

Mount Hollywood United Church of Christ – Los Angeles
Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost – October 1, 2017 – World Communion
Rev. Anne G. Cohen, Minister

Philippians 2:1-13 (NRSV)

FOR REFLECTION

“If you are determined on the religious life, you have to toughen up your mind. You have to let it be a thoroughfare for all thoughts, and among them you must make choices.”

— Robertson Davies, The Rebel Angels

Novelist Robertson Davies wrote, “One always learns one’s mystery at the price of one’s innocence.” [1] The word innocent comes from the Latin for unwounded or not harmed. The innocent one hasn’t yet learned from his or her wounds, and therefore doesn’t know his or her full reality yet. Human life only develops in the shadowlands, never inside of pure light or total darkness.

[1] Robertson Davies, Fifth Business (Penguin Classics: 2001), 245.
— Adapted from Richard Rohr, A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life
<https://cac.org/entering-the-dark-wood-2017-09-04/>

Save Yourself!

Paul is in prison. He writes a letter to people who are dear to him – a church he founded in a Roman colony in the City of Philippi. He exhorts them to unity and humility. And he provides them with a theological review in the form of a hymn in verses 6-11. In summary: Jesus is a contradiction in terms – as is every one of us.

Vs. 1-8 Jesus is born in the image of G-d and chooses to take on the form of a human slave. He humbles HIMSELF to the point of suffering a slave’s death – crucifixion.
Vs. 9-11 G-d is pleased with this behavior so, people, show some respect.

And then Paul says:

12 Therefore, my beloved...**work out your own salvation with fear and trembling;**
13 for it is God who is at work in you...

So, salvation, then, (for Paul in this particular text), is being aware of the G-d within US – choosing to be humble rather than lording it over others – taking care of each other – allowing G-d’s pleasure to be our reward. In the meantime, along with all of Creation, we need to recognize the prototype for our lives in Jesus – remind ourselves (regularly and humbly) of the G-d within JESUS and how he handled himself.

The key phrase for me is: **Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you...**

Save yourselves – save your self – knowing G-d is at work in you.
But saving yourself is not a solitary endeavor focused on one's navel.
It is looking to the needs of others and finding unity of mind and heart with others.
Self-regulation and choices are involved.
Awareness of the suffering and needs of others is involved.
And some amount of initiative is involved. We are not saved by sitting around hoping
and wishing and waiting.

We are expected to save ourselves while, simultaneously, focusing away from
ourselves. We, like Jesus, are called to be contradictions in terms.

And this is one thought that came to mind last night when John and my Dad and I saw
the new documentary “Dolores.” Dolores Huerta was co-founder of the United Farm
Workers (UFW), community organizer and contract negotiator, strike and boycott
leader, source of the phrase, “Si se puede!” – a rallying cry that candidate Barack
Obama admits to having stolen in his campaign, “Yes we can!”

Dolores gave her life to organize farmworkers – not just in California, not just Latinos –
but nationally and across racial lines – to fight for their rights as human beings and as
Americans. She sacrificed her own passions (music and dancing) and many of her own
needs (a middle-class life-style) to do this work. She even sacrificed, in many ways,
the happiness and stability of her own 11 children – for what she saw as a larger
quality of life issue – something they have all had to come to terms with.

It was no accident that Dolores Huerta and Ramona Holguin (a long-time UFW
volunteer and dear friend of Dolores) were at Burning Man with QueViva! Camp. Yes,
her daughter, Juanita Chavez, (niece of Cesar) was a member of the camp and invited
her. But Dolores saw that the mission of this particular group of 30 people was to
transform the culture of an event that drew 70,000 people. She was supporting the
efforts of artists and activists to de-criminalize immigration, lift up the value of lives of
Color, engender conversations across racial lines that might change attitudes and
behaviors, increase the self-proclaimed “radical inclusion” that the event failed to
achieve.

Dolores never did anything by accident. She made tough, informed choices that often
meant re-prioritizing her own needs. And when she was not chosen to succeed Cesar
Chavez as president of the UFW, she humbly made her farewells for the unity of the
union. But she continues to organize and educate through her own organization, the
Dolores Huerta Foundation. <http://doloreshuerta.org/>

Dolores is a remarkable person – not necessarily because of her accomplishments – but because of her choices. She humbled herself to lift up others. She opened her mind to the struggles of others and made connections between Latinos and Filipinos, the Black Civil Rights Movement and the Environmental movement, Feminism and her own Catholicism. She spent the time to listen to individual stories – connect people with overlapping stories – and build a network that changed the world.

Which leads me, of course, to reflect on my own choices – and to ask all of us to reflect on our choices – past and present.

The first step is to recognize that G-d is at work in each of us and in all of us together.

The second step is to allow that information to humble us – as well as unite us.

The third step is to make thoughtful choices about our behavior, our attitudes, our treatment of others – including those closest to us.

When John and I got married I was already jaded from two previously terminated marriages. I couldn't promise to love him until death or beyond. So, what we promised was to wake up each day and choose to love each other as best we could that day. If that meant passion – great. If that meant doing the laundry for the other person – excellent. If that meant choosing to leave instead of kill or maim the other person – that would be a good choice.

Marriage, like anything in life, is day-to-day, hour-to-hour choices. This is the hard work of saving ourselves from our shadow-sides, contradicting our negative impulses with better practices. The Jewish Talmud says,

Whoever destroys a soul, it is considered as if he destroyed an entire world. And whoever saves a life, it is considered as if he saved an entire world.

Mishnah Sanhedrin 4:5; Yerushalmi Talmud 4:9, Babylonian Talmud Sanhedrin 37a.

Even if the life that we save is our own – we have saved an entire world. If someone else doesn't have to save us or clean up our messes, they can concentrate on others – save another world. We are all connected; our choices affect others and vice versa.

May our ritual of Communion – once again – remind us of this fact: G-d is at work in us. We must save ourselves and thereby save the entire world.

Let us go forth and make good choices. Amen.

Philippians 2:1-13 (NRSV)

1 If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, 2 make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. 3 Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. 4 Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. 5 Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,

6 who, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,
7 but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form,
8 he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death—
even death on a cross.

9 Therefore God also highly exalted him
and gave him the name
that is above every name,
10 so that at the name of Jesus
every knee should bend,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
11 and every tongue should confess
that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.

12 Therefore, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed me, not only in my presence, but much more now in my absence, **work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; 13 for it is God who is at work in you,** enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.