

"THE USES OF DISILLUSIONMENT"

A sermon by Dale Rosenberger, Minister
The First Congregational Church, Darien, Connecticut

Two months ago the Penn State abuse scandal hit. Much of that shock and pain seemed to resurge last week as they hired a new football coach. Great sadness and disillusionment still hang over the university. Some alumni disavow future support for PSU. They wash their hands and walk away... We hear similar deep disenchantment in election years like 2012. Now it all begins again. "Politicians will say anything for a vote," people gripe. "They promise the moon and stars but deliver nothing. I am disillusioned. I won't vote."

My friend, Seattle writer and consultant Tony Robinson, claims, "We all get disillusioned at times and with different people and things. Sometimes we make disillusionment an excuse. 'I'm disillusioned so I don't vote. I'm disillusioned with the church, so I don't go anymore.' But to be 'disillusioned' means trading your illusions for the truth, which may be a hard thing, but is never a bad thing. Joe Paterno is not God. Neither Penn State football nor any college or university is above reproach or question. Neither college football nor sports are the most essential things in the world. These are illusions. We are better off without them. *It is what you do after you have been disillusioned that matters.*"

Tony is right. Let's face it, last time I checked, our alma maters, political caucuses, and churches are all composed of human beings. And the history of human beings of living up to our highest ideals is quite checkered at best. In fact, our own history of living up to our highest ideals is quite checkered at best. That is true of all times, all places, and all settings. Leaf through the Bible, with its many generations across millennia. You'll hear the same story. God keeps his promises. As for us? Not so much. Still, we hold out for some group--*any group*--to live up to cherished ideals of respect, integrity, and trustworthiness.

When that doesn't happen—and human nature never changes—we rotate to another circle where this time we surely won't be let down. Maybe it is an investment club, the kid's soccer league, the citizens rebuilding the local library. Maybe we seek out a new town, another denomination. "Yeah, it will be different this time." Of course, if we wait long enough, they will prove as human as the last group. I guarantee it. So what, do we move on again? It proves to be a rootless way to live, what with all this migrating to protect our ideals. For every time we rotate it wears on us until we are not only disillusioned. We are becoming bitter and resentful. We start to give up on dreams, both ours and God's. And this hurts deeply. Moments of dream deflation leave large, indelible marks upon the soul.

We see how raw feelings get in the Old Testament Jezebel-chasing-Elijah story. Elijah had zealously defeated the prophets of Baal for God. What did he get for risking so much? "I'm the last faithful guy," Elijah moans, "and they're going to kill me." Even when that isn't literally true, it can feel that way. Elijah fled Jezebel's hit men into the mountains where he shivered in a cave. "What are you doing in there?" Yahweh asks him, as though to say, "you can't quit yet." To convince Elijah to reengage the fray of life, Yahweh sends wind, earthquake, and fire to jar Elijah out of the self-pity and complacency of his hiding.

The message is clear. Our disillusionment calls for something bigger than capitulation. Rather than flee, how can we stand and survive life's messiness? Maybe that path is trading our illusions for the firmer footing of living from a deeper place. Maybe we have let others down as well and that was lost on us, hurt as we were by others. Maybe this is a hard thing, but not a bad thing. Maybe what we do after disillusionment is the key to living a life of spiritual integrity, and sustaining ongoing relationships with God and neighbors.

Last week John the Baptizer arrived. John was not beholden to those religious for a living, the temple establishment. People were disillusioned with that hypocritical set. John spoke pure and unfettered truth. So they came in droves to the desert, despite his radical idea of knowing God outside the temple. Who even thought something like that was possible?

In today's text, John is in prison because he called out Herod Antipas for sleeping with his half-brother's wife. "Go get those fat cat, corrupt Roman collaborators!" folks had egged him on. "Attaboy, John!" But it's amazing how imprisonment and association with criminals doesn't add the sheen of your reputation. Real disenchantment with John is growing.

Just then Jesus leaps to his defense. "Did you go out to John expecting that one speaking God's truth so fearlessly to imperial power wouldn't eventually get crushed by them?" Jesus talks like his own work was impossible apart from how John prepared the way for him. It was. But get this. By now Jesus has been out there ministering long enough that some are also disillusioned with him. So he summarizes the criticisms against John and himself. "You criticize John saying, 'He is a loony,' because he doesn't attend your parties, keeping himself holy and apart. But then you criticize me saying, 'He is a boozier,' because I *do* attend your parties, seeking you out where you live your lives. So which is it?" he asks them. "You can't have it both ways." Then Jesus does something interesting.

He reflects back at them the childishness of their disillusionment with the two of them. He recites what was likely a nursery rhyme of the era. "We played the flute for you, and you didn't dance; we wailed and you didn't mourn." Here Jesus calls them on their immaturity.

