

Marvelous Works

A Sermon for Morning Worship on Mission Sunday
United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT
June 25, 2017
Text: 1 Chronicles 16:23-26

So, how many folks here this morning remember the '70's?
(pause) How many people here lived through the '70's?? (pause)
Okay, for those of you who lived through the 70's, I'd like you to
take just a moment and put yourself back there. What were you
doing at that point in your life? Where were you living? In
general, what was life like for you back then? Think about it, and
hold on to those memories for just a minute. For those of you not
alive during the '70's, you missed some good times. I'm just
saying... But, I'd like you to think about what you know of that
time period, and try to imagine what it might have been like to
live through them. Think about what history you know of that
era. The ending of the Vietnam War, the Nixon-Watergate crisis,
the "free love – mind-bending drugs are great" ethos, hippie tie-
died t-shirts and long, long hair, flower power and platform shoes.
Okay, got the picture? Good.

So, for those who lived through the '70's and those who can
only imagine what they were like, here's a blast from the past:

[Sing: *I'd like to build the world a home and furnish it with love
Grow apple trees and honey bees and snow white turtle doves.
I'd like to teach the world to sing in perfect harmony
I'd like to hold it in my arms and keep it company*

*I'd like to see the world for once all standing hand in hand
And hear them echo through the hills for peace through-out the
land.]*

Okay, who remembers this song? Who remembers what product it was used to advertise? Yep, Coca-Cola. In fact, the original title of the song was the “Buy A Coke Song.” Later when it was re-recorded as a pop single, that line, “I’d like to buy the world a Coke” was replaced with “I’d like to take it in my arms”. Amazingly, no one thought a thing about this odd juxtaposition of a commercial enterprise with such an incredibly positive message of hope at the time. The truth is this song was written as a commercial jingle to sell Coke. The original words were written by Bill Backer, an advertising executive with the McCann Erickson agency. The music was written by two song writers from the United Kingdom, Roger Cooke and Billy Davis. The three of them were delayed at an airport in Shannon, Ireland and were sitting around drinking Cokes. Bill penned the first line and off they went. The song was ground-breaking because it was the first time a commercial jingle went on to become a pop sensation. It was re-recorded with the references to Coke dropped by The New Seekers, The Hillside Singers and Ray Coniff. Coca-Cola waived all royalties for the song donating the \$80,000 it received to UNICEF instead. That is marvelous, isn’t it?

I confess, I loved this song. I knew all the words and I loved the commercial featuring it with its long range shot of what

seemed like thousands of people on a hillside drinking coke together. Everyone was different, clearly representing folks from around the world. Everyone was smiling and happy. And everyone was holding and drinking a bottle of Coke. With the bloody war in Vietnam just ending in chaos, it offered a hopeful alternative just when the world needed it. The song made real, for just a moment, that it might be possible for all of us to come together and build a world where peace and compassion were the order of the day, made tangible by the simple act of sharing a soft drink together. I can't begin to describe how powerful that image was, how powerful it still is, although admittedly much dimmed by our awareness of all that has happened to our world and our lives since 1972.

Peace in the world, tolerance for others different from ourselves, kindness as routine, justice for all in all circumstances and corporate responsibility with the needs of the people outweighing the demands of the stockholders remain an even more distant dream than they were in the '70's. And yet here we are, still reaching for them, still trusting that they are what we should be striving to attain. Still we recognize them as the marvelous works of God in our midst, works to which God invites us all to lend a hand. Forty-five years and how many recessions and wars later, we still know in our heart of hearts that we should all strive in whatever ways we are able to bring those incredibly

simple and over the top, pie in the sky lyrics into reality: *I'd like to build the world a home and furnish it with love; Grow apple trees and honey bees and snow white turtle doves.*

Friends, these are biblical words. These are prophetic words. These are the words which describe the marvelous works the Chronicler was writing about five centuries before the birth of Jesus! “Sing to the Lord, all the earth,” he proclaims. “Tell of God’s salvation from day to day. Declare God’s glory among the nations.” All of these good things, these wonderful possibilities, these marvelous works are possible because of God and God’s great love for God’s people and God’s Creation. God is marvelous! And God created us to be marvelous too. But, too often, we fall short of the mark of what we might do. By a lot.

