

Isaiah 40
Psalm 67
May 22, 2022

Tea Cup Faith

We have heard from the psalter already, the 67th Psalm, which offers a prayer for graciousness and blessing for the people, not only the people of Israel, but all nations, all the peoples on earth. In addition, I want to draw your attention to the 40th chapter of the Book of Isaiah, because it has in it good advice on this occasion we call Youth Sunday. Before we hear from it directly, let me speak of a few things that are a part of that good advice.

1 - When I was young I came under the impression that one of the goals in life was to change the world, leave it better than I found it. My generation would not change the world in any way that matters. It was naive to believe that we would be able to do better than previous generations. It turns out we were pretty much like previous generations in this sense: we are human beings, and human nature hasn't changed, nor has the human condition.

We did not have billionaires and now there are about 2700 of them, but we still have poverty. Our cars and furnaces are more efficient than they were forty years ago, but issues regarding the environment are still with us. The Vietnam War ended, and so did the Cold War, but we still have war. In these things, some good things have happened, but people are still the same.

Technology has changed. We did not have computers in our homes until I was in college, and usually only one TV, one land line telephone, often one car. There was no internet. There were no smart phones, tablets, and certainly no Siri or Alexa. Technology did change, but at a basic level, people haven't.

I do not mean to disparage my generation. People of my generation were smart and creative and well-intentioned, but they were also selfish and greedy, sometimes angry and violent, and often afraid. The universal struggle with anger and fear and selfishness was neither heightened nor diminished in my time. The advice to the younger generation is to expect to make some things better, but to have realistic expectations about changing human nature.

2 - Much time in our younger days is spent learning to accomplish things. From the earliest years of learning to walk and talk to the childhood time of learning to read and write and multiply and divide, all the way up to achievements in the arts and athletics and making grades, to calculus and chemistry and advanced degrees, we are taught to believe that achievement is the chief aim in life.

Meaning in life, a sense of fulness rather than emptiness, joy rather than sorrow, hope rather than despair, doesn't come from accomplishing things. People will struggle with the idea that their accomplishments have any ultimate significance at all. Both things and success can add to our lives, but do not satisfy our deepest hunger.

3 - Finally, the human tendency is to think that the world is as big as what we can see, and that God must be at least a little bigger than the world. As time goes by the perception of the world keeps getting bigger and our conception of God has a hard time keeping up. "Is not life more than what you think it is?" Jesus asked his congregation in the Sermon on the Mount. Is not the world, the universe, bigger than you think? Is not God more than what you can comprehend?

I came across an illustration used by an American Baptist minister more than 100 years ago, that expresses this thought and that I appreciated so I will share it with you. The preacher's name was Harry Emerson Fosdick and though I am probably taking his image out of context, I still feel like I should attribute it to him.

He spoke about putting the ocean in a tea cup, about literally taking a cup and dipping it in the ocean. And then going to a laboratory for analysis. Nothing the lab report would say about the ocean would be untrue, but it would be absurd to take the tea cup of ocean water, even filled to the brim, into a classroom, and saying, "this is the ocean."

And if I were giving advice to the younger generation it would be, do not to put God in a tea cup. "Dost thou not know? Hast thou not heard?" Isaiah writes in the 40th chapter, "The Lord is the everlasting God, the creator of the ends of the earth. God will not grow weary or tired, his understanding no one can fathom?"

The question is asked, "who has held the dust of the earth in a basket?" Which is the same as, "who has held the ocean in a tea cup?"

The 40th chapter of Isaiah is worth close attention, not only because of the way it begins, with its Advent prophecy that later became associated with both John the Baptist and Jesus, but because it challenges us to humble ourselves at the vastness of the universe and the mysterious wonder of life and the majesty of God and how little, even now, we know about it.

So much of our religion, its doctrines and rituals, all our words about God, can be an attempt to practice a tea cup faith much too small to warrant the effort. But if all *that* is seen as pointing beyond itself to a greater reality, a bigger life, then our religion can do its work in us, and produce a stronger faith, a higher love, and a better understanding of the world and its people.

And this wonderful chapter comes with a promise at the end, "God gives strength to the weary, increases the power of the weak. *Even the strong* grow tired and weary (I wish someone had emphasized that), the young stumble and fall. But those who put their hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles, they will run and not be weary, walk and not faint."

While we seek to grow beyond our basket-sized understanding, let us set aside our tea cup faith, and in humility acknowledge our weakness and smallness, and to put our hope in the Lord, for everything, which

is where it belongs. It is a beautiful life that we have been given, let us not squander it by making it smaller than it is.

“May God be gracious to us and bless us
and make his face shine on us
May the peoples praise you, God;
may all the peoples praise you . . .
May God bless us still,
so that all the ends of the earth will fear him.”

Prayer (excerpts of a John Baillie prayer)

Here we are, O God, humbly yours, lifting up our tea cup lives to you, before whom all created things are as dust and mist. You are behind the curtain of our limited sight and hearing, incomprehensible in your greatness, mysterious in your almighty power, yet here we are speaking to you with the familiarity of a child to a parent. If we could not speak to you in this way, we would be without hope in the world.

Take this day's life into your keeping; guide our thoughts and feelings, direct all our energies, instruct our minds. Sustain our wills.

Take our hands that we may serve you.
Take our feet and make them quick to go where you ask.
Take our eyes and keep them fixed on your everlasting beauty.
Take our mouths and give us the words of love.

May this day be a day of obedience, of joy and peace. Make this week's work be a part of the work of the kingdom of the Lord Jesus, in whose name these prayers are said. Amen.

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