks in Tough Times"

From the Joel reading I am taken aback by the first words: "Fear not, O soil." If ever there was a time for the soil to quake with fear it is now. Never in human history has the soil that covers but a very small part of this earth been so threatened. Pollution, urban sprawl and erosion will inevitably render the soil useless or unavailable. The question is simply how long? How long until there is no more arable land? How long until waterways are clogged with the results of erosion? How long until the last farmable acre is paved over? How long until the natural consequences of our abuse of soil, water, air and light fulfill their destiny?

Fear not, O soil? Be glad and rejoice? Fear not you animals in the pastures? Fear not, O children? I don't think so. Without a change in human behaviour a disastrous future is unavoidable, a more compelling future, unachievable. Without a change in attitude, a change of behaviour is impossible.

Well, right about now you may be tempted to throw up your hands and say, "This is not what I want to think about on Thanksgiving Sunday!!!!" I can assure you that thanksgiving is not only possible in tough times, giving thanks in the toughest times is not only possible, giving thanks in tough times is necessary. Living thanks at all times is a greater challenge and one I think is absolutely essential.

Perhaps if there is any hope it is found in the rest of that verse in Joel: "Fear not, O soil, be glad and rejoice in your God; for God has given the early rain for your vindication, God has poured down for you abundant rain . . . as before."

Thomas Merton, in the solitude of the Trappist monastery where he lived, listens to the rain and meditates, "The night became very dark. The rain surrounded the whole cabin with its virginal myth, a whole world of meaning, of secrecy, of silence, of rumour. Think of it: all that speech pouring down, selling nothing, judging nobody, drenching the thick mulch of dead leaves, soaking the trees, filling the gullies and crannies of the wood with water, washing out to places where men have stripped the hillside! What a thing it is to sit absolutely alone, in the forest, at night, cherished by this wonderful, unintelligible, perfectly innocent speech, the most comforting speech in the world, the talk that rain makes by itself . . ." (Thomas Merton, Raids on the Unspeakable (New York: New Directions, 1966, p. 89)

Rain as speech! To turn a Shakespearean phrase, God's word, "droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven upon the place beneath . . .," like mercy.

Jesus says of the rain that it falls on the just and unjust alike. Perhaps that's what Shakespeare had in mind when he equated rain and mercy. I know I was troubled by that phrase for many years. The rain falls on the just and the unjust alike. Why would the unjust get the same treatment as the just? That's not what fairness is about. Growing up I had absorbed the idea, not from home life but certainly from my cultural context, that the unjust were to be caught and punished. The just would be rewarded. That's what fairness is all about, isn't it?

Recent letters to the editor decry the sentence of Cochrane cement truck driver, Daniel Tschetter, to a mere 5 1/2 years in jail. I know I expected at least 10 years. Others want to throw away the key. Yet how many years would it take to bring back to life the five people who died in the accident he caused?

Contrary to what people think, when Jesus uses the phrase "an eye for an eye" he is pointing out the inadequacy of that supposed fairness. He is saying that violence in response to violence simply doesn't work. When you get too much rain, turning on the sprinkler doesn't help. When there is a drought grabbing a flame thrower is pointless. A change of attitude is needed. A change of gratitude is needed.

By observing and reminding us that the rain falls on the just and unjust alike, Jesus points to God's fairness. Rain falls on everyone just or unjust. It is not unfair - it is profoundly fair. Creation and all that it contains, all of nature and all of life, is freely and unreservedly given to all of us. We don't earn it except by enduring birth. For the span of our lives it is ours to do with as we please. We are asked only to look after it and each other. And be grateful.

Instead of violence in our Gospel reading today, Jesus urges us to "consider the birds of the air, the lilies of the field". How macho is that??? An invitation to contemplate birds and lilies may not stir our blood the way vengeance can, but think of the long-term consequences.

Creation is God's first and only book, and it is good. The book about God, the Bible, can only make sense when read through the context of the first book, creation. That is the only way we can develop a theology for a sustainable future and a different attitude.

Dorothee Soelle writes, "Creation is the book that God wrote. To read in it means to put amazement and cognition together. [wonder and thinking together.] Bernard of Clairvaux testifies that whatever he knows of divine things and Holy Scriptures he learned in woods and fields. 'I have no other masters than the beeches and the oaks.'" (The Silent Cry: Mysticism and Resistance, Fortress Press, 2001, p. 100)

It has been said that the first word of faith is thanks. Unfortunately that deep gratitude cannot be realized without an appreciation for the giftedness of creation. When we are utterly amazed by all we have been given, deep gratitude and deep ecology, even deep theology, become possible. A new attitude emerges

This coming March at the Calling Lakes Centre at Fort Qu'appelle, Saskatchewan, Rabbi Marcia Prager is offering a program called "Abraham: A Journey of Faith." In the Centre's new catalogue she writes: "It is said that as a boy, when Abraham recoiled in horror from the idolatrous travesty that consumed the soul of Ur, he would lie for hours in the open fields, his insistent spirit soaring, interrogating the star strewn sky. If the idols were not gods, what then?"

Was God the mysterious moon of night? Could that be? Yet dawn comes and the moon yields sky to the sun. Perhaps, he thought, we are called to serve the flaming fire of day? As he lay pressed into the earth, his soul soaring to heaven, days and nights rolled past. Sun, then moon, then sun again . . . Knowing grew inside him: oasis waters seeping, swelling. No! Not sun, not moon, no force that can be seen or named. Something larger, greater, more powerful, sourcing all yet filling all. Not sun. Not moon. Not the idols or their priests. Only One Power. One Source. One God! YES!"

The other day I walked past a local store which sells decorative items. I had passed it a number of times over the last two years. This time, however, I looked down as I passed the corner window. There on the bottom shelf on a small sign were these words, "Thankfulness begins with a good memory." I have to admit that my first thought was, "I'm getting old enough that soon I won't have to be grateful any more!" As I thought about it, though, I realized how much depth can be packed in a few words.

Last Sunday we were urged, in the Communion Service that Jan wrote for us, to remember the great works that God has done and the wisdom for living we have been given. Again and again we called "Do you remember?" and you responded, "Yes, we remember." And as we remembered I felt my own gratitude increase. What great gifts our faith has given us in and through and beyond tough times. Our faith lives and our gratitude lives no matter what. "Thankfulness begins with a good memory."

In setting aside these few days of Thanksgiving each year we are invited into gratitude, remembering family, friends, community, society -- all that enables the goodness in life for each of us. We need also remember the soil from which life comes. Remember you are clay. Remember you are stardust. Remember you are so much more than golden. Remember you are a beloved child, not just a child of the universe but a child of all that brings the universe into being. Remember you are loved into being. Remember you are loved into fulfilment. Remember and give thanks, remember and live thanks. Live thanks. Especially in the tough times.

Remember you are clay. Remember you are soil and live thanks. "Do not fear, O soil; be glad and rejoice, for God has done great things!"

May you always be amazed.

Amen