

“The Reformation”

The Rev. Drew Willard
UCC at The Villages, FL
October 28th, 2012,

Jer. 31:7-11

Mark 10:46-52

*‘I, the Lord, will bring my people back from Babylonia
and everywhere else on earth.’*

Jer. 31:8

Let us pray... O God,

Help us to see that it is OK that you are not finished with us yet

and that we are growing as we allow your mercy and love to work within us.

Amen

“If God is who He said He is, then God cannot lie...”

That was something a missionary friend said to me more than 30 years ago,
inexplicably – no explanation.

Then he asked me if I had been ‘saved’...

His words prompted me toward an important milestone on my personal journey
which led me into ordained ministry with a sense of purpose –
a mission for my life.

‘Wherever you are on life’s journey, you are welcome here...’

This is what we say here at UCC at The Villages –

a teaching that has become part of who we are

thanks to the “God is still speaking” initiative in recent years.

And like our scripture lesson from Jeremiah,

it is a message of radical welcome for an exile’s return.

Today, we have welcomed new members who

have made a recommitment to their baptismal vows and

have chosen to be part of the United Church of Christ at The Villages
as their faith community.

We also witnessed Cherie make her commitment to be a Christian

and continue her spiritual walk as a shared journey with us.

Together, we are traveling on a pilgrimage – a ‘kadimah’,

to become that Beloved Community that is possible.

It’s a road where we can find healing and peace, salvation and life everlasting

even if it takes years to gain perspective – to see,

how that salvation comes true.

From our Gospel lesson today, Bartimaeus is described as a blind man

sitting by the roadside, destitute with only a blanket for shelter.

When he hears that Jesus of Nazareth is passing by,

he cries out for mercy and healing.

Willard, p.2

The name 'Bartimaeus' literally means "Son of Honor" –

so, we have a character in this story who also represents a group of people.

He is a metaphor for a proud person who has been brought low by his blindness but gets a healing insight along with a cure for his eyesight.

He is given the opportunity to go his own way,

but chooses to follow Jesus on The Way
which is a metaphor for Christianity –

as well as the central concept of the Chinese philosophy, Taoism –
which is 'The Tao', or 'The Way'.

Taoism and Confucianism are considered to be part of
the great prophetic traditions that originated during
a period of history called the Axial Age.

I first read about this era in a book about comparative religions,
describing it as the '6th Century (BCE) Revolt' against priest-craft.

'Priest-craft' represents the abuse of those who presume to control
access to 'the gods' or Ultimate Reality.

Other religious traditions that emerged then include

Buddhism and Jainism that came out of Hinduism –
which also experienced reform.

Greek philosophy and Persian Zoroastrianism likewise appear then.

Israelites carried off into Babylonian exile, finally return as religious Jews
with a new understanding of God as a universal Divinity.

They all continue to this day and – though their doctrines are incompatible,
they share the value of rational loving-kindness – it makes sense to be kind.

This summer, I attended the Network of Biblical Storytellers Festival Gathering
where I heard theologian and author, Phyllis Tickle speak about
a modern theological movement called the Emergent Church.

According to her,

*"...the great emergence is a construct. It is made up of many things –
social, economic, environmental, intellectual, political, [religious]."*

She also makes the point that in the Church's history

there is a cycle of change that occurs every 500 years.

If we go back 500 years from our time, it was the Reformation when Protestants
broke away from medieval Catholicism.

500 years before that was the split between the Catholic and Orthodox traditions –
as well as the Crusades.

500 years before that was the endorsement of Christianity by Rome –
and soon after, the Fall of the Roman Empire.

And 500 years before that was *'the birth, death and resurrection of Christ.'*

<http://www.livinglutheran.com/seeds/phyllis-tickle-on-the-emerging-church.html#.UInse8Xpcus>

Willard, p.3

And when we recall that 500 years before Christ,
the 6th Century Axial Age established the world's great religions,
we can see there appears to be purpose at work in human history.