The Chronicler, the name given by scholars to the author of 1st and 2nd Chronicles, knows this too. “The gods of the people are idols,” he writes. They are false, not true, unreal and lead only to empty promises which create empty lives. Who were these gods of the people? The same gods we have today. The search for unrestrained power and unbridled control. The desire for excessive wealth at the expense of those less fortunate. The exploitation of God’s own Creation in the pursuit of this wealth, unbound by concern for the long-term consequences of short term solutions to complex, interdependent problems. These are our modern-day idols, grounded in the human sin of arrogance, the

confident trust that mere humans are capable of resolving the problems which human greed and selfishness have created. So, our question must become, how do we reclaim God's vision of marvelous works for ourselves and for our children and grandchildren and great-grandchildren? How do we work together as followers of Jesus to become once more the recipients of God's marvelous works intended for us since before time began? What are we to do? How do we even begin?

Again, this text from 1st Chronicles provides us direction and insight, this time from more than just the words. The text itself, all of 1st and 2nd Chronicles, offer us hope and possibility that we can overcome the problems and challenges life lays at our feet each day by remembering who we are as the people of God. 1st and 2nd Chronicles contain much the same materials as is found in 1st and 2nd Kings and 1st and 2nd Samuel, but with one vitally important difference. Chronicles was one of the last books of the Hebrew Bible to be written and it was written with a clear purpose and intent which speaks to us in our situation today in the world in which we live. The Chronicler had two specific intents with his writings. First was to enable the people of Israel reclaim their God-given identity as God's people. Second was to put the tragedies and challenges the people of Israel had endured within the context of their history which was a history of sojourning and settling. In other words, the Chronicler wanted the people to

understand, and even more importantly, to believe that all of the hardships, the disappointments, the challenges and fearful things they had endured were not God's last word for them. They never had been and they never would be. The Chronicler also reminded them that they had done their share of disregarding God and God's teaching. They had ignored God's commandments when it suited them. They had stepped around God's guidance when it was offered. In other words, they had trusted themselves and their own abilities to solve problems more than they had trusted God. And that, he reminded them, was sin. Good thing then, he tells them, that God is always ready to receive back all who turn away so that new life is always possible. Repentance is key to turning things around, the Chronicler tells the people. Hope for the better world, the better days God promises is always alive as long as God's people are willing to consider their own shortcomings and invite God's help to overcome them. Hope is always possible when we are willing to admit that we need God more than God needs us. And that, dear friends, is never, ever easy.

So, what about us? Where do we start to do our part to participate in, to reclaim God's marvelous works in our midst? Again, the Chronicler has some simple suggestions for direct actions any of us can take any time. They appear right in this morning's text: Sing, tell, declare. Sing, tell, declare. Okay, you're thinking: "But I don't sing. Well, I sing, but not well." No

problem! You don't have to sing well! You don't even have to sing out loud! Just sing in your head, something simple like "I'd like to build the world a home, and furnish it with love. Grow apple trees and honey bees and snow white turtle doves." And guess what? This can and will change your focus. Maybe it will remind you that we're doing this right here, right now in our very own church. It's called the Pollinator Garden and you all know about. It is one way we are building the world a new home, a new habitat to replace the one which is being destroyed. You can be a part of this in so many ways. Just talk to any member of the Pollinator Garden committee to find out what you can do.

Let's not forget the tell and declare part of the Chronicler's instructions either. That is just as important, sometimes even more important than anything else you can do. What does this mean? Tell people about this church, about why it matters to you, why you make the time to come on Sundays, why it makes sense to you to support this church and all that we do financially. Don't be shy about this. Tell someone, and then bring them to church with you one week. Bring them to Harvest Table or Books one time. Invite them to come to any of the events we sponsor. Tell someone you know about this church and trust God do the rest.

Then there's declare. That might be a little tougher, but maybe not. Declare means to speak enthusiastically, directly, even forcefully about what God means in your life. Speak your

truth about God to someone else. Yes, I know this is a really scary thing to do. We don't want to wear our faith like a big red armband. We don't want to be pushy because religion is a very private thing. We don't want to be one of "those people" who talks about "the Lord" did such and so for me all the time. No, no, no! That's not me, we think. Well, okay. But, maybe, just maybe, it should be. Not every day. Not all the time. Not to everyone and anyone you know. But, maybe, just maybe, you could be the one person someone else is ready to hear from when it comes to God's love for them which knows no bounds. Maybe, just maybe, God needs to use you and your words, every once in a while, to bring those marvelous works into sight for someone who desperately needs some hope, some faith, or a new beginning in the companionship of a God who loves you both. Maybe. It's worth thinking about, don't you think? I mean, you are one of God's most marvelous works after all. Who knows what's possible? Amen.