

**The fragments and scraps....**  
**Isaiah 60:1-6 and Matthew 2:1-12**

Do any of you here like to work with your hands? Construct, sculpt, sew, knit, weave, paint, anything at all that requires your hands to actually do something to make concrete and visible something that previously existed only as a wish, a thought, an image inside you waiting to get out? If you do work with your hands, or had the opportunity to do so have you ever felt compelled to create or produce something tangible – something that can be seen, handled, passed around, passed down, used, admired, enjoyed?

That happened to me the other evening as I came home from the office. I walked into my house and a desire to create something tangible compelled me to open up an old box, that I've had "kicking around," so to speak for several years.

It's a small box. Bright colours. It used to hold crayola crayon themed shoes, little person shoes, a child's size 9 1/2 that once fit one of my young sons.

My youngest son is 20 years old now – so that will give you some idea of just how many years this box has travelled with me.

And everywhere I find myself, this box finds a place on a book shelf – always near at hand – usually visible.

What treasure does this box contain?

This box contains many tiny pieces of fabric that are part of a long-term project;

a very long-term project.

You see, I've always liked to sew and when my sons were young I channeled my sewing energy into creating quilts.

The quilt making required precision and control, something I'd do mostly in the evening as an antidote to how chaotic my days felt in my efforts to raise my three young sons.

Every time I started a new fabric project I would take some of the scrap or leftover pieces and cut them into precise one and 2 inch squares, tiny diamonds and small pentagons – with the intent that some day all of these tiny remnants of all of my larger projects would be hand sewn into what is known as a postage stamp quilt. A postage stamp quilt ends up having literally 1000's of tiny pieces joined together in some pleasing fashion and the purist in me has begun and intends to continue to hand sew rather than machine sew these pieces together. A long-term project, yes? Potentially a life-time project, also yes.

These tiny pieces of fabric, tangible representations of my own personal larger story, are for me and whom ever I offer them up to – one day – a bit of a treasure.

The heart of today's story from Matthew also contains the offering up of treasure.

Overwhelmed with joy that their life's project has led them to the feet of the Christ child, The astrologers from the East kneel before him and open up their treasures, another translation says "open up their coffers," and present their precious contents to the child and his mother. But the contents of the box, the gold and the frankincense and the myrrh are only symbolic of all that they have already offered up of their lives to seek and to find this child.

The star they saw, the trip meticulously planned, the miles covered – for years possibly, the courage required to enquire of the king where the "ruler" of the Jews could be found, and the risk encountered until warned in a dream that they return to their own country by another way. This trip cost them more than the treasure in their coffers and they seem to have offered it gladly. When the star re-appeared and revealed to them the exact location of mother and child, we read that they were overwhelmed with joy.

But the story doesn't end there. This encounter of astrologers and Christ child cost others beyond these Magi even more. This story as you may well know is followed by the story of the slaughter of the Holy Innocents; the slaughter of all male children under the age of two in Bethlehem. And if we will we can still hear Rachel weeping for her children, Rachel who will not be consoled. This timeless Rachel – whose character is lifted from the pages of the Hebrew Scriptures in order to be placed here in Matthew, wept first for the Hebrew refugees who died before or on their way to Babylon, in Matthew this Rachel weeps for

these wee ones who were slaughtered instead of Jesus and the timeless wailing of Rachel weeps still for those who could not escape South Sudan safely, or the typhoon in the Philippines or.....

What joy can be had and what treasure can be offered up in the face of all this? What story can our own hands make tangible when so much suffering and darkness always exists at the edge of the joy and the light.

This questions flirts at the edge of my thoughts a lot these days. Apparently, one of the greatest challenges of our time is a growing cynicism about finding solutions to the greatest struggles of our time. This cynicism, like darkness at the edge of the light has crept closer to most of us than at any previous time in my lifetime.

Cynicism about what can be done about climate change

Cynicism about the political realm

Cynicism about civic engagement...

Cynicism about how our individual and collective lives can create positive change.

There are certainly inspirational venues in our world that are trying to transform thinking and imagination and through them the world in positive ways.

TED talks are inspirational. TED stands for Technology, Entertainment and Design and their purpose is to inspire people towards positive personal and world transformation. After I had listened to a few, I began to think of them as sermons for people who don't go to church. But this week I listened to a TED talk by someone who was quite cynical about the power of these talks to make any kind of difference.

He says,

that

to be clear, [he thinks] that having smart people who do very smart things explain what they are doing in a way that everyone can understand is a good thing....

