

“Open Hearts”

The Rev. Drew Willard
UCC at The Villages
March 20th, 2016
Palm/Passion Sunday
Choral Procession

Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29

Luke 19:28-42

As [Jesus] was now drawing near, at the descent of the Mount of Olives,
the whole multitude of the disciples began to rejoice and praise God
with a loud voice for all the mighty works that they had seen, saying,
“Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord!
Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!”

Luke 19:37-38

Let us pray... O God,
We lift our voices in joyful celebration with the voices of all the generations
who have followed Christ.
Like the hopeful multitude that walked with Jesus to Jerusalem,
we seek to follow him, too.

Amen

Do you know this song?

*Seventy-six trombones led the big parade
With a hundred and ten cornets close at hand.
They were followed by rows and rows of the finest virtuo's
The cream of ev'ry famous band.*

*Seventy-six trombones caught the morning sun
With a hundred and ten cornets right behind
There were more than a thousand reeds
Springing up like weeds
There were horns of ev'ry shape and kind.*

<http://www.stlyrics.com/lyrics/themusicman/seventy-sixtrombones.htm>

Get caught up in the big parade!

Caught up with a catchy phrase and a clever sound byte.
The Broadway musical, “Music Man”, was all about *that*
as a con man comes to town promising gullible parents to
teach their disinterested children how to play musical instruments,
with the vision of a marching band to spur their imagination.
But when the instruments and uniforms arrive – and are paid for,
the con man, Professor Harold Hill, skips town
without putting the band together...

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Music_Man

However, Professor Hill gets caught in his own scam,
before he can get away.

Yet true love saves the day as Marian the Librarian comes to his rescue
and shows how the children really did take it all seriously
and make the idea of a marching band, a reality.

Willard, p.2

Don't you love stories like this, in which a mysterious stranger comes to town – and despite everyone's suspicions, goodwill prevails.
We can find Jesus in that role in our Gospel narrative for Palm Sunday in which we celebrate the Triumphal Entry.
Unlike Professor Hill who is motivated by self-interest, Jesus is the real deal...

Parades are fun and sensational. You can get caught up in a parade.
Bead necklaces are a big deal at some parades, like around Mardi Gras-time. In Tampa, they celebrate a fictitious pirate takeover called the Gasparilla parade with folks in costume, tossing beads from floats.
There is even a parade that is a variation of Halloween called Guavaween, doing the same kind of frivolity.
In Philadelphia at New Years Day, there's the Mummers Parade where clubs formed – originally from Irish and Italian neighborhoods, to dress up in uniform, colorful costumes as 'comics', 'fancies', 'string bands', and 'fancy brigades'.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mummers_Parade

Not all parades are fun – like parade season at the US Military Academy, where the West Point cadets march on Fridays in the Fall and Spring. You wouldn't know it to watch it from the stands, but there is constant chatter in the ranks with rifle corrections, jokes, and the harassment of Plebes.
However, there doesn't seem to be much fooling around in videos I have seen of North Korean military parades with their mincing and prancing steps – which are not much different from the goose-stepping of the Nazi Wehrmacht...

When I was in the US Army serving in Germany – at a time when that country was still divided into East and West, I had the opportunity to visit Nuremberg.
During a bus tour, we stopped at a stadium that had been used to hold Nazi rallies and very likely those goose-stepping military parades. I remember the stadium was not as big as I expected – I was even vaguely disappointed at that.
But I could also imagine it being full of thousands of people and I was troubled at the thought of them all caught up in a spirit that was arrogant and self-centered – alien to the Holy Spirit that otherwise calls people to work together for the common good.

Willard, p.3

It is the spirit of the mob that arises in times of crisis,
looking for likely candidates among minority groups who are most vulnerable
to be scapegoated for retribution.

That happened in Nazi Germany and it happened here in the American South,
and we must be on our guard to keep it from happening again.

I am sure in this election season – as you engage in political discussions
with loved ones who don't see things your way,
that you are finding it is important to remember
how facts have little to do with convincing someone
of the rightness of your position.

Instead, it is more important to listen and maintain an open heart –
a heart that is open to have empathy for others.

For an open heart is the means to keep an open mind.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a German –

he was a very gifted theologian who came to America
to study and teach at Union Theological Seminary in NYC,
which is seminary that is associated with the UCC.

