

“Spring Cleaning”

The Rev. Drew Willard
March 8th, 2015
3rd Sun. in Lent

Psalm 19

John 2:13-22

[19] Jesus answered them,

“Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.”

[21] But he spoke of the temple of his body.’

John 2:19,21

Let us pray... O God,

May the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts

be pleasing to you, The One Who Is, our strength and our redeemer.

Amen

There was a comment in the Villages (“E”) News last week

that was in response to an article about UCC at The Villages.

It started out like this:

I, as a believer in JESUS CHRIST, my LORD AND SAVIOR,

must take a stand against this church!! This is STRICTLY against the Bible...

And this person proceeded to criticize us for our “open & affirming” stance
as a congregation.

Now what is ironic is that the article was advertising our

New England Ham & Bean Dinner...

You would think – from a strict interpretation of the Bible,

there would have been some mention about us having a dinner during Lent –

let alone serving ham at that!

You would think the issue from a literal point of view would have been about

violating Kosher laws based on Leviticus 11 – which forbids the eating of pork.

In Jesus’ day,

it was also forbidden to eat with people who were ritually unclean – like Samaritans.

The Gospel, however, portrays Jesus as breaking such laws

even telling his disciples to eat whatever was set before them

when going out on their apostolic journeys...

Jesus set an example for us in our time

by saying that the Sabbath was made for the sake of people

and not the other way around.

Imitating Christ, we as a congregation of the United Church of Christ,

welcome people no matter who they are or where they are on life's journey –

and we eat well, too!

Certainly, not all behavior is acceptable –

and people should be held accountable for their actions.

Predatory sexuality against the vulnerable – for example,

is justifiably condemned universally.

Willard, p.2

The Roman Catholic Church had been blinded to this particular sin while taking a public stand against abortion and gay rights.

But when painful revelations of clergy abuse forced this issue into the open, the Catholic Church now stands as an example for all Christian congregations to examine how well we make sure our sacred spaces are safe places, too.

With the new pope, Pope Francis, Catholics are being given an opportunity to examine other aspects of their tradition.

Though he hasn't actually made any changes in doctrine, it is expected he will make a substantive pronouncement in the near future regarding the environment – as in Nature, raising fears among his critics that he is leading the Catholic Church to become a 'modern pagan green religion'.

<http://www.newrepublic.com/article/121168/pope-francis-conservatives-battle-us-catholic-churchs-future>

Periodically, the Church with a capital "C" has had to do some 'housecleaning' – a re-examination or even a 'reformation', of its beliefs and practices.

Our Gospel lesson today describes this as a literal event in which Jesus himself cleans house, even to the extent of making a whip to goad moneychangers and sacrificial animals alike, out of the Temple!

Jesus' 'cleansing' of the Temple is ultimately what got him into trouble with the religious and civic authorities.

What he said about 'destroying the Temple' was later used at his trial, as proof of his sedition.

Still, this was his goal – or as Rev. Bill Baran might say, if you follow in Jesus' footsteps, you're likely to step on some toes; and what Jesus did worked to shake things up and change the world.

The kind of housecleaning that most often needs to be done, is a review of traditions and what ought to be sacred.

We have to clear out the idols every now and then – letting go of what is false or obsolete, while retaining what is true and useful.

We have to do this as a church community and as a society, in ways that are informed by our faith convictions.

So, this also means a housecleaning on a personal level – we have a responsibility to examine ourselves.

Coming out of seminary, I realized I needed to review my own beliefs.

I needed to "unlearn" some of the things I learned –

not to throw them away, but to put them in perspective.

Take the Trinity for example – what does that mean to you?

And that question, right there, is the key: What does it mean *to you*?

Willard, p.3

We may find ourselves saying the tenets of our faith without understanding them – but that is OK.

You don't have to understand a religious doctrine so long as you have a sense that it is good – and not just right.

Whether we understand thermonuclear dynamics or not, the Sun is still going to shine.

The Sun is going to be and do what it does, independent of what we say or do or think.

Even if you don't *know* all the theology involved, you can just take it on faith – or just *believe* that what the Church is ultimately about is true and good.

As members of the United Church of Christ, we can 'live with the questions' because we are not creedal, but covenantal.

We all don't all have to believe the same way, but we have to agree there is something in our Bible and religious traditions that are worth believing to be true and good.

We can hum along with the hymn, even if we don't know the words to the lyrics, because we still know that somehow it is about what is true and good.

When I need to clear my head, I like to look up into the sky – I especially like seeing the Sun through trees in the late afternoon.

