

Sermon: Visionary People  
- Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16 -

Have you watched the movie, “Pay it forward?” This movie was released in 2000. It is a good movie that I would highly recommend for you to see.

In this movie on the first day of middle school, Trevor, an eleven year old boy, was challenged by a question posed by a new teacher in his social studies class. Mr. Simonet, the new teacher, who had burn scars all over his face, gave his students an assignment to “think of an idea to change our world – and put it into action” This is a big question to ask, especially to seventh grade kids. Isn’t it? One student mumbled “it’s like so... so... ‘then another student finished the sentence “weird.” Right after, other voices join in complaining that the assignment is “crazy, hard, and a bummer.” (Pause)

After hearing all the complaints Mr. Simonet says with a confirmative voice “how about possible. It’s possible. The realm of possibility exists... in each of you...so you can do it.” Unlike the other kids, Trevor is motivated by the idea and the challenge to change the world. An eleven year old boy dreams of making the world a better place. But is it really possible for a child to change the world? (Pause) Visionary people need faith.

On the way home, Trevor changes his ordinary route and rides his bicycle around his town, Las Vegas, “the most dynamic and spectacular city on the earth” as a travel guide describes it. But, what caught his eye were not the splendid hotel buildings nor the monuments on the street, but a homeless man, Jerry, who was starving to death in the slums.

As an eleven year old boy who naively believed his teacher’s word, “possible,” Trevor brings the homeless man into his house, giving him a bowl of cereal, a hot shower, garage for a night’s sleep and even a little money from his piggy-bank. The next morning, Trevor’s mother, Arlene, who did not know about Jerry’s presence, finds a stranger in her house. She is startled and screams at Jerry to get out of her house, even when Trevor claims Jerry is his friend. This is the ordinary reaction of most people. We teach our children not to talk to strangers or play with them. “Don’t follow people you do not know” and of course, “do not bring strangers into the house.” Right? (Pause) For Arlene, an eleven year old boy’s effort to change the world seemed irrational, irresponsible and even dangerous.

Realizing that her son’s unusual actions were due to an assignment from Mr. Simonet’s social studies class, Arlene visits him to complain. During their hostile conversation, Mr. Simonet bluntly says “I don’t expect them to actually change the world. It’s to get them to think, not walk on water!” As an adult who already experienced the bitterness of the world, Mr. Simonet did not actually believe that the world could be changed by a seventh grade kid. Mr. Simonet, who encouraged Trevor to believe in the possibility of changing the world, he himself did not really have faith in the “possibility of changing the world.” He was just doing his job as a teacher. Without faith, there is no vision for change. (Pause)

Unlike Arlene and Simonet, Trevor, our young visionary who believed he could change the world, formulates an excellent way to transform it.. In the classroom, he presents his remarkable idea. It is that each person helps three people with “something really big.” Those who receive this big favor must do the same for three other people so when the process is continued... the world will eventually be changed. In other words, “Pay it forward. Three big favors for three other people.”

Instantly, he gets mixed feedback from classmates. One girl says “it is a good idea” while his close friend, Adam says “it’s stupid because nobody is going to do that.” What do you think?

Do you think this “pay it forward” idea is good or stupid? Mr. Simonet admires his idea, but he evaluates it as an “overly utopian idea” because “this idea requires an extreme act of faith in the goodness of people.” To put it another way, this seems to be almost impossible to achieve. (Pause) But isn’t it faith that visionary people need?

We, Christians, believe in the coming kingdom of God or at least we confess “thy kingdom come” in the Lord’s Prayer every Sunday morning. We live *with* and live *for* this vision of the coming Kingdom of God in which God’s rule of love is fully realized and no one is discriminated against due to their skin color, physical appearance, gender, sexual orientation and so forth. There is no thirst or hunger but everyone enjoys and shares the bounty of God’s table.

But, isn’t the coming kingdom of God an “overly utopian idea” that requires an extreme act of faith in God? Aren’t we, Christians, visionary people who see the kingdom yet to come? (Pause)

Of course, many good utopian ideas do not work in practice: When Trevor visited the motel where Jerry, the first recipient of his favor, stays, Jerry seemed to be doped up as usual. Trevor calls him, but Jerry does not respond. As we all know, any kind of addiction cannot be easily overcome. A single big favor from Trevor was not enough to save Jerry from his helpless addiction. Trevor’s utopian idea of “pay it forward” seems to be feeble in the face of the harsh reality of this world. Without any signs of change, Trevor’s faith is shaken. (Pause)

Those who received the Letter to the Hebrews, possibly, the Early Christians in Rome, faced the same problem. Christians in Rome expected that Jesus would soon come again so they endured through series of persecutions and public humiliation. But Jesus didn’t come back as they expected. Their Christian family and friends kept dying and there was no sign of Christ. As the wait for Christ prolonged, Christians were losing hope for the second coming of Jesus Christ. As we sometimes question whether the kingdom of God is really coming or if it is just a theological idea, keeping one’s faith in Christ without any glimpse of the evidence of his coming is a tall order for anyone. (Pause)

However, according to Hebrews, what Christians need is not a visible sign, but faith in Christ’s coming, even though there is no tangible evidence at all. In fact, faith is the proof. “Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” (v.1) What visionary people need is not tangible evidence. Rather it is faith to see the coming of God’s kingdom, which is unseen.