He traveled extensively throughout the world

and became an advocate of ecumenical outreach of the Church
and of peace.

However, he also became an early opponent to the rise of Adolf Hitler
as chancellor of his country.

As war was coming, Bonhoeffer caught one of the last ships back to Germany
to serve God and *the people* of his country.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dietrich_Bonhoeffer

One of the ways he did that was to teach in an underground seminary,
aligned with others who sought to form a faith community called
the Confessing Church which based itself on the Barmen Declaration.

I have included a copy of the Barmen Declaration

as part of this sermon text to be posted this week on our church website.

I have also included my summation for you to compare for your own interpretation
which we can discuss at this week's Talk Time With The Pastor.

Essentially, the Lutheran, Reformed, and Evangelical Churches in Germany
were being undermined by Nazi sympathizers from within and
co-opted by a rival organization calling itself simply,

“Deutsche Christen” or “German Christians” –

which advocated Adolf Hitler as a ‘German prophet’

and racial pride as ‘a source of revelation alongside the Bible’.

Willard, p.4

The Barmen Declaration –

named after the German town where the “Confessing Church ‘emerged’, affirmed that the Church is not controlled by the State and the Word and Spirit of God are not controlled by the Church.

http://www.ucc.org/beliefs_barmen-declaration

We are not at such a point in the history of our church or country that we would have to consider such a re-examination of our faith and practice.

Yet, let us take counsel from what history can tell us about the importance of how we listen to as well as guard the treasure of God’s Word as it has been handed down to us – to study, interpret, and apply for our time before we get on the bandwagon of popular events.

Let me say at this point, that a traditional understanding of the ‘crowd’ that followed and cheered Jesus on his triumphal entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday was the same crowd that turned against him on Good Friday.

However, contemporary scholar, Dominic Crossan, suggests otherwise – that those who condemned Jesus would have had limited access to places where the various trials took place.

Though the scapegoating mechanism of mob mentality can turn on a celebrity faster than the latest edition of the National Enquirer, it is more likely that the people in the ‘crowd’ that came with Jesus to Jerusalem were unaware of these events – until it was too late.

For the Gospel of Mark 10:46-52 tells us that Jesus came to Jericho with an unknown number of people with him, but he leaves with his disciples and ‘a great multitude’ to go to Jerusalem more than 40 miles away.

I will conclude with what happens next in this Gospel story, to illustrate how the way of Jesus Christ is worthy to be followed...

And they came to Jericho – and he was leaving Jericho with his disciples and a great multitude, Bartimaeus – the son of Timaeus, ‘the son of Honor’, a blind beggar was sitting by the roadside.

When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth passing by, he began to cry out,

“Jesus, Son of David! Have mercy on me!”

But the crowd told him to “Be quiet!”

yet he cried out all the more saying, “Son of David, help me!”

And Jesus stopped and said, “Call to him.”

So they called him, “Take heart!” “Get up! He is calling you!”

Willard, p.5

Throwing off his blanket – his most precious possession,
he sprang up to present himself to Jesus.

And Jesus said to him,

“What do you want me to do for you?”

And the blind man said to him,

“Rabbi, let me receive my sight!”

Jesus said,

“Go your way. Your faith has made you well.”

Instantly, he received his sight –

and followed Jesus on *the* Way!

The Way of Jesus is the way of truth and love.

Amen

"The Barmen Declaration"

In view of the errors of the "German Christians" and of the present Reich Church Administration, which are ravaging the Church and at the same time also shattering the unity of the German Evangelical Church, we confess the following evangelical truths:

1. *"I am the Way and the Truth and the Life; no one comes to the Father except through me." John 14:6*

"Very truly, I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold through the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit. I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved." John 10:1,9

Jesus Christ, as he is attested to us in Holy Scripture, is the one Word of God whom we have to hear, and whom we have to trust and obey in life and in death.

We reject the false doctrine that the Church could and should recognize as a source of its proclamation, beyond and besides this one Word of God, yet other events, powers, historic figures and truths as God's revelation.

2. *"Jesus Christ has been made wisdom and righteousness and sanctification and redemption for us by God." 1 Cor. 1:30*

As Jesus Christ is God's comforting pronouncement of the forgiveness of all our sins, so, with equal seriousness, he is also God's vigorous announcement of his claim upon our whole life. Through him there comes to us joyful liberation from the godless ties of this world for free, grateful service to his creatures.