There is a sanity to Nature – it works by cause and effect. Mathematics and science support this.

It's not that we look at a sunset or a mountain or the sea, to turn that into our vision of God, but that we see such things as helping us understand the "nature" of God.

Nature worship has historically been considered "pagan" from the Judeo-Christian perspective – and is especially suspect when its imagery is used as idols to be worshipped, or when fertility rites were involved.

Sexuality – or rather lust, therefore, became the principle sin associated with Nature worship to be rejected.

Yet a respect for nature is evident in the word-imagery of today's Psalm, as a legitimate – though qualified way to talk about God.

Celtic Christianity reintroduced a love for nature in Europe during the Dark Ages after the fall of the Roman Empire.

However, this view became suppressed as the Roman Church reasserted itself in the Middle Ages.

Willard, p.4

In the 12th Century CE,

St. Francis' 'Canticle to the Sun' celebrates elements of Nature as part of God's world;
and so do the visions and writings of St. Hildegard of Bingen,
an earlier contemporary of Francis.

Native American spirituality has become more acceptable –
if not fashionable with progressive Christians,
because of its respect for the natural environment
and its neutral language about God as the Great Spirit.

Even so, Native spirituality gets lumped together with New Age religion
and dismissed as "pagan" by conservative Christianity.

So where do we draw the line about what it means to be a Christian?

What is it about? Is it about following rules to be ritually clean –
or creating a sacred space that is a safe place, too?

Is it about knowing beyond a shadow of a doubt –
or believing enough to 'live with the questions'?

One of the unifying factors of the four denominations that
compose the United Church of Christ, was a desire to get back to the basics:
Christ as the head of the Church, the Bible as our guide,
and the congregation for democratic decision-making.

That desire to get back to the basics always brings us back to Christ.

We can clear out the sanctuary of our church building –
and our hearts and minds, but for us as Christians in our quest for God,
it still comes down to this question: Who is Jesus Christ?

There is a CNN series on TV this month, each Sunday night,
called, "Finding Jesus" which focuses on archaeological discoveries
that seek to prove Christ's existence.

However, like believing the Bible is the inerrant Word of God,
that everything in it happened literally, we will never satisfy all the mysteries.

When it comes down to it: What do we know? What do we know for sure?

In my confirmation class, our pastor, Mr. Willard Bickett,
told us that the only thing we know for certain is this:
About 2,000 years ago, a person named Jesus lived in the vicinity
of what is now Israel/Palestine – and he changed the world.

As we look at the stories about him that are available to us through the Bible,
we can see that the operative word in Christianity about who Jesus was
and what he is still about, is love – rational loving-kindness,
along with forgiveness, healing, salvation, and resurrection.

Love unifies what is true and good.

The Spirit of God is love and Jesus is the expression of that Spirit
serving as an example for us to follow.

Willard, p.5

Jesus is the character of God – the expression of God’s “nature”

in the confidence that Ultimate Reality is a Who and not a What.

Another way to experience Christ is through people who have been touched by him in their lives, who in turn teach us through our relationships with them.

Every so often, I have to clear out the idols in my own heart and mind,

and in the process, I dust off references to those people

who have helped me in my faith formation –

and whom I periodically introduce to you.

I especially have hoped for you to become acquainted with those whom

I have known personally or encountered through books,

people that I have known for years and those I am still meeting,

people who made a difference in their time

and who still have something to say in our time...

They are the “old time Jesus people”

like Yohann Anderson who sang for us two Sundays ago and

in a variety of places while he was here.

I have recently gotten to know The Rev. Bill Baran –

who is also in that category of progressive Christians,

with his simmering ‘crockpot’ of faith.

The Rev. John Allen is another minister who comes from that era

when church and society struggled over questions of war and race –

and he will preach the message to you next week.

There are also those writers and speakers, religious and otherwise

from decades ago – like Paul Tillich, Martin Luther King, and Malcolm Boyd

as well as those who have emerged more recently –

like Phyllis Trible, Walter Wink, Rene Girard, and Brian McLaren.

Each of them are people whose lives have been touched by Christ

who have touched each of us in turn through our relationships with them...

Willard, p.6

In closing, I will share a poem by James Allan Francis
that I remember from a sermon by Rev. Bickett,

and that Dr. King used in his sermon, "The Drum Major Instinct"...

