

Glimpses of the Future
October 27, 2013
Mary R. Brownlow

I imagine in the future we will see a different class of archaeologist. We are all familiar with those who dig up the past's fragile bones, unearthing pre-Columbian pots and ancient arrowheads. But maybe, centuries from now, the adventurous scholar will put on protective gloves and walk up to their keyboards. Or, wait, by then voice recognition or thought recognition will be used, and they will simply speak (or think) into a microphone and say, "show me the past." In their holographic 3D virtual reality units, they will be sent back to our simpler time, of primitive web sites and e-mail accounts. We look at the pyramids, and wonder at the imagination that built them; our descendants will find our websites, and smile at the childlike first steps of the internet. At least, I imagine all this....even as I do, I know that the future is likely to look completely different.

The future keeps escaping our grasp, even as it rushes towards us. I heard the story of a man who experienced the floods of 1993, that lifted the Iowa River over the 712-foot Coralville dam with such force that it cut a path 15 feet deep into the earth on the other side. When the water subsided, 28 days later, it had churned up so many layers of concrete and stone that it exposed fossils from when Iowa had been a sea floor - 375 million years ago. As the man looked at those sea anemones, frozen in the rock, he remembers thinking that surely, this would be the story he would tell his children's children. The epic flood of 1993. Then, despite huge efforts of sand bagging in the Midwest, it happened again. In 2008, the river crested even higher. In between (and after), the river has flooded regularly. The dramatic high point was **not** frozen in time, in 1993.

What does this mean for people of faith? How can they begin to speak of it? How can they use the insights of the past to give any direction? We have many names for God, and many ways of praying to God. Some have been given to us by Scripture, and some have come to be since our canon of Scripture was closed. The theologian John Haught says that one of the best names that we have for God is "The Future." Not only "Our God, Our Help in Ages Past," but The Future, as yet to be embodied. Our most recent church profile, written three and a half years ago, contains this paragraph: "On being asked about occasions when we have experienced the presence of God in the life of the congregation one member of the Search Committee remarked that he would rather point to the many signs that God has worked among us. "It is easy to see where God has been," he said. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the life and attitudes of our older members: in their careful attention to the preached Word; their thoughtful response to the musical ministries of the church; their deep prayerfulness; their awareness of the needs of others; their encouragement of the younger people." It is indeed easy to see where God has been with us. But today we are asked to look forward with imagination and hope.

2500 years ago, the Judean prophet Joel announced that "the times the are a-changing." This was very reassuring to his listeners: they had just survived a plague of locusts, so they welcomed his words about a good harvest and abundance and the end of disaster and shame. That's is his message for the present. But, "afterward," in the future, comes the Spirit time. This dangerous Spirit of freedom works through prophets and people who dream dreams and see visions—people open to the novelty that God is calling into being. The new community of the Spirit will be available to all.

God will pour out this Spirit on everyone without exception, and not just on the elite and powerful. This prophecy does not mention priest or clergy or professors or experts. It is a divine grassroots movement, and these verses were quoted again at the first Pentecost after the Resurrection, and used over and over whenever the Church needs to express its yearning for change and renewal. They call us to remove limiting assumptions about who does what, about what is possible, and about where the Future leads. In each age, we discover what could not have been imagined in the past, as when Martin Luther King, Jr. dreamed his dreams – true visions that are beginning, at least, to become real.

What limits us, what hampers us on our Spirit-led path? Our Gospel reading today gives us one picture of such limitation, and, at the same time, challenges what we may assume about the parable's characters. Rather than take the simplest interpretation – the “bad” Pharisee and the “good” tax collector – let's shift our perspective and look for new insights. Jewish scholars have examined this parable: after all the “punch line” in the second half of verse 14, “all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted,” belongs to Jewish Wisdom tradition.

Jewish scholars question the usual Christian reading of the Pharisee as hypocritical, sanctimonious, and legalistic, and their identification with the tax collector, the appropriately repentant and humble sinner. This reading enables us to conclude “God, I thank you that I am not like this Pharisee” and places us in the very position we condemn. All the while, we are overlooking the wonderful qualities of this man: tithing, fasting, giving thanks without asking for something in return. A non-Christian reading lets us see the Temple is a place where repentance and reconciliation can happen: that justification, or “good relationship with God” that is sought after in prayer. It may even be that the first Jews who heard it thought that the mitzvah, the good works, of the Pharisee overflowed to impact the spiritual life of the tax collector. Just as the sin of one person impacts the community, so the merits of the righteous can benefit the community. The shocking message of the parable might be just that: not only that the tax collecting collaborator with Rome is justified, but that the Pharisee's own good works helps in that justification.

These musings on the parable are just some facets of interpretation that challenge our easy labels. Let's look at the prayers themselves, which show the ways we limit the possibilities God has to offer. Jesus names the danger of trusting only in oneself, and of regarding others with contempt. I believe that there is also a danger inherent in shutting down the future through the self-contempt of the tax collector. Both were in need of God's touch, of that mysterious Spirit that would unlock new life. Contempt, or the shame that Joel speaks of, may cloud our minds to what is really happening. Neither the Pharisee nor the tax collector should trust in themselves, either as righteous or unredeemable. In prayer, we turn our focus to trust outside of ourselves, to throw ourselves into the arms of the God who is not only our help in ages past, but our hope in days to come.

I think that this parable gives us some flexibility as we pray – in the sense that sometimes we need a kick in the pants because we are complacent, and sometimes because we are gloomy. When the Spirit is poured out, neither complacent or gloomy will do. It is telling that this parable is followed by the story of Jesus welcoming little children, who own the always-arriving Kingdom of God. A childlike openness to possibility, a childlike innocence about dreams coming true – these are qualities that help us receive the future.

Which brings us to the future of this church. When we limit our imaginations to restoring a rose-colored past – beautiful as that past may have been – the Spirit does not have room to blossom. The Spirit was not poured out for restoring the past, but for surprising new life. A few years ago, I could not have imagined that I would be married here, as I was, 2 weeks ago. I could not have imagined the beautiful reception offered by this church to me and to William last week. I was limited by my assumptions – but God wasn't. Life will change, old certainties will fail, but look: God is offering us more, and then more. In the 2nd century, Irenaeus of Lyons said, "The glory of God is the human person fully alive." Perhaps the glory of God is also the **church** fully alive. Do we have the courage to let go of contempt, of shame, of nostalgia, of all the scaffolding we build to keep things steady? Do we have the trust to allow God's Spirit to pour through our lives? This is a place where we can ask creative questions, question limiting assumptions, and speak a challenging covenant to each other. Who know where that will take us? I can't wait to find out.