What is his point? The signs of God's reign abound. The blind see, the lame walk, lepers are healed, the poor exult. Can't you recognize the advance of God's purposes in this? What are you waiting for? You don't like John? You prefer other messiahs? Push through your disenchantment with John to engage God's emerging reality. Rise above not liking my inscrutable parables that dismantle life as you know it to hear good news of how God will put things back together anew and afresh. But don't just stew in your juices. For if you do, you will miss the chance of a lifetime. Push through your pain, grow up a little (*hence, the nursery rhyme*), stand with me now to come out the other side, where God awaits us."

If that Jesus sounds tough, remember, he wants to strip them of facile illusions in order to give them deeper, foundational truth. That job leaves little room for sentimentality. Also, remember, this is the Jesus who bathed the feet of 12 disaffected disciples in the upper room, who betrayed, denied or abandoned him. Finally, remember, disillusionment will

happen. Expect it. Don't be surprised. It is what we *do* with disillusionment that matters.

If Tony Robinson claims disillusionment is not the dead end it seems, Soren Kierkegaard kicks that truth up a notch. He says until we *despair* of scanty ideas such as "beauty will save the world", or "the plans and intentions of noble people will rescue us," we will never experience our deep, existential need for Christ. Can you believe that? Treating disillusionment and despair *as opportunities* to propel us into deeper wells of living to connect with God in new ways? The problem with this perspective is that a heart of faith is first required to see opportunity in what feels like a painful dead end. What if we don't have all of that faith in the moment we are being sorely tested? Can we stay, push through and come out the other side? The reality is sometimes we can; other times, we can't. Frankly, I feel for people on either side, those who persevere, and those who decide to move on.

But make no mistake. The faith that puts a cross—a tool of execution—at the center all things, proclaims that God can and will use everything for good with those who love him. The God who uses a cross can surely use disillusionment. There is nothing God cannot use. That's why we are so much more than optimistic. We bear sturdy, rock-ribbed hope. What does real hope, death-proof hope, hope superior to the world's darkness, look like?

Let me tie a bow on this sermon and interpret what this weekend means with a final story. After Rosa Parks refused the back of the bus, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was heralded as the shining knight to slay the evils of racism, hatred, and violence. Surely the Montgomery bus boycott would only last days and the cause would be vindicated. But days became weeks and months. The stakes soared. King grew disillusioned with his impossible cause.

King's soul bottomed out on 27 January 1956. After an evening planning meeting, his wife Coretta slept soundly. But there was no rest for Dr. King. The phone rang and a sinister voice told him to leave Montgomery or face death. King hung up, afraid and devastated. This was too much. He couldn't do it anymore. Dr. King was Elijah trembling in the cave.

He made coffee and sat down at the kitchen table. "I was ready to give up," King writes in his book *Stride Toward Freedom*. "With my cup of coffee untouched before me, I tried to think of a way to move out of the picture without appearing a coward. In this state of exhaustion, with my courage had all but gone, I decided to take my problem to God. With my head in my hands, I bowed over the kitchen table, praying aloud, '...I am at the end of my powers. I have nothing left. I have come to the point where I can't face it alone.'"

"At that moment, I experienced the presence of the divine as I had never experienced it before. It seemed as though I could hear the quiet assurance of an inner voice saying, 'Stand up for justice. Stand up for truth; and God will be at your side forever.' Almost at once, my fears began to go. My uncertainty disappeared. I was ready to face anything." I am not telling you the sky will always part at your darkest hour. I am saying we can push through our disillusionment. We can lose our frothy illusions in favor of foundational truth. Maybe Tony is right. Maybe disillusionment isn't so bad, if it *disabuses* us of our illusions.

The surprise is not that humans become disillusioned. Frankly, that is pretty predictable, given humankind's track record. What's surprising is the light-filled opportunity hidden within disillusionment, if we're willing to take the road less traveled and trust without proof.

Of course, the truly miraculous surprise is that God has never grown totally disillusioned with us. Hear the good news, friends. God is crazy about us. God will use anything to win us back, and will not give up on us. It has nothing to do with us and everything to do with God. We didn't create it, we didn't cause it and we don't deserve it. This is our final hope. Amen.

God of grace and truth, with dismay we remember a time when Christian people were content to buy and sell human beings, often fellow Christians, like livestock. With thankfulness we recall how you have inspired generations of courageous leaders to push through great discouragement and to sacrifice everything to remove the shame of slavery from our land.

We remember peaceful warriors, like Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., through whom you have increased dignity and liberty for all. Give us similar pause as we, like him, want to give up on tough callings. We turn to you in hope for the task isn't yet complete. Inspire us mightily, that we may continue the work of freedom in the cause of peace. Create in us such a thirst for justice and such a horror of bigotry, that we will strive to comprehend complex issues and to train ourselves and our children in the ways of respect and acceptance. Work in our hard hearts, teaching us to judge people not by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character. In our daily lives, so sharpen our consciences that we interrupt the habits of degrading comments made about entire populations, and instead see Jesus' face in theirs.

Enlighten the eyes of our hearts, to see one another as you see us: beloved children, forgiven sinners, trying to make our way through life as best we can, with what we have. Help us forgive one another, advocate for one another, delight in one another, that through us the world may see all the colors of your creation in a new and holy and Christlike light. Amen.