

“It’s Going To Be OK”

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UCC at The Villages, FL  
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All Saints Sunday

Revelation 7:9-17

Matthew 5:1-16

[Jesus said,]

*“Blessed are you when [others] revile you and persecute you  
and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.*

*Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven,  
for so [they] persecuted the prophets who were before you.*

Matthew 5:11-12 [RSV]

Let us pray... O God,

Ripen us into the healing and salvation we need to be fully human.

Take away our fear of death and grant us the courage to live authentically,  
now and for the time to come.

Amen

“Do you know you are going to Heaven?”

That is what my West Point classmate, Pete Kingman, asked me  
quite a few years ago.

He is a true conservative evangelical – one whom I am proud to know.

I don’t agree with everything he says,

but he taught me a lot about prayer and the Bible.

I had a great time seeing Pete at our 40<sup>th</sup> Reunion

and we spent a good part of one afternoon walking around the grounds,  
reminiscing of days that were good and not so good.

Here’s another question posed by a storyteller friend of mine, Rich Humphreys,

“What happens when we die?”

I saw Rich this year, too – during the summer  
towards the end of my sabbatical road trip.

He is an amazing, creative person who uses “gnome” folklore  
to teach about the environment.

He also struggles daily to anticipate how much insulin to take because of diabetes.

He has had this condition since he was a teenager and is now almost 80.

Another friend of mine named Garrett Wilson – who was a Korean combat veteran  
and worked with the UCC Council of American Indian Ministries, said to me,  
‘I am not afraid to die, I just don’t want to be there when it happens.’

These are important questions to ask of ourselves –  
but not to dwell on.

We are all mortal – and judging from the news,

death can come without warning and seemingly, without rhyme or reason.

The determination to live, then, must be equally illogical – defiant even;

And joyful – regardless of your present circumstances.

Willard, p.2

Our religion actually has something to say about life and death – and life after death.

Christianity is a religion that is both spiritual and practical.

We have a God who came to Earth as one of us, who suffered and died as we do – yet who rose from death to show us that *there's more to this life than we know and it's going to be OK.*

Cause and effect rules the Universe – though that may not always be obvious.

For example, Newton's theories of physics are accurate for Planet Earth, but they have to be set aside for Einstein's theories to give us a more accurate perspective for how the Universe operates.

By the way, it has only been recently that what Einstein said about gravity being able to bend light, space, and time has been confirmed – still by cause and effect.

<http://www.businessinsider.com/dwarf-star-bends-light-confirms-einstein-2017-6>

Cause and effect works in the minds of deranged people, too, as well as criminals – oh, and extremists who are convinced they are right beyond a shadow of a doubt...

Though the cause of their behavior seems to have nothing to do with the victims of their misdeeds, there's always a reason 'why'.

Pain is always a root cause for evil behavior – like revenge.

Lashing out with violence or lingering in despair – these are such mechanisms that follow a self-negating logic.

But of course not everyone who is in pain does this.

Pain can also make us compassionate – which may seem illogical.

You may not appreciate it at the time, but having experienced pain, you have an idea of what it is like for others under similar circumstances.

Though we should avoid saying, 'I know what you are going through' – because we can never really know that, we should still recognize how our pain can teach us to have empathy for others who are hurting.

Pain brings out the worst – and the best in us.

Both are possible, so this means we have a choice:

Do we allow pain to corrode us – or endure to bring forth golden possibilities through the fires of life's trials?

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. said:

*My personal trials have also taught me the value of unmerited suffering.*

*As my sufferings mounted I soon realized that there were two ways that I could respond to my situation:*

*either to react with bitterness or seek to transform the suffering into a creative force. I decided to follow the latter course.*

*Recognizing the necessity for suffering I have tried to make of it a virtue.*

Willard, p.3

*If only to save myself from bitterness,  
I have attempted to see my personal ordeals as an opportunity  
to transform myself and heal the people involved  
in the tragic situation which now obtains.*

He means 'the people involved' in persecuting him through racism.

