

Sunday April 8, 2018

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As I reflect on the stories that have shaped my life, I am constantly gravitating towards the three temptations of Jesus while fasting in the desert.

One stands out the most

From the top of the mountain, the devil showed Jesus the world and all that was in it,

And said to him: “All these things I will give You, if You fall down and worship me.” (Matthew 4:9).

There is so much temptation around us everywhere, politicians get lured by power and influence, people in corporations seek to control and own the things that matter to everyone, from the food we eat, the water we drink, to the clothes we wear.

We are tempted daily to protect our privilege and to fight for it, some would do so at any cost.

I came to First UCC fully aware of the lack of permanent answers and solutions at scale to these pressing issues.

But I also came fully aware that this is a place where we can discuss these challenges head on.

This is a place where we listen to our tireless God, who wants us to love and care for creation and each other.

I also came with the full expectation that as a mature church committed to justice and tolerance we would seek to find new ways to understand how God wants us to live.

For me God has no specific church or place, God to me is the world itself, it is us, it is creation.

Because of this belief that grounds my faith, I truly believe that what we do to each other and to the world around us we do on to God.

The struggles of today seem to be perennial struggles of the world. What ails us today is also not very different than thousands of years ago.

Conditions, scale and actors have changed, new issues have emerged, but the foundation of the conflicts and the reason we can't achieve peace have not changed.

We identify with the stories of the bible because they speak to these struggles of many who seek to build a more peaceful and just world across time.

So, how do we reconcile the fact that we keep struggling over the same things sometimes achieving great gains in achieving a better world to just fall back again and again.

In fact the problems keep getting worse. Hunger, poverty, bigotry, discrimination, human trafficking, ecological degeneration.

For as long as we have existed, a significant part of the population has had to dedicate their lives to fighting the injustices and destruction that the rest of the population causes.

The scripture tells us to share the burdens of those who struggle in their daily attempt to find food, shelter, clothing and the basic necessities of life.

The bible tells us about these forces of good and evil and that we are to fight them forever, but doesn't that by definition affirms, that scripture itself is telling us that these issues will never be resolved?

If that is the case, what are we supposed to do?

What are we to tell the children, the youth going to Guatemala, why does that matter?

God is still speaking, we believe, but what is God saying to us today in relation to the incessant advance of the destructive forces of humanity?

Are we listening or is God again speaking to a mostly deaf world?

Our attempts to heal and build a more just and enjoyable world is consistently under attack. Too often by the very people and institutions that preach they are working for the progress of humanity.

The question is, progress towards what?

When we step back and try to see ourselves in this world where forces of destruction seem to have taken over and currently threaten our own survival, it is hard to find hope.

But in my life, in the life together with Amy and our kids, and in my life as part of this community, it is precisely because of such reality that we feel driven to do a lot more.

We do believe and have faith that there is enough to go around for everyone and we have witness it in the lives of many we have shared our journey with.

We must challenge our understanding of what it means to work for a just world where peace and reconciliation can prevail.

The mounting evidence of how broken our world has become is overwhelming, and a stark reminder that we need to think seriously about the challenges we face as a faith community and our understanding of what our role and our responsibilities as a community out to be.

In any direction we look, we find evidence of a world struggling with its own temptations and unable to resist evil.

According to the Institute for Faith, Work and Economics, today human trafficking generates an estimated \$150 billion annually. There is a total of approximately 39.5 million people in slavery today. Children represent 26% of the total estimated force labor victims.

The United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization estimates that about **795 million** people of the **7.3 billion** people in the world, or one in nine, were suffering from chronic undernourishment in 2014-2016

These facts reflect not an unavoidable phenomena, as it is the result of how the world is organized and structures are tilted to benefit a small group that dominates, exploits and cares little about the consequences.

We must start thinking of our privileges not as something that we have worked hard for, but as something we have taken from others. Just like economic wealth, we can't accumulate it in one place or by one person without others having to give it up.

So, it is with privilege. And the cold truth about both is that once we have them, we will find in our minds a way to justify, defend and fight for them.

Whether we do these things intentionally or unaware, does not change the outcomes.

If we can't reconcile our own mental discrepancies with reality, we are also unable to see past our own privilege and start truly working on the permanent solutions to these powerful temptations. To build a just world requires that we listen to scripture differently. To me heaven is a world at peace, for peace to materialize there must be justice and true freedom.

Justice means a world without hunger and poverty, which means a world without super-rich, super powerful and super dominant systems that ensure the rich get richer and the poor get poorer.

A world without hunger and poverty means a world without systems that enslave and exploit and rob communities of their food security systems.

Some of those systems date back to ancient times and though many with few updates can be a true solution to many of today's challenges, they are discounted in favor of what is killing us.

In our discourse here at First UCC we always speak of our complicity with oppressive systems, but we also speak of our communal responsibilities within the same system.

Within this convoluted, complicated and sometimes depressing world, we seek to find our way.

Our Guatemalan service learning project is one more important attempt at doing our part in a small part of the world where injustice prevails.

So, we go there with our youth and some adult members of our congregation

We go there to learn, to listen to the speaking God through the words of children and through the witness of their lives.

Children whose futures became dogged by the global forces and structures that effectively trickle into the fabric of families and rip them apart.

We will go there to see if we can accompany these children as they strive to mend the fabric of their unfolding lives.

But we go there with a full understanding that we are not there to fix anything, we go there to help but also to learn the language of the God who is still speaking through them, through us.

I have struggled my whole life with properly interpreting the teachings of Jesus, it was while seeking those answers that I first went to the orphanage, where I met Amy and we started a path that eventually landed us here, looking at this same world and same challenges together with you.

Every time I step back and look at the brokenness of the world and examine my own life and my participation in it, I am reminded that the world is the result of our daily choices and that we CAN choose to do better.

During our trip to Guatemala we will work on the orphanages' rain water collection system, but my hope is that water will be but a vehicle by which we will experience their lives.

Water will be our excuse, so we can better interpret the conditions and the systems that delivered those children there.

So, when we come back to our place of comfort here in Northfield, away from their reality, we will see the world a bit closer to the way it actually is for the majority.

We hope that we will grow a bit more and find ways to listen to our speaking God differently, with purpose and more clarity.

We will come back feeling good of what we did, and we will share it with you joyfully, but we will also be clear in our understanding that we went there to serve and learn and that this learning is critical to our church as we continue to shape our ways and do our part in mending the broken fabric of this world.

May it be so, and may us believe not only on a God that is still speaking, but transform ourselves into true listeners and a capable congregation of turning those words into new ways of thinking and living our own lives.