

“Finding The Lost”

The rev. Drew Willard
UCCat The Villages
September 15th, 2013
17th Sun. in Pentecost

I Timothy 1:12-17

Luke 15:1-10

[The Apostle Paul said,]

“Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.”

This saying is true, and it can be trusted. I was the worst sinner of all!

Let us pray... O God,

Thank you for loving us enough to search for us in times of distress,
and bring us healing and peace.

Thank you for entrusting us to reach out to help others in the same way.

Amen

The 50 year commemoration of the March on Washington
was big news a couple weeks ago.

The original event in 1963 was an effort to bring attention to the need for
jobs and freedom for African-Americans and it is especially remembered for
Martin Luther King Jr's enduring “I Have A Dream” speech.

I admire the idealism that young people had back then

and the confidence that they could make a difference in changing the world.

There was a lot that needed changing back then and

there have been many successes since, which often came at a terrible cost...

But lately, some of those successes have appeared to be losing ground –

like the Supreme Court decision nullifying some of the voters' rights

protections enacted – to some extent, in response to Dr. King's speech.

Outrage over the death of Trayvon Martin seemed to rekindle the Civil Rights-era
commitment to social change – especially, by bringing awareness

to the vestiges of racism evident as racial profiling and

the legitimizing of a culture of violence through ‘stand your ground’ laws.

This was part of the message at those 50 year commemoration events,

but these remembrances were soon overshadowed –

as news broke out about terrible events domestically,

let alone events in Syria.

Young African-Americans have been accused in three high profile tragedies –

the killings of Christopher Lane – an Australian baseball player in Arizona,

and Delbert “Shorty” Belton – an elderly WWII vet in Wash. state,

as well as the brutal beating of a white youth on a bus in Florida.

Willard, p.2

This all flew in the face of Dr. King's challenge that future generations of African-Americans would be judged by the content of their character and not for superficial excuses that hold people back.

There is no excuse for any of these acts of violence – but there are reasons why they happened.

Outrage by the white community is frustrated with cries of “reverse racism” and “Why isn't this a hate crime?”

Yet this outrage is unfocused and reluctant to align with overtly racist hate groups and supremacists.

In the midst of these demands for justice – we must recognize there is already a strong response to black on white crime with the disproportionate number of black males in prison.

These accused black youth – even if set free, will still face a system set up for retribution – and neglect.

With regard to the killing in Arizona, one of the boys said they did it out of ‘boredom’ – a random act of violence for no other purpose than violence itself.

This perpetuates the view of American youth as disconnected from reality, yet plugged into computer games, music, and movies that promote anarchy, and texting friends with the same narrow worldview.

Not all youth who listen to such media or grow up amidst negative influences take such a path, but how did these youth get so lost?

We all lament each new catastrophe, as evidence that our society has become a wasteland without conscience, but we are often blind to our own complicity through neglect.

There are those in America who say our society has gone off its moral track, but their answer would be to bring everybody into their way of thinking that gun ownership is a God-given right, for example.

The same voices call for stricter laws against crime, tougher punishments, higher walls – physically, economically, and socially.

Yet with no urgent call for investment in job opportunities – or in education, for that matter, which seem like what should be ‘God-given rights’, perhaps it should be no wonder to us why some youth have become so hopeless.

How did we get so lost?

Willard, p.3

One of the most powerful images of Christ is that of the Good Shepherd,
depicted in early Christian art as

a man carrying a lamb across his shoulders –
that 100th lamb that wandered off!

As far as we know,

Jesus himself did not work as a shepherd – though on his mother's side,
he is descended from Israel's greatest sovereign, King David,
who was a shepherd and the author of the 23rd Psalm.

Jesus speaks frequently and favorably about shepherds –

those who are charged with caring for a flock of sheep,
leading them to pasture, defending them if necessary,
and keeping them all gathered together.

The shepherd – or shepherdess, does this because they know their lambs
just as the lambs know their voice and follow when they call.

They know their lambs by how they act and how they look,
their idiosyncrasies and their flaws.

They care about their lambs and go looking for them when they don't show up.

Jesus is like a good shepherd and God is like Jesus.

God knows us by our behavior and appearance,
our idiosyncrasies and our flaws;
and God cares for us, even willing to track us down
when we have wandered off into some hopeless situation
of our own doing or by the circumstances of life on Planet Earth.

Think of it...

God through Christ healed those who were disabled by blindness and disease,
fed those who were hungry for food and starving for hope,
freed those who were oppressed in body, mind, and spirit,
and ultimately faced death at the hands of violent people
only to live again, to forgive again, to love again.

All this, in an effort to be just as determined as his enemies,
but for their sake, to find them in their weakness and shame
to transform them into the loving people that mature human beings
are created to be.

We are not left alone, even when we feel we are so lost.

Willard, p.4

This week at Biloxi, Mississippi,

where several of us went on a mission trip to Back Bay Mission
and we had a chance to see some shepherds in action
seeking out people who would otherwise be lost
and we had a chance to help in the shepherding.