He goes on to say:

*I have lived these last few years with the conviction  
that unearned suffering is redemptive.*

[http://kingencyclopedia.stanford.edu/encyclopedia/documententry/suffering\\_and\\_faith.1.html](http://kingencyclopedia.stanford.edu/encyclopedia/documententry/suffering_and_faith.1.html)

This is what Jesus' Beatitudes describe – they are more than just a list of blessings, for they tell a story about how someone is transformed in this life to be readied for eternal life.

Though we start out as *poor in spirit...*  
yet *the kingdom of heaven* is ahead.

Though we *mourn...*  
yet we *shall be comforted*.

Though we are humbled and made *meek...*  
yet we *shall inherit the earth*.

Though we *hunger and thirst for righteousness...*  
yet we *shall be satisfied*.

As we are *merciful...*  
we *shall obtain mercy*.

As we are *pure in heart...*  
we *shall see God*.

As we become *peacemakers...*  
we *shall be called sons [and daughters] of God*.

And though we are *persecuted for righteousness' sake...*  
*the kingdom of heaven* will still be our refuge.

Think of all the people in recent years who were going about their lives raising families, going to school, working or looking for work, when they were killed or maimed because of someone else's agenda.

Were they ready? Maybe, maybe not, but they are beyond the trouble of this world now, but we are still in it.

They remain witnesses to us as 'martyrs' to remind us of a better world we stand to lose, if we don't start working together for that beloved community that is still possible 'on Earth as it is in Heaven.'

Dr. King said that 'the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice', however, if we are not careful, 'justice' might mean returning the planet back to lizards and cockroaches.

Willard, p.4

Regarding judgment in the time to come, 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 13 says – to this effect that,  
now, we see in a mirror dimly, but someday it will be like looking through a window  
to be face to face with God – who loves us.

Then, I believe it will be like the Langston Hughes' quote I read on a wall  
of the Smithsonian African-American Museum in Washington, DC:  
... *they'll see how beautiful I am and be ashamed.*

Love means continuing the journey, while hatred means being stuck at the door.

When we – as members of the United Church of Christ, say that,

'No matter who you are or where you are on life's journey, you are welcome here,'  
know that this holds true with the Beatitudes' journey of ripening.

The Beatitudes begin and end with the beloved community of God's Kingdom –  
it is always *now*, and we are always being ripened wherever we are on that journey.  
The blessing remains for all God's children that we have the opportunity for ripening  
no matter how long we have here, and that there is more to this life than we know  
and it is going to be OK.

Amen

*Our lesson today from Revelation 7:9-17 of the Common English Version,  
describes the time yet ahead when there will no more hunger or trouble,  
but there will be healing and consolation.  
In words attributed to the Apostle John while in prison on the Island of Patmos...*

<sup>9</sup> After this, I saw a large crowd with more people than could be counted.  
They were from every race, tribe, nation, and language,  
and they stood before the throne and before the Lamb.  
They wore white robes and held palm branches in their hands,  
<sup>10</sup> as they shouted,  
“Our God, who sits upon the throne, has the power to save his people,  
and so does the Lamb.”

<sup>11</sup> The angels who stood around the throne knelt in front of it  
with their faces to the ground.  
The elders and the four living creatures knelt there with them.  
Then they all worshiped God <sup>12</sup> and said,  
“Amen! Praise, glory, wisdom, thanks, honor, power,  
and strength belong to our God forever and ever! Amen!”

<sup>13</sup> One of the elders asked me,  
“Do you know who these people are that are dressed in white robes?  
Do you know where they come from?”  
<sup>14</sup> “Sir,” I answered, “you must know.”

Then he told me:  
“These are the ones who have gone through the great suffering.  
They have washed their robes in the blood of the Lamb  
and have made them white.  
<sup>15</sup> And so they stand before the throne of God  
and worship him in his temple day and night.  
The one who sits on the throne will spread his tent over them.  
<sup>16</sup> They will never hunger or thirst again,  
and they won’t be troubled by the sun or any scorching heat.  
<sup>17</sup> The Lamb in the center of the throne will be their shepherd.  
He will lead them to streams of life-giving water,  
and God will wipe all tears from their eyes.”

