

The Woman at the Loom: Finding Meaning in Living a Generous Life

II Corinthians 8:7-15 July 1, 2018, St. Vincent's Edinburgh by Kent Walley

It is really good to be here with you this morning. I have been looking forward to this for some time. I bring you greetings from St. Luke's Episcopal Church in Gladstone, NJ, where I have served as rector for the past 10 years.

I must apologize for my accent. It is the only one I've got. In our country, should anyone from the UK, England, Scotland or otherwise speak in church we are usually put into an immediate state of awe and reverence. I think your manner of speech lends itself to worship much more readily! I fear my American accent might have the opposite effect on you here in Edinburgh. Hopefully, that will not be the case and you will at least be able to understand what I am saying for the most part.

I am here this morning with my wife, Joy, who has been traveling with me on this sabbatical. We were first in Oxford taking a class and I was doing research. Next we did a little sight-seeing in London and York and now we are here with you for two weeks in Edinburgh.

A woman haunted my thoughts and dreams a couple of nights ago. And it was not my wife, Joy, or anyone I personally have known, but a woman I encountered in York. Actually, she isn't real. She is just a representation, but she got me thinking. This woman is a Viking woman living in the ancient village of Jorvik. She is an audio animatronic character on the Jorvik Adventure. If you haven't been, I would recommend it. It is an exhibit in the heart of York based on the archaeological work that began there in 1976. They have discovered many artifacts and remains of the ancient city of Jorvik that dates to the 10th century. And you actually ride through a recreation of the village that is based on the archaeological discoveries. It feels very much like you are there. It is quite realistic right down to the smells, which, in a village before there were toilets and running water, can be a bit unpleasant. It is amazing to see what they did have so long ago, like an ancient padlock and key. But there is also evidence of lice, intestinal worms

and other challenges, which made me thankful for our modern technology, even with all the annoyance that it can bring.

The woman that I encountered in Jorvik, was an audio animatronic of a woman at loom, inside a building that was dark with few windows. Her task was to weave and she sat at a loom weaving in this dark building by candlelight for long hours of the day. And something about that image got me wondering about what it would be like to live in that 10th century village and to be sitting at a loom day in day out weaving in the dark. It seems depressing to me, to think about that. How does she find any enjoyment or satisfaction in life? She is not a woman of means so she does not have the ability to travel. Her life experience from cradle to grave would most likely be in that village, weaving every day.

This image was in stark contrast to a place we toured in Oxford a earlier: Blenheim Palace, which as I am sure you know is an extravagant lavish palace built for the first Duke of Marlborough in reward for a great military victory he won against the French. It was in that palace that Winston Churchill was born. It is quite ornate, and lavish to the extreme. Giant paintings and murals and tapestries and gold cover the walls. There are dozens of golden clocks, sculptures, and ornate creations from silver. We were told that the first Duchess of Marlborough had a falling out with the architect because she felt the whole design was too ostentatious. They of course had the latest early 18th century technology, such as hand cranks in each room that sounded a bell in the servant's area. Each room sounded a bell of a different tone, so that by the pitch, the servants would know to which room they were being summoned. A woman living in Blenheim Palace would not be sitting in the dark, isolated, working at a mindless task. She would have all kinds of art to enjoy, a beautiful estate with gardens and fountains, and even her own personal hairdresser. The hairdresser was paid more than the butler and helped the duchess with the latest fashion – hair held up on her head with chicken wire and attachments over a foot above her head. It was said that if she went anywhere in a carriage she would have to sit on the floor because of the height of her hairdo hitting the ceiling!

In both the 10th century Viking Village and the 18th century palace, the men excelled at war. The Vikings with their long boats and the Duke of Marlborough with his military strategy. Those cultures excelled in technology, such as long boats and ancient padlocks and in ornate art and architecture, such as that of the palace. And it all makes me wonder what a future generation might observe about us. Imagine a future ride to experience 21st century Western Europe and North America. I wonder, what would they think we excel at? What would they marvel at? Our politics? War? Terrorism? Extravagance? Consumption in a consumerist society? Perhaps they would marvel at our elaborate contrivances to create entertainment, the comforts of modern technology, or our communication technology bringing to us instantaneous news from anywhere in the world. But even with all we have -- does any of it really bring meaning to our lives? Do we really have any more meaning in our lives than the woman at the loom?

