

“In The Service”

The Rev. Drew Willard
UCC at The Villages, FL
November 9th, 2014
22nd Sun. after Pentecost

1 Thessalonians 2:9-13

Matt. 25:1-13

‘You remember, brothers and sisters, our efforts and hard work.

*We preached God’s good news to you, while we worked night and day
so we wouldn’t be a burden on any of you.’*

1 Thess. 2:9

Let us pray... O God,

Show us ways to serve your good purpose, in Jesus’ name we pray...

Amen

It is hard to imagine what it was like for those first Christians
as they started forming the first congregations
that became the first churches.

From the Bible itself and current scholarship about that era,
we see that the apostles ventured out making converts by speaking
in the synagogues, public places, and homes of people
in Galilee and Judea.

Acts 2:44-47 describes how things got started
when the first believers gathered in Jerusalem.

They listened and learned from the apostles about God through Christ,
they took care of each other, shared meals, and prayed together.

They were amazed at the “signs and wonders” that were happening
which they attributed to God.

They were united and pooled their resources.

Now, how about this for a stewardship program:

*They would sell pieces of property and possessions and
distribute the proceeds to everyone who needed them. [Acts 2:45]*

They were committed to be the church where they were, way back then.

From Jerusalem, they ventured out
on the roads and waterways of the Roman Empire
to bring the Good News to the wider world and
create communities of Christian faith.

Today’s lesson from the Epistles is about such a missionary effort
to the Thessalonians and the Apostle Paul’s letter to them became the first
of many writings that would be collected together to make up
the Christian scriptures.

Willard, p.2

The apostles ‘preached God’s good news’ and
‘worked night and day so [they] wouldn’t be a burden’ –
apparently, by doing part-time jobs.

They ‘appealed to... [and] encouraged... and pleaded with [the Thessalonians]
to live lives worthy of... God’, and ‘thank[ed] God constantly’
that [the Thessalonians] ‘accepted [the apostles’ teachings]
as God’s message’ to them.

This was the pattern of spreading the Christian community and creating churches,
but then things got complicated by the active antagonism
of the Roman Empire which was suspicious of this emerging religion.

Things got worse before they got better as both Peter and Paul
were put to death by the Romans under Emperor Nero.

There were terrible persecutions against Christians,
like throwing people to the lions, up till about 300 years later –
when suddenly, things changed under Emperor Constantine.

Constantine made Christianity the state religion in an attempt to unify
the Empire from splitting into eastern and western regions.

During this period, Christianity enjoyed the patronage of Rome –
while Gnostic Christians and any group who differed
from traditional Christianity were suppressed.

However, Christianity itself didn’t co-operate
and contributed to the deepening rift.

It is just not possible to keep Christianity in a nice neat “box” –
no more than it was to keep Christ in the tomb.

Christianity is doing it again – what some theologians call the ‘Emerging Church’,
which if it is what it is supposed to be,
will be the same dynamic reality just expressed in a new way.

How has it all held together through the centuries?

Things have certainly changed, but there are some specific
core values and characteristics
that continue to guide each new generation of believers –
the Bible being the main resource for this.

How will it continue in our own time with the challenges we face?

Just as it always has been:

The followers of Christ have had to have faith, hope, and love
and a commitment to put those values to work.

It takes a “can do” attitude, often despite stiff opposition if not just apathy.

It is a struggle to be the church whenever and wherever it finds itself
and a struggle to keep it going.

Willard, p.3

It is a struggle that is also a privilege – it is its own reward,
no matter what the challenges are.

In that way, it is like being in the service – in the military, that is,
because there is a mission that calls you to do something
that is greater than yourself.

Thirty years ago, I left the US Army to go to seminary to become a minister,
and people would ask me how I could have made so big a career change.
The answer I give, though, is that the common mission
of both ministry and the military, is “service”.

I am disturbed to hear about young people lured into fighting for ISIS,
though I can understand the attraction of sacrificing oneself
for a great cause – I said ‘great’, but not ‘good’.

What would be ‘good’ is the transformation of the world –
where people are allowed to be themselves without imposing on each other
and the environment of the world is properly managed and protected.

We as Christians are called to serve no less a mission than saving the world itself –
and I don’t mean to make everyone a ‘Christian’.

I do mean that we are to proclaim the love of God through Christ
and that means forgiveness and repentance should be common practice.

I do mean that we as Christians should be about building up
the Beloved Community of God’s Kingdom –
and that means in the wild diversity in which God made us,
balanced in equal parts of justice & peace.

