

“Imagine”

John Lennon’s song echoes the vision that another man named John expressed in the narrative called the Revelation to John. Both men have been suspected of being stoned when they wrote. By stoned, I mean high on hallucinogens, not pelted with pebbles. And Peter’s vision of inclusivity came in a dream. Yet both of the biblical writers as well as the modern songwriter invite us to catch a vision with our eyes wide open, our senses intact and our brains fully functioning.

Both Peter and John, the early John, that is, understood their visions to have come directly from God, and to carry moral imperative in relation to their current human cultural and political contexts. Peter lived in those precarious earliest days of forming the church, which to him seemed a Jewish movement in the face of a hostile Roman Empire, and the imperative given to him was to reach out to include gentiles, even a Roman centurion and his family. The story of Peter’s struggle to come to this strange, even threatening, new understanding takes up the entire tenth chapter of Acts, leading up to today’s reading.

Make no mistake, this new vision of inclusion was more than difficult for Peter, considering all that he and the other followers of Jesus had been through. It called him to stretch beyond anything he would even have considered, had not the remembrance of Jesus and the presence of the risen Christ kept pushing him from behind and pulling him from before. Our human desire, indeed perhaps among our basic needs, is to seek safety in our faith, familiarity in our community, and security in our position in life. Yet the consistent call of God throughout scripture and throughout the history of not only Christianity but all the major religions, has been to a morality that sees beyond our own needs to comprehend the needs of others, even others not like us.

So what about Revelation, where we find not only the promise of a new heaven and a new earth but the promise of cosmic punishment for wrongdoers? This is not the place to dissect the entirety of the vision and the theology and the history behind this odd book. Suffice it to say that it was written to give hope to the church in times that made Peter’s life seem like a cakewalk. The author can be forgiven for expressing that hope in ways that labeled their persecutors as enemies of God and promised that their persecutors would suffer damnation. The remarkable thing about this vision was not that the seer succumbed to the desire for

vengeance, but that he could even imagine that God would bring about a new kind of reality here on this earth.

God's message of inclusion, of peace and of a new level of morality breaks through the complex, confusing and sometimes sordid history of human activity in the Bible time after time, punctuating the struggles of the people with the calling to learn more, to become more, to be more. In the giving of the law recorded in Deuteronomy are these words: "For the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who is not partial and takes no bribe, who executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and who loves the strangers, providing them food and clothing. You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt." Instructions to the tribes of Israel included that no landowner was to harvest his entire crop, but ten percent was to be left so that families in poverty could gather food for themselves. From there, all the way to Jesus' story of the Good Samaritan, or what we today might think of as the Good Mexican or the Good Arab, and on to the judgment scene in Matthew, where Jesus repeats, "inasmuch as you did it to the least of these, you did it to me . . ." God's message is clear and repeated.

It can be hard for people to accept the personal aspect of that message when faced with competing for a job with someone of a different race or nationality. It can be hard for people to accept the personal aspect of that message when it means more than giving charity. But it can be harder yet in our individualistic society to even grasp the cultural moral imperative that the stranger is to be welcomed in our midst.

You may think that I am talking about this congregation's history of welcoming people of different sexual orientation, yet not wanting to talk about it in order to proclaim itself Open and Affirming. Well, perhaps that, too, but today I'm talking about something far more egregious and urgent. I'm talking about the moral breakdown in our society that allows and even condones hate talk, character assassination, calls for torture and murder and even worse. I'm talking about the moral breakdown in our society that makes it okay to enact laws that invade personal privacy, that restrict and even deny human rights, that conveniently labels matters of justice as "political correctness", that preys on the impoverished and on those simply struggling to survive. I'm talking about rhetoric in the name of God and country that incites fear and whips up chauvinism. I'm talking about a lopsided economic system that rewards the most greedy and punishes the innocent. I'm talking about a nation that has lost its moral compass.

We have seen the damage done to the environment and to people by legitimated greed in so many places and ways that I don't even have to name them. They are on the front pages of our newspapers and blatant on the news hours of every television network, and even more

apparent in Facebook and Twitter. We have seen and heard lawmakers dehumanize the workers who fuel the businesses in their cities and harvest the crops on their farms, branding them as “illegals” and worse. This is immigrant rights Sunday. How ironic that it comes in the wake of Arizona’s new “papers, please” law. How mistaken we have been to allow these issues to be seen and spoken of as simply “politics” when “politics” is nothing more than the reflection of the morality and the ethos of the people.

My question today, to the church and to the society, is, what part of “Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself” do we not understand? What part of “Inasmuch as you have done it to the least of these, you have done it to me” do we not get? What part of “welcome the stranger in your midst, for in so doing, you may entertain angels unaware” do we not hear? So far, in today’s so-called discussion, the voice of the progressive church has been only a whisper. The Colorado Council of Churches has created a curriculum on immigration reform. We have a copy in our church office. I don’t know if it has been looked at. Various coalitions have formed and dissolved and re-formed, without tremendous effect. Where is our voice? It is time for us to demand to be heard. It is time for us to declare that this is NOT simply a matter of politics, but a moral issue.

I care less about what shape immigration reform takes than that we begin and maintain a civil discourse that allows and encourages more than our basest instincts to be heard. If people can openly pray to God that our national leaders should be assassinated, WE can openly pray to God that our nation remember the lonely lady who stands in New York harbor with the sadly forgotten words etched at her feet, “Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free.”

Our nation, its elected leaders, its unelected power mongers in corporations and elsewhere, and most of all its people, need to get on our knees and say, “Father/Mother God, forgive us, for we have sinned.” And then we need to get up on our feet and join the struggle for justice and peace and for environmental responsibility. It matters not which of these things is most important to you, for they are all tied together and the future of humankind depends on our learning new ways.

There is no time to waste. The State of Louisiana is sustaining one more devastating blow. People continue to die due to unsafe working conditions, and more people continue to die struggling across the desert and through the barbed wire trying to come into this nation where they may have a chance to feed their families despite the hostile reception they find. People are dying, people are suffering, the land is suffering. Hatred is spewing forth its own kind of black ash cloud across our skies. We cannot stand idly by and still call ourselves Christians. At

the very least, we must find our voices. We must speak to the companies whose stock we own, to the businesses we patronize, to those who represent us in legislatures, and most of all to those who advocate hateful actions in the name of God. Years ago, Blaise Pascal said, "Men never do evil so completely and cheerfully as when they do it from religious conviction." And, to get back to the title topic of this sermon, Mark Twain once said, "You cannot depend on your eyes when your imagination is out of focus."

Let us imagine the world in which God wants us to live, and then let us call it into being, with our voices, our hearts, our heads, our prayers, our hands, our courage and our determination. We are the church of Jesus Christ. We must be about his business. Amen