

Arvada
United Methodist Church

June 28, 2009

Together We Can

Rev. Rusty Butler

Psalm 30

Eleanor Porter was a children's author in the early part of the twentieth century. You might not have ever heard of Eleanor Porter, but I know you've heard about the subject of the children's stories she wrote. They stories were all about a young girl named Pollyanna.

Pollyanna was an orphan who was sent to live with her mean old Aunt Polly. Where Aunt Polly was mean and nasty, Pollyanna was sweet and precious. When Aunt Polly would discipline Pollyanna by making her eat bread and milk for supper, Pollyanna would say, "Oh, how I do love bread and milk for supper!" When Aunt Polly would make Pollyanna go sit in the attic as a punishment, Pollyanna would say something like, "Oh, how I do love the view from up there in the attic. And on and on it went.

I do not like Pollyanna type faith. You've heard it in a hundred different clichés. Let go and let God! God never gives you more than you can handle! When God closes a door, she'll open a window. On and on it goes. Makes my stomach churn.

I suspect there are more than a few people who have been completely turned off of religion by that kind of cliché faith.

I heard recently that on the continuum of sermons...if you just laid them out on one end, there are sermons that are just cliché...like a bumper sticker, just about as deep as that. And on the other end, sermons can be unsolvable riddles, unsolvable to the person giving them and entirely misunderstood by the people who have been subject to them.

The key is trying to find something in the middle. Not a cliché and not something completely misunderstood. That's what we are aiming for. We'll see if we can get there!

Can I tell you a secret? Sometimes, not all the time, sometimes when I read the bible and especially the Psalms, I get this strange nagging feeling that some of those writers had a Pollyanna kind of faith. Now I don't think they did but sometimes it comes across that way. I don't know how else to say it.

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Just listen, “His anger is but for a moment; his favor is for a lifetime. Seriously? Whoever wrote that must have had one bad thing happen and then everything else good in a lifetime...how often does that happen?

Or how about, “you turned my mourning into dancing...you have taken off my sackcloth and clothed me with joy.” Really? I don’t know it seems too...I don’t know...too easy. Maybe we’ve just read it so many times that now it seems like a cliché.

I met a fellow this week. He was from the Western slope. He needed some help, wanted to come and talk to me and so I said ok. Nice guy. Two college degrees, owned his own business, was a father, a member of a United Methodist church out on the western slope. He had hit rock bottom. Lost his business, lost his wife, lost his daughter. Just lost everything. At the bottom, as the Psalmist puts it he was in the pit. Some of you have been there. He could not see a way out.

But he had this faith. It is not the kind of faith I have but he had a faith. His position was that God was doing this to test him, or it was a punishment because he’d done something wrong.

I don’t understand God in that way. I think sometimes the economy goes sour and people lose their jobs and I think that when you marry someone, sometimes things get turned upside down and sometimes you don’t stay together and it’s better for everyone involved.

But this fellow thought it was God doing it to him. Well that is a faith stance. I think it’s a stance that is held by a lot of people. They lay the trials and tribulations of a difficult life alongside their faith and they have the kind of theology that matches up one thing on this side of the ledger with something from that side. Well maybe that is a way to see it. Maybe.

I think there might be another approach. I’m not one hundred percent sure this other way is better. To get at and understand the painful parts of life. But I think there’s more to faith and the religious life than clichés. I think you might think that too.

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In the Psalm you heard today, there is a certain formula to that Psalm. There is a need, there is a rescue, and there is thanksgiving. I think that is natural. It makes sense doesn't it?

But there are some twists and turns in that Psalm. Did you hear them? In verses 8 and 9, the writer makes a bargain with God, says, "What profit is there to you O God, if you leave me at the bottom of the pit? Then he goes on and says, I won't be singing your praises then I can assure you of that! You'd better bring me up out of this pit...and then I'll praise you!" I paraphrased that a little but that's the jist of it!

It reminds me of the title of a book written a few years ago about Junior High aged people and their relationship with their parents, called Get out of my life, but first could you drive me and Cheryl to the mall?

The tone is a little reminiscent of a story told about Teresa of Avila who during the Thirty Years War was removing dead bodies from the battlefield on an oxcart. In the midst of her work it began to rain...just poured and the fields quickly became thick with mud, she could barely move the cart. She is reported to have shaken her fist at the heavens and said, "No wonder you don't have any more friends if you treat them like this!" (Feasting the Word, Year B Vol. 3, p. 178)

Well, just how do you deal with things? How do you keep going without resorting to some kind of clichéd faith? What's a faithful life supposed to look like anyway?

