

“Privilege & Prejudice”

The Rev Drew Willard
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Psalm 137

Luke 17:5-10

[Jesus said,]

‘Who among you would say to your slave who has just come in
from ploughing or tending sheep in the field,
“Come here at once and take your place at the table”? ’ Luke 17:7

Let us pray... O God,

Help us to recognize injustices in our society and in our lives.

And help us to do something about them when we can. Amen

The lectionary readings in recent weeks have been
very challenging to preach about – but timely.

The Bible is not always ‘pretty’
in its assessment of the human condition –
but its message of redemption is infallible.

Psalm 137 is one of those readings for today
and I was familiar enough with the beginning,
but missed the harshness of the last verse
which is excessively violent.

During a time of worship, we are vulnerable,
because we are in a sacred space –
‘a sacred conversation’, so to speak,
and I have to be protective of you for that reason.
But I am finding this congregation is pretty resilient
and able to listen for God’s grace

I gave Maureen the option of not reading it,
going only as far as the 8th verse,
‘O daughter Babylon, you devastator!
Happy shall they be who pay you back
what you have done to us!’

And verse 9 goes on to describe a violent act of retribution
of killing their oppressors’ children.

[9 Happy shall they be who take your little ones
and dash them against the rock!]

Willard, p.2

We must be able to understand such words in terms of people
who were uprooted from their land
and carried off into Babylon for exploitation.

The opening lines of this Psalm speak of the bitter resistance against
singing the songs of Zion – the sacred songs of the Jewish people
about God's power and promises to save them.

But as an entertainment for their overlords' mockery,
this would have been a cruel irony too hard to bear.

Instead, they festered in rage and waited for revenge –even as atrocity.

In recent weeks, I have spoken of the ancient prophets
and their challenge to us in our time
about issues of poverty and injustice.

Last week, we heard about the prophet Jeremiah
whose criticisms against the leaders of his day
became known as 'jeremiads'.

Another Jeremiah in contemporary times
spoke in very harsh terms about American society.

The film clip of The Rev Jeremiah Wright, a UCC minister,
denouncing America for injustice was inflammatory –
and he remained unrepentant for his words.

It got a lot of airplay during the 2008 election year
and led presidential candidate Barack Obama
to withdraw from that UCC congregation.

My family are no strangers to the black community,
but my folks were very upset by Jeremiah Wright's words.

So, I shared with them an experience that I had
which I hoped would put these divisive, angry words
into a context that would reassure them.

It was shortly before I would leave the Army to go to seminary
when a friend of mine, a black woman named Edna Stewart
invited me to go with her to church and
hear a visiting preacher who was going to be in town that week.

It was a large brick church in downtown Augusta, GA
and there was about a thousand people there
and I was the only one of my complexion!

Willard, p.3

The preacher spoke of the ongoing persecution of the black community
by whites whose injustices he compared with that of
Pharaoh and the Egyptians, Caesar and the Romans.

His tone was angry, but I did not feel the message was
personally directed at me, there and then.

But it was sad and difficult for me to listen to.

Afterwards, as we were leaving, Edna said,

“I’m so sorry! I didn’t think it would be like this.”

And I said,

“Don’t be. Thank you for letting me hear
how your community really feels.”

And as we were going down the steps from the rear balcony,
I looked up and saw a full length painting of Jesus
with blond hair and blue eyes.

I thought right there is proof for the possibility
of peace and reconciliation.

The uproar over Jeremiah Wright became the occasion for
inspiration when then-President of the UCC,

The Rev John Thomas challenged all UCC congregations
to begin a ‘sacred conversation on race’ in America.

And this is because we need to realize that the struggle
for the civil rights of black people in America is still an issue.

Last night we hosted the second of such ‘sacred conversations’
by this church on the issue of race.

Dr Thomas W. Cole a scientist, educator, and college administrator
spoke to us about racism in America in terms of
inequalities of privilege between white and black people.

The civil rights movement has brought together all kinds of people –
and the United Church of Christ has been right in the thick of it
since the beginning of our nation.

And the UCC has become a leader in other liberation movements
for women, gay people, Native Americans –
even us men, thank you Robert Bly!

Lately, undocumented migrant workers – who are generally Mexican
have been singled out as a political scapegoat
Muslims are also subject to distrust and harassment
in our post-911 society.

