

Back to the Future

[Texts - Ecclesiastes 1:1-11]

Pastor Dave Shackle
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“Vanity of vanities! All is vanity....A generation goes, and a generation comes....The sun rises and the sun goes down....The wind blows to the south, and goes around to the north; round and round it goes....What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done; there is nothing new under the sun.”

These bleak words from the 1st Chapter of *Ecclesiastes* can cause us to feel rather discouraged. When we think about the repetitive and cyclical nature of Life's strife and struggles, problems and pain, it can bring about a sinking feeling of futility and despair. “What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done.” So maybe we should just turn out the lights and call it day....On the other hand, let's not throw in the towel just yet. This week, in the midst of the unending cycle of dismal news reports, with the woeful words from *Ecclesiastes* meandering through my mind, I was thrown a lifeline of hope from two remarkable people: Betty Gifford and Victor Melfo-Fawcett. And I'm going to share that hope with you, right now!

As most of you know, two weeks ago, Betty Gifford fell and severely fractured her left leg. That can be a devastating blow for anyone, at any age. And I'll admit, I was deeply concerned about how Betty, at age 97, would handle it. I suppose I should have known better. Each time I've visited Betty, rather than talking about herself and her precarious condition, she has gone on and on about the wonderful people caring for her: doctors and nurses, family and friends, therapists and staff. She's fully aware of the long, hard road ahead toward recovery, yet she remains remarkably hopeful and positive. She asks about how we are doing, and what's going on at the church. Wednesday afternoon, I

told her that I was headed to the west side of Cleveland to check-out a two week summer camp that Victor was attending, briefly explaining what it involved. And on Thursday, the first thing Betty said to me was, “So, tell me more about Victor’s camp. I’ve been thinking about it all day. It sounds great!”

That camp was held at the greenhouse property on West 41st Street, which is the center of Doug and Anne’s Cleveland Roots Project. This non-profit organization brings local residents and volunteers together to raise and provide affordable, fresh produce to people in the neighborhood. They also hold workshops and events that promote healthy living and that foster community-wide renewal and participation. That neighborhood includes Bethany UCC, one of the venues where we serve our Hunger Meals; and the Thomas Jefferson International Newcomers’ Academy, where several of us volunteer in the classrooms of newly arrived immigrant children. The two week camp that Victor attended, focused on reaching out to that community - utilizing creative modern media, an old hand-set printing press, and concluding with a neighborhood “Rescue Dinner”.

The youth involved had hands-on experience in salvaging perfectly-good food that grocery stores and restaurants typically throw-away on a daily basis. And though I couldn’t make it to the dinner, I understand that it was a fantastic feast, enjoyed by all! Not only were people’s bodies fed; their minds were also nourished by the notion that there are creative and constructive things that people of all ages and stages of Life can do, to make a positive difference in this world. And as we talked about this, Betty Gifford and I agreed, that **this** may well be the future of the Church.

It’s always encouraging and uplifting to have young people attend and participate in our worship services. And I’m fairly confident

that they get more from this experience than their sometimes indifferent demeanor indicates. But I'm completely confident that Victor wasn't bored by what he experienced and accomplished the past two weeks. And I'll bet that at yesterday's Gay Pride Parade, Lindsey and Naomi and Olivia understood that they were doing something important and meaningful, by celebrating the rights of people who are still subject to prejudice and discrimination. For many people in the up-and-coming generation, especially those with no Church background, a worship *service* can feel like a foreign or futile thing. *Serving* people in need and standing-up for people who are persecuted, on the other hand, feels right and good and [perhaps] even Godly!

Now here's a fascinating observation that Betty made as we were discussing this: The *future* of the Church may well be about recovering and reclaiming the Church's *past*! Jesus wasn't concerned with building buildings or debating doctrines; he was about feeding the hungry, healing the sick, welcoming the foreigner, and showing compassion for all people. I'm not saying that the Church - or this congregation - hasn't done, or doesn't do, these kinds of things. Our Congregation's history includes radically progressive positions - and actions - on behalf of the eradication of slavery, racial equality, the advancement of women's rights, and the extravagant welcome of LGBTQ people. And these are the kind of social-justice issues - along with global warming, nuclear proliferation and others - that are extremely relevant to today's youth - including Victor and Lindsey, Naomi and Olivia, our children and our grandchildren.

So forget about *Ecclesiastes*! Yes, history does tend to repeat itself - "and round and round it goes"; but that's not necessarily a bad thing. Perhaps we need to go back, to discover the future of the Church; back to the basics that Jesus taught and embodied, and reclaim them for a viable and revitalized future. A future in which we still recognize the importance of gathering together for

worship, prayer and praise; for encouragement, strength and inspiration. Yet a future in which we are willing to expand the parameters of who we are and where we go as the Church. The Good News is, that as long as we strive to faithfully follow the loving way of Jesus Christ, you and I will be blessed with a tremendous example and power that is truly Divine! And as members of Brecksville United Church of Christ, we'll also have the marvelous example of Betty and Victor to keep us hopeful!