

## Beyond Futility

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The Last Sunday after the Epiphany  
Transfiguration Sunday  
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2 Kings 2:1-12; 2 Corinthians 4:1-6; Mark 9:2-13

“Therefore, since it is by God’s mercy that we are engaged in this ministry, we do not lose heart.” -- 2  
Corinthians 4:1

As I’m sure most everyone here this morning knows, February is Black History Month, and we are seeing again the sometimes grainy film footage of the marches and sit-ins and boycotts and rallies for the civil rights of African-American citizens that once capture our country’s attention, on the one hand, and, on the other, were so regularly met with violent and sometimes lethal resistance.

Many of us in the room can remember the riots, the assassinations, and above all the palpable fear that the center of this country, whatever it was, might not hold, and that we would literally tear ourselves apart over the issue of equality for all American citizens.

We had been in that spot before, and some of us wondered why we hadn’t learned the lessons of the first civil war. Many of us wondered why, after so much suffering, destruction, bloodshed, and loss, states began systematically undoing the work of reconstruction and rebuilding the type of racist, classist society that had cost the country well over half a million lives. Even so great a price as that seemed not enough to those bent on maintaining their privilege and power at the expense of others.

PBS recently broadcast a program about the music of the civil rights era, and one of the most famous of those songs is “We Shall Overcome.” I suspect that most of us can sing it from memory: “We shall overcome. We shall overcome. We shall overcome someday. . . .”

“Deep in my heart, I do believe that we shall overcome someday.” That’s a statement of faith. It explicitly says that for those of us in the Christian faith, this business of struggling to overcome economic injustice, legal inequality, and environmental racism is a matter of belief.

For Christians, the struggle for justice of every kind – justice for racial minorities, justice for women, justice for sexual minorities, justice for the environment – all of those struggles are matters of faith. They are grounded not in secular ideas about ecological management and social engineering – necessary and welcome as those ideas are – but rather in the conviction, as Paul said to the Corinthians in our text for this morning, that “it is by God’s mercy that we are engaged in this ministry, [and so] we do not lose heart.”

It is a mercy, Paul says, to be engaged in what he calls a few verses on in this letter “the ministry of reconciliation.” It’s not a burden. It’s not a duty. It’s not a chore, a pain, or an inconvenience. It’s not an embarrassment and it’s not a cause for alarm. It’s a mercy. It is one of the many gracious acts of God toward us, that some of us have been graced with the urge, as the prophet Isaiah said, “to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners . . . to comfort all who mourn. . . .”

It’s a mercy to be anointed with God’s Spirit to do that. It’s a mercy to be delivered from thinking only about yourself. It’s a mercy to have your heart and mind and spirit grown into ever-widening circles of connection and concern. It’s a mercy to see the futility not of our ministry, but rather the futility of serving the self and its demands.

A few nights ago, I was at a community meeting in South Euclid to discuss a proposal to turn a

vacant lot near my house into a pocket park. A pocket park is simply a small public green space. I was asked to attend this meeting to speak on behalf of the idea, which I was more than glad to do. I had heard that some residents were objecting to the idea, and so I'd drawn up a list of reasons why I thought a small park in our neighborhood would be a benefit. I never got to use that list because, as it happened, no one at the meeting objected to the park. Everyone was for it. And not only was everyone in favor of the additional public green space, but people were speaking out on behalf of their neighbors and not just themselves.

One elderly couple urged the park so that the young parents they see with strollers could have a place to meet each other. Another man with grown children said he hoped we wouldn't eliminate the nearby space where kids from the neighborhood have pick-up games of baseball and touch football and Frisbee. His children are long grown, and he and his wife are at the greatest risk for a fly ball going through one of their windows, but they'd rather take that risk than eliminate an area where kids can play and get to know one another.

I went to that meeting, after a long and difficult day at work, with a roaring headache, but as I left two hours later, I realized that my headache was gone, and that I hadn't felt that good about human potential in years. My neighbors had clearly been graced with the gift of God's mercy, whether they would have recognized it in those terms or not.

I'm not overlooking the other realities that point in a different direction for those of us committed to the stewardship of creation. I just saw in the paper, as I'm sure many of you did as well, that the owners of the former Acacia Country Club in Lyndhurst are being courted by a local developer. We all know what that means. It doesn't mean more green space. It means less. It means more retail in an already saturated retail market. It means more impermeable surfaces creating runoff. It means more congestion, more mindless consumerism, more money in fewer pockets. Yes, of course it'll create a few jobs, but what kinds of jobs, at what price, and for how long? And if you can create jobs pushing stuff that people don't need, you can also create jobs pushing stuff that people – and rabbits and foxes and hawks and trees – do need. There's nothing inevitable about jobs coming only from destroying the environment or depleting resources or fueling the consumption frenzy. Jobs can also come from building up, from repairing, restoring, and putting back.

But it's pretty certain that won't happen at Acacia, just as it didn't happen at Oakwood Commons and it didn't happen at Chagrin Highlands before that and it didn't happen at Legacy Village before that. The tree-huggers among us have grown used to setbacks, and it takes a real effort not to give up, give in, and say that we've lost and there's no point.

But we don't, and the reason we don't is because for those of us who try to base our actions on our faith, the point is not in succeeding; the point is in being faithful. You do what you believe God is calling you to do whether you have much chance of success or not. The ministry doesn't come from us, and it isn't as much about changing the world as it is about changing us. We change the world only as and to the extent that we change ourselves, and as long as we know that we are being changed – “changed from glory into glory” as we'll sing in our last hymn – we have faith that the world will change with us, eventually. Changed not by us, but by God, working in and through us. That's the ministry that takes us beyond futility. We do what we do because we believe it's what God would have us do, even if we're the last ones believing it and the last ones doing it. And in that believing and in that doing, we do not lose heart.

I close with a story I heard from my old boss, Gilleasbuig Macmillan, the minister of St. Giles' Cathedral in Edinburgh. Gilleasbuig said that an official from the former Soviet Union stopped into a Russian Orthodox Church one day and said to the priest, “You know we'll win, don't you? You know that we are the mightiest nation on earth, and your churches are falling down or barely surviving. You have no money, no clout, no authority, and the only people you can attract are little old ladies. What are you going to do when they're gone?”

The priest replied, “God will send us more little old ladies.” That priest recognized that the ministry we have comes from God, and he had not lost heart. The Soviet Union is now on the ash heap of history, and the little old ladies in the Russian Orthodox Church are experiencing a rebirth.

“Therefore, since it is by God’s mercy that we are engaged in this ministry, we do not lose heart.”