

“Nurtured By the Spirit”

The Rev. Drew Willard  
UCC at The Villages  
May 12<sup>th</sup>, 2013  
*Mothers' Day*

Acts 16:16-34

John 17:20-26

*‘About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing praises to God,  
while the other prisoners listened.’*

*Acts 16:25*

Let us pray... O God,

Help us to find our song and to sing it well.

And even when we don't sing as good as we would like,

may we be willing to listen, and help others to sing their song

Amen

There's a roundness to things in life – circles and spheres are emblems of power:

The Sun, for example, with its power to make life possible on Earth,

is in the shape of a sphere;

and it seems to follow a circular path each day,

which is what we see because the Earth itself turns in a circle on its axis.

The Earth and the planets of the Solar System follow a circular orbit around the Sun

giving rise to the seasons of fall, winter, spring, and summer;

and like the cyclic processes of the seasons,

there are the fertility cycles of living creatures and the roundness of pregnancy.

From Nature, humanity got the idea to invent the wheel for wagons

which led to cars and the cogs of the motors that power them.

In the iconography of Christianity,

we show divine beings with halos of light around their heads –

symbols of power and beauty.

The Christian Year follows a cycle of seasons:

Advent in the Fall, Christmas in the Winter, Lent to Easter lead into Spring,

and the season of Pentecost through the Summer –

which begins next week.

Being aligned with the seasons of our annual journey around the Sun,

we are helped to retell the story of Christ and the beginnings of the Church,

There is the roundness to the kind of table where family and friends

can sit down and talk as equals, with mutuality and respect,

just like political leaders should and as our Conference church leaders do.

For us as members of the Florida Conference of the United Church of Christ,

there is the Annual Meeting – which will now meet twice a year,

when we gather to discuss the joys & concerns that matter to us

as congregations and as a conference.

It is a chance for us to get new ideas, worship together, fellowship

and be nurtured by the Spirit of God through Christ.

Willard, p.2

The Florida Conference of the United Church of Christ  
held its Annual Meeting last week in Orlando, Florida –  
and that began with a pre-event retreat at Winter Park UCC.

Nancy Bell and I attended this initial meeting  
and Ed & Liz Johnson, John Allen, and Jo Posillico  
joined us the next day in Orlando.

The pre-event began with a presentation by Elizabeth Dilley from the UCC's  
national office for ministerial support, who spoke about  
“igniting” inspiration in local congregations.

About 50 of us were divided into small groups to talk about experiences of  
being “on fire” with excitement or “scorched” by disappointment.

In these small group discussions and throughout the weekend,  
it was important to hear the struggles and successes of  
our sister churches here in Florida.

It was an opportunity to get some new ideas, but also some confirmation  
about what we are already doing is pretty good.

This sharing of ideas continued the next morning  
at the Renaissance Hotel in Orlando when the rest of the delegates arrived.

“Vitality Conversation Groups” were held to discuss such topics  
as Social Justice, Marketing, Outreach to Baby Boomers, and the Arts.

Nancy Bell said to me that her impression was that many of the ideas that  
came up in these discussions about the ‘best practices’  
of churches in our Conference, is what we are already doing.

I want to thank you for that – we are a small church with a big heart  
to do what a lot of churches are just getting around to do.

For example, projecting hymns is a big first step as we know,  
but we have had our whole worship services on power point  
for just over two years now.

Nancy attended a discussion about Social Justice and noted that – again,  
we are ahead in our participation in community interfaith events,  
support for local food banks, and organizing  
“Sacred Conversations on Race” programs.

Thank you for all that you are doing –

I am proud of who we are and what we are doing here at The Villages.

Ed went to the discussion about ‘branding’ or marketing –  
how you let the community know who you are

and how to apply what you know about your community  
and their needs in order to best provide for those needs.

Being Open and Affirming is one example of our attributes and we need to ask  
what else sets us apart as our claim to fame.

Willard, p.3

Ed suggests that “branding and marketing” be something for a committee to be dedicated to do.

Facebook in particular is a tool to help target an age group.

Jo Posillico was there and she was very excited about the ideas that were being put forth during the Annual Meeting.

Jo, John Allen, and Ed liked what the keynote speaker, Cameron Trimble of the Center for Progressive Renewal.

Ed especially what she said about having worship that is vibrant and seeking to provide for *the people who are not there* on a Sunday morning—people who you want to attract, and have them want to come back.

By the way, we were the only church to have a table display – but as a church serving a retirement community, we just might see clergy and congregants of the Florida Conference retire here.

John Allen attended the “Growing Older and Thinking Younger” discussion, based on a book written by Keith Haemmelmann, a pastoral colleague from the Tampa Bay-area, with ideas for getting people involved.

One idea was dinner programs like our “Dine With 9”, mixing up the invitation list to get away from inviting people you know to inviting people you don’t know.

Again, thank you for all that we are already doing as a church.

John also appreciated the keynote speaker Cameron Trimble of the Center for Progressive Renewal for what she said about change that churches are going through – everybody’s struggling with it.

Change is specifically a challenge these days as the Florida Conference deals with the shock of our Conference Minister, Kent Siladi, leaving and organizing the search process to replace him.

John also noted the excellent music by the Orlando Gay Choir which was for our entertainment at the Friday night dinner.

I have been impressed with Winter Park’s facilities for many years, which includes a pottery studio which they make available to outside groups.

They also have an excellent liturgical dance troupe that performed during the closing worship communion service.