I do mean that we ought to help Jews be better Jews, Muslims be better Muslims,
Buddhists be better Buddhists, Wiccans be better Wiccans,
Cherokees be better Cherokees, Franciscans be better Franciscans,
and that we all be better people of goodwill.

In the Common English Bible version of Jesus’ parable today, he said,
“The Kingdom of Heaven will be like...”,

but the Revised Standard Version has him saying,
“The Kingdom of Heaven is compared to...”

It could be that Jesus was describing what *the world* is like,
and how God’s Kingdom is in sharp contrast.

The world described in Jesus’ parable of the bridesmaids,
is a world where the powerful shut the door in your face
if you don’t have enough oil for your lamp, or the right paperwork,
or enough money on time.

Jesus is telling this parable to his disciples on the Mount of Olives,
just days before the fateful events of his trial and crucifixion.

Willard, p.4

A Third World perspective on this parable would celebrate
the resourcefulness of the five bridesmaids who find oil for their lamps
after everything is closed, but it was too little too late.
So, Jesus was giving his disciples some practical advice.
He was also preparing the Church through the ages
for the ongoing struggle with the powers that be.

It is not easy to be the church – never has been;
But we here at the United Church of Christ at The Villages
have some opportunities to do some real good.

Did you see the Daily Sun and Village News articles last week
about our Community Garden? It means we are about growing things.
Tomorrow, we will have a panel discussion on LGBT issues
which follows a class the last three weeks, about how being
'open and affirming' is the way ahead to a social ethic based on love
and not just lip-service to puritanical hypocrisy.
We are going to have an Angel Tree Christmas Party
for the children of prisoners' families of our area
in the hopes of breaking the cycle of lawlessness and lovelessness.
Then there is the Second Sunday in Advent – "Peace Sunday"
when our Christian cross can serve as a plus sign
between the Jewish star of David and the Muslim crescent –
and between the communities those symbols represent.

My goals with you as pastor here at The United Church of Christ at The Villages is
to keep you connected with each other as a congregation,
with The Villages community, and with our surrounding communities;
to keep you connected to other UCC churches, our Florida Conference,
and the National Setting of our General Synod;
and to be connected with people of goodwill in the interfaith community.

To do that we need support. We need a 'can do' attitude of service.
We need you to do your part and help this church grow
in spiritual depth and not just number in the pews.
We don't need to be a big church – we just need to be big enough.

As Betty McLeod said,

"We are [a small church], but we have a huge heart."

Amen

In today's lesson from 1 Thessalonians 2:9-13, the Apostle Paul is reminding the congregation of Thessalonica of the apostles' relationship with them as teachers and advocates and of their shared mission.

- ⁹You remember, brothers and sisters, our efforts and hard work.
We preached God's good news to you, while we worked night and day so we wouldn't be a burden on any of you.
- ¹⁰You and God are witnesses of how holy, just, and blameless we were toward you believers.
- ¹¹Likewise, you know how we treated each of you like a father treats his own children.
- ¹²We appealed to you, encouraged you, and pleaded with you to live lives worthy of the God who is calling you into his own kingdom and glory.
- ¹³We also thank God constantly for this:
when you accepted God's word that you heard from us,
you welcomed it for what it truly is.
Instead of accepting it as a human message,
you accepted it as God's message,
and it continues to work in you who are believers.

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

Matt. 25:1-13

[Jesus said,]

^{25:1}“At that time the kingdom of heaven will be like
ten young bridesmaids who took their lamps
and went out to meet the groom.

² Now five of them were wise, and the other five were foolish.

³ The foolish ones took their lamps
but didn't bring oil for them.

⁴ But the wise ones took their lamps
and also brought containers of oil.

⁵ “When the groom was late in coming,
they all became drowsy and went to sleep.

⁶ But at midnight there was a cry,
‘Look, the groom! Come out to meet him.’

⁷ “Then all those bridesmaids got up and prepared their lamps.

⁸ But the foolish bridesmaids said to the wise ones,
‘Give us some of your oil, because our lamps have gone out.’

⁹ “But the wise bridesmaids replied,
‘No, because if we share with you,
there won't be enough for our lamps and yours.

We have a better idea.

You go to those who sell oil and buy some for yourselves.’

¹⁰ But while they were gone to buy oil, the groom came.

Those who were ready went with him into the wedding.

Then the door was shut.

¹¹ “Later the other bridesmaids came and said,

‘Lord, lord, open the door for us.’

¹² “But he replied,

‘I tell you the truth, I don't know you.’

¹³ “Therefore, keep alert, because you don't know the day or the hour.