Since I have been a pastor of Asbury UMC, I have sensed your deep love for one another and Asbury UMC. But at the same time, I have also sensed untold fear about the future. We love our church but young people do not come to the church. Covid-19 has forced us to face this hard truth. While the state government provides guidelines for in-person worship services, most of our church members belong to the vulnerable age group for Covid-19. You may expect this relatively young pastor to have some magic skill to bring young people back to the church. But you may be disappointed because we do not have any tangible signs of improvement.

My -friends, what we need is faith. Visionary people need faith. In fact, “our task, as Christians, is not to ensure the survival of the church. The church does not belong to us but it belongs to Christ. And after all, resurrection has a prerequisite. Perhaps the church is called to ‘lay down its life for its friends.’ We are called to follow Jesus’s teaching of radical hospitality and love that subverts unjust power in the world such as systemic racism, sexism, or militarism. That might get us killed. But have we forgotten that it is in dying that we rise?

By faith in our Lord Jesus Christ and his resurrection, we can keep working for the kingdom of God with patience and hope, even though there is no sign of its presence. We can wait for the kingdom yet to come where God's peace and justice are fulfilled.

Our young fellow Trevor is disappointed by seeing that his "pay it forward" method does not work for Jerry, but he somehow keeps his faith in the possibility of changing the world and tries to help his second recipient, Mr. Simonet. Mr. Simonet's burn scars show that something terrible happened to him in the past. His father was an alcoholic who battered his wife and son, and eventually set fire to his son when Simonet was sixteen years old. Because of the deep wound in his heart by a person who was supposed to love him, Mr. Simonet was afraid of having an intimate relationship with anyone. . As an innocent young kid, Trevor attempts matchmaking Mr. Simonet and his mother, Arlene who had recently separated from an abusive alcoholic husband. Everything seemed to be going well until Trevor's father comes back apologizing for what he did and Arlene accepts him back into the family. Everything is messed up and Trevor's plan failed yet again. Furthermore, Trevor could not help Adam, his third recipient, when Adam was beaten up by three bullies because Trevor was afraid. (Pause)

The world seems to reject being changed by a young visionary kid similar to how it refused a visionary young man from Nazareth two thousand years ago. (Pause) The world seems resistant to change. When a passionate visionary black preacher, Martin Luther King Jr., marched to change the world, the world responded to him with a cold bullet of hatred, refusing to be changed. (Pause) The world seems to refuse to be changed. When the visionary Florida school shooting survivors raised their voice a few years ago to change unjust gun laws, the world tried to shut them up with death threats, rejecting to be changed. The world seems to refuse to be changed. When visionary people, both old and young, protested for racial justice and the end of police brutality against African Americans, the world shot tear gas and rubber bullets to disperse them. It seems that the world does not want to be changed and hates visionary people who attempt to change it. Can "Martin Luther King Jr.'s Dream" come true? Is the peaceable kingdom of God really coming? Can we still work for the dream of God's kingdom even if there is no tenable sign of change?

What is needed by visionary people is faith... a faith to see the kingdom of God's peace and justice right here and right now... and the kingdom yet to come. We need an extreme act of faith in God and God's promise. We should live with and live by faith although we do not have visible signs of change.

In the last part of the movie, it turns out that Trevor's "pay it forward" actually works and it becomes a goodwill movement and extends to Los Angeles. and other major cities on the West Coast, although Trevor did not know it.

When Chris Chandler, a reporter, desperately needed help, he received a really big favor from a stranger who gave him a luxurious Jaguar. He began to track all the stories of 'pay it forward' and eventually meets and interviews our young visionary boy, Trevor. For Trevor, this is a glimpse of what he hoped for, seeing "things not seen." (The possibility of changing the world, which always remains in the realm of the future.)

Unfortunately, our young visionary Trevor dies that day when he was accidentally stabbed by a bully while he tries to stop Adam from being beaten up. (Pause) Again, the world seems to refuse change.

The movie ends with a scene where thousands of people show up at Trevor's house at night with small candles and flowers to commemorate his life. The world is dark, but we see the

endless number of lights that shine in the world. Trevor did not see the changed world, but “from a distance he saw and greeted it.”

Visionary people need faith. We are visionary people and what we need is faith. Faith in God’s promise. faith in the goodness of people who are created in God’s image; faith in God’s never-failing love that overcomes hatred and bigotry; faith in resurrection that overcomes death and fear of our unknown future; and faith in the coming kingdom of God in which everyone will share true fellowship and friendship regardless of skin color..

With faith, we can continue to work for the kingdom of God to glorify God and transform the world. My friends, do not be afraid of the future of the church but Light the candle of faith and let it shine in the middle of the darkness. Live by faith until God’s kingdom comes. Amen.