Perhaps they could come here one day to share their talent.

We all had a wonderful opportunity to be nurtured by God’s Spirit at this year’s Annual Meeting of the Florida Conference UCC for the challenges ahead.

Willard, p.4

It so happens that at last year's Annual Meeting,  
the keynote speaker, Brian McLaren – one of the principal spokespersons  
for the Emergent Church Movement,  
happened to preach on the text of our lesson this morning from Acts 16.  
In his message, he told us “salvation” meant something quite different in Paul's time  
compared to what it has come to mean in our time.  
For us, there is an overlay of history and our own American culture that has  
interpreted the Gospel message of “salvation”  
as the only admission ticket to Heaven.

But McLaren pointed out that jailer in the story was at the point of despair,  
about to take his own life, because of the punishment he would face  
for losing all his prisoners.

When an earthquake shatters the doors and loosens the chains,  
the prisoners were free to escape – but they don't.

Paul calls out to this man, not to harm himself,  
reassuring him that they are all still there.

But why? Why did they stay?

They were being nurtured by God's Spirit in the midst of their life challenges.

Earlier they had been listening to Paul and Silas sing hymns,  
and despite the reasons for their imprisonment –  
though they all could have escaped, they stayed.

They stayed to face the situations of their lives –  
unafraid of their fate, unfazed by their circumstances.

They had found something – peace,  
and the jailer wanted what they had.

It is in the midst of this realization that the jailer asks Paul,  
“What must I do to be saved?”

*They replied,*

*“Have faith in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved!*

*This is also true for everyone who lives in your home.” Acts 16:31a*

Brian McLaren points out that there had been no reference to Heaven  
or caution to this man about not entering the next world because of his sin.  
But this man wanted whatever it was that Paul and his companion Silas  
and all those other prisoners seemed to have –  
he wanted salvation in this world.

Willard, p.5

With all the discussion about igniting the vitality of our churches  
and strategies for making our worship more engaging  
it comes back to how well we as the Church –  
our church, any church, are helping to transform peoples' lives.

That jailer wanted what Paul and Silas and all the prisoners had –  
peace in the midst of life now.

That's the key for us, too, as a congregation, as a conference,  
as a denomination, as a Church.

We want others to have what we have as Christians  
nurtured now – as well as the time to come, by the Spirit  
of God's love and peace.

*It only takes a spark to get a fire going.*

*And soon all those around can warm up in its glowing.*

*That's how it is with God's love, once you've experienced it,  
you spread his love to everyone; You want to pass it on.*

words & music by Kurt Kaiser

Happy Mothers' Day! Amen

Acts 16:16-34

16 One day on our way to the place of prayer, we were met by a slave girl.  
She had a spirit in her that gave her the power to tell the future.

By doing this she made a lot of money for her owners.

17 The girl followed Paul and the rest of us and kept yelling,

“These men are servants of the Most High God!

They are telling you how to be saved.”

18 This went on for several days.

Finally, Paul got so upset that he turned and said to the spirit,

“In the name of Jesus Christ, I order you to leave this girl alone!”

At once the evil spirit left her.

19 When the girl’s owners realized that they had lost all chances  
for making more money, they grabbed Paul and Silas  
and dragged them into court.

20 They told the officials,

“These Jews are upsetting our city!

21 They are telling us to do things we Romans are not allowed to do.”

22 The crowd joined in the attack on Paul and Silas.

Then the officials tore the clothes off the two men  
and ordered them to be beaten with a whip.

23 After they had been badly beaten, they were put in jail,  
and the jailer was told to guard them carefully.

24 The jailer did as he was told.

He put them deep inside the jail and chained their feet to heavy blocks of wood.

25 About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing praises to God,  
while the other prisoners listened.

26 Suddenly a strong earthquake shook the jail to its foundations.

The doors opened, and the chains fell from all the prisoners.

27 When the jailer woke up and saw that the doors were open,  
he thought that the prisoners had escaped.

He pulled out his sword and was about to kill himself. 28 But Paul shouted,

“Don’t harm yourself! No one has escaped.”

29 The jailer asked for a torch and went into the jail.

He was shaking all over as he knelt down in front of Paul and Silas.

30 After he had led them out of the jail, he asked,

“What must I do to be saved?”

31 They replied,

“Have faith in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved!

This is also true for everyone who lives in your home.”

32 Then Paul and Silas told him and everyone else in his house about the Lord.

33 While it was still night, the jailer took them to a place  
where he could wash their cuts and bruises.

Then he and everyone in his home were baptized.

34 They were very glad that they had put their faith in God. After this, the jailer took  
Paul and Silas to his home and gave them something to eat.

John 17:20-26

[Jesus said,]

[20] "I do not pray for these only,

but also for those who believe in me through their word,

[21] that they may all be one; even as thou, Father, art in me,

and I in thee, that they also may be in us,

so that the world may believe that thou hast sent me.

[22] The glory which thou hast given me I have given to them,

that they may be one even as we are one,

[23] I in them and thou in me, that they may become perfectly one,

so that the world may know that thou hast sent me

and hast loved them even as thou hast loved me.

[24] Father, I desire that they also, whom thou hast given me,

may be with me where I am, to behold my glory which thou hast given me

in thy love for me before the foundation of the world.

[25] O righteous Father, the world has not known thee,

but I have known thee; and these know that thou hast sent me.

[26] I made known to them thy name, and I will make it known,

that the love with which thou hast loved me may be in them, and I in them."