

The Proof Is in the Bread

Malachi 4:1-3
II Thessalonians 3:6-15

Andrew Conner has led somewhat troubling discussions in our adult Sunday school class on systemic poverty, homelessness, and related issues. This fits into our Matthew 25 identity as a congregation seeking not just to learn about these things, but somehow to do something about them. In one class we watched clips from the 2014 movie, Time Out of Mind. In it, Richard Gere plays a man slowly descending into mental deterioration and homelessness. The movie pulls no punches. It is hard to watch. It is impossible not to have sympathy for his character, George. We see how the world stacks up against people without mental and financial resources. We see how difficult it is for them even to get where they need to go. People mistreat them, harass them, take advantage of them. At the start he has a small pull case, like the ones we richer people stuff in the overhead bins on airplanes. He also carries a large black trash bag. Add the clothes on his back to whatever is inside them, and you have all his worldly possessions. As the movie progresses he loses even these things.

In the class discussion we noted how much easier we have it. If we need to go to the store we just hop in our vehicles and go. And when we get there we can afford what we want without having to count out every last penny in our pockets. We have warm, safe places to sleep. People do not stare rudely at us or call us names. One

person commented that the movie really brought to light the contrast between how hard many homeless people must work just to survive. This fact belies the stereotype we so often have that they must take the blame for their situation. I admit I have watched the grown-up men riding bikes around town and done the Judgmental Two-Step. Step number one: I assume they do not have jobs. Step number two: I assume they do not have jobs because of some combination of mental illness, addiction or just plain sloth. Time Out of Mind pulls the curtain away and reveals the truth. Many homeless people have tried everything they can think of, often finding creative solutions to problems the rest of us never face. But they just cannot catch a break.

In our passage from II Thessalonians its author, the Apostle Paul, repeatedly warns his Christian brothers and sisters not to “live in idleness”. He has heard reports of conflict in that church. He attributes the root causes of that conflict to two things: incorrect beliefs and idleness. But we must not assume, and judge the Thessalonians too quickly. It turns out the word our New Revised Standard Version translates as “idleness” has a slightly more complex meaning. In the Greek that word is *atakteo*. In its verb form it does mean to be idle or lazy. In its adverbial form, however, it means in a disorderly manner. Paul uses this word in both forms in our passage. The whole of his meaning is that the idleness of some has created disorder in the church. Have you ever felt irritated that the same few people seem to do the vast majority of work in the church? When that feeling grows and becomes widely shared, the church becomes a swamp pit of gossip and resentment. That can cause the death of any church.

I do not deny I have heard a little talk around here. I have heard the 80/20 Rule invoked (eighty percent of the work gets done by twenty percent of the people). I have heard retired folks wonder aloud why the young families aren't more active. (Hint: it's because they're incredibly busy at school and in the community, and besides, as we age we forget how exhausting child rearing is.) But after thirty-eight years of ministry in five churches I believe I am qualified to observe that this is indeed a healthy congregation. I have really enjoyed the return of the meal on committee/commission meeting night, largely because it visually demonstrates the large number of people serving here. And this most recent time and talent survey has proven an effective tool for helping yet more of us get involved.

Literally only God knows what the next chapter of the pandemic will look like. But for now we can enjoy seeing visitors checking us out, some of whom have already joined. Week over week we see more of our old friends making the decision to come out for worship, communion prep, youth group, book clubs, Sunday school, Bible studies, maintaining our facility, and more. Last spring I resumed visiting people in their homes or apartments at Westminster Village. The deacons and I have taken home communion to our shut-ins. As we slowly approach our previous norms in the work of the church, I want to make this gentle request. Please do not eat anyone's bread without paying for it. Please do not let others do the work. Please follow the example of those hard-working twenty percenters.

Here is a list of the committees, commissions and other groups that in my view

could use a burst of fresh energy. The Worship Commission, which when I got here was one of the most impressive church committees I can remember ever seeing, has dwindled. It has three very committed and effective elders and just a smattering of others. Please, if you would like to assist in planning services, decorating the sanctuary according to the church season, preparing communion and the like, join the Worship Commission. You can do so by speaking with Alan Harder, Beth Christ or Luanne Tilstra. Or if you have only lately come to us and do not know these people, speak with me.

We have a solid, spiritually oriented youth group. But I would like to see it grow. That happens best when the youth invite their friends to come to a meeting. Our previous congregation had just over half as many members on its roster as we have. Yet their youth program was spectacular. They took 25 to 30 youth on mission trips. Regular meetings averaged 20 or so. They had a week-long special program each summer that challenged the youth to do difficult things—including on several occasions cleaning the homeless shelter—and paired them with mentors of college or post-college age. All of the mentors had gone through that program. How did they do it? The youth invited their friends to check it out. Their friends occasionally came, and when they did, they usually came back. Now here is the interesting next step. Sometimes those friends' families would visit a worship service. Sometimes they would keep visiting. Those who did that normally ended up joining the church. A consultant who worked with that church on long-range planning estimated that over half of its membership came to them through that youth program.

There is no reason that cannot happen here. I have spoken about this with Tim Ghogle, our excellent youth director, and he agrees. Perhaps he and I need to speak more frankly with our young people, even play out some ways to make the invitation. I hope I have been among you for long enough to use my former church as an example. I want to stress again that Linda and I love this church. But if we are, as Paul writes, not going to grow weary in well-doing our youth program could serve as a very promising source of energy for us all. And I will add to you adults, you can make personal invitations to your friends to visit our worship services, too. I know some of you feel all your friends already belong to a church or do not want to. All I can say is, please pray about this and see whether God plants somebody in your heart and mind. Our current long-range goals include that we want to expand our demographic. We want to become more diverse along racial, income and other lines. I can think of no way that can happen except through personal invitations.

Paul and the Prophet Malachi shared a belief that the Day of the Lord, the Day of Judgment, would come and soon. Hence Malachi's imagery about the day of fire, when all "the arrogant and evil doers" will burn down to stubble. Malachi wrote these words around 2,570 years ago. No wonder God's people grow weary in well-doing! We get worn down by the sheer number of years that pass. We see others who do not seek to follow Jesus prosper, and it makes us question his whole program. We note the arbitrary nature of suffering—medical, emotional, physical—sustained by God-fearing people and we wonder whether we truly do serve the God of justice. We need a booster! Malachi knew this, as he wrote, "But for you who fear (the name of the

Lord) the sun of righteousness will rise, with healing in its wings. You shall go forth leaping like calves in the stall...”

What does it mean to fear the name of the Lord? Malachi undoubtedly believed its primary component was obedience to the law of God. But it would also mean praising and worshiping God, and maintaining a healthy fellowship in the church. Yes our spiritual and emotional tanks can get empty. Yes, we encounter moments in our lives when pain and/or fear force us to focus on ourselves—and deservedly so. Yet those times usually pass. When we try to obey God, praise God together with our sisters and brothers in this congregation, and put a little work into the network of relationships that is the fellowship of the church, we fill up those tanks again. We do not grow weary.

Other areas of this congregation's life that could use some help include the Facilities Commission, which maintains our aging building. As you can imagine, a lot needs to get done over time. We always need more Sunday school teachers, for all ages. Please understand we team teach, and every month we have one or two Sundays when we do things other than traditional class work. So this is not a heavy commitment. And of course, we could use a few more singers in the choir. You do not have to be Beverly Sills or Luciano Pavarotti to join!

Do not grow weary in well-doing. Build up yourself and this church. And you will receive the spiritual energy to keep going.