We reject the false doctrine that there could be areas of our life in which we would not belong to Jesus Christ but to other lords, areas in which we would not need justification and sanctification through him.

3. *"Let us, however, speak the truth in love, and in every respect grow into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body is joined together." Eph. 4:15-16*

The Christian Church is the community of brethren in which, in Word and Sacrament, through the Holy Spirit, Jesus Christ acts in the present as Lord. With both its faith and its obedience, with both its message and its order, it has to testify in the midst of the sinful world, as the Church of pardoned sinners, that it belongs to him alone and lives and may live by his comfort and under his direction alone, in expectation of his appearing.

We reject the false doctrine that the Church could have permission to hand over the form of its message and of its order to whatever it itself might wish or to the vicissitudes of the prevailing ideological and political convictions of the day.

4. *"You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. It will not be so among you; but whoever wishes to have authority over you must be your servant." Matt. 20:25-26*

The various offices in the Church do not provide a basis for some to exercise authority over others but for the ministry [lit., "service"] with which the whole community has been entrusted and charged to be carried out.

We reject the false doctrine that, apart from this ministry, the Church could, and could have permission to, give itself or allow itself to be given special leaders [Führer] vested with ruling authority.

5. *"Fear God. Honor the Emperor." 1 Pet. 2:17*

Scripture tells us that by divine appointment the State, in this still unredeemed world in which also the Church is situated, has the task of maintaining justice and peace, so far as human discernment and human ability make this possible, by means of the threat and use of force. The Church acknowledges with gratitude and reverence toward God the benefit of this, his appointment. It draws attention to God's Dominion [Reich], God's commandment and justice, and with these the responsibility of those who rule and those who are ruled. It trusts and obeys the power of the Word, by which God upholds all things.

We reject the false doctrine that beyond its special commission the State should and could become the sole and total order of human life and so fulfil the vocation of the Church as well.

We reject the false doctrine that beyond its special commission the Church should and could take on the nature, tasks and dignity which belong to the State and thus become itself an organ of the State.

6. "See, I am with you always, to the end of the age." Matt. 28:20 "God's Word is not fettered." 2 Tim. 2:9

The Church's commission, which is the foundation of its freedom, consists in this: in Christ's stead, and so in the service of his own Word and work, to deliver all people, through preaching and sacrament, the message of the free grace of God.

We reject the false doctrine that with human vainglory the Church could place the Word and work of the Lord in the service of self-chosen desires, purposes and plans.

The Confessing Synod of the German Evangelical Church declares that it sees in the acknowledgment of these truths and in the rejection of these errors the indispensable theological basis of the German Evangelical Church as a confederation of Confessing Churches. It calls upon all who can stand in solidarity with its Declaration to be mindful of these theological findings in all their decisions concerning Church and State. It appeals to all concerned to return to unity in faith, hope and love.

Verbum Dei manet in aeternum. The Word of God will last for ever.

Adapted from Robert McAfee Brown, Kairos: Three Prophetic Challenges to the Church, published in 1990 by Wm. B. Eerdmans.

About this testimony

The Barmen Declaration, 1934, was a call to resistance against the theological claims of the Nazi state. Almost immediately after Hitler's seizure of power in 1933, Protestant Christians faced pressure to "aryanize" the Church, expel Jewish Christians from the ordained ministry and adopt the Nazi "Führer Principle" as the organizing principle of church government. In general, the churches succumbed to these pressures, and some Christians embraced them willingly. The pro-Nazi "German Christian" movement became a force in the church. They glorified Adolf Hitler as a "German prophet" and preached that racial consciousness was a source of revelation alongside the Bible. But many Christians in Germany—including Lutheran and Reformed, liberal and neo-orthodox—opposed the encroachment of Nazi ideology on the Church's proclamation. At Barmen, this emerging "Confessing Church" adopted a declaration drafted by Reformed theologian Karl Barth and Lutheran theologian Hans Asmussen, which expressly repudiated the claim that other powers apart from Christ could be sources of God's revelation. Not all Christians courageously resisted the regime, but many who did—like the Protestant pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the Roman Catholic priest Bernhard Lichtenberg—were arrested and executed in concentration camps. The spirituality of the Barmen Declaration profoundly influenced many of the first generation of pastors and laypeople who formed the United Church of Christ in 1957.

