

God Reigns

by Rev. Joseph Connolly

“*Yahweh*, God, will reign forever— / your God, O Zion, / will reign for all generations. / Alleluia!” — Psalm 146 v. 10.

Most people know the warm feeling of helping out. And sometimes helping out includes actions like donating clothes to the needy, taking canned goods to the local food pantry.

Further, over and over, researchers have demonstrated doing good feels good. On the other hand, sometimes that heartwarming feeling might be obscuring a troubling fact. What we think of as doing good might not be doing the good we intend. Or so said a recent article in *The New York Times*.

(Quote:) “Donors can tell they get a warm glow when giving,” says Katherina Rosqueta, of the Center for High Impact Philanthropy at the University of Pennsylvania. “But it’s harder to tell whether they have made a difference. It’s easier to know how *you* feel than it is to know the effect on the beneficiary.”

Take something as relatively common and seemingly beyond reproach, the article said, such as canned-food drives, something often undertaken by schools to help food pantries— if we take that we see an interesting picture. Why? Food pantries usually buy from nonprofit clearinghouses and can purchase large quantities far more cheaply than its retail cost. [1]

Many of you know I am involved, as are some of our parishioners, with *Our Daily Bread Food Pantry*, located at Emmanuel Episcopal Church. Because of my association with the pantry, I can confirm we get canned goods at a very low rate.

The orders we place for canned goods with the Central New York Food Bank fall into one of two price categories. The first category: ten cents a pound. That’s right— the price is not by the can but by the pound.

The second category? Free— that’s right: free. The only fly in that arrangement is on occasion the Food Bank does not have in stock what the food pantry need.

Now, I need to be clear: I am not trying to discourage you from donating canned food to food pantries. There is no question about this: it helps the pantries and it may help you. But I *am* trying to name two greater needs.

First and obviously, pantries need money. They can buy more than any individual with the money people contribute. In fact, if you still want bring food, please do that, since it will probably help you feel good and it does, in fact, help the pantry. But please bring a check also.

The second need is both simple and hard. Pantries need people to be there, on site, to help. And that’s not just people to move boxes and canned food around (although that is a need). People are needed to interact, to console, to connect on a human level with those who have to access the pantries.

All that leads to another issue: when we do give money, how do we know the charity to which we give does a good job using the money? Sad but true, the only way to know a charity is effective is to do research about them. I’ll do the research on *Our Daily Bread Food Pantry* for you right now: every dollar you donate goes to food, case closed.

Michael Miller, director and producer of the documentary *Poverty Inc.* says, “People ask, ‘What can I do to help

those in poverty?’ That’s the wrong question, he says. The right one is, ‘What do people need to create prosperity in their families and in their community and what can I do to help with that?’” [2] (Slight pause.)

These words are recorded in the 146th Psalm: “*Yahweh*, God, will reign forever— / your God, O Zion, / will reign for all generations. / Alleluia!” (Slight pause.)

When the Psalm was introduced, you heard it said the Psalms are a collection of hymns, songs. Biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann says this about the 146th Psalm. Israel sings and we never know what holy power is unleashed by singing. Israel sings and we never know what human imagination is authorized by singing.

One reason *we may not* sing is we think just *having* enough hope to sing is intellectually outrageous. Or we think singing is too subversive. But the Church and Israel do sing! Singing is the vocation of Israel! Singing is the vocation of the church!

Why? By singing we name the fact that this world has been closed off for prisoners, for the blind, for the sojourner, for the widow, for the orphan, for the oppressed.

So the claim being made by the Psalm is that when we sing we help justice prevail because we shine a light on injustice with our songs. Because of our songs, the world is sung open by the light we shed on injustice. [3] These, the thoughts of Walter Brueggemann— and imagine that: singing vanquishes injustice! (Slight pause.)

I think most of you know I am a lyricist with professional credits. I think I know a little about song writing.

There are two things that need to be done simultaneously when writing a song. First, unleash your imagination. Second, that imagination needs to be tempered with the discipline of structure. Unless a song is structured so a listener understands the imagination being displayed, the song will not be understood or even heard.

That brings me back to the question asked earlier: what do we need to do to create prosperity in families and community and what can we do to help? A little like writing a song, I think there are two things that need to be done simultaneously.

First, we need to have imagination. Imaginative innovation can create solutions which vanquish injustice. But second, we need recognize how the real world works. And the real world is often slow, sloppy, cumbersome and conflicted. Therefore, engaging the real world takes not just imagination but discipline. (Slight pause.)

I think we, as a church, as a community of faith, try to do both— imagination and discipline. Indeed, we are coming up on a major hands on project: Turkey Basket day, when we get involved here in distributing over 200 baskets. That takes an enormous amount of both imagination and discipline.

Yes, it takes money. But it takes people, people willing to participate, people helping people, people willing to be present to those in need, to listen, to console, to connect on a human level.

And maybe that is the song people need to hear: connecting on a human level is a song of hope and a song of faith and song of love. Connection is a song filled with imagination *and* with discipline. (Slight pause.)

Well, today is our so called Enlistment Sunday, when we invite people to make a pledge so the work we do at this church might be empowered to sing in the course of this next year. And that takes imagination and discipline also.

I have said here many times. Every dollar you pledge or put in the plate at this church, goes toward outreach. What does that mean? It means among other things that, as a church, we are lucky to have an abundance with which we can help others.

But it also means historically those who went before us had the imagination and the discipline to invest in their future. And we are their future. Those who went before us had the imagination and the discipline to invest in us. That leaves a question: do we have imagination and the discipline to invest in those around us who are in need and invest in all who will come after us?

I would suggest that when imagination and discipline work together, we— together— can do good in this world. And when we sing with imagination and discipline we can make the claim that we strive to sing songs which vanquish injustice.

And so in a little bit, when you are invited to make a pledge, please consider what we do here. We strive to do the work of justice. And we have been singing amazing songs of justice over the years and we shall continue to sing those songs if we have both imagination and discipline.

Why? How? Our imagination *and* our discipline should tell us the words of the Psalm ring true: “*Yahweh*, God, will reign forever— / your God, O Zion, / will reign for all generations. / Alleluia!” Our imagination and our discipline should also tell us we need to continue to sing until injustice is vanquished by our songs. Amen.

11/08/2015 - Enlistment Sunday

United Church of Christ, First Congregational, Norwich, New York

ENDPIECE: It is the practice of the Pastor to speak after the Closing Hymn, but before the Choral Response and Benediction. This is a précis of what was said: “The thought for meditation today is from Albert Camus (quote:) ‘Too many have dispensed with generosity in order to practice charity.’ One reason the word charity became so prominent in the West is the King James translates the Latin word *charitas* as charity that way. But that’s a bad translation of *charitas*. But *charitas* does not mean charity. It means love of God. So when we do give we need to give not with charity but with *charitas*, with the love of God.”

BENEDICTION: Let us lay aside anxious toil. Let us give our lives over to the One who grants life. Let us be open to the possibility that the whole of our being should rest in the will and wisdom of God and that the whole of our being should rest in the ways of love taught by God. In short, let us trust God. And may the face of God shine upon us; may the peace of Christ be among us; may the fire of the Spirit burn within us this day and forevermore. Amen.

[1]

http://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/08/giving/when-making-donations-know-an-agencys-needs.html?emc=edit_tnt_20151103&nlid=11820119&tntemail0=y

[2] Ibid.

[3] Walter Brueggemann, “Psalm 146: Psalm for the Nineteenth Sunday After Pentecost,” *No Other Foundation* 8/1 (Summer 1987) 29. Note: these words were edited and paraphrase for this context.