

“A Faith That Makes Sense”

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October 4<sup>th</sup>, 2015 ©  
*19<sup>th</sup> Sun. after Pentecost*  
*Rally Day/Choir returns*

Hebrews 1:1-4, 2:5-12

Mark 10:2-16

*In the past, God spoke through the prophets to our ancestors  
in many times and many ways.*

*In these final days, though, he spoke to us through a Son.*

*God made his Son the heir of everything and created the world through him.*

*Hebrews 1:1-2*

Let us pray... O God,

Help us to make sense of this world by helping us see options for how to live in it  
by living according to a faith that makes sense –  
and not conforming to a faith that turns a blind eye to human need.

Amen

What a week! “Is the Pope Catholic” – or what?

“The Russians are coming! The Russians are coming” – to Syria, that is.

And another indiscriminate, senseless massacre of innocents...

What do we make of all this? What do we do? Where is God in all this?

Well, first things first...

Seems like September or October would be a better season for  
starting a new year rather than January – well for us anyway.

Today, we welcome back our seasonal members as more and more of you  
return south or from wherever you have ventured this summer.

Many churches – now, including us here at UCC at The Villages,  
start Sunday School this time of year,  
designating a Sunday in early autumn to be ‘Rally Day’.

This is comparable to public schools in many communities ‘up north’  
that traditionally go back in session this time of year –  
though for many of us here that’s only significant  
when it involves grandkids.

By the way, the “school year” in America originally was set to start in September  
because young people way back when, were expected to help in the fields.

Through the late spring and summer, youth worked to bring in the harvest,  
and after the growing season, then it was time for school.

This tradition has continued long after American society ceased to be agrarian,  
that is to say, dependent upon agriculture.

The Jewish New Year – Rosh Hashanah, takes place this time of year,  
followed by Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement,  
which is a time for repentance and renewal.

Willard, p.2

Last week, 8 of us went to Temple Shalom and attended their harvest festival, Sukkoth – the Feast of Tabernacles, which is celebrated to remind the Jewish people of *their* agrarian roots.

Kind of makes sense when you think about how such traditions were set up, reflecting the needs of people at the time.

The cycles of Nature – the sanity of Nature and its laws of cause and effect, have served as an organizing principle for the Judeo-Christian culture.

The demands of life in the desert, likewise shaped the traditions of Islam. Such practices become tradition and the occasion for holidays or memorials to help a community remember the folklore of its origins, identity, and vision.

There are many religious practices within these ritual events that arose to serve practical purposes –

for example the dietary laws of both Jews and Muslims prohibit eating pork originally because of the very real danger of trichinosis.

These days however, we know that proper food preparation

by cooking pork thoroughly, kills the parasite, yet the tradition persists – which doesn't really make sense.

When traditions block people of faith from dealing with present-day needs, common sense tells us they should be changed.

However, it is hard to break away from 'we've always done it this way' traditions especially in how we interpret the Bible – or the Constitution...

One of the ways God has given us to tell when it is time for a change... is pain.

The problem of pain has been a part of the human condition from the Beginning of life on Planet Earth.

Pain serves a useful purpose in teaching us what not to do or what we are to stop doing.

Like the old joke where the patient says to the physician, "Doc, it hurts when I do this" and the doctor replies, "So, stop doing it!"

Sometimes we can't escape pain, which means we have to persevere through it; At such times, we have to rely on faith to help us transcend our outward circumstances.

There are all kinds of pain – physical, emotional, and spiritual pain, that we naturally seek to avoid if we can manage by ourselves, or manage with the help of others when we are not able, or as people of faith, turn to the great spiritual mystery that we call God.

When pain is unresolved and neglected, it can become disfiguring of a person's body, mind, and spirit.

Pain is always at the core of evil behavior – in a way, there is a logic to evil, there is always a motive, a 'reason why' that is rooted in pain.

Willard, p.3

Rage, isolation, agony, meaninglessness, loneliness, or indifference can lead to a poverty of the spirit that sees itself persecuted and seeking revenge on someone else, to blame and punish. In this way, evil with its source of pain, makes sense.