Bishop Stanovsky gave the closing address at Annual Conference. She charged us with some instruction. I wanted to share it with you because I thought it was so important, so good, not a cliché.

She said we need to do four things. I perked up a little. What four things?

She said we needed to worship. Well you know, I pretty much have to do that every week. I at least go to worship. She said you've got to do it regularly 3 out of four weeks a month. She said that's the center, that holds it together. Worship. Well, I could buy that.

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Second she went on we need to grow. She explained that people needed to grow in faith. Some people do it by prayer she said. Then she told how that was hard for her, but she learned there was more than one or two ways of prayer and that helped. In our church we have different avenues to help people grow, you can walk the labyrinth, you can sit in the library, you can meet with a group...she said grow. Worship and Grow. I thought now I can remember that.

Then she said you need to do a third thing...it seemed easy so far so I leaned in to get the third thing. You need to give. I sat back.

She said, United Methodists give about two percent of their income, if we gave 3% we'd have no financial problems in any conference and in any church. Here at AUMC you are all so generous, I can say that because I know that while our attendance is about 12 or 13th in the conference our giving ranks us 6th or 7th.

Worship, Grow, Give...this is easy I thought.

Then she said there's a fourth thing. Participate. She mentioned three things that would make an impact on the church and on us. The first is to have a conversation with a young person about their faith. What they believe is important, what they think about God and Jesus and the church. That is scary...for most of us.

This week I received an email from a young woman who is a part of our church. She is going from sophomore into her junior year. Her name is Heather. She sent me an email.

It said in part, I was reading *les Miserable* by Victor Hugo and came upon this part and thought it interesting. Then she shared the part.

I will read just a little of it so you can catch the flavor.

Some people wonder about the church and about whether they are interested in those things anymore. Heather's letter told me they do. The Bishop suggested we talk to a young person about their faith. That can make a difference.

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The second she said was be in ministry with the poor. We do that. We're going to do more of it.

And lastly, she said, develop a culture in your church where you participate in the significant events in the ministry and life of others.

That sounds like something the clergy should do doesn't it... but she told us we all should be doing that.

The highpoint of Annual Conference for many people who attended was the Saturday afternoon Ordination service. Now many people from the conference headed home before that, but I was stranded and so I stayed.

The conference ordained 18 elders, 6 or 7 deacons, and commissioned a handful of local pastors.

Some of them have become friends of mine through the 6 or 7 year long process. So there were a few hundred of us there in this theatre in Grand Junction, family friends, sons and daughters, mothers and fathers, spouses and so forth. I sat in the back with a couple of staff people from the Rocky Mtn conference and another pastor, his name was Paul Kottke. Pastor down at UPark.

The ordination service went on and on. All of them answering the questions, having hands laid on them. It can be pretty redundant. Almost routine. Bishop Elaine would say to them after she put a stole on them, the Yoke is light. And I wanted to say what about the burden?!!

Well they got through it all and then there was another piece, added on this year, I never saw it happen before.

It read like this. Just as all Christians are set apart for love and service in baptism, God chooses some from among the baptized to be set apart as elders and deacons. This afternoon the spirit of God is among us to call a new generation of pastors and servants, elders and deacons to take up the mantle of leading the church of Jesus Christ.

Perhaps you have sensed a nudge toward ordained ministry. Perhaps you have imagined yourself serving Christ by leading others in service to the

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needy or in leading a congregation in word and sacrament. These moments are the ways that the Holy Spirit gets our attention. These need to be welcomed and examined...pray and listen to the quiet voice of God.

If you sense some inner calling to respond, I invite you to come forward as an act of faith to test this calling, come and speak to one of the cabinet or to me about it, Then she said, "If you've already been called, I invite you to rise and come forward as an act of faith and a sign of your willingness to pursue God's call."

I looked at Paul and Paul looked at me. And then we watched as people started getting up all over the theatre and going down there, all going to have a word with those district superintendents and the bishop. "Well," Paul said to me, "I was thinking that no one would go down there". But it ended up there were probably 50-75 people who were lined up. And the young woman I was sitting beside, she is on the conference staff and she went down there. When she got back, with tears in her eyes, she said, "I've been thinking about this for a long time...today was the day."

Worship, grow, give, participate. More than just a cliché. A faith filled life.