It was an opportunity for us to see

how the work of making it a better world is continuing and
that the United Church of Christ is still part of that work.

We also learned about the history of Biloxi and the Civil Rights movement

and that there was a cost to the United Church of Christ
and why UCC churches are no longer there...

Houses that belonged to white people along the coast in Biloxi

were considered the beaches to be an extension of their private property –
excluding black people from enjoying the beaches, too.

The black community organized and did a ‘wade-in’ to protest
the segregation of the beaches;

and the third time this was attempted in April 24th, 1960,
the black protestors were attacked by a violent white mob.

There was a fourth wade-in protest in 1963 and among the protestors arrested
were two UCC pastors and a UCC intern working at Back Bay Mission.

When it was learned of their participation,

some white members of those two UCC congregations in Biloxi were upset.

They left the church or helped put pressure

on the black members of those churches to leave, too, or lose their jobs;
and by 1973, those two UCC churches were closed...

Though it came at a cost, the desegregation of Biloxi beaches
was finally achieved in court by 1968.

Back Bay Mission – as an outreach project of the United Church of Christ
to poor people in that region, survived and has continued to be a presence
in the Biloxi area advocating for the poor people of that town.

<http://www.smithsonianmag.com/history-archaeology/A-Civil-Rights-Watershed-in-Biloxi-Mississippi.html?c=y&page=2>

In the Epistle reading from 1st Timothy today,

we are reminded of the faith journey of the Apostle Paul
who was literally knocked off his high horse,

transformed from being an active enemy of Christ to become
Christ’s greatest evangelist or spokesperson.

Willard, p.5

Paul was tough and even a little arrogant, but in a good way – if that's possible,
because it was for the sake of the Gospel truth
and not his personal advantage.

His boldness often got him beaten up and thrown into prison,
just like those who struggled for Civil Rights in our time.

Christ himself sought out Paul and the vision of this experience
and how Paul became changed enabled him to mentor Timothy
who was the first bishop of Ephesus.

The world at that time was no less thoughtless and cruel than our own,
but it was into that region of the human condition
that Christianity was planted by those who were determined
to make a difference – even those who had been rescued themselves
from the blindness of their prejudices.

*A college student attending a recent football game, took it upon himself
to explain to a senior citizen sitting next to him
why it was impossible for the older generation
to understand his generation.*

*"You grew up in a different world – I would even say, a primitive world!",
the student said, loud enough for many of those nearby to hear.*

*"The young people of today grew up with instantaneous communications
like cell phones and wireless computers,
space travel to the Moon and Mars.*

We have nuclear energy, electric and hydrogen cars, and..."

*As he paused to take another drink of beer,
the Senior took advantage of the break in the student's litany and said,
"You're right, kid. We didn't have those things when we were young,
so we invented them.*

*Now, you arrogant little punk,
what are you doing for the next generation?"*

[adapted from material found on internet, source unknown
]

*Amazing grace! How sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me!
I once was lost, but now am found; was blind, but now I see.*

*'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear, and grace my fears relieved;
how precious did that grace appear the hour I first believed.*

*Through many dangers, toils, and snares, I have already come;
'tis grace hath brought me safe thus far, and grace will lead me home.*

<http://www.hymnsite.com/lyrics/umh378.sht>

Amen

Our lesson today is from I Timothy 1:12-17.

*Writing to a young man he was mentoring,
the Apostle Paul admitted that he had initially opposed Christianity.
Yet God would not give up on him – eventually entrusting Paul with bringing
the Good News of Christ to the wider world.
This young man was Timothy who would become the first Bishop of Ephesus.*

[The Apostle Paul said,]

12 I thank Christ Jesus our Lord.

He has given me the strength for my work
because he knew that he could trust me.

13 I used to say terrible and insulting things about him, and I was cruel.

But he had mercy on me because I didn't know what I was doing,
and I had not yet put my faith in him.

14 Christ Jesus our Lord was very kind to me.

He has greatly blessed my life with faith and love just like his own.

15 "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners."

This saying is true, and it can be trusted.

I was the worst sinner of all!

16 But since I was worse than anyone else,

God had mercy on me and let me be an example
of the endless patience of Christ Jesus.

He did this so that others would put their faith in Christ
and have eternal life.

17 I pray that honor and glory will always be given to the only God,
who lives forever and is the invisible and eternal King! Amen.

Luke 15:1-10

[1] Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear him.

[2] And the Pharisees and the scribes murmured, saying,
"This man receives sinners and eats with them."

[3] So [Jesus] told them this parable:

[4] "What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he has lost one of them,
does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness,
and go after the one which is lost, until he finds it?

[5] And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing.

[6] And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and his neighbors,
saying to them,

‘Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep which was lost.’

[7] Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents
than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.

[8] "Or what woman, having ten silver coins, if she loses one coin,
does not light a lamp and sweep the house and seek diligently until she finds it?

[9] And when she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying,
‘Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin which I had lost.’

[10] Just so, I tell you, there is joy before the angels of God
over one sinner who repents."