

“Obiwan & Towanda”

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UCC at The Villages, FL
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Acts 2:1-21

John 15:26-27, 16:4^b-15

[Jesus said,]

*But when the Counselor comes, whom I shall send to you from the [Abba/]Father,
even the Spirit of truth, who proceeds from the [Abba/]Father,
[the Counselor] will bear witness to me...*

John 15:26^a

Let us pray... O God,

Thank you for the counselors you have sent to each of us, at one time or another,
as lights along our path as we journey through life.

Thank you for those who have been teachers, ministers, gurus, drill instructors,
coaches, big brothers/big sisters, and/or mentors to us
and thank you for opportunities to be one for somebody else, too

Amen

Last Sunday we were privileged to hear our Conference Minister, John Vertigan,
preach the message.

He started out having us wonder, ‘Who’s on first?’ –

as in the old Abbott & Costello routine, but then we learned ‘they’ is ‘us’;

we are ‘them’, the people of the Bible long ago– specifically, the disciples.

We share to some extent what they were like as human beings,

and we have the potential to be as exceptional as they were.

We think of them as being different – saintly, heroic, above the common place,
but what made them different? How did they become that way?

How can we become more like them?

The prophets and saints were people like us who encountered God;

and their stories and wisdom have inspired generations up to the present day.

You are them – potentially, good and bad, saint and sinner,
disciple and teacher.

Sometimes, jokingly, I will say to one of you that you are approaching the status
of ‘Obi-wan’ if you a man, or ‘Towanda’ if you are a woman.

Now, these are fictional characters from movies who were in the role of mentors–
Obi-wan Kenobi of ‘Star Wars’ was the spiritual guide for Luke Skywalker,
and one of the last of the Jedi knights.

“Towanda” or Idgie Threadgoode of “Fried Green Tomatoes”,

was an elderly woman at a nursing home in 1980s Alabama who

befriends a young woman, Evelyn Couch, teaching her life wisdom
just by telling stories about growing up in 1930s Alabama.

‘Obi-wan’ and ‘Towanda’ are not only emblematic of elders who are teachers,

but these films also show how they suffered and persevered in their youth,

they evolved to become wise – like each of you, if not in the same ways...

Willard, p.2

This was true for Jesus, too, as the Gospel stories show us how Jesus himself evolved to become who he was and is;

And that what was inside came out by challenge and affirmation – like it is for us.

It's not good to dwell in the past, but it is important to remember your roots and the stories of how you got to be who you are and to know what you still have to offer.

'Obi-wan' and 'Towanda' are examples for me of older people who are still young at heart.

That is what I love best about being a pastor here at The Villages – to work with so many seniors who are optimistic, educated, imaginative, well-traveled, articulate, and fun, with a sense of mission.

"The child is parent to the adult" – to update a wise, old saying;

And many of you – in various ways, continue to cultivate 'the child within' – which some call 'the Christ within'.

Today, we celebrate Pentecost as the "Birthday of the Church" when humankind received God's gift of the Holy Spirit.

This does not mean the Holy Spirit suddenly showed up that day as something new or that its activity was exclusively for the benefit of Christians alone – actually, they were all Jews at Pentecost.

According to the Bible, the Holy Spirit has been with us all along, ever since "The Beginning" in Genesis –

when the Spirit of God hovered over the 'watery chaos' of Creation.

The prophets of ancient Israel like Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel, experienced the Spirit of God through epiphanies that took the form of spoken words or visions from God, sometimes delivered by angels as messengers.

For Elijah, God was not present in catastrophic earthquakes, windstorms, or fire, but through a 'still, small voice'.

Isaiah described the Holy Spirit like this...

The Spirit of God rests upon me,

to anoint me to preach good news to the poor. [Isaiah 61:1]

Jesus quotes this verse in his inaugural sermon at the synagogue of Nazareth, reflecting the imagery of his baptism when the Spirit of God descended upon Jesus like a beautiful bird.

The events of Pentecost in Acts 2 likewise were visual with tongues of fire as well as sounds and wind when the Spirit-led disciples spoke in a way that people gathered from throughout the ancient world could suddenly hear and understand the disciples... in their own languages.

Willard, p.3

This is a wonderful, spectacular story about how the Holy Spirit came to be manifested in the Church.

We might well ask, though,

“Why isn’t the Spirit still getting people of different nations and creeds to talk with each other and understand each other?” – especially when that is so desperately needed these days...

I really enjoyed our Conference Minister’s visit with us last week;

John Vertigan and I had a chance to talk briefly about how – when we were growing up, there was strong support in the UCC for ecumenical outreach and interfaith cooperation.

