

It is the beginning of a ministry.

Today, that statement is true in two significant ways:

1. In the text Jill just read, this is the beginning of Jesus' public ministry. After solidifying his own sense of purpose for 40 days in the wilderness, Jesus was now amongst the people, ready to share his vision for how God's kin-dom should take shape on earth.
2. We are also in the midst of the beginning of the ministry of Lyndhurst Community of Faith Church. After working through a process of discernment for almost 40 months together, we are ready to distill our vision for how Jesus calls us to live into that same kin-dom in our own time. Yesterday we held our first ever onboarding with church leaders. Today, we will move through the process of ratifying the first budget of this new church. Over the course of this year, the foundations of the ministry of this church will take shape.

As our schedule of readings sits us on the hillside with Jesus and his followers, we are given the opportunity to glean wisdom from that context and apply it to our own.

We may sometimes think that Jesus was inventing the wheel - creating a life with God that was completely unique. In fact, he, along with his cousin-prophet John, were seeking to wake people up to a deeper understanding of who God had historically wanted them to be, and how God had wanted them to be living their lives for generations! Jesus makes this

crystal clear in our reading today when he plainly proclaims—as *The Message* translation puts it:

17-18 “Don’t suppose for a minute that I have come to demolish the Scriptures—either God’s Law or the Prophets. I’m not here to demolish but to complete. I am going to put it all together, pull it all together in a vast panorama. God’s Law is more real and lasting than the stars in the sky and the ground at your feet. Long after stars burn out and earth wears out, God’s Law will be alive and working.”

Jesus and John recognized that the Law had become obscured to the people of God. They were practicing a prescribed form of religion, instead of an embodied form of discipleship. They’d lost their understanding of the essence of the Scriptures—to bind them, body, mind and spirit, with their Creator by whom they were beloved. This is the message John and Jesus proffered with all their might (with their very lives, in fact); showing the people what it was about and calling them home.

The problem was they were so lost they couldn’t recognize what home was. All they knew was that something was missing. They had a yearning that they weren’t able to name until these proclaimers of the gospel spoke it and lived it – and they relished it. Some were so hungry and thirsty for it that they lapped it up.

Those who most understood it were folks identified by Matthew as those:

- who are hopeless
- who grieve
- who are humble
- who ache for righteousness

- who show mercy
- who have pure hearts
- who make peace
- whose lives are harassed.

“Wait a second,” those people on the hillside said. “You are extracting THIS message from our sacred texts? We haven’t heard that message, in this manner, ever.”

It was an ancient message: God loves you. God has a passion for you. God’s desire is for you to live a just life; with God and with your neighbor. When you know this within the depths of your being, you will be blessed. Such a blessing, Jesus confided in them, is possible today, even if you have your back up against the wall.

And most of these folks did have their backs against the wall. They lived in an environment that was constantly oppressive. It would be like a fish swimming in an algae polluted bowl, yearning for clean water, but knowing it didn’t have the power to change its situation...so, on it swims, gills straining to filter out the muck.

What Jesus said to them was an old message made fresh, and made relevant, and made ACTIVE. Jesus offered them a new way to VALUE their lives and their daily interactions with one another. In Jesus, it was alive and breathing; and it sparked HOPE. But even more than hope, Jesus would show them that he was willing to take on the systems that were polluting their lives. Jesus went so far as to prophetically hold up a mirror to those who benefited most from, maintained, and even cultivated and propagated the system so they

themselves had the opportunity to be self-reflective, and seek, in the words of Paul, “a more excellent way.”

Any who caught the message, and were willing to change whichever parts of their life that did not affirm the foundations of this Word, discovered new meaning in and value to their lives. All Jesus did was offer them a vision from another viewpoint, that spoke Truth to them, and inspired them to change.

This week I was introduced to an excerpt from an article by Timothy Shriver called, “Of Bullies and Possibilities.” In it, Shriver names a number of people from within our own historical sphere who helped others see from a different perspective, calling them to change their life situations in order to experience, well, transcendence. He writes,

"History is full of individuals who operated outside the boundaries of (conventional) thinking and [who] inspired generations. Think of Abraham Lincoln's “malice toward none,” words spoken in the midst of the most divisive and bloody conflict in American history. Think of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr's exhortation to create the “beloved community” despite brutal oppression. Think of Archbishop Desmond Tutu's worldview grounded in the African concept of *ubuntu*, which is loosely translated as “I am because we are.” Consider the moral courage of Jane Adams, the mystical consciousness of Thomas Merton, the nature-infused spirituality of Mary Oliver, the raw truth-telling of Fannie Lou Hamer, and the unbridled resilience of Sojourner Truth.

Each of them embodies a different story, a unique lens on meaning and purpose, and all of them reveal the marks of a mindset not trapped in narrow individualism or despair, but instead imbued with a belief in

universal dignity, the moral courage to cross boundaries of exclusion and hostility, the practices of both justice and joy, and the capacity to see beyond the narrow interests of any given conflict to discover the transcendent possibility of change.