Pain can be the true test of injustice, but it can also be used to justify causing pain unjustly to others. The 'myth of redemptive violence' where the bad guy terrorizes the town until the good guy defeats him is a narrative that all human cultures teach their children.

But that is also the myth that sends more and more young people to fill the ranks of ISIS or allows lone sociopaths to feel justified in taking vengeance for perceived injustices against them. Evil has its own logic and it adapts the idea of 'survival of the fittest' for its own ends; and to those who practice it, it makes sense. To the world, 'an eye for an eye', makes sense, too, as a response to evil that nevertheless, perpetuates the pain through this 'myth of redemptive violence'.

What doesn't make sense is love – a community that operates on the basis of compassion over and against pain and injustice doesn't make sense to the world. Love is the way we would hope individuals and societies throughout the world would treat each other. Yet, the choice to love in the face of pain and in the face of the world's opposition, is not logical. Love does not make sense – to the world.

Despite the world's view of 'survival of the fittest' and 'an eye for an eye', a faith that is based on love makes sense when it responds to real needs that are root causes of injustice, signaled by pain. Desire that becomes jealousy is such a root cause of pain that leads to competition and violence, spiraling out of control, until blame is assigned to a scapegoat to be punished. 'Random acts of love and senseless beauty' may be a cute bumper sticker phrase, but it also serves as a strategy for us as Christians to break that vicious cycle. Choosing to love breaks the cycle of pain by absorbing its wrath just as Jesus did through his suffering on the cross.

It doesn't make sense to the world, but Jesus' sacrificial love helped make way for a new 'world that is coming' as it says in our lesson from Hebrews today and that we must become like children in order to receive it and enter into it as it says in our Gospel lesson.

Willard, p.4

As Christians, we must look at our Bible with new eyes –  
with eyes like little kids who see everything in a new way,  
children who are not yet bitter,  
but are still open to wonder and enchantment.

Take for example the Gospel teaching about divorce today.  
I would venture to say that many of us here today have either  
been through a divorce or know someone who has.  
Jesus' words would seem a very harsh condemnation  
even saying that to remarry was a form of adultery.  
What he has to say about marriage itself also sounds exclusive,  
as limited only to a man and a woman.

Yet knowing what you know about Jesus –  
do you really believe he was more concerned about preserving tradition  
or about addressing root causes of pain?  
Is it likely that these teachings were an addition by editors  
who felt responsible to reinforce the formative structures of the Church?  
Or was Jesus speaking in the context of his time,  
to come down hard against divorce because women – and children,  
would otherwise be powerless in 1<sup>st</sup> Century Middle Eastern society?

In that case, the issue at hand for Jesus would not simply be compliance alone,  
but compassionate justice, too.

Regarding the reference to adultery, perhaps this was his special emphasis  
on the responsibility to be loyal in a marriage relationship.

This way of looking at Jesus' teaching about divorce and adultery  
takes him out of the role of defending the institution of marriage itself –  
while supporting its core reality of compassion  
for those who would be most vulnerable.

Now, Jesus did not comment on the problem of domestic abuse –  
but other teachings of his suggest he would have supported intervention like  
breaking into a 'strong man's house' to steal away his 'goods'  
and that punishment for abusing the 'little ones' would be worse than  
having a "millstone" hung around an offender's neck  
and dropped into the "sea".

What Jesus said about the union between man & woman  
is certainly true for heterosexual marriages,  
but his affirmation does not take away  
from the same psychological, biological, and emotional dynamics  
that exist between two people of the same gender  
in what we now call gay marriage.

Willard, p.5

Perhaps editors of scripture and translators over the years  
have shaped Jesus' words or even put words in his mouth  
to support the Church's institutional traditions.

That seems to be what happened with the surprise revelation that  
Pope Francis had met with Kim Davis –

the Kentucky clerk who refuses to sign gay marriage licenses.

You may well have said, "Is the Pope Catholic?" when you first heard about all this –  
but fortunately for those of us who have hoped Francis is an ally for change,  
there was also a counter-revelation that he *does not* endorse her actions.