John said that he has been told that there is a Council of Churches in Florida, and that he is automatically a member of it,

but there doesn’t seem to be a meeting scheduled any time soon, and there is apparently little or no interfaith activity at the state level either.

The Spirit that pulled nations together from the ashes of World War II to form the United Nations,

and pulled religions together in solidarity with Jewish people after the atrocities of the Holocaust, and pulled Christian denominations together to form the World Council of Churches and the National Council of Churches, has seemed to have lost its voice in our time.

Even our own denomination was part of that Spirit that saw in 1957, the uniting of four streams of Christianity –

the Evangelicals who are heirs of the Lutheran and Catholic traditions, and the Reformed Church of the Calvinists, the Congregationalists of New England’s pilgrims and puritans, and the Christian Church of the American frontier.

We of the United Church of Christ may very well be the last and best hope for that movement, that vision of world peace

that these other movements also represent – and may yet revive...

Many of these efforts are in decline and it baffles me how this could be – and how institutional evil is active and growing disguised as religion, not only in the form of ISIS, but in Christian cultures as well.

We are living in a world not unlike the universe of “Star Wars” manipulated by a variety of “Empires”

and yet crying out for new Skywalkers to set things right.

We are still living in communities that are not unlike the parochial and racist South of “Fried Green Tomatoes” that still cries out for “Towanda”.

There is still a need for people to go out on a quest

and they need Obi-wan and Towanda to help them get there.

Willard, p.4

I didn't have a chance to ask Rev. Vertigan about –

Who had been his guides into ministry?

Who had taught him about an ecumenical and transcendent Church?

Who acted in his life on behalf of that Spiritual “Counselor” Jesus spoke of,
that Spirit that has sought to connect churches and other faiths
into the common cause of ‘Beloved Community’?

I was reminded recently how *people* have played the ‘Counselor’ role in my life, like:

Willard Bickett, my pastor;

Lori Witmer-Roberts, youth minister and pastor;

Priscilla & Abner Salant, Jewish neighbors;

Helen O’Sullivan, cook and baby sitter;

Eugene R. Seaman, public school vo-tech counselor;

Harry Devlin, WWII vet and professional artist;

Jack McKenna, invalid & owner of the 2nd largest collection
of Joan of Arc memorabilia in the world;

John & Betty Meyer, missionaries to Japan;

Fr. Edward Sanders, SJ, seminary professor;

Fr. Alexander Veronis, Greek Orthodox priest;

Chris Farlekas, Korean War vet and newspaper reporter;

Chaplain Sam & Gini Lambach, of the Post Chapel at Ft. Monmouth;

Koda Garrett Wilson, Korean War vet and member of CAIM;

Herv & Thelma Hervey, church members & community theatre backstage crew.

They have been my Elijahs who challenged the false priests of Baal,

the Esthers who stood up for me at such a time as I needed them,

Apostles who spoke the truth to discipline me and –
with love, to encourage me.

I wish every one of you had seen the movie Justice & Peace hosted last week,

“Bowling For Columbine” by Michael Moore –

about disaffected youth and violence in America.

For some people, Michael Moore is more like Darth Vader than Obi-wan Kenobi,

but there was something I saw in that 2002 film that speaks to
the world we live in today.

One of the insights of that film

is that we are being conditioned to be afraid...

It is not some obvious conspiracy – though there are certainly special interests

that benefit by keeping the pot stirred up between classes of people,
between races, between generations...

The real problem seems to be *our* complicity with a spirit of fear.

There are indeed violent, sick people out there in the world,

but not as many as there are fearful people.

Willard, p.5

The spirit of fear is the exact opposite of what the disciples received on Pentecost through the Holy Spirit which transformed them into apostles.

The Holy Spirit of Christ himself went with them to guide them as their Counselor till they became counselors themselves for the next generation of apostles.

The Obi-wans and Towandas of early Christianity endured the brutality of the Empire of their day which made current event atrocities seem quaint, yet these apostles remained undefeated and unconquered.

They had something then that is still available to us now.

This Pentecost Sunday and Memorial Day, I invite you to join in on the fight for a better world now and in the time to come.

The world still needs “Obi-wans” to inspire and guide those who can oppose the “Empires” that benefit from fear, ignorance, and disunity and who are indifferent to people and to our planet itself.

The world still needs “Towandas” to inspire and guide those who would oppose racial hatred, gender discrimination, and violence against the vulnerable.

The world still needs spiritual guides who themselves recognize their own need for a spiritual guide – what is traditionally called a spiritual father or spiritual mother.

When those people have done their job and moved on from this life, there is still a Counselor available to you through prayer.

None of us can go it alone – for Christ himself prayed to God through the Spirit.