Phyllis Tickle agreed that the Reformation was not simply about religion –
it also involved changes in politics and economics, art and literature,
science and medicine
which helped create an educated middle class as a social group in Europe.

With the invention of the printing press,
new versions of the Bible became accessible.

Protestants translating the Bible from Latin into common languages
allowed educated people to begin questioning contradictions
between what the priests were telling them
and what the Bible actually said.

In 1517, Martin Luther protested the Roman Church's 'priest-craft' corruption
by nailing 95 accusations to a church door – and the word got out.

One of the worst abuses was the practice of making people buy "indulgences"
to set loved ones free from Purgatory in the afterlife –
in spite of the Gospel teaching that it is by grace
and not by works that we are saved.

Like proud Bartimaeus,
their eyes were opened and the truth was setting them free,
but the medieval Roman Church would not give up without a fight.

<http://www.williamtyndale.com/obiblehistory.htm>

A consequence of this antagonism between Catholics and Protestants
led to "The 30 Years' War" of the 1600s which shaped European society
along with discoveries made in the colonization of the New World
setting the stage for the modern world and a new 500 year cycle.

Phyllis Tickle and others say the Christian Church is in such a cycle right now,
evident in the Emergent Church movement.

The Occupy Movement and Arab Spring also give credence to this notion
of Divine intention active in a broader panorama of human history.

We are striving inexorably toward freedom, justice, and world peace,
though it is a journey that goes beyond individual lifetimes.

The term of 'Beloved Community' from the American Civil Rights Movement
is still relevant as an inclusive term for this comprehensive goal.

Even it is never to be achieved everywhere at the same time,
just by starting that journey, in a sense, you are already there...

Willard, p.4

So, what does this all mean?

It means “God is *still* speaking”
in our time.

It means God is *still* the Author of those mythic forces that have urged
human beings onward and shaped human societies throughout history.

It means God is *still* calling each of us into lives of purpose – of mission.

And as Christians, we are *still* called to the high adventure of working out
our own relationship with that Great Mystery we call
God, Christ, and Holy Spirit.

It is a personal decision you must make on your own,
but not as a journey you have to *travel* alone.

As a member of the Christian family of faith and as a child of God,
you are not alone to face your fears or infirmities.

For by the grace of God,
Christ and the church go with you.

“If God is who He said He is, then God cannot lie...”

So, friends, have you been ‘saved’?

*I invite you now to a time of silent reflection about the spirit journey you are on –
and for you to have an opportunity to spend some quality time with God...*

Amen

Jer. 31:7-11

The Lord says:

‘Celebrate and sing for Israel, the greatest of nations. Offer praises and shout,

“Come and rescue your people, Lord! Save what’s left of Israel.”

I, the Lord, will bring my people back from Babylonia
and everywhere else on earth.

The blind and the lame
will be there.

Expectant mothers and women about to give birth
will come and be part of that great crowd.

They will weep and pray as I bring them home.

I will lead them to streams of water.

They will walk on a level road and not stumble.

I am a father to Israel, my favorite children.

Listen to me, you nations nearby or across the sea.

I scattered the people of Israel, but I will gather them again.

I will protect them like a shepherd guarding a flock;

I will rescue them from enemies who could overpower them.

Mark 10:46-52

[46] And they came to Jericho;

and as he was leaving Jericho with his disciples and a great multitude,

Bartimae'us, a blind beggar, the son of Timae'us, was sitting by the roadside.

[47] And when he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to cry out and say,

"Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!"

[48] And many rebuked him, telling him to be silent; but he cried out all the more,

"Son of David, have mercy on me!"

[49] And Jesus stopped and said,

"Call him."

And they called the blind man, saying to him,

"Take heart; rise, he is calling you."

[50] And throwing off his mantle he sprang up

and came to Jesus.

[51] And Jesus said to him,

"What do you want me to do for you?"

And the blind man said to him,

"Master, let me receive my sight."

[52] And Jesus said to him,

"Go your way; your faith has made you well."

And immediately he received his sight and followed him on the way.