

THE IMPOSSIBLE DREAM – October 8, 2006

Preached by The Reverend Ruth E. Shaver at the United Church of Schellsburg UCC

The 17th Sunday after Pentecost

Stewardship 4 – Service

Job 1:1, 2:1-10, Mark 10:13-16

Don Quixote was always tilting at windmills. Well, not always literally, but figuratively, he spent much more time fighting windmills than real dangers.

As Miguel Cervantes created the character, Alonso Quijana had this wild – some would say idiotic – idea that he had a calling to be a “knight errant”, a hero destined to serve a grand lady in all his endeavors. He dubbed himself Don Quixote and dedicated his entire life to heroic acts, intent on earning notice from his lady Dulcinea with the help of his faithful and somewhat more grounded manservant, Sancho Panza.

Along came the Great Enchanter, who tempted Don Quixote away from his quest and back to his home, where, it happened, he was encouraged to change his will to allow the Great Enchanter – aka Dr. Carrasco – to inherit his considerable wealth by marrying his niece.

This could be the end of the story, but a mysterious visitor paid a call on Alonso Quijana and convinced him to continue with his quest, what Don Quixote had earlier called his “Impossible Dream”¹:

To dream the impossible dream,
To fight the unbeatable foe,
To bear with unbearable sorrow
To run where the brave dare not go;
To right the unrightable wrong.

To love, pure and chaste, from afar,
To try, when your arms are too weary,
To reach the unreachable star!

Job is the Biblical Don Quixote.

Job has everything going for him – a beautiful wife, many happy and productive children, lots of land and many wonderful things to make a comfortable life, and, most important of all, strong faith in God that makes him a righteous, moral man. No need to tilt at windmills with everything going right for him.

Enter a fellow we’ll call “Joe” for reasons I’ll explain in a moment. We won’t call him “Satan” with a capital “S”, as that’s a name reserved in Christian theology for the Devil for reasons lost

¹ “The Impossible Dream” from *Man of La Mancha*, lyrics by Joe Darion, music by Mitch Leigh. ©1966 by Joe Darion and Mitch Leigh.

in time and libraries. His title is "satan" with a small "s", a word which translates most accurately to "questioner" or "inquisitor." Joe is, for all intents and purposes, Heaven's Grand Inquisitor, a position mirrored here on earth in the office of Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith within the Roman Catholic Church. That earthly office was the previous post of Pope Benedict XVI, formerly known as Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger. Hence, we'll call Heaven's Grand Inquisitor "Joe" in tribute. Or something like that.

Anyway, Joe spends his time walking to and fro and up and down on earth looking for the most righteous men and women to test. It seems that his theory about faith boils down to one salient point: faith is dependent upon comfort. Remove the comfort and faith evaporates, making even these most righteous of men and women unfit for God's protection and favor.

Joe the satan says as much to God, who gives Joe leave to do whatever he deems appropriate to Job so long as Job's body isn't harmed.

So Joe does his worst. Everything Job has – all his material wealth and his pride and joy, his family, are taken from him in horrendous ways. Fire, invasion, and natural disaster leave Job bemoaning his fate at the end of the first chapter: "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return there; the Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away..." But far from causing the reaction Joe the satan expected, Job goes on to say, "...blessed be the name of the Lord."²

So the contest between Joe and God continues – with our friend Joe far more interested in the outcome, seemingly, than God. God isn't concerned because he knows how this is all going to end, but he allows Joe the satan to inflict yet more horror on Job, so long as Job does not die. Thus it is that we leave Job covered in sores from head to toe and shushing his wife, who has lost whatever faith she had and wants him to curse God and die rather than suffer as he is.

Now Job begins what to a casual reader might appear to be tilting at windmills. Throughout the rest of the story, Job remains steadfastly convinced of God's presence, God's justice, and God's worthiness to be praised. He is like Don Quixote, somehow, following what seems to be an "Impossible Dream" of his own.

He questions God mightily even as he fights the unbeatable foe and bears the unbearable. Job exhibits the kind of childlike faith that Jesus admonishes his disciples – and us – to have when he says that we are to receive the Kingdom of God as a child.

² Job 1:21

Children question everything, you see.

Children question everything but have unwavering faith in love, in truth, and in justice, just as Job does. They still believe in the “Impossible Dream” of a perfect world.

As a result of this belief in a perfect world, children are generous to a fault with their love. Their service to us comes naturally, without guile and without much thought as to what they might get out of it – unless, of course, you happen to be their parents or grandparents, in which case all claims to innocence are qualified. If we pay attention to what they give us in their unconditional love, then we can learn from them and “pay it forward” by doing the same thing for others.

And that’s really what service is all about, doing good things for others because you love them, without wanting much of anything back. The added benefit to being good stewards of our service is that serving others helps us feel better about ourselves.

I know that some of you sitting here either worked at Fall Foliage yesterday or will be working at some point. Why? Because you belong to or support a service organization. That group may or may not be specifically Christian – but whenever you help others, you’re doing Christ’s work on earth. It doesn’t always seem that way when you’re serving Gob cakes or drawing soda or making change, but even those mundane tasks ultimately make a difference in someone else’s life.

Around the church, we rely on each other’s generous donations of time and energy to make things happen, even though some of what happens is less noticeable than other things. Service is obvious in tasks like teaching Sunday School and ushering. What about the property folks, whose work is often unnoticed until something *isn’t* done? Mike and Dick give a lot of time to make sure that the church building is safe and I rely on them to help me with things at the parsonage that I either don’t know how to do or can’t do by myself. We won’t talk about the things I do by myself but probably shouldn’t like, oh, perhaps *hanging curtains at the top of 9 ½ foot windows...* How often do we take the service of our financial folks for granted? Betty and Mary Grace work together to make sure that income is properly documented and bills are paid on time, while Sandy tracks our spending trends and reminds us to use our monetary resources wisely.

When it comes to service through mission work, much of what we do is support work. When we contribute our fair share as a congregation to Our Church’s Wider Mission, we pay for infrastructure in Greensburg and Cleveland as well as direct service locally, nationally, and

around the world. In every place our money goes, people with the skills of Betty, Mary Grace, and Sandy work to make sure that our mission giving is used wisely for the good of all. Trust me when I tell you that their job is not easy, but it's even harder if we don't do our part by providing resources for them to use as they strive to bring better living conditions and true freedom to those most in need.

The "Impossible Dream" of Don Quixote is very much the vision of the world promised when all people have equal access to God's liberty and justice. The "unreachable stars" aren't unreachable when we give our time and talents in service, generously and unconditionally as children do. With God's help, the "Impossible Dream" will become a reality, and no one will ever tilt at windmills again.