Violence abroad and violence at home make that 'world that is coming'  
promised in the Book of Hebrews, still seem very far off.

But love can take the form of resistance as Walter Wink pointed out  
that modern English versions of the Bible have mistranslated Jesus' words,  
'Do not resist one who is evil' – to this effect,  
"Don't hit your enemy back with violence, but fight back."

It remains to be seen how the crisis in Syria will play out on the international stage,  
such that we can only hope and pray that the evil logic  
of intimidation and violence will be outplayed by the wisdom  
of those entrusted with the fate of the free world.

The crisis at home is a different story, because there are things *we* can do  
to begin to change the culture of redemptive violence.

We can work to make sure those who are responsible for resourcing  
violence against the vulnerable in our society, also share in the pain  
by changing the laws that protect those perpetrators.

The ways of this emerging Christianity does not make sense to the world,  
but it is in concert with all the great religions and philosophies  
which acknowledge that it makes sense to be kind.

As it says in Zechariah 4:6<sup>b</sup>,

*"Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit", says the LORD of hosts.*

Amen

*Our first scripture lesson is Hebrews 1:1-4, 2:5-12  
from the Common English Bible.*

*This passage affirms Christ's identity with the ultimate reality of God in heaven  
and at the same time with the painful reality of being human...*

[1:1] In the past, God spoke through the prophets to our ancestors  
in many times and many ways.

[2] In these final days, though, he spoke to us through a Son.  
God made his Son the heir of everything and created the world through him.

[3] The Son is the light of God's glory and the imprint of God's being.  
He maintains everything with his powerful message.

After he carried out the cleansing of people from their sins,  
he sat down at the right side of the highest majesty.

[4] And the Son became so much greater than the other messengers, such as angels,  
that he received a more important title than theirs.

[2:5] God didn't put the world that is coming (the world we are talking about)  
under the angels' control.

[6] Instead, someone declared somewhere,  
What is humanity that you think about them?  
Or what are the human beings that you care about them?

[7] For a while you made them lower than angels.

You crowned the human beings with glory and honor.

[8] You put everything under their control.

When he puts everything under their control,  
he doesn't leave anything out of control.

But right now, we don't see everything under their control yet.

[9] However, we do see the one who was made  
lower in order than the angels for a little while—it's Jesus!  
He's the one who is now crowned with glory and honor  
because of the suffering of his death.

He suffered death so that he could taste death for everyone  
through God's grace.

[10] It was appropriate for God, for whom and through whom everything exists,  
to use experiences of suffering to make perfect the pioneer of salvation.

This salvation belongs to many sons and daughters  
whom he's leading to glory.

[11] This is because the one who makes people holy  
and the people who are being made holy all come from one source.

That is why Jesus isn't ashamed to call them brothers and sisters when he says,

[12] I will publicly announce your name to my brothers and sisters.

I will praise you in the middle of the assembly.

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

Mark 10:2-16

[2] And Pharisees came up and in order to test him asked,

“Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?”

[3] He answered them,

“What did Moses command you?”

[4] They said,

“Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of divorce, and to put her away.”

[5] But Jesus said to them,

“For your hardness of heart he wrote you this commandment.

[6] But from the beginning of creation,

‘God made them male and female.’

[7] ‘For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother  
and be joined to his wife,

[8] and the two shall become one flesh.’

So they are no longer two but one flesh.

[9] What therefore God has joined together, let not man put asunder.”

[10] And in the house the disciples asked him again about this matter.

[11] And he said to them,

“Whoever divorces his wife and marries another,  
commits adultery against her;

[12] and if she divorces her husband and marries another,  
she commits adultery.”

[13] And they were bringing children to him,

that he might touch them; and the disciples rebuked them.

[14] But when Jesus saw it he was indignant, and said to them,

“Let the children come to me, do not hinder them;  
for to such belongs the kingdom of God.

[15] Truly, I say to you,

whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it.”

[16] And he took them in his arms and blessed them, laying his hands upon them.