

“Tikkun Olam”

Rev. Dr. Laura Miller-Purrenhage

Sunday, November 8, 2020

Please pray with me: Holy God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be pleasing and faithful unto you, for you are our rock and our salvation. Amen.

When I first realized that Stewardship Sunday was the one after election day, I was concerned. I thought it likely that the country would be exhausted, and it seemed that a sermon focused more on comfort would be needed. The dramatic increase in Covid cases over the last few weeks, including the death of a 20-year old Grand Ledge college student, probably also make us yearn for comfort.

But then I remembered one of the incredibly important messages of scripture; it is precisely at the times when tensions are high, when people are divided and afraid, when people are hurting and sad that stewardship is most needed, because that's when God and the church are most needed. Our country needs us and our message of love, justice, and inclusion. Now is precisely the time to preach about stewardship.

Christianity, Judaism and Islam—the three faiths descended from Abraham—all hold an important tenet; People of faith are in covenant with God and upholding our part of that covenant puts us under a certain obligation. The Hebrew scriptures call this obligation, “Tikkun Olam,” which translate as “Repairing the World.”

The ancient Israelites, people who had been enslaved, then freed, then captured, dispersed, and exiled, a people whose country had been mighty and then was taken over and destroyed, a people who knew political upheaval, war and disease—these people knew what it meant to live in a broken world. And when they prayed to God about that world, what they heard in answer was that it was their job to repair it.

We might look around our world, our country and know a broken world, too. And, like our ancient Jewish kin, our obligation, as Christians, is to repair that world and try to live as if the Kingdom of God is already here. That is what it means to be stewards.

It can be hard to hear this message right now. I will admit that I am certainly often tempted to throw myself into something, anything really, that will make me forget about our world and its mess. But our New Testament lesson today warns against that behavior. It teaches us that, to be wise, we need to have all of the oil that we need, ready always to do God's work and be good stewards of God's creation. Even, perhaps especially, when it might seem like God isn't around. Right? The women in the story are ready for God, ready to do God's work, but God doesn't show up right away. It seems like God might not be there. It could certainly seem like that to us now, right, with our country so divided. But wisdom teaches us to be ready with our lamps anyway, so that we may be a light to others in such a difficult time.

As an aside, I will note that that story shows us that even the wise women took a nap in the midst of their preparations. Jesus, in telling that story, could have left that little part out. Or he could have showed the wise women staying awake, while the other slept. But that's not how he told the story. Instead, he made a little note of the fact that even the wise need to rest. Repairing the world is not something that we will accomplish in a day's, week's or month's work. It's not something we can accomplish in our lifetimes. As the Bishop Ken Utener points out in the prayer we read for today, recognizing this fact is liberating. It allows us to take breaks, to care for ourselves so that we can have the strength and health to care for others. So please know that this call for Stewardship does not require you to work unceasingly or to take on more jobs than you

can physically manage. As Bishop Utener says, our obligation is that we need to focus on a few ways to care for the world—and to do those things very well.

Our church does a few things very, very well. We support, love, and advocate for our LGBTQ+ siblings. We care for the poor, the hungry, the underhoused, and survivors of domestic violence through our support of GLEAP, the foodbank, Siren Shelter, Habitat for Humanity, and other missions. And we have also been flexible, supporting desperate needs as they arise. Just last week, the Endowment Funds Disbursement Team approved requests by the Outreach & Executive Boards to financially support wildfire relief in California, as well as the Islamic Center of East Lansing's fresh produce and dairy distribution to those in need—a need that has grown exponentially during the pandemic. And as we have seen needs to support immigrants and to do the very important work of learning about anti-racism so that we can support and love our siblings of color, we have stepped up. I am so, so very proud of this church and of all of the work that we have done and continue to do together. As Frieda said last week, we—as a whole body—can and make a larger impact when we pool our resources and do these things together. This is why we have Stewardship Campaigns—because we, like our country, are stronger when we work together.

My Dear Ones, it's hard to say what will happen in the next few weeks. I believe that our work of repairing the world will probably grow more intense as we are called upon to start repairing the breach in our society between right and left, between brown skinned and light skinned, between the city and the country.

But of this, I am also certain: Although it could feel like we are sitting in the dark, waiting alone with our lamp oil, more and more lamps are being lit all around us by others who wish to repair the world. And, as workers, ministers, and prophets, we are guided by the hand of our Messiah and Master Builder who is quietly working among all people of goodwill, guiding and strengthening us. So do not grow weary of your obligation. We are God's beloved, already loved and saved by grace, and we have work to do. Amen.