But [he goes on to say] have you ever wondered why so little of the future promised in [TED talks](#) actually happens? So much potential and enthusiasm, and so little actual change. Are the ideas wrong? Or is the idea about what ideas can do all by themselves wrong?

He is clearly cynical about the oversimplification of problem solving that is so often part of TED talks.

Basically he argues instead for deep and hard discussions about the complexities surrounding the systems within which we find ourselves embedded. And these hard conversations he says need to include history, economics, philosophy, art, ambiguity and they need to go way beyond personal stories of inspiration so that our overall understanding of the complexities surrounding us is increased and not dumb-downed.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/dec/30/we-need-to-talk-about-ted>

Urban issues columnist for The Toronto Star, Christopher Hume, noted in this weekend's paper that of all the problems our city must deal with, growing cynicism is among the most intractable. His description of Toronto's problems is apt when he says these problems have been brought about by recessionary economics, polarized politics and a leadership vacuum. He notes too how we have squandered decades and let the city idle while its population and congestion have grown exponentially. He also claims that "one way or another, the issues we face stem from the cynicism, even contempt, with which so many view Toronto and its institutions. This loss of respect, which extends beyond the civic arena, is global. In the popular imagination, politicians are crooks and leaders only in it for themselves. Realistically, he says that restoring civic faith and rebuilding the infrastructure, - transit, power, sewers, housing, - will cost billions and take years.

Even so -this year – an election year – is a good time to go back to basics and remind ourselves how imagination, dreams and ideas can transform not just the city, but the world.

He and others at the Star are calling for new approaches, proposals and suggestions, new ways of thinking and new ideas to keep this election year focused on issues and away from personalities.

Their (The Star and its writers') call for increased civic engagement is laudable and I hope the citizens of this city take them up on it.

But I wonder, are dreams, imagination and ideas the way forward, as Hume suggests? Do we need more appreciation for and deeper

discussions of the complexities of the systems of which we are part, as our TED talk critic says?

I would say that both approaches are definitely important but secondary to something even more fundamental.

There is an important question that must be asked prior to the one about dreams, imagination, ideas and hard conversations. The question that precedes these is as follows:

What is it that is worth putting our ideas, dreams and imaginations in service of?

What do we put the work of our hands in service of?

What can possibly create the kind of joy that demands that we fall on our knees in homage and open up the treasures of our hearts and minds, our work and our lives?

As I'm sure you've already gathered, the answer in our text is not what, but who.

In stories and poems and prophecy and wisdom writings, the text we call our Bible reveals a God of justice and mercy to whom, in Isaiah 60, the wealth of the nations will stream (symbolized in the poem in Isaiah 60 by people and camels who stream over the mountains carrying gold and frankincense) The Glory of Israel's God, as it arises and shines on  
the people  
attracts  
the peoples,  
the wealth

and the praise of the nations.

The Light that creates such a powerful attraction radiates from the very Being and words and actions of God. This Glory and righteousness of God defends the cause of the poor, gives deliverance to the needy and crushes the oppressor.

The astrologers of the East are seeking this 'ruler,' and are overjoyed when they find him.

I contend that the light that emanates from God is the only reality powerful enough to keep today's cynicism at bay.

But even so, we need to remember that the light that illuminates the cause of the poor and needy among us also illuminates the deeds of the oppressor. This kind of light and power destabilizes our complex systems, just as it destabilized Herod and all of Jerusalem when they heard that a new kind of ruler had been born.

The light of God isn't dappled as through the leaves of trees lighting up one thing but leaving another thing in shade, but more like the sun on a brilliant winter's day gleaming from a blue and cloudless sky and reflecting off the snow making us shield our eyes. It uncovers our own needs and poverty of spirit at the same time as it implicates each one of us in the oppressive structures and systems of which we are part.

And so now what do we do with our dreams, imagination and ideas, the work of our hands



and our hard conversations about the difficulties within which we find ourselves?

We do the only thing we can do, the only thing we are compelled to do, we gather up the fragments and scraps of the projects and stories that represent our lives and the life of this community and with whatever humility we can muster we place them in the service of the One in whose light we live.

If God's actions in Matthew's story are any indication, God loves to use dreams. I know God works through our imaginations and ideas. I suspect God is able to use any scrap and fragment we choose to offer. I am keenly aware that God can be present in hard conversations. And if TUMC is about to embark on a major building project then I pray God use the work of our hands.