“Going with Your Gut”

Jeremiah 34: 31-34; Psalm 46

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Rev. Howard Thurman, a revered African American author and civil rights leader tells a story about his grandmother, who was his primary theological teacher. Early in her life she was a slave in Florida, and later she owned a plot of land which she farmed. There was a White woman who lived adjacent to the land and did not like that this Black woman was her neighbor. Out of spite, the White woman decided to go to her chicken coup, collect all of the manure, and then - late at night - dump it on Thurman’s grandmother’s land, on her tomatoes and greens, to smother her plants. But Thurman’s grandmother would rise early in the morning, take the manure, mix it into the soil, and use it as fertilizer. Over and over the nasty neighbor would dump manure at night and Thurman’s grandmother would turn it into the soil in the early morning.

Eventually, the old White woman became ill. As it turns out, she wasn’t just mean to Black people—she was mean to everyone. She had no visitors, no one to offer a kindness in her hour of need. Her next-door neighbor, Thurman’s grandmother, arrived at her door one afternoon with a big bouquet of roses. The White woman was shocked that this woman, to whom she had been so mean, would stop by see her. And upon seeing the roses she exclaimed, “Why, those flowers are beautiful! Where in the world did you get something so pretty around here?” Thurman’s grandmother smiled and explained, “You helped me make them. I know it was you, dumping manure on my land, with intent to do my crops harm. But I rose early, each morning, and mixed your manure with the dirt in my garden. My soil became rich, so I planted rose bushes. And now I have beautiful roses which have grown up from the manure you dumped.”

2020 has dumped a lot of manure on us. Many people are describing this year as a “dumpster…that has caught on fire.” The saying is so common, there are now 2020 Christmas ornaments of a dumpster fire!

A picture containing text

Description automatically generated A pile of hay

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We are up to our eyeballs in manure. We have taken it and taken it. But now it feels time for us to decide—what are WE going to do? How will the dumpster fire that has been 2020 impact 2021? Is there a way forward that can be good?

The book of Genesis gives us a glimpse, a hint, of hope for the future. The Rev. Katie Day dared to assign you reading homework last week, so I’m boldly doing the same. This assignment is a rip-roaring tale, so set aside Netflix for a night and read Genesis, chapters 37 through 50. In these 14 chapters you’ll find fashion, fine wines, false accusation, kidnapping, seduction, prison, famine, a hidden treasure, and, in true Hollywood style, a happy ending!

Joseph, he of the coat of many colors, was his father’s favorite, and he knew it. Overcome by jealousy, his brothers sell the “full-of-himself” Joseph into slavery. Through a cadre of plot twists and turns, Joseph ends up in a position of great power—a position that enables him to save the lives of both his family and many of the people in the land.

And the moral of the story is: God can take what is intended for evil—what seems to be so bad—the manure of this world—and turn it into something good. Something even salvific. In Genesis 50, verse 20 Joseph says to his brothers, “Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people….”

Most often in life, things don’t turn out as we expect, or even intend. You know the phrase, “If you want to make God laugh, tell God about your plans.” Our plan was to call a new Head Pastor and embrace her family, celebrate her with a big reception, gather around her for the children’s sermon, lean in from our chosen pew and listen to her interpretation of God’s word for us. We worked and waited years for this and then…dumpster fire.

Alas, we are not in control of all things in this world. We are not even in control of our own lives. But we certainly can make choices about what we are given. So here we are, in October 2020 wondering, “What can I do? And looking forward into the future of 2021, what will I do?”

Where can we find the answer to that question? Jeremiah tells us God’s word to us. God says, “I will put my law within them, I will write it on their hearts.”

*Where* do I look Jeremiah? God says, “I will put my law within them, I will write it on their hearts.”

Listen carefully to those verses. Do you hear those words bubbling up? THEM. I will put my law within THEM. I will write it on THEIR hearts. Those words are plural. So the question for us isn’t “What can I do? What will I do?” The question is, “What will WE do?”

Folks, we are indeed individuals, with our own opinions, talents, personalities, and resources. But together, as Christ’s church, we are one body. Though we are many, we join together as Pleasant Hill Presbyterian Church, a specific church in a specific part of the world called to specific ministries. So it doesn’t have to be up to each one of us to discern what to do or where to focus the love, justice, mercy and resources we have to give. Thank God we aren’t in this alone. Thank goodness we are part of a CHURCH. There is this place, where all that we do is for the good of all of God’s creatures.

And we do not work alone. We worship a mighty God, a God who takes things and works with them for the good. In Psalm 46 Maggie read for us: “God is in the midst of the city…God will help it when the morning dawns.” That sounds like a promise to me! “God will help it when the morning dawns.”

With God’s promise to meet us early in the morning, it’s time for us as a church to rise at first light, take the manure the secular world dumped throughout the night, and turn it, mix it, and intermingle it with God’s law so that what is intended for bad is indeed used for good.

It is time to plant some roses.

God has taken the law and placed it in our hearts. Now is the time to look deeply into our hearts and do *what we know in our gut to be right*. Now is the time to think intentionally and pray deeply. What gifts and resources will you give to the church of Jesus Christ as we plant our 2021 rose garden? You don’t control what happens in the world, but now is the time to make a choice about what to do with what you’ve been given. And I pray that like me, you’ll make a choice with all boldness and freedom. You’ll step out on faith with me to make 2021 as rosy as we can.

Go with your gut and give generously. Let’s pool our resources and dream big, dream of red and yellow and pink rose blooms growing out of our building windows, wrapped around the steeple, flowing into the Duluth community and out into the world.

You’ll never hear the saying, “The kingdom of God is like a dumpster fire.” No.

But this is a phrase we can believe: “The kingdom of God is like a bouquet of roses, imagined by our Creator, curated by the church, and gifted to all who are in need of some beauty.

Amen.

Podcast: “On Being with Krista Tippett,” #884, Rev. Otis Moss III—The Sound of the Genuine: Traversing 2020 with ‘the Mystic of the Movement’ Howard Thurman.