

What Does a Hopeful Future Look Like?
A Sermon for Pilgrim Congregational Church, UCC
October 24, 2021
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Scripture Reading

Luke 14:1, 7-15

1 On one occasion when Jesus was going to the house of a leader of the Pharisees to eat a meal on the sabbath, they were watching him closely.

7 When he noticed how the guests chose the places of honor, he told them a parable. **8** “When you are invited by someone to a wedding banquet, do not sit down at the place of honor, in case someone more distinguished than you has been invited by your host; **9** and the host who invited both of you may come and say to you, ‘Give this person your place,’ and then in disgrace you would start to take the lowest place. **10** But when you are invited, go and sit down at the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he may say to you, ‘Friend, move up higher’; then you will be honored in the presence of all who sit at the table with you. **11** For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.”

12 He said also to the one who had invited him, “When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. **13** But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. **14** And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.

15 One of the dinner guests, on hearing this, said to him, “Blessed is anyone who will eat bread in the kingdom of God!”

Sermon

Doesn't Jesus like to tell wild stories? He speaks in parables, metaphors and hyperbole

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The pearl of great price, the mustard seed that became the tallest tree, the prodigal child -

And we are drawn into the stories. For two thousand years we have found ourselves in these wonderful, provocative tales that guide our lives.

Imagine the feast laid out on the table at this dinner:

You are there.

Your favorites are there - all of them - and the person next to you, their favorites are there, too.

You can see the pumpkins and apples and smell the fresh baked bread and hear the laughter. And you can taste all that is good at this feast of abundance, and you are not hungry anymore.

Imagine *who else* is there:

Your neighbors, your friends, folks you've never met before, folks you didn't intend to meet, rich folks, poor folks, people from all over the world and zipcodes from north to south, cisgender folks and non-binary folks, folks who look like you but mostly folks who *don't* look like you, folks of every ability, every background, every language, children and old folks...and you.

You are there.

The table just keeps getting longer and longer, seats added, dishes piled on, newcomers welcomed.

And it is okay that you are not at the head of the table because only one is at the head of the table and that is the One who has invited us all.

Oh, indeed, "Blessed is anyone who will eat bread in the kingdom of God!"

Jesus tells some good kingdom tales, tales of the basileia of God, the near and future, the already and not yet, and the invitation to us is to believe that it might be possible, and to be builders of God's reign, on earth as it is in heaven. We are invited, by Jesus' preaching, into a future with hope.

This week at Church Council I offered a visioning exercise that I'm going to invite you to be part of, as well. I know it is hard, while CoVid still weighs upon us, to look even a little ways ahead. And yet I'm going to invite you to imagine well into the future - not too far, but not next Tuesday, either. A future with hope in this congregation - and in your own individual life. Before you get your pens going, to help get your creative juices flowing I want to share the words of another storyteller, a science fiction writer. NK Jemisin has a story in her collection, *How Long Until Black Future Month?* That describes a certain city that is full of joy. I invite you to imagine yourself there as you hear the details in this rich description:

“It’s the Day of Good Birds in the city of Um-Helat! The Day is a local custom, silly and random as so many local customs can be, and yet beautiful by the same token... It is a day of fluttering and flight..., where pennants of brightly dyed silk plume forth from every window, and delicate drones of copperwire and featherglass—made for this day, and flown on no other!—waft and buzz on the wind....

Some wings are organza stitched onto school backpacks; some are quilted cotton stuffed with dried flowers and clipped to jacket shoulders....Thus adorned, children who can run through the streets do so, leaping off curbs and making whooshing sounds as they pretend to fly. Those who cannot run instead ride special drones, belted and barred and double-checked for safety, which gently bounce them into the air. It’s only a few feet, though it feels like the height of the sky.

But this is no awkward dystopia, where all are forced to conform. Adults who refuse to give up their childhood joys wear wings, too, though theirs tend to be more abstractly constructed. (Some are invisible.) ...

Oh, and there is such joy here, friend.

How can I illuminate the people of Um-Helat? You have seen how they love their children, and how they honor honest, clever labor. You have perhaps noted their many elders, for I have mentioned them in passing. In Um-Helat, people live long and richly, with good health for as long as fate and choice and medicine permits. Every child knows opportunity; every parent has a life. ...And so this is Um-Helat: a city whose inhabitants, simply, care for one another. That is a city’s purpose, they believe....”¹

¹ <https://www.lightspeedmagazine.com/fiction/the-ones-who-stay-and-fight/>

I invite you to take out those pieces of paper from your bulletin - maybe they are like butterfly wings - and a pen or pencil, and consider. Use one piece of paper for imagining your own hopeful future and your household's; use one for Pilgrim's future. Folks on Zoom, I'm going to invite you who are willing to put your ideas in the chat, or email me later. Folks in the sanctuary -at the end of the service I'll invite you to leave your Pilgrim dream page on the pew- we'll add them all together, from Zoom and in person, into a vision board next week.

Dream a wild and wonderful and hopeful future - and write down your ideas about what that looks like, sounds like, tastes like. What do you feel like in this hopeful future? And who's there?

I invite you to take about ninety seconds for that now.

<<pause>>

Thank you, I can't wait to see what you've written. You might wonder what Council wrote - here's one from Julia"

I want to see Pilgrim grow - I've felt really loved and supported here, and I just want other people to be able to experience that, too.

Someone else said, in this future, we're a vibrant community of all ages working to make our community a better place. (That's our mission chair.)

Here's my dream - that folks all over this area, when they are yearning for something that they would know - that they would have heard - that this is an inclusive and welcoming place where they can connect to community and connect to God.

And the interesting thing is:

These futures are actually not too far away. We do have a reputation in our area for inclusion, for justice seeking.. We are a congregation that nurtures its youth. We do make our community a better place. And, we hope for more.

And that's because we have and we are and we will work for all that.

NK Jemisin, in this beautiful vision of a utopian city, says something very important:

“...the people of Um-Helat are not naive believers in good intentions as the solution to all ills. No, there are no worshippers of mere tolerance here, nor desperate grovelers for that grudging pittance of respect which is *diversity*. Um-Helatians are learned enough to understand what must be done to make the world better, and pragmatic enough to actually enact it.”

In other words, you have to see a hopeful future, and commit to being part of it.

Which, friends, brings me back to Jesus, to whom we should always come back. Jesus, in our text this day, speaks to intention and commitment. He doesn't just ask us to be guests. He asks us to help set the table, put out the invitations, offer the welcome.

“ When you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind.”

And so, my friends, here we are in stewardship season, imagining a future with hope. Imagining that great feast right here. It's a season when a literal feast still eludes us, but we can see the future coming, and we know we have a part in it. Amen.