(Oneing: Unveiling, Spring 2022, 57)

Shriver's words invite us to examine the beginning of our own ministry. I have recently had the Epiphany that I am no longer pastor of Lyndhurst Community Presbyterian Church. "Duh," you may say. But since the transition to the new church happened in the PLACE where my old ministry happened, it was hard for me to make that psychological shift. I served LCPC for eight years. I am now in my 22nd day of officially serving Lyndhurst Community of Faith Church.

We are a NEW church! What's so hard is that we bring with us experience and practices from what we've done before. We have LOTS of assumptions about what ministry means, what it IS, how it should be done.

Yesterday in our leadership onboarding meeting, we took a deep dive into the VALUES that we hold for ministry. Since we are building a new church, it will serve none of us to step into this work without evaluating WHY we do what we do. What is the bedrock of our ministry? Or, maybe more aptly asked, what is the fertile soil out of which our church can thrive? Over the course of the next hour—particularly as we discuss the 2023 budget—we might be tempted to turn ourselves over to despair. Tom and Phil will fill you in with the details, but we are facing an \$80,000+ deficit. We are aware that this is unsustainable moving into the future. Whatever happens over the course of this year will lead to a 2024 budget that is much closer to being balanced.

Ah - and that's where I want to put a laser focus on the remainder of the time I have in this pulpit today. I want to return to the last paragraph of Timothy Shriver's words:

Each of the (people he listed) embodies a different story, a unique lens on meaning and purpose, and all of them reveal the marks of a mindset not trapped in narrow individualism or despair, but instead imbued with a belief in universal dignity, the moral courage to cross boundaries of exclusion and hostility, the practices of both justice and joy, and the capacity to see beyond the narrow interests of any given conflict...

Right there, Shriver lists the bedrock values that connect these luminaries. (Ah, luminaries! I believe Jesus said in our text today that it does no good for anyone to hide their light under a basket. Instead they need to put it on a high place and let...it...shine.) Every single person in that list suffered for letting their unique light shine...in fact, we're well aware that the one we claim to follow also suffered greatly for sharing his light with the world. However, in those most trying of times, when, indeed one's back is up against a wall, that is when one must rely on their bedrock values. Of these, Shriver lists,

- Belief in universal dignity
- Courage to cross boundaries of exclusion and hostility (one might call that radical hospitality)
- The practices of BOTH justice and joy
- The capacity to see beyond the narrow interests of a given conflict (one might call that having clarity of purpose) Think of Jesus, being tempted by the Devil constantly saying "You shall not put God to the test...God and God alone." When at our weakest what is our touchstone value?

Before we give into despair, we must allow ourselves to be fueled by desperation. Despair and desperation are quite different from one another. Despair leads us to be like the character Eeyore from the *Pooh* stories: “Ah me, poor me, it’s sunny over there but it’s raining on me...” In despair, we are paralyzed by our pitiful condition.

Desperation, on the other hand, propels us to ACT: to identify just who we are, and WHY we are called to do what we are to do. Desperation invites us to draw deep from the well watering hole(!) of our values and courageously take some risks to live into them.

Friends, facing an \$80,000 deficit, would we not say we are in desperation mode? Are we courageous enough to ACT our way out of it? To take whatever means are necessary to put ourselves in a position to thrive?

Shriver says that when one changes their way of being to live from their values then they discover the transcendent possibility of change. I looked into this word: *transcendent*. At its root is the Latin verb *scandere* which means "to climb." The prefix *trans-* means “Extending across, through, or over.” So, *transcend* has the basic meaning of climbing so high that you cross some boundary. A transcendent experience is one that takes you out of yourself and convinces you of a larger life or existence.

(<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/transcendent> and [https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/trans-#:~:text=%2C%20beyond%E2%80%9D\).-,%2C%20beyond%3B%20outside%20of.](https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/trans-#:~:text=%2C%20beyond%E2%80%9D).-,%2C%20beyond%3B%20outside%20of.))

In short, it translates to being blessed, especially when we change our lives to orient them towards values authored by God. I think you'll see what I mean as close with Eugene Peterson's paraphrased translation of the Beatitudes:

3 "You're blessed when you're at the end of your rope. With less of you there is more of God and God's rule.

4 "You're blessed when you feel you've lost what is most dear to you. Only then can you be embraced by the One most dear to you.

5 "You're blessed when you're content with just who you are—no more, no less. That's the moment you find yourselves proud owners of everything that can't be bought.

6 "You're blessed when you've worked up a good appetite for God. God's food and drink in the best meal you'll ever eat.

7 "You're blessed when you care. At the moment of being 'care-full,' you find yourselves cared for.

8 "You're blessed when you get your inside world—your mind and heart—put right. Then you can see God in the outside world.

9 "You're blessed when you can show people how to cooperate instead of compete or fight. That's when you discover who you really are, and your place in God's family.

10 “You’re blessed when your commitment to God provokes persecution. The persecution drives you even deeper into God’s kin-dom.

11-12 “Not only that—count yourselves blessed every time people put you down or throw you out or speak lies about you to discredit me. What it means is that the truth is too close for comfort and they are uncomfortable. You can be glad when that happens—give a cheer, even!—for though they don’t like it, I do! And all heaven applauds. And know that you are in good company. My prophets and witnesses have always gotten into this kind of trouble.

May we be so bold.

Amen.