What’s the Use

In one of his poems, John Greenleaf Whittier wrote these lines:

Of all sad words of tongue or pen,
The saddest are these: It might have been.

Today, if we were asked to rewrite Whittier’s lines to reflect the mood of many people, we might put it this way:

Of all sad words that are on the loose,
The saddest are these: What’s the use?

Some years ago in Chicago, a minister sent out hundreds of questionnaires to people in every walk of life. He received a surprisingly great response, all of which he carefully indexed and tabulated. In each questionnaire only one point was raised: What is the outstanding problem or question you face daily in your thinking or living? Forty-eight percent mentioned personal living: the seemingly loneliness, general failure and futility of it all.

Have you ever been blue, worried, discouraged, disappointed about a task or job that you agreed to do, were asked to do, or called to undertake? Have you begun the task or assignment or mission with great hopes, high expectations, and tons of energy! only, somewhere along the way, the hopes and expectations seem to be trampled and the energy just flows away into weakness and futility?

You and I have been there. You and I have felt that pain of not having been heard, or understood, or supported. It may be in your work place or at school where your supervisor or teacher just doesn’t understand. You work hard, you obey the rules, you give the job or project all you have to offer, and someone who has worked less, is under-committed, and cuts corners is the one who gets the promotion, the grade, and the publicity. And we wonder “what’s the use.”

You may feel that your family just doesn’t get it. As children you think your parents do not have a clue. As parents, we think our children are bone-headed and rebellious. The tension and conflict can reach that point where we cry out “what’s the use.”

We hear those words of discouragement and despair from our prophet. He has preached to the people yet they did not seem to respond. He watched the nation disappear from the face of the earth and his brothers and sisters scattered among a foreign people, and they were still unwilling to hear. Their minds were closed, their ears plugged. The prophet cried out: What’s the use.

“I have labored in vain,
I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity;”

One hot day in August a chaplain was sitting in his office at the Georgia Regional Hospital outside of Atlanta, watching the sun’s long, warm rays crawl across the hospital grounds, when the phone rang. The chaplain picked it up. A nurse from the admissions unit told him, "Chaplain, Nancy has run away again, can you come down here?" "Sure," the chaplain said, "I'll be right down." "Please hurry," she said. "All the male attendants have left and we don't
think any of us can catch her." The chaplain drove quickly to the admissions building, about a half-mile away.

The admissions building always had an eerie feel about it. The lighting was indirect and diffused softly, supposedly to keep down anxiety. The chaplain found it depressing. He began to wonder if Nancy did, too. Maybe that was why she ran away so much. The head nurse, a feisty woman from north Georgia in her late forties, organized them in teams of two to begin the search. As they left the building, one of the patients, a good friend of Nancy's, waved and said, "Hello, Chaplain".

The chaplain found Nancy sitting behind a tree. Nancy looked at the chaplain and said, "What's the use?" The chaplain paused to ask God for an answer. No answer came, so he said, "How should I know?"

Nancy was an ex-nun, now a patient in a mental hospital. iv Where do we turn, when we are feeling distraught and discouraged? Those outside the church turn to violence, hate mongering, drugs and alcohol, or worse. Those who live in darkness spiral into self-destructive behaviors.

But you and I, baptized believers and children of almighty God know where to turn. We turn to the one who is our source of strength and courage: The one who created us, who knit us together in our mother's womb. Before we took our first breath, or looked upon the face of another, God named us and claimed us as his own. This God of the Israelites is the God who established the ministry that is our lives.

When we wonder what it is worth, God reveals to us that it is worth the very life of his only son, Jesus. When we feel that our labors are in vain and that it is not worth the energy, remember that God has already paved the way. What God is doing may be hidden from our eyes. We cannot see beyond the moment, beyond the failures, beyond the disappointments. Yet God holds the future in his hands and his purposes will be fulfilled.

Let us not, therefore, be discouraged and disheartened. Rather, let us lift up our faces and continue the journey.

Over the years that I have lived on the prairie, I am constantly in awe of the pioneers who settled this land. Those pioneers where your ancestors. The harsh winters, the bitter cold, the biting winds did not stop them. Though they may have experienced times of discouragement and despair, they did not give in. When I hear your stories of the dirty thirties, I am amazed that you remained. It is that pioneer spirit and determination that tamed this land of extremes.

We are called upon to have that same determination, that same courage. When we wonder if it is worth it, we are reminded by God that it is. Because of God’s faithfulness, God’s church will survive, it will prosper, it will endure. The good news of Christ will continue to be preached in your words and in your actions.

Do not be downhearted. Know that God is faithful, and our lives are in his hands.

Amen.
First Presbyterian Church
Huron, SD
Pastor Kevin Channell

Date: January 16, 2011
Scripture: Isaiah 49:1-7

Service Beset by "What's the Use?" by Donald Macleod
A Renewed Call: http://www.esermons.com/theResultsPage.asp?firstLogin=
Isaiah 49:4 (NRSV)