Willard, p.4

So, what can we do about it?

We have to begin by examining our hearts
as individuals and as a faith community.

Let me say that UCC at The Villages is an example to be followed.

We were supposed to host a neutral pulpit for a guest preacher today,
but this was changed and another venue was provided.

Nevertheless this was an opportunity for me to learn
something very important about you as a congregation.

It was a last minute request by the Conference for a neutral pulpit,
but I consulted with our church leadership
and figured we could do it.

I contacted the minister
who is candidating for a church in Florida,
and had a very good conversation with her.

In the course of our conversation,
this person let it be known to me that she was transgender.
What that term means is – for example, those who are born male
but realize inside themselves they are female, choose to
change physically by surgery or hormonal treatment.

I have met transgender people before
and have come to believe that such a person has had to
demonstrate great courage
to overcome terrible prejudice in our society
just to honestly be-who-they-are.

But even though the UCC at the Villages is ONA,
I didn't know how all of you might feel to be introduced
to a transgender minister on Sunday morning.

At the end of Bible study last Monday,
I told everyone that we would be providing a neutral pulpit
and that our guest preacher was a transgender person.
No one spoke to me about it and – as it was late, people went home,
but I wasn't sure how they had taken this news.

Willard, p.5

The next day, I spoke to our regional minister, out of concern that this had been a short fuse request for a neutral pulpit and that I would have liked to have at least prepared you as a congregation rather than have anyone be surprised.

It was my goal to protect you – we are the UCC, we are ONA, but I believe in giving people a choice.

Our regional minister saw that there was a question and acted to be protective of the candidate by moving the venue against my objection, but that was her call.

I was disappointed and I shared the whole situation that afternoon with our Governing Board.

When asked if anyone would have had reservations about having a transgender person speak from our pulpit, your Governing Board unanimously agreed we are a safe place for all who come to hear and to preach God's Word and that if the opportunity arose, we would invite this candidate to come preach here in the future.

This incident has given us an opportunity to say that there will be no need to 'prepare the congregation' for this question in the future.

[Jesus said,]

'Who among you would say to your slave who has just come in from ploughing or tending sheep in the field,

“Come here at once and take your place at the table”?’ Luke 17:7

Jesus' question recalls the vision of Dr Martin Luther King Jr. who challenges us to keep working for that day when the children of those who were oppressed will sit down together at the same table of fellowship with the children of their oppressors.

You are my heroes. You are approaching – though in this world, we never quite get there, but we are approaching that Kingdom that already is, that Beloved Community that is yet possible on earth as it is in heaven.

Amen

The Jewish Testament lesson today comes from Psalm 137
which speaks about the Babylonian exile.

This is an example of how the Bible does not always have
a pleasant message for us like a Hallmark card,

This one is about the pain of those who were conquered,
humiliated, and enraged.

1 By the rivers of Babylon— there we sat down and there we wept
when we remembered Zion.

2 On the willows
there we hung up our harps.

3 For there, our captors asked us for songs,
and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying,
‘Sing us one of the songs of Zion!’

4 How could we sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land?

5 If I forget you, O Jerusalem,
let my right hand wither!

6 Let my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth,
if I do not remember you, if I do not set Jerusalem
above my highest joy.

7 Remember, O Lord, against the Edomites the day of Jerusalem’s fall,
how they said,
‘Tear it down! Tear it down! Down to its foundations!’

8 O daughter Babylon, you devastator!

Happy shall they be who pay you back what you have done to us!

9 Happy shall they be who take your little ones
and dash them against the rock!

Luke 17:5-10

5 The apostles said to the Lord,
‘Increase our faith!’

6 The Lord replied,
‘If you had faith the size of a mustard seed,
you could say to this mulberry tree,
“Be uprooted and planted in the sea”,
and it would obey you.

7 ‘Who among you would say to your slave
who has just come in from ploughing
or tending sheep in the field,
“Come here at once and take your place at the table”?

8 Would you not rather say to him,
“Prepare supper for me, put on your apron and serve me
while I eat and drink; later you may eat and drink”?

9 Do you thank the slave for doing what was commanded?

10 So you also, when you have done all that
you were ordered to do, say,

“We are worthless slaves;
we have done only what we ought to have done!” ’