You have got to stay connected to ‘the vine’ as Dr. Margarita Romo said; and Rev. John Vertigan told us, we are like those disciples of long ago who were empowered to become apostles.

An apostle is just another label for someone who is truly alive and in touch with ‘the child within’ – which some call ‘the Christ within’.

Another name for the Holy Spirit is the Life-Giver whose activity is to give life, and that description is in keeping with this quote by Joseph Campbell ...

"The influence of a vital person vitalizes, there's no doubt about it.

The world without spirit is wasteland.

People have the notion of saving the world by shifting things around, changing the rules, and who's on top, and so forth.

No, no! Any world is a valid world if it's alive.

The thing to do is to bring life to it, and the only way to do that is to find in your own case where the life is and become alive yourself."

[Joseph Campbell Facebook page: Reference to Bill Moyers interview “The Power of Myth”]

So, just as God through the Spirit of Christ tells us over and over again, ‘Fear not’, we must then listen for how ‘God is still speaking’

through the ‘Obi-wans’ and ‘Towandas’ of our lives, calling us into new life of loving-kindness and the unity of Beloved Community, and then, to take our turns as ‘Obi-wans’ and ‘Towandas’ ourselves...

Amen

*Our lesson today is Acts 2:1-21 from the Common English Bible translation,
and it tells the story of Pentecost – the name for the Jewish harvest festival
of ‘First Fruits’, and the name for the birthday of the Church...*

- [2:1] When Pentecost Day arrived,
they were all together in one place.
- [2] Suddenly a sound from heaven like the howling of a fierce wind
filled the entire house where they were sitting.
- [3] They saw what seemed to be individual flames of fire
alighting on each one of them.
- [4] They were all filled with the Holy Spirit and
began to speak in other languages as the Spirit enabled them to speak.
- [5] There were pious Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem.
[6] When they heard this sound, a crowd gathered.
They were mystified because everyone
heard them speaking in their native languages.
- [7] They were surprised and amazed, saying,
“Look, aren’t all the people who are speaking Galileans, every one of them?
[8] How then can each of us hear them speaking in our native language?
[9] Parthians, Medes, and Elamites; as well as residents of Mesopotamia,
Judea, and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, [10] Phrygia and Pamphylia,
Egypt and the regions of Libya bordering Cyrene;
and visitors from Rome (both Jews and converts to Judaism),
[11] Cretans and Arabs—
we hear them declaring the mighty works of God in our own languages!”
- [12] They were all surprised and bewildered. Some asked each other,
“What does this mean?”
- [13] Others jeered at them, saying, “They’re full of new wine!”
- [14] Peter stood with the other eleven apostles. He raised his voice and declared,
“Judeans and everyone living in Jerusalem! Know this!
Listen carefully to my words!
[15] These people aren’t drunk, as you suspect;
after all, it’s only nine o’clock in the morning!
[16] Rather, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel:
[17] In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people.
Your sons and daughters will prophesy.
Your young will see visions. Your elders will dream dreams.
[18] Even upon my servants, men and women,
I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy.
[19] I will cause wonders to occur in the heavens above
and signs on the earth below, blood and fire and a cloud of smoke.
[20] The sun will be changed into darkness,
and the moon will be changed into blood,
before the great and spectacular day of the Lord comes.
[21] And everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.”
Let us be guided and challenged by these words...

John 15:26-27 [RSV]

[Jesus said,]

[15:26] ... when the Counselor comes,

whom I shall send to you from the [Abba/]Father, even the Spirit of truth,

who proceeds from the [Abba/] Father,

[the Counselor] will bear witness to me;

[27] and you also are witnesses,

because you have been with me from the beginning.

[16:4] ... I have said these things to you,

that when their hour comes you may remember that I told you of them.

I did not say these things to you from the beginning,

because I was with you.

[5] But now I am going to [the one] who sent me; yet none of you asks me,

‘Where are you going?’

[6] But because I have said these things to you,

sorrow has filled your hearts.

[7] Nevertheless I tell you the truth:

it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away,

the Counselor will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you.

[8] And when he comes,

he will convince the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment:

[9] concerning sin,

because they do not believe in me;

[10] concerning righteousness,

because I go to the Father, and you will see me no more;

[11] concerning judgment,

because the ruler of this world is judged.

[12] “I have yet many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now.

[13] When the Spirit of truth comes, [that one] will guide you into all the truth;

for he will not speak on his own authority,

but whatever he hears he will speak,

and he will declare to you the things that are to come.

[14] [The Spirit] will glorify me,

for he will take what is mine and declare it to you.

[15] All that the Father has is mine;

therefore I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you.