http://www.ucc.org/beliefs_barmen-declaration

An interpretation of the Barmen Declaration by Pastor Drew Willard

1. Jesus Christ is the Word of God to whom we listen, trust, and obey in life and in death.
We reject the false doctrine that the Church could and should recognize other events, powers, historic figures, and truths as a source of its proclamation of God's revelation.
2. As Jesus Christ is God's comforting pronouncement of forgiveness for all our sins, so, he is also God's claim upon our whole life of joyful liberation for free, grateful service.
We reject the false doctrine that there could be areas of our life in which we would not need justification and sanctification through Christ.
3. The Christian Church is the community in which Word and Sacrament through the Holy Spirit and Jesus Christ act in the present as Lord to testify and pardon; and in which we may live by Christ's comfort and under Christ's direction alone, in expectation of his appearing.
We reject the false doctrine that the Church could permit itself to hand over the form of its message and of its liturgical order to self-serving design, or to the popular ideological and political convictions of the day.
[I must add here that – as an 'open & affirming' church, we would challenge this limitation with scripture].
4. The offices in the Church do not provide for some to exercise authority over others, except to perform services.
We reject the false doctrine that the Church could permit special leaders with ruling authority.
5. By divine appointment, the State has the task of maintaining justice and peace by means of the threat and use of force.
The Church acknowledges with gratitude and reverence toward God the benefit of this appointment, while drawing attention to God's Dominion, commandment, and justice, and the responsibility of those who rule and those who are ruled; to trust and obey the power of the Word, by which God upholds all things.
We reject the false doctrine that beyond its special commission, the State presumes to be the sole authority over human life in lieu of the Church; or that the Church take on the nature, tasks and dignity of the State and thus become an organ of the State.
6. The Church's commission is to deliver to all people the message of the free grace of God through preaching and sacrament.
We reject the false doctrine that the Church could hand over the Word and work of the Lord to serve self-chosen desires, purposes and plans.

*Our lesson today from Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29
is like a song celebration of the people of Israel for God
as a God of justice – a God who will help us...*

¹Tell the Lord how thankful you are, because he is kind and always merciful.

²Let Israel shout, “God is always merciful!”

¹⁹Open the gates of justice! I will enter and tell the Lord how thankful I am.

²⁰Here is the gate of the Lord! Everyone who does right may enter this gate.

²¹I praise the Lord for answering my prayers and saving me.

²²The stone that the builders tossed aside
has now become the most important stone.

²³The Lord has done this, and it is amazing to us.

²⁴This day belongs to the Lord! Let’s celebrate and be glad today.

²⁵We’ll ask the Lord to save us! We’ll sincerely ask the Lord to let us win.

²⁶God bless the one who comes in the name of the Lord!

We praise you from here in the house of the Lord.

²⁷The Lord is our God, and he has given us light!

Start the celebration! March with palm branches all the way to the altar.

²⁸The Lord is my God! I will praise him and tell him how thankful I am.

²⁹Tell the Lord how thankful you are, because he is kind and always merciful.

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

Luke 19:28-42

[28] And ... [Jesus] went on ahead, going up to Jerusalem.

[29] When he drew near to Beth'phage and Bethany,
at the mount that is called Olivet, he sent two of the disciples,

[30] saying,

“Go into the village opposite, where on entering you will find a colt tied,
on which no one has ever yet sat; untie it and bring it here.

[31] If any one asks you, ‘Why are you untying it?’ you shall say this,
“The Lord has need of it.”

[32] So those who were sent went away and found it as he had told them.

[33] And as they were untying the colt, its owners said to them,
“Why are you untying the colt?”

[34] And they said, “The Lord has need of it.”

[35] And they brought it to Jesus, and throwing their garments on the colt
they set Jesus upon it.

[36] And as he rode along, they spread their garments on the road.

[37] As he was now drawing near, at the descent of the Mount of Olives,
the whole multitude of the disciples began to rejoice and praise God
with a loud voice for all the mighty works that they had seen,

[38] saying,

“Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord!
Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!”

[39] And some of the Pharisees in the multitude said to him,
“Teacher, rebuke your disciples.”

[40] He answered,

“I tell you, if these were silent, the very stones would cry out.”

[41] And when he drew near and saw the city he wept over it,

[42] saying,

“Would that even today you knew the things that make for peace!
But now they are hid from your eyes.”