Do we not long for something more significant than a meaningless manual job? I suppose the woman at the loom is really not that much different than many in our world today who labor to survive at boring, mindless work. I suppose that woman, as people today, might find meaning and joy in her family and in her relationships with others. The men of the past might find meaning in military conquest and technological achievements. But even with all of that, is there not something within us that wonders even today – with all that we have – isn't there more to life than this?

C.S. Lewis following after St. Augustine and St. Anselm wrote this in his book, *Mere Christianity*:

If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world.

His argument is something like this – the fact that I hunger for food indicates that food must exist, otherwise it would be ridiculous to think that I am hungry. Feeling hungry doesn't get me food, but does point to the fact that my body was designed for food and has evolved to feel hunger when I need to eat something for nourishment. Hunger then suggests the existence of food.

Likewise our longing for meaning suggests that we were destined for something greater. Lewis suggests that when we see something beautiful or hear beautiful music we are actually experiencing something that points us to a greater reality – a heavenly beauty. Our experiences of beauty in this world are like a “scent of a flower we haven’t found, echo of a tune we have not yet heard, and news from a country we have not visited.” All suggesting that we were destined to experience a weight of glory – to perceive God’s glory and to share in His glory with Him.

I wonder if likewise feeling depressed about living like the woman at the loom doesn’t suggest that we are destined to be part of something that is of eternal significance. As Augustine said, our hearts will be restless until they find their rest in God. Perhaps this longing for meaning and significance is part of what it means to be made in the image of God. Perhaps our finding some comfort in the woman at the loom having joy and meaning in relationships suggests we were made for relationships – with one another and with God.

What kind of meaning and significance are we destined for? I think that Paul writing to the Corinthians in this morning’s Epistle reading has something to say to us about this.

Paul’s Apostolic authority and motives have been challenged and he spends much of this second epistle to the Corinthians defending himself and calling the Corinthians back to the gospel. But here in chapter 8, Paul is urging them to contribute to an offering that he has been taking for the poor in the church in Jerusalem. A famine had impoverished many in Jerusalem and for years Paul has been collecting offerings from the churches of the ancient world to support them. He had begun his fund raising in Corinth before the challenges arose to his Apostolic authority. Now he is calling them to repent, come back to the gospel and to show their sincerity through their generosity.

But in his appeal for this specific fund raising project Paul points to something deeper. He suggests that God is the supreme example of generosity. Jesus became poor that we

might become rich – that is Jesus gave His all in coming to earth, living our life, dying our death that we might have salvation – that we might be forgiven and live in the presence of God forever. God in that sense, forsook the Blenheim Palace of heaven to come as a peasant in a culture even more primitive than 10th century Jorvik. He came to earth a millennium earlier. Jesus also probably faced problems our technology has solved, such as lice and intestinal worms. Jesus came into our world to show us the very nature of God. And what is at the heart of the very nature of God? The supreme characteristic of God is generosity. He gave everything to suffer, to be humiliated, to be brutally, unjustly, tortured and killed so that we might have everything – forgiveness and eternal life. God is lovingly gracious and generous beyond all measure. He gave everything – He became poor so that we might become rich in lives full of meaning and purpose in relationship with Him forever.

And this suggests what our nature is – being made in the image of God we are to be like God – we were made to find meaning and purpose in being lovingly generous and self-giving. And this can speak to us in the 21st century. We were not made to find meaning in consuming things, in perpetual entertainment, or in storing up treasures for ourselves on this earth. There is no meaning and purpose in such things. They are but trifles – counterfeits of the real joy and beauty that we are to find in God – and in being like God. “It is more blessed to give than to receive.” We know that intellectually, but we can still struggle to live it. When we live lives of generosity, lovingly, not begrudgingly giving to the work of God and to those in need, it shows that our faith is genuine, that we truly know and follow God. We do not give generously to earn our place with God – but when we give it shows our heart – and giving generously and lovingly flows from a heart that is filled with the love of God.

This is what happens, when His love and generosity overflows within us – we can’t help but share it and extend it to others.

And so I close by asking you – have you find satisfying meaning and purpose in life? Have you claimed your destiny in relationship to God? Should they ever make a future

attraction to feature the people of St. Vincent's – the St. Vincent's Adventure – let it be said of you that they excelled in loving generosity! As Paul challenged the Corinthians then, so he challenges us now to follow Christ's example to live generously. Would that be said of all of us – of the people at St. Luke's in Gladstone NJ as well. Let it be said of each of us as individuals – he lived a loving and generous life that reminded people of the God whom he worshipped and served.

To Him Be the Honor Glory Power and Praise. Now and Forever. AMEN.