

“Church and State”

The Rev. Drew Willard
UCC at The Villages, FL
October 19th, 2014
19th Sun. after Pentecost
Quarterly Town Meeting

1 Thessalonians 1:1-10

Matthew 22:15-22

Then [Jesus] said,

“Give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God.”

When they heard this they were astonished, and they departed.

Matthew 22:21^b-22

Let us pray... O God,

Show us how to render back to you, that which belongs to you in the first place,
that we may return it with interest and share in your joy.

Amen

“Give unto Caesar what is Caesar’s and unto God what is God’s”

and so, Jesus cleverly escapes the trap of mixing Church and State.

Yet can we really separate them? When do we let God in?

Isn’t Christianity at the crossroads where church & state meet?

Didn’t our parents warn us, ‘Don’t talk about politics or religion’,
yet isn’t that what everybody likes to talk about these days?

There’s always something going on that touches on
both of these forbidden topics.

They both have their role in society and in our personal and spiritual lives,
and when the issue involves injustice, shouldn’t the Church get involved?

At Men’s Fellowship Breakfast the other day, there was a discussion about
whether or not the government should break up monopolies
like the telephone company, AT&T in 1982.

There are a number of telecommunications companies these days
are trying to merge, though the government has blocked them –
and is that a good thing?

In a way, this is like the history of the United Church of Christ:

Various Protestant groups *protested* and broke away from
the medieval Catholic Church in the 16th Century Reformation,
with four of those traditions uniting to become the UCC in the 20th Century.

I believe it is a good thing for people to break away from a monopolistic system
in industry or government that keeps costs high and quality of service low, or
in Church, by limiting how people may worship God ‘in spirit and truth’.
Roman Catholicism did correct itself of most its coercive practices
in a Counter-Reformation that still retained its richer traditions.

Willard, p.2

I believe it is good for Christian churches to unify,

while still acknowledging and celebrating their differences.

Thanks to our E&R churches, we have regained some of the beautiful traditions of Roman Catholicism – which can be seen in the architecture of many E&R churches in Pennsylvania.

Our Congregational & Christian tradition has given us a strong emphasis on democracy, considering that Congregational churches in New England often served as the gathering place for town meetings –

like the quarterly meeting we are going to have after the service today.

Aren't there appropriate ways for church & state to meet?

For some Christians it's hard to see that connection, because church ought to be where we can retreat from the world and its troubles.

Everyone should feel they can come to church on Sunday to get renewed so they can face the challenges of each new week.

Yet for others, the church is not just a place of retreat, but a place of organizing for action.

The church played such a role in the events leading up to the events of the Fall of the Berlin Wall in November 1989 and the collapse of the Soviet Union –

the Church was a gathering place for revolutionary transformation...

What does it take to get someone to see that Church is not just for Sunday?

What does it take to get someone radicalized –

not like the 'noisy gongs and clanging cymbals' of extremism?

What does it take for that mix of spiritual intention and political action that has been evident in the lives of people like Martin Luther King Jr. who won the Nobel Peace Prize 50 years ago this week for his work in Civil Rights.

This week, teenager Ms. Malala Yousafzai is a Nobel co-winner this year with Kailash Satyarthi, both champions for children's rights.

Dr. King was a Christian, Malala is a Muslim, and Mr. Satyarthi is an Hindu, but all are motivated by the same spirit of compassion to seek justice in the world.

So, what prompted that commitment in them

to cross the line between religion and society, church and state?

When does God collect on what belongs to God?

October with its autumn coloring,

is beautiful time of year in Plainfield, NJ where I'm from.

But by November the leaves are all down from the wind and rain and it is bone-chilling cold.

In January, it is more of the same with the first snow turned to dirty ice, with skies as gray as the asphalt roads.

Willard, p.3

In 1970, Martin Luther King had been assassinated two years before,
and there was still no national holiday for him, though there was talk
about commemorating his birthday on January 15th –
there was also unrest...

Much like Ferguson, MO, Plainfield, NJ had been in national headlines
for the Riots of 1967 – and there was lingering anger
in the African-American community

When I was a sophomore at Plainfield High School –still in the old building,
something was up that first day back to school after Christmas vacation.
The tension was tangible, especially at mid-morning study hall.

When the bell rang to change classes, more than 100 high school kids
were filing into the connecting corridor from the cafeteria to the main hallway
when the first punches were thrown. I myself was hit twice.

Then there was panic and everyone was trying to get out, into the main hallway.
I pushed my way through, and with my back against the lockers, I yelled,
“The world’s gone crazy!”

All of a sudden, all the kids scattered and there were adults
who had come from the main hallway – all men, except for one woman.
It was my youth minister, Lori Witmer – Lori Witmer-Roberts.

Lori was part of a community team that patrolled the halls
and she told me later that the kids scattered
because they all knew that knew them.

She told me that there was a time when she went into a girls bathroom,
and found three girls smoking.

One of the girls came up to her and said,
“What’s to keep us from kicking your butt?”

And Lori said,
“Two things: First of all, if anybody touches me, I’ll kill ‘em.
And second, I’ve got a secret weapon.”

The biggest kid said, “Oh yeah? What’s your secret weapon?”
and without batting an eye, Lori said
“Bad breath!” and those girls just laughed.

Lori said later that she was never quite able to establish
an ongoing relationship with those girls,
but one time in the hallway, one of them saw her and said,
“Hey! You still got your secret weapon?”
and Lori said, “Still got it” as she tapped the side of her mouth.

Lori taught me that church is not just for Sunday.
That Jesus patrols the halls of fear and the corridors of power.

Willard, p.4

Lori is in assisted living these days, retired from ministry many years now, following the effects of a stroke.

