

HOW CAN WE CHANGE THE FUTURE?

(12/31/17)

Scripture Lessons: Romans 12:1-2
Revelation 21:1-7
Mark 1:9-15

“Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.”
(Romans 12:2)

It seems especially meaningful to be gathered here in worship on the last day of the year. It feels like we are entering into or are already in what the anthropologists call a liminal space. A liminal space is sort of betwixt and between. The limen, as you probably know, is the spot right under a door. It is not exactly in this room, and it is not exactly in the next. Yet it is actually in both.

In the rites of passage, the initiatory rites that function in traditional cultures to move a young person from being a child to being an adult, or from being a single person to being married, the initiate is usually brought to or voluntarily enters a liminal space. This is the place where things happen. The person undergoes experiences, sometimes ordeals that prepare him/her for the next stage.

The elders, the ones who oversee the process function as mentors. Since they have already made the transition to the new stage, both psychologically and socially, they oversee the process of the initiation and ensure that it is carried through to a successful conclusion. When a rite of passage is successful, both the individual and the society benefit. The individual self-actualizes; he/she grows and matures developmentally. And the society now receives the contributions of a psychologically mature adult.

When I think of these rites of passage, I think of Jesus' experience in the wilderness immediately following his baptism. As recorded in the Gospel of Mark, the Holy Spirit drove the young Jesus into the desert. There he underwent severe hardship and deprivation for forty days, and he was tested by Satan. The three temptations were the Adversary's efforts to pull Jesus off center, to keep him from stepping forward into the life to which God had called him.

Something powerful must have happened to Jesus during his time alone in the wilderness. When he emerges, he begins to proclaim the coming of the kingdom of God.

He calls his disciples. He also discovers that he has the power to heal both physical and psychological dis-ease. He essentially becomes a change agent in creating a better world.

This time of year, a sort of liminal time, reminds me of a story about an idealistic young trekker (sort of like myself) seeking words of wisdom from a Tibetan Buddhist master. The young man undertook a difficult journey. He embarked upon a trekking pilgrimage to a sacred lake, a sacred mountain, and to where the master lived in a small monastery high in the Himalayan Mountains in Tibet.

Sitting at the master's feet, the young man asked his question: "Can you tell me what the future will be like--both for me as an individual and for the world?"

"Certainly," said the master. "Today will be just like yesterday. Tomorrow will be just like today."

"So the future will always be like the past?" asked the puzzled young man. "I find that quite discouraging."

"Yes," replied the master. "The future will be exactly like the past." After a long pause, the master continued: "Unless, of course, there's a change of consciousness."

We know there are going to be changes in the coming year. Computers will be faster, smaller, and less expensive. The economy will shift more and more to e-commerce, closing down many brick and mortar stores and even shopping malls. Something new that we can't even imagine will be invented that will replace something else--like CDs replaced records and tapes and DVDs replaced videos. We will design automobiles that will be more fuel-efficient and will not pollute the environment. We will ride in and perhaps even purchase a self-driving car. There will be amazing breakthroughs in medicine and medical technology.

There will be many changes in our world in the coming year. Governments will change, some through a democratic process and others through more violent means. Some tyrants will fall from power while right wing fascist dictators will come to power in other countries. We will solve some health problems that have plagued us while other unknown and even more deadly diseases will arise. Despite our finely tuned early warning systems, because we fail to care for our environment, natural disasters will take their deadly toll.

These are not the kind of changes that concern me. As a minister and a psychologist, I am much more interested in whether people will change. Will we continue to move forward into the 21st century while our hearts remain mired in the Stone Age? Despite the technological advances that make our world so much smaller, will we continue to be afraid of or prejudiced against people who are different from us? Will white supremacy and hetero-centrism remain characteristic of large segments of our society, even large segments of our religious society? Will all emerging national boundaries be formed along ethnic lines, with people of one racial, ethnic, cultural, or religious group unable to live in peace with those of a different background or different belief system?