*Let us be challenged and guided by these words...*

Matthew 5:1-16

Seeing the crowds, he went up on the mountain, and when he sat down his disciples came to him. <sup>2</sup> And he opened his mouth and taught them, saying:

<sup>3</sup> “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

<sup>4</sup> “Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.

<sup>5</sup> “Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.

<sup>6</sup> “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.

<sup>7</sup> “Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy.

<sup>8</sup> “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.

<sup>9</sup> “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.

<sup>10</sup> “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

<sup>11</sup> “Blessed are you when [people] revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. <sup>12</sup> Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so [people] persecuted the prophets who were before you.

<sup>13</sup> “You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trodden under foot by men.

<sup>14</sup> “You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hid. <sup>15</sup> Nor do men light a lamp and put it under a bushel, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. <sup>16</sup> Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.

Inspired by Matthew 5:1-12

AND SEEING THE CROWDS, [JESUS] WENT UP THE MOUNTAIN.  
AND HE SAT DOWN WHEN HIS DISCIPLES HAD CLIMBED UP  
AND WERE BEFORE HIM.

AND FROM HIS LIPS CAME THIS TEACHING...

“TO BE RIPENED ARE THOSE WHO ARE CHALLENGED BY  
POVERTY AND DISABILITY,  
FOR THEIRS IS THE BELOVED COMMUNITY OF HEAVEN.  
TO BE RIPENED ARE THOSE WHO SUFFER,  
FOR THEY SHALL BE COMFORTED.  
TO BE RIPENED ARE THOSE WHO ARE HUMBLLED,  
FOR THEY SHALL WIN IT ALL IN THE END.  
TO BE RIPENED ARE THOSE WHO HUNGER AND THIRST  
FOR JUSTICE, FOR THEY SHALL BE SATISFIED.  
TO BE RIPENED ARE THOSE WHO ARE MERCIFUL,  
FOR THEY THEMSELVES SHALL RECEIVE MERCY.  
TO BE RIPENED ARE THOSE WHO ARE PURE IN HEART,  
FOR THEY SHALL SEE GOD IN ACTION.  
TO BE RIPENED ARE THOSE WHO ARE PEACE-BUILDERS,  
FOR THEY SHALL BE CALLED THE CHILDREN OF GOD.  
TO BE RIPENED ARE THOSE WHO ARE PERSECUTED  
FOR THE SAKE OF JUSTICE, FOR THEIRS, TOO,  
IS THE BELOVED COMMUNITY OF HEAVEN.

AND TO BE RIPENED ARE THOSE OF YOU WHO WILL  
BE CURSED AND PERSECUTED AND ACCUSED OF ALL KINDS  
OF TERRIBLE THINGS – AH, FALSELY ON MY ACCOUNT.  
REJOICE AND ANTICIPATE THE GREAT REWARD THAT  
AWAITS YOU IN THE HEAVENS  
FOR THE PROPHETS WERE ABUSED IN THE SAME WAY.  
YOU ALL ARE THE SALT OF THE EARTH,  
BUT WHEN SEASONING BECOMES TASTELESS,  
WITH WHAT SHALL IT BE MADE SAVORY AGAIN?  
WHY, IT IS GOOD FOR NOTHING, YET EVEN THEN  
IT CAN BE THROWN OUT ON SLIPPERY WALKWAYS.  
YOU ALL ARE THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD;  
A CITY BUILT ON A HILL CANNOT BE HIDDEN.  
NO ONE LIGHTS A LAMP AND PLACES IT UNDER A BASKET,  
BUT ON A LAMPSTAND, SHINING FORTH  
TO ALL THOSE IN THE HOUSE.  
IN THIS WAY, YOUR LIGHT MUST SHINE FORTH  
IN THE SIGHT OF ALL HUMANITY  
THAT THEY MAY SEE YOUR GOOD WORKS AND PRAISE  
FOR YOUR BELOVED GUARDIAN  
WHO IS IN THE HEAVENS.