She grew up in Pillow, PA which is in the central part of the state; and Lori, herself, was radicalized while in college, during the 1960s where she heard Martin Luther King speak.

She became committed to work in the Civil Rights Movement and went south to help with voter registration.

Lori Witmer-Roberts' legacy to me is the belief in a Jesus who is involved in our lives and our world.

Though unseen, he is our companion, challenging us to do the right thing. Just as we must give to Ceasar what is Ceasar's, Jesus boldly reminds us, it all belongs to God.

From her, I saw that the church must work to unite with people of goodwill of all faiths to meet the challenges before us.

Years later, she told me she didn't believe in ghosts, and that institutional evil – like racism, is our biggest challenge.

This is in accord with Walter Wink's theories about 'the powers that be' – that institutions are represented by spiritual entities, capable of good or evil, and it is our work to convert these institutions to do the right thing.

When I was in seminary I learned about liberation theology and 'comunidades eclesiales de base' – 'basic ecclesial communities', or 'base communities'.

The origins of Liberation Theology were in South America when there was a shortage of priests to serve the predominantly Catholic populations.

Lay Catholics would gather for Bible study and these gatherings became a social movement.

By looking to the Bible for guidance, these study groups would ask the question, 'How does this apply to our lives?'

They became politicized and radicalized, working to bring attention to social injustice – though at times, this would bring the wrath of the powers that be...

It was a movement that was rejected by the Roman Catholic hierarchy, but it serves as an example for how the first Christian churches were formed.

Comunidades de base are akin to the concept of 'beloved community', a term which Martin Luther King frequently referred to in his writings and speeches – another term that describes how God's Kingdom of Heaven can become possible on Earth.

Willard, p.5

Next week, we will host representatives

of the migrant farmworkers community of Dade City,
called 'Calle de Milagros' or "Street of Miracles".

Margarita Romo founded the Farmworkers Self Help, Inc. advocacy group
to help immigrants and the poor of the Calle de Milagros neighborhood.

She has intuitively followed the principles of basic Christian community.

They have something to teach us about faith in action –

and that we are allies for a common goal of social transformation
through God's grace and the achievement of beloved community
in Christ, which is the glory of God.

Which brings us to today's skit, which is based on Jesus' parable of the talents...

The absentee landlord of the original parable
is the CEO in the skit.

The steward who fails to invest his talent and is sent out to wail and gnash his teeth
is the vice president who passed the buck and ultimately sent to the mail room
to deliver the mail and stash the company's keep..

The stewards who invest their talents and are rewarded
are the middle manager and sales team who tried to do the right thing.

The one who returns to pass judgment

is the diligent and generous gardener – much like we'd expect Jesus will do.

The scenario of this parable is the subprime loan disaster
that brought the world into the Recession we are still recovering from.

Though the unjust practices of the financial 'powers that be' were exposed,
it remains to be seen what can be done about the mechanisms in place.

What is suggested by Jesus' parable and this skit is that we use our talents
to work together, as individuals and institutions, as Church and State.

The Apostle Paul congratulated the people of Thessalonica
for being the church in their time and place, when he wrote:

*... we remember your work that comes from **faith**,*

*your effort that comes from **love**,*

*and your perseverance that comes from **hope**...*

1 Thessalonians 1:3^b

There's a familiar pattern here when we remember in 1st Corinthians 13, Paul said,
"Faith, hope, and love abide, these three – and the greatest of these is love."

This is the radical vision for what true Christian community is about
and what the Church can yet become, as an example for the world.

Amen

Our lesson from 1 Thessalonians 1:1-10 is a greeting to the congregation of Thessalonica.

It is believed that this book is the oldest letter that the Apostle Paul wrote and therefore the oldest Christian scripture also called the New Testament.

^{1:1}From Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy.

To the Thessalonians' church that is in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.
Grace and peace to all of you.

²We always thank God for all of you
when we mention you constantly in our prayers.³

This is because we remember your work that comes from faith,
your effort that comes from love, and your perseverance
that comes from hope in our Lord Jesus Christ
in the presence of our God and Father.

⁴Brothers and sisters, you are loved by God,
and we know that he has chosen you.

⁵We know this because our good news didn't come to you
just in speech but also with power and the Holy Spirit
and with deep conviction.

You know as well as we do what kind of people we were
when we were with you, which was for your sake.

⁶You became imitators of us and of the Lord
when you accepted the message that came from the Holy Spirit
with joy in spite of great suffering.

⁷As a result you became an example
to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia.

⁸The message about the Lord rang out from you,
not only in Macedonia and Achaia but in every place.
The news about your faithfulness to God has spread so
that we don't even need to mention it.

⁹People tell us about what sort of welcome we had from you
and how you turned to God from idols.

As a result, you are serving the living and true God,
¹⁰and you are waiting for his Son from heaven.

His Son is Jesus, who is the one he raised from the dead
and who is the one who will rescue us from the coming wrath.

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

Matthew 22:15-22

¹⁵ Then the Pharisees met together

to find a way to trap Jesus in his words.

¹⁶ They sent their disciples, along with the supporters of Herod, to him.

“Teacher,” they said, “we know that you are genuine
and that you teach God’s way as it really is.

We know that you are not swayed by people’s opinions,
because you don’t show favoritism.

¹⁷ So tell us what you think:

Does the Law allow people to pay taxes to Caesar or not?”

¹⁸ Knowing their evil motives, Jesus replied,

“Why do you test me, you hypocrites?

¹⁹ Show me the coin used to pay the tax.”

And they brought him a denarion.

²⁰ “Whose image and inscription is this?” he asked.

²¹ “Caesar’s,” they replied.

Then he said,

“Give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar
and to God what belongs to God.”

²² When they heard this they were astonished, and they departed.