I would like the coming year, 2018, to be different from the last. I would like tomorrow to be different from today. I would like our country and our world to evolve. I cling to the hope that the kingdom of God that we can experience as a spiritual reality in our lives can increasingly influence the state of affairs in the world. In the words of the prayer that Jesus taught us, I would like to have God's will be done a little more on earth. I would like the earth, and my life, to become a little more like heaven. I would like the future into which we are stepping not only to advance technologically but also spiritually, just as I would like to become more deeply spiritual in the little time that is still allotted to me.

I would just like to say that I am troubled by those political and even religious leaders who believe that we will not be able to find a more constructive approach to the resolution of international conflict than war. Some of my Christian brothers and sisters, those on the more Evangelical end of the spectrum, ground their beliefs in the biblical prophesy that there will be wars and rumors of wars before the final end, the apocalyptic Second Coming of Christ. I am afraid that this fundamentalist biblical fatalism can lead us to embrace a nuclear holocaust, either over the "ownership of Jerusalem" or in raining fire and fury on the people of North Korea as the "will of God."

I am not naive enough to believe we can end all war, but it is not because of predictions that are recorded in the Book of Revelation. I believe it is because, as God realized and is recorded in Genesis 8:21, there is evil within the human heart. There will be wars in the future not because they are ordained as signs of the end, but because we

are unwilling or unable to come to terms with our dark side, our shadow, as nations and as individuals. I also believe that the only way we can prevent war, the only way we can make this a better world, the only way we can make the future better than the past is if, as the master said, we change our consciousness.

I think we know what we need to do to prevent war in the coming year, to prevent war in the future. All we need to do is to dissolve the distinction between me-and-not-me, the distinction between self-and-other. We have to break down the walls that divide us. This is a fundamental principle of both Buddhism and Christianity: that the distinction between self-and-other, between the other group and our group is an illusion. When we realize this, when we realize our deep connectedness with everyone, with all sentient beings; when we realize that we are all children of God and therefore we are all brothers and sisters, we will realize the foolishness of war.

This brings us back to the words of wisdom that were imparted to the young, idealistic trekker by the Tibetan Buddhist master. The only way that the future will change is if individual people change. And the only way people will change is if we can let go of our self-centeredness.

We do this when we let Jesus into our heart, when we let Jesus become the center of our life. The apostle Paul tells us in Philippians 2:7, that we need to take on the mind that was in Christ Jesus. Just as the human Jesus emptied himself to be filled with the Spirit of God, so also we should empty ourselves to be filled with the Spirit of Christ. If we are filled with the Spirit of Christ, if we take on the mind of Christ, how can we hate and persecute those who are different from us?

Today *can* be different from yesterday. Tomorrow *can* be different from today. The future *can* be different from the past. But it has to begin with us. When we dissolve the artificial distinctions between self-and-other, we are doing what Jesus called us to do in the Parable of the Good Samaritan: to realize that even those who are different from us, those whom we have regarded as our enemies, are really our neighbors. This is what it means to experience, to be in the kingdom of God. And this is the way the world changes. It begins with us as individuals. It begins with a change of consciousness.

I hope that over the past few decades we have learned that the idea of a “war to end all wars” is an illusion. The only way we can prevent war is to change the hearts of

people. We learned that we can legislate equal rights for blacks, but we cannot legislate an end to racism. The only way we can end racism is to change the hearts of people. The Supreme Court decreed that gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered people should not be deprived of their constitutional rights. But the only way to overcome homophobia is through love.

As was illustrated in the story of the young trekker, the only way that our hearts can be changed is if our consciousness is changed. It is changed when we fill the center of our life with the Holy Spirit. When we become conscious of our deep connection with all of our brothers and sisters, even those who are different from us, we will respond by trying to create a new and better world.

As the master said, we *can* predict the future. We can predict it with a good deal of certainty. Today will be just like yesterday. Tomorrow will be just like today--unless, of course, there is a change of consciousness.

It all begins with us.

*A sermon preached by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson
The First Community Church of Southborough
www.firstcommunitychurch.com
December 31, 2017*