

Sermon – Injustice at Bay
Sunday, November 13, 2022
Scripture Readings: Isaiah 65:17-25, II Thess. 3:6-13
The Rev. Dr. Blythe D. Kieffer
Westminster Presbyterian Church
Springfield, Illinois

Our Old Testament reading assigned for this week, Isaiah 65:17-25, celebrates that which is genuinely new. The prophet's vision is of a transformed environment with peoples, habitations, and nature all woven into a complex relationship of unity and harmony, communing together. This peace reflects the character of Israel's God. Listen to what the Spirit is saying through Holy Scripture.

17 For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind. But be glad and rejoice forever in what I am creating; for I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy, and its people as a delight. I will rejoice in Jerusalem, and delight in my people; no more shall the sound of weeping be heard in it, or the cry of distress. No more shall there be in it an infant that lives but a few days, or an old person who does not live out a lifetime; for one who dies at a hundred years will be considered a youth, and one who falls short of a hundred will be considered accursed. They shall build houses and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit. They shall not build and another inhabit; they shall not plant and another eat; for like the days of a tree shall the days of my people be, and my chosen shall long enjoy the work of their hands. They shall not labor in vain, or bear children for calamity; for they shall be offspring blessed by the Lord—and their descendants as well. Before they call I will answer, while they are yet speaking I will hear. The wolf and the lamb shall feed together, the lion shall eat straw like the ox; but the serpent—its food shall be dust! They shall not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain, says the Lord. Amen.

Our second scripture reading in II Thessalonians 3:6-13 reminds members within an early Christian community of the importance of working together for the good of all. Although the reality of their everyday life still fell short of Isaiah's vision, brothers and sisters are called to reflect the integrity of Christ by doing what is right. Hear now God's word.

6 Now we command you, beloved, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, to keep away from believers who are living in idleness and not according to the tradition that they received from us. For you yourselves know how you ought to imitate us; we were not idle when we were with you, and we did not eat anyone's bread without paying for it; but with toil and labor we worked night and day, so that we might not burden any of you. This was not because we do not have that right, but in order to give you an example to imitate. For even when we were with you, we gave you this command: Anyone unwilling to work should not eat. For we hear that some of you are living in idleness, mere busy bodies, not doing any work. Now such persons we command and exhort in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work quietly and to earn their own living. Brothers and sisters do not be weary in doing what is right. Amen.

The title of the meditation: “Injustice at Bay”

Text: “Brothers and sisters, do not be weary in doing what is right.” II Thessalonians 3:13

Let us pray. Holy and loving God, may we not grow weary in doing our part to create your vision of unity, wholeness, and harmony. And now may the words of my mouth and the meditations of each of our hearts be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

In 1974, five years following Westminster’s Mission Trip to Mount Morris Presbyterian Church in Harlem, New York which Rogers Smith attended with fourteen other high school students and five adult leaders, Westminster established the Frances M. Bay Fund for Lay Education. The purpose of the Fund established by the children of Frances to honor their mother was to bring theologians and professors to Springfield for adult education seminars. The first Bay Weekend welcomed Dr. William Eichelberger, Professor of Louisville Theological Seminary, who spoke on “A New and Renewing Quest for Human Dignity.”

Every Bay Weekend since the first has been a new and renewing quest for human dignity as theologians and professors share their expertise to broaden the horizons and to deepen the faith of our members. How fortuitous it is that this year’s Bay speaker’s expertise grew out of his experiences of faith formation within this congregation and the injustices he witnessed attending a synod meeting and mission trip. While Westminster was establishing the Bay Weekend, Rogers was coming into his own as a young man and beginning an academic journey as a political scientist that would focus on issues of citizenship and racial, gender, and class inequities.

The title of today’s meditation “Injustice at Bay” is a play on words. As we explore the injustices in the 1960’s and today at this Bay Weekend, we continue to work together as people of faith to keep “injustice at bay.” According to the Oxford Dictionary: To keep something at bay is to hold off a threat, to prevent it from advancing or moving closer; to control something and stop it from causing harm.

The call to keep injustice at bay has long been a part of our faith story. In Amos 5, Yahweh rejects the hypocritical worship of Israel and declares: But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. The greatest tragedy in the history of faith is when religion, rather than keeping injustice at bay, promotes prejudice, inequity, and projects disrespect and disdain on certain groups of people based on their race, class, gender, and sexual orientation. When the Apostle Paul declares in Galatians 3 that there is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, neither male nor female because we are all one in Christ, he is not negating our individual experiences, rather Paul is celebrating the diversity of humanity, the God who delights in each of our stories, and the God who by joining us in the incarnate Christ, unites our stories in sacrificial love, grace and mercy.

In Rogers’ 2020 book [That is Not Who We Are: Populism and Peoplehood](#), which he dedicated to his parents, he talks about a cacophony of stories and resists offering a single story because it can rob *people of dignity* by not recognizing our equal humanity with all our differences.

Rather than a single story, Dr. Smith writes: *We can look for areas of common ground for resistance to injustices, and common paths for progress. It is not by all adopting any one story of peoplehood, but rather through many people advancing different stories, all saying that xenophobia, racism, misogyny, and religious bigotry are NOT who we are now as Americans, that the United States can become, not only more united, but the best we can hope to make it. We must look for many stories that resonate, that are respectful, and that are reticulated, stories that provide secure places for as many diverse groups as possible...By doing so, we may find that our stores have many harmonies, and that we can build bridges across our divides.*

In light of Isaiah's vision of the new creation which culminates in a scene of harmony with the wolf and the lamb on God's Holy Mountain communing together and last week's call to raise the simple melody of our lives into a full-voiced, glorious harmony, let us work toward unity and let us keep injustice at bay.

As we build bridges across our divides and collaborate in creating the peaceful kingdom Isaiah envisioned, let us not grow weary in doing what is right and let us nourish our spirits along this journey to wholeness and harmony at the table of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.