

How Are We Doing?

Gene McAfee
Faith United Church of Christ
Richmond Heights, Ohio

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“For you, O God, have tested us; you have tried us as silver is tried.” – Psalm 66:10

When the late Ed Koch was mayor of New York, he liked to stand on street corners and ask passersby “How’m I doin’?” And the residents of New York told him and he listened. And he was elected by them three times to lead one of our country’s most illustrious and complicated cities.

Ed Koch wanted to know what ordinary New Yorkers thought of him as a mayor. He genuinely wanted to know how his leadership was affecting the lives of the people he had been elected to serve. He valued their opinion, and he respected their views. He didn’t always agree with them, but he loved them. And he fiercely loved his hometown.

Every working day was a kind of self-initiated referendum for Ed Koch. He wasn’t afraid of criticism – receiving or giving – because he believed that you get better by having your flaws and weaknesses brought to your attention. Being tested at least gave you the opportunity to improve. If you surround yourself only with flatterers and sycophants, you’ll never know how lousy you really are in your job.

God is the great non-flatterer. God is nobody’s sycophant. God is nobody’s poodle. God does not go along to get along. God does not keep God’s head down to keep the peace. God stirs things up, makes things difficult, tries us as silver is tried.

I have taken as my text the tenth verse of the sixty-sixth psalm, “For you, O God, have tested us; you have tried us as silver is tried.”

We’d all agree, I think, that we’re living in a trying time, and for most of us, “trying” simply means “vexatious.” A child or spouse or student who’s trying our patience is simply an annoyance; we see no value in their behavior. Maybe we should look closer.

When something bothers us, we rarely take the time and make the effort to ask why. Why does this bother me? Why is this getting on my nerves? It doesn’t seem to bother others. Why am I reacting this way?

It’s one thing for someone else to say, “Why are you reacting this way?” but there’s far more value in the question when we ask it of ourselves and do the work to come up with a reasonably truthful answer.

I know it’s time for me to take a walk when I get upset about something. It’s my way of exercising that pithy advice we’ve all heard from time to time, “Walk away.” Sometimes you just need to walk away from a situation to make it better – or at least not to make it worse. I’ve often had to tell people when they come to me to discuss a problem that there’s not much you can do to make this better right now, but there are lots of things you can do to make it worse, and that’s what you want to avoid.

How are we doing now, in the midst of our pandemic? This will be the defining event of our generation, and through it God is testing us. God is using this difficult time to help us see ourselves as we truly are, and not as we fancy ourselves to be. We are being given an opportunity to see what we're made of, to see how well we respond to a crisis – or not – and whether our faith has shaped us or merely decorated us. This is a truth-telling moment; what truths is God telling us through this pandemic, and are we taking those truths to heart?

To no one's surprise, we're learning that some of us are selfish. That's hardly news. Hoarding some of us called it, panic-buying others of us have called it. The name doesn't matter; what matters is the self-centeredness reflected in the behavior. I heard President Trump say some weeks ago, bluntly and clearly, "Don't hoard." Hoarding is a hard impulse for us Americans to resist because our consumerist economy is put together in such a way as to encourage us to hoard, that is, to take more than we need. You never hear advertisements telling us that we have plenty or even enough. Until this crisis, you never heard advertisements telling us to share. Instead, for three generations – essentially since the widespread presence of television and prosperity after the Second World War – we've been bombarded with the message that we are still in need – the car we have isn't good enough, we're in need of another one or a new one. The house we live in isn't big enough or modern enough or in the right neighborhood, so we need a new one. The pots and pans in our kitchens aren't safe enough or shiny enough, and so we need safer ones or better ones.

When I was in journalism school, one of the courses that we were required to take was a course in advertising, where we learned, among other things, that one of the main tasks of advertising is to generate what social psychologists call "need synthesis" – that is, advertisers create a sense of need in people for things that they didn't think they needed until the ad told them that they did. Genuine needs don't arise from being told you have one; you'll recognize a genuine need when you feel it for yourself: a need for food and water and clothing and shelter; a need for companionship and social interaction; a need for comfort and reassurance in times of distress. Put all of that together and you have what the Beatles sang to us so long ago, "All You Need Is Love."

And we're learning in this pandemic that people do need love and that many more of us are capable of providing it, in situations that we never imagined, than we realized.

We're hearing on a regular basis of people dying without the presence of loved ones to comfort them as they make the transition from this life to the world to come. The people who would be there in a heartbeat to hold their hand or wipe their brow or sing to them or just be nearby are kept away for reasons of safety, and that's a heart-wrenching loss. But we're also hearing of nurses and doctors and aides and therapists and chaplains and orderlies and administrators and cleaning staff and God only knows who else who are stepping up and stepping in to hold the hands and speak the words and express the love on behalf of separated loved ones. We're being tested, and as we build caring relationships within institutional walls, we're discovering that some of us are passing those tests with flying colors.

Most of us don't like the idea of being tested because we're afraid of failure. But most of us don't fail tests most of the time. Most of us pass most of the tests we have to take. Most of us have a driver's license. Most of us passed the blood test we had to take to get a marriage license. Most of us passed the bar exam if we wanted to be a lawyer, passed our boards if we

wanted to be a nurse, and passed our psychological and personality tests if we wanted to be a minister.

And most of us passed most of those tests because we prepared for them, and although we're in the midst of the testing of this pandemic right now, it's not too late for us to turn again to those resources that help us develop the compassion, understanding, patience, and creativity that will see us through these difficult times and perhaps help us build better times going forward.

Last Tuesday night, our church council spent a good chunk of its meeting discussing how and when to begin the process of returning to our building. There is no target date. We have to keep watching the numbers and rates of infections in our area. We have to continue to pay attention to the best advice from science and medicine. We have to continue to trust our leaders to make decisions for the common good. We have to return, again and again, to our own feelings of isolation and frustration and ask how we can ameliorate them not only for ourselves but also for others. We have to look seriously at the gift of personal time and space we've been given by our forced social distancing to see if we're making the best use of those precious commodities.

To return to Psalm 66: silver is tested not to destroy it, but to make it better. Silver is tested to refine its finest qualities. Silver is tested to bring out its best.

When this time of testing is over, how will you be different? Will it have brought out your best, will it have brought out your worst, or will it have left you largely unchanged? Will you have made the best of this time, or will you have spent it cowering in fear or lashing out in pain and frustration?

Yes, God is testing us, and thank God for it, because silver ore doesn't become one of those Christmas "silver bells" until it's tested.