“Walking Billboards”

20th Sunday after Pentecost, Oct. 22, 2017, Year A

1 Thessalonians 1:1-10

First Congregational Church, UCC, Saugus, Massachusetts

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The pre-Christian Celtic world moved in spiritual rhythm with nature. Celts observed the natural world closely, learning how - with careful attention and a wonder-filled reverence - they could see, hear, feel, and sense all that the Earth and the Great Mystery of God had to offer them.

The two greatest mysteries of life for the Celts were birth and death. The Irish writer, John O’Donohue, points out in his lovely book, *Anam Cara: A Book of Celtic Wisdom*, that the miracle of our birth points to a destiny far greater than any of us could ever imagine. He writes,

“To be born is to be chosen. No one is here by accident. Each one of us was sent here for a special destiny…a sheltering providence dreamed you, created you, and always minds you…

“You were not consulted on the major factors that shaped your destiny: when you were to be born; where you would be born; to whom you would be born…Your identity was not offered for your choosing. In other words, a special destiny was prepared for you.

“But you were also given freedom and creativity to go beyond the given, to make a new set of relationships and to forge an ever new identity, inclusive of the old but not limited to it…You were sent to a *shape of destiny* in which you would be able to express the special gift you brought to the world.”

Birth is a miracle and a mystery. Immediately after my daughter was born, and I held her for the first time, we looked into each other’s eyes with wonder and curiosity. Her eyes had the calm, clear gaze of ancient wisdom, and I got the strange feeling they were sizing me up, saying, “Now, who did I get for a mother *this* time?” I felt I had entered into the endless, holy rhythm of Creation, where our spirits come, grow, evolve, leave, and return again to experience life in a different way or *form*.

O’Donohue calls this form our “*shape of destiny*,” that is, who we were born to be and what we were born to do in the world. Before we are born, there is an empty space in the world into which our unique shape is meant to fit. Celts believed in a predestined life of creativity, productivity, and relativity to the Earth, to each other, and to our Divine Creator.

So, what *shape* are we? How does *our* shape fit into God’s plan for us? And does our shape fit seamlessly into communal life or are we feeling more like square shapes in round holes?

The fledgling Christian church in first century Greece that the Apostle Paul was writing his letter to was attempting to create, not only a new spiritual community, but a new way of living. Paul praises them for being so faithful and so unique that other Christian communities around the Mediterranean were talking about them – in a good way. Paul says, “God not only loves you, but has put a hand on you for something special.” Paul says, “You’re imitating Jesus. The way you live in the world speaks for itself. *You* are the message God has been trying to send to us. Keep up the good work!”

Would that we Christians believed that had a cheerleader like Paul in the church today that would tell us the same thing! Unfortunately, Christianity has taken several hits the past 30 years or so. Historians have documented the sordid truth about how Christian conquerors destroyed indigenous cultures around the world, including that of the original Americans. Some Christians preach that prosperity is just around the corner, IF we buy into the axiom, “God helps those who help themselves.” And some Christian clergy have violated their ordination vows by betraying the sacred trust granted to them by their congregations.

But, there *are* Christian churches that exist simply to do good works in the world. They are filled with selfless people who only want to walk in the ways of our teacher, Jesus, who preached love, compassion, forgiveness and peace. These are the people who don’t have to say anything; they just prove their goodness by serving others.

So, how do we Christians overcome the bad-but-honest press we’ve gotten? By doing as the Thessalonian church in Greece did – *be the Message*! Be like a walking billboard for God’s vision! Want the people of the world to treat each other like they want to be treated? *Be* the person who does just that! Want everyone to go to bed fed, clothed and safe? *Be* the one who remembers Jesus said, “When I was hungry, you gave me something to eat. When I was thirsty, you gave me something to drink. When I was naked, you gave me clothes. When I was sick, you looked after me. When I was in prison, you came to visit me.”

When we strip away all the dogma and the uppity righteousness, living as a Christian in the world is really counter-cultural. It is a way of life centered on giving of ourselves so that others may thrive. It is a humbling, transformative way of being. It is in keeping with how God intends for us to live, from the moment of our birth to the very last day of our lives.

Our church offers a meditation group twice a month we call, “The Healing Circle.” We imagine this is the style of worship that was practiced when the Christian church first came into being, before there were ever church buildings, when people gathered in each other’s homes. In our Circle, we sit in a circle around a candle that casts its glow upon the faces of everyone there. We listen to a teaching; we practice meditation and prayer; we share our stories; we receive a blessing; we feel healed and energized. We don’t ask people to believe in anything except the healing power of God. We ask them to trust that they are never alone; that God has a path for each one of us, and the more we are attuned to what that path is, the closer we get to filling the *shape* in the world God has chosen for us.

Our denomination, the United Church of Christ, has a wonderful banner that proclaims all that our churches should strive to be. It says, “Be the Church.” And the way the UCC says to be the Church is: “Protect the Environment. Care for the Poor. Forgive Often. Reject Racism. Fight for the Powerless. Share Earthly and Spiritual Resources. Love God. Enjoy This Life.”

Jesus taught us all of these lessons; we can read all about them in the Good Book. Reading is good but *doing* is better. To do better, we need to *be* *the Message*. We need to be walking billboards for God’s vision.

John O’Donahue writes, “There is a unique destiny for each person. Each one of us has something to do here that can be done by no one else…It is in the depths of your life that you will discover the *invisible necessity* that has brought you here. When you begin to decipher this, your gift and giftedness come alive. Your heart quickens and the urgency of living rekindles your creativity.” And, we hope, your heart beats with a passion to become a contributing member of a community of caring.

“To be born is to be chosen.” Every tiny life that comes into this world has so much potential. Families have a great responsibility to nurture this potential. But it is not family alone who do this for us. Our God nurtures us, even if we don’t know it. God is the One who claims us, in love, and who opens up exciting paths for us, if we are open and ready to receive God’s signals. But sometimes life gets crowded and God’s signs are harder to hear and see.

We may be in a dead end job, one that is draining our health and our soul. And then one day, we meet someone who inspires us, who gives us direction and guidance along a path that we may have been reluctant or afraid to take. But when we decide to take one step along that path, suddenly good things start to happen. After a while, we feel swept along – supported even – by a joyful spirit within us that begins to uncover that special *shape* we were always meant to have.

And then, when we find our unique shape, we are then witnesses to others of the joy and grounded-ness we have found in that shape. They see the difference in us: we are happy; we are fulfilled; we are doing what we have always wanted to do. And then, without using words but just by our way of being in the world, we become *walking billboards* for the freedom found in a loving, living God who is always actively working in our lives.

John O’Donahue wrote, “To be born is to be chosen. No one is here by accident. Each one of us was sent here for a special destiny…a sheltering providence dreamed you, created you, and always minds you…” It’s time now, for young and old, if we haven’t already, to seek the destiny God offers to us, and the full and happy life God intends for all of us. Don’t wait any longer. As Jesus said, “Seek and you shall find.” Thanks be to God. Amen.

References

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O’Donohue, John, *Anam Cara: A Book of Celtic Wisdom* (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 1997), 83-85

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