<http://www.bartleby.com/73/916.html>

*Here is a man who was born in an obscure village, the child of a peasant woman.
He grew up in another obscure village, where He worked in a carpenter shop
until He was thirty, and then for three years
He was an itinerant preacher.
He never wrote a book. He never held an office. He never owned a home.
He never had a family. He never went to college.
He never put his foot inside a big city.
He never traveled two hundred miles from the place where He was born.
He never did one of the things that usually accompany greatness.
He had no credentials but Himself.
He had nothing to do with this world
except the naked power of His divine manhood.*

*While still a young man, the tide of public opinion turned against Him.
His friends ran away. One of them denied Him.
He was turned over to His enemies.*

*He went through the mockery of a trial.
He was nailed to a cross between two thieves.
His executioners gambled for the only piece of property He had on earth
while He was dying—and that was his coat.
When he was dead He was taken down and laid in a borrowed grave
through the pity of a friend.*

*Nineteen wide centuries have come and gone and
today He is the centerpiece of the human race
and the leader of the column of progress.
I am far within the mark when I say that all the armies that ever marched,
and all the navies that ever were built, and all the parliaments that ever sat,
all the kings that ever reigned, put together
have not affected the life of [humankind] upon this earth
as powerfully as has that One Solitary Life.*

Amen

Our lesson from Psalm 19 celebrates how God is evident in nature – especially through the example of the Sun, which we Floridians appreciate! The references to God’s law may have been added later to keep the text connected to the Hebrew tradition...

[19:1] Heaven is declaring God’s glory; the sky is proclaiming his handiwork.

[2] One day gushes the news to the next,
and one night informs another what needs to be known.

[3] Of course, there’s no speech, no words—their voices can’t be heard—

[4] but their sound extends throughout the world;
their words reach the ends of the earth.

God has made a tent in heaven for the sun.

[5] The sun is like a groom coming out of his honeymoon suite;
like a warrior, it thrills at running its course.

[6] It rises in one end of the sky; its circuit is complete at the other.

Nothing escapes its heat.

[7] The Lord’s Instruction is perfect, reviving one’s very being.

The Lord’s laws are faithful, making naive people wise.

[8] The Lord’s regulations are right, gladdening the heart.

The Lord’s commands are pure, giving light to the eyes.

[9] Honoring the Lord is correct, lasting forever.

The Lord’s judgments are true. All of these are righteous!

[10] They are more desirable than gold—than tons of pure gold!

They are sweeter than honey—even dripping off the honeycomb!

[11] No doubt about it: your servant is enlightened by them;

there is great reward in keeping them.

[12] But can anyone know what they’ve accidentally done wrong?

Clear me of any unknown sin

[13] and save your servant from willful sins. Don’t let them rule me.

Then I’ll be completely blameless; I’ll be innocent of great wrongdoing.

[14] Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart

be pleasing to you, Lord, my rock and my redeemer.

John 2:13-22

[2:13] The Passover of the Jews was at hand, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem.

[14] In the temple he found those who were selling oxen and sheep and pigeons, and the money-changers at their business.

[15] And making a whip of cords,
he drove them all, with the sheep and oxen, out of the temple;
and he poured out the coins of the money-changers
and overturned their tables.

[16] And he told those who sold the pigeons,
“Take these things away;
you shall not make my Father’s house a house of trade.”

[17] His disciples remembered that it was written,
“Zeal for thy house will consume me.”

[18] The [Judeans] then said to him,
“What sign have you to show us for doing this?”

[19] Jesus answered them,
“Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.”

[20] The [Judeans] then said,
“It has taken forty-six years to build this temple,
and will you raise it up in three days?”

[21] But he spoke of the temple of his body.

[22] When therefore he was raised from the dead,
his disciples remembered that he had said this;
and they believed the scripture and the word which Jesus had spoken.

Inspired by John 2:13-22

Now, it was close to the Jewish Passover,
when Jesus went up to Jerusalem.

And at the Temple,

he found that people were selling oxen, sheep, and doves for sacrifice
and sitting at tables as money-changers.

Then having made a lash out of ropes, Jesus drove them all out of the Temple –
animals and people alike.

As for the money-changers, he spilled the stacks of coins
as he tipped over their tables.

And to those selling the doves, he said,

“Take them out of here!

Don’t make the house of my Abba/Father into a marketplace.”

This reminded his disciples that it was written,

“Passion for your habitation consumes me!”

So, the Judeans responded, saying,

“What is your justification to us for what you have done?”

Jesus answered,

“That even though the temple will be destroyed, I will raise it up in 3 days!”

Thus the Judeans said,

“It took 46 years to build this Temple! And you would raise it up in 3 days?”

But Jesus was talking about the ‘temple’ of his body.

Therefore, when Jesus was raised from death,

his disciples would remember he said this –

and believe the scripture’s prophecies and all the words that Jesus spoke.