

WGUMC February 28, 2016 Isaiah 55:1-9
"Everyone Who Thirsts"

A year ago, when I was sitting with the five children of Bill Chamberlin and listening to their stories about their growing up in the Valley of Heart's Delight, I thought I was having a flashback to a time that is quickly receding in memory. Bill and Kay bought a house here, got to know their neighbors, raised their kids, sent them off to college, engaged in fulfilling careers, church and community activities, and enjoyed a comfortable, satisfying retirement. The longer I sat there, the more I realized that for many of us that story will never be told.

The pain of that realization struck me again both last week and this week as we said our good-byes to Chuck Fissel and Fred Collen, two more of the greatest generation who lived the American Dream. They worked hard; they lived well. Chuck and Fred were wonderful guys, but a lot of men and women just like them will never be able to own a home around here

and are wondering how they could ever afford to send their kids off to college.

When young and middle-aged folks living and working in the Bay Area hear these stories, many of us recall the words of Isaiah and wonder, "Why do we spend our money for that which is not bread and our labor for that which does not satisfy?" That is the question that we ask, but one that we are too afraid to answer, because we have a sinking feeling that at any time this house of cards we are living in here in Silicon Valley could come crashing down.

The Prophet Isaiah is speaking to the Jews who are in exile in Babylonia. They are about to give up on the Jerusalem Dream. They are about to forget what they have long yearned for. They are not sure anymore what there is to go home for. And so Isaiah tries to remind them; he tries to encourage them. He says, "Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters." In saying this, he speaks not so much to quench their thirst but

to revive it. He wants to keep the longing alive, the dream from dying.

There are times in your life when it feels like the dream is dying. And today I'm going to tell you about one of those times in my life. When I went to seminary, I didn't exactly know where God was leading me in ministry, but I always suspected that I would end up back in academia. I was on the ordination track and had to "do my time" in the parish, and to my surprise, I discovered that I loved to preach. But with all the fund-raising, volunteer recruiting, building-maintaining that you have to do as pastor, there wasn't a lot of time for teaching. And so, after the brain surgery, I decided to go back to school and get a PhD. My goal was to be a university chaplain because then I could preach AND teach. When I was an undergrad, I had been the live-in housekeeper for the Dean of the Chapel, and I was very attracted to the idea of ministry in a university environment.

Unlike in college and seminary, I had no scholarship money at first to help defray the cost of living in the Bay Area, so I had to work throughout the program. Four years in, I was serving as pastor, having a baby, and dealing with a church that had suffered a big financial loss, a flood and then a fire. I had to withdraw from the program for a while. In the end, it took me twelve years to finish my degree.

Then the reality hit me. With everything I had done, I was never able to get any college teaching experience to put on my resumé. And who would want a Wesley scholar, anyway? Only schools that were in places I wasn't willing to live. Besides, I was 46 years old and that is really too old to get a teaching job, and at this point in my life, I couldn't afford the loss of housing and the cut in salary even if I were offered one.

I had worked so, so hard and sacrificed so much and for what? I realized that I was having a kind of post-partum depression. I had survived a long labor and birthed a

dissertation but it wasn't the blessing that I had hoped it would be.

"Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters." As you might have guessed, I was sliding into my mid-life crisis, and I was thirsting for answers to some big questions. Who am I now that I can't be what I'd always dreamed of being? What am I going to do now that life has narrowed my options? And will I ever feel fulfilled in doing it or will I always live with this thirst for something I can't have?

I couldn't shake these feelings of doubt and discouragement, and I remember thinking, "What I really need is a Parker Palmer retreat." Parker is an education reformer, social activist, author, and spiritual leader who comes from the Quaker tradition. Twice when I was a pastor in Oregon, I had attended retreats led by him in which the participants practice a method of communal spiritual discernment called "circles of trust." Drawing from Quaker principles, the groups are designed

to allow a person to listen to the divine voice within and reconnect with their true calling. For me, Parker Palmer was the modern-day voice of the Lord who once spoke through his prophet, saying, "Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live."

Years had passed since I had been part of a circle of trust but that day I decided to google Parker Palmer. And lo and behold, I discovered that a Parker Palmer-trained facilitator was going to be leading a series of five retreats on the theme of "Courage to Lead." Even better, the retreats were being held at a retreat center run by Dominican nuns in San Rafael, just a few miles down 101. It was a sign from God. And over the course of the next year, I spent much time there listening carefully and delighting in rich spiritual food.

In between retreats, I walked the labyrinth at the Lutheran Church in Terra Linda, pondering whether I should stay in parish

ministry. One evening as I was walking, I stopped and looked at the altar at the front of the sanctuary and the truth hit me.

All my life, I had been what you could call an accidental pastor, thinking that parish ministry was just preparation for something else, whether it was overseas mission work, teaching or chaplaincy. And it came down to this: I could give up the meetings, the fundraising, and the building maintenance easily, but as I stared at the altar I realized that I couldn't give up the preaching or sharing the presence of Christ through the sacraments. I had given up a lot in my life, but I couldn't give up that.

Why does it take some of us so many years and so many tears to become who we were all along? I wonder how many of us are unhappy or unsatisfied or unfulfilled because we've been dreaming the wrong dream. Many of the Jews in exile in Babylonia had the wrong dream. Some of the elites were doing well and wanted to stay and make a go of it in Babylon, though

they were losing their faith in the process. Others weren't sure they wanted to go home to the Jerusalem they had known. After all, it was a city that was full of corruption and injustice. Isaiah knew that what they really wanted was a new city, and he was trying to help them dream a new dream.

Maybe what we need is a new dream, one that is better suited to who we really are. Despite what you hear or may have been told, we were not put on this planet to live the American Dream. Besides, we are finding, as our economy becomes more globalized and our lives become entwined with people in Thailand and Bangladesh and Honduras, that our living the American Dream means that countless others will never get a chance to. As pleasant as that life may be, God is calling us to a different life, a more purposeful life. Thank Goodness that God's economy is not a market economy. In God's economy you can buy wine and milk without money and without price. In

other words, you can have what you truly need and live your true dream without mortgaging your soul.

But it's one thing to believe this and another to live it, as I well know. We can't all go live in a yurt in Montana to figure this all out. We have to somehow learn to live authentically right here, which is much harder. It can take years to learn to listen carefully to the divine voice within us and we need others whom we can trust to tune our ear to hear it. Even when we discover who we really are—to our great relief and delight—it takes a lot of grace and a lot of work to get our life in alignment with our truth.

One of the blessings of the appointment system in the United Methodist Church is that the Holy Spirit and the Bishop give pastors lots of opportunities over the course of their careers to start over in a new place. Not long after my epiphany on the labyrinth, I called our District Superintendent and said to her, "Ever since I got to this Conference, I have

been trying to do at least two full-time jobs at once. Now that my degree is finally finished, I am ready to give parish ministry my all. Send me to a church that will demand everything I've got. And I ended up here.

As far as I'm concerned, this is as good a place as any to discover who you really are. Believe me, each one of you is a treasure waiting to be found, a truth waiting to be lived. And there is no higher privilege for me than to help you make that discovery. As one of my favorite folk singers puts it, "I'm here for the journey; I'm not just here for the ride."
Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters.