

“Thank You, Jesus!”

The Rev. Drew Willard  
UCC at The Villages  
November 24<sup>th</sup>, 2013  
Reign of Christ  
*Thanksgiving Sunday*

Colossians 1:11-20(CEV)

Luke 23:33-43(RSV)

‘God’s Son was before all else, and by him everything is held together.’

Col. 1:17(CEV)

Let us pray... O God,

Guide us in discovering who you are through Christ.

May we become more Christ-like in how we treat one another.

Amen

Just as it is important every now and then to refresh ourselves  
in how we understand who God is, we need to clarify who Christ is.

I remember from years and years ago – at the first church I served,  
a church member who was very theologically conservative, disagreed with  
how I presented Jesus in my Biblical storytelling and preaching.

In his words, he objected to my making Jesus into a ‘sweaty Galilean’ –  
and I thought about this and came to the conclusion... Yeah!

I liked the idea of Jesus as a ‘sweaty Galilean’  
walking the dusty roads of ancient Israel.

If that is all he turned out to be, I would still love to meet him.

I would be proud to meet him.

I would be proud of him for all he said and did

and how he helped people and continues to help people  
over and against all manner of devils and disease,

deceptions and desolations, fear and foolishness, and even death itself.

That disaffected church member, though, expected something grander  
and I would like to think he was right, too.

I would hope that to be in Jesus’ presence would be awe-inspiring, magnificent –  
even heartbreakingly beautiful.

I would like to think that there would be no more strife, burden, or alienation –  
and no end to experiencing who God is through Christ.

I would like to think that to be with Christ would be just like  
finally coming home after a long journey.

Willard, p.2

In the Book of Colossians which is attributed to the Apostle Paul,  
the believers in Colossae are challenged to get their doctrine right  
and not allow other spiritual traditions  
to seep into their beliefs and practices.

They are challenged to get it right about who God is and who Christ is  
and Paul urges them to be grateful to God  
for being rescued from the powers of evil  
and having a place in 'the kingdom of light...  
the kingdom of his dear Son, who forgives our sins and sets us free.'

Paul goes on to say,

'Christ is exactly like God, who cannot be seen'.

Like a first born son, Christ is the heir of all creation, in heaven and earth –  
'everything seen and unseen, including all forces and powers,  
and all rulers and authorities' are subject to Christ.

Like the Word or Logos in the beginning of the Gospel of John,  
Christ pre-existed creation and  
everything that was created was made by and for Christ,  
who also holds it all together.

So, there is a super-natural dimension to who Christ is,  
with attributes that are simultaneously greater than nature,  
yet intimately woven into the natural world, too.

Again in language similar to the Gospel of John,  
God lives fully in Christ – the human being Jesus of Nazareth,  
who is both the Son of Man and the Son of God.

Like a proud parent, God delights in Christ for reconciling  
'all beings in heaven and on earth' to have peace with God,  
and this came about by dying on the cross.

This cosmic Being who is described as the source of creation,  
took on our human form to suffer and die as one of us –  
not only that, but as someone who dies as a victim of violence.

The Great Mystery of "who God is" has become accessible by being 'in Christ'  
as Jesus of Nazareth, but do we really get it?

Are we really willing to accept God in the form of a person –  
or is it easier to let God and Christ be this other worldly 'Lord Almighty'?

Are we unwilling to accept a God who is capable of humility, self-sacrifice,  
mercy, and even humor?

Willard, p.3

I came across a quote by Clarence Jordan, who organized an interracial cooperative farm in Atlanta in the 1950s and '60s and wrote the play, "Cotton Patch Gospels" which sets the stories of Jesus in the American South, substituting Atlanta for Jerusalem.

In Clarence Jordan's words:

*"When God becomes a man, we don't know what to do with him.*

*If he will just stay God, like a God ought to be,  
then we can deal with him.*

*We can sing songs to him if he'll just stay God....*

*We can build our cathedrals to him.*

*This is the bind we get in today.*

*We reverse the action—from heaven to earth—*

*and we turn it around and build it from earth to heaven.*

*And salvation becomes something that we will attain someday,  
rather than God coming to earth to be among us.*

*So we build churches, we set up great monuments to God  
and we reject him as a human being."*

What I believe he is saying is we human beings are inclined to create a monolithic image of what we imagine God to be like.

Such a God who is all powerful and in control –

becomes perceived as unreasonable, unreachable, and out of touch.

Such a God who inspires fear and must be placated with sacrifices,

becomes irrelevant to one's daily life and easier to ignore.

Contemporary theologian Brian McLaren puts it like this:

*"God is like Christ rather than Christ is like God".*

That is what Clarence Jordan is saying

and that is really what the Apostle Paul is saying, too.

The Great Mystery of God was focused into something we could see and touch

as *someone* – a human being who walked the earth like one of us.

That means that no matter what we face in this world –

the most terrible, the most joyous, the most routine,

as well as the most miraculous, God goes with us as our companion.

The Crucifixion brings God down to Earth in a way that holds a mirror up to us – not only to see the suffering of Jesus,

but to see our suffering and that of all people, the just and the unjust,

and to see the violence which human beings are capable of doing,

violence that is rationalized as just as well as... just irrational.

The Crucifixion is meant to shock us into empathy –

to get us to care about one another, just like God cares about us.

Willard, p.4

Our God is a God who cares about humanity in the here and now.  
and not just about conformity for salvation by and by.

There is a convergence taking shape as people begin to question their religion,  
their politics, the whole system of our commerce, health and environment.  
A new ethic is taking shape based on love – rational loving-kindness,  
that goes beyond literalism, and it is showing up in some surprising places...

Comedian and media personality Russell Brand invited two members of  
the Westboro Baptist Church as guests on his talk show.

Westboro Baptist Church, located in Topeka, Kansas, is notorious  
for its anti-gay protests – often as demonstrations at military funerals,  
with crude signs that declare God's hatred.

Initially, there were catcalls from the audience, but then Russell Brand –  
who kind of resembles Jesus with his shoulder-length hair and beard,  
urged them to listen.

The two guests are provocative with a hate sign featuring Brand himself, and  
at one point, accuse him of hating the audience because he 'applauds' sin,  
but Russell Brand immediately said,  
'I don't applaud any sins what's hurting people or yourselves.'

But the two guests –  
referring to the great commandment to love others as yourself,  
condemned the encouragement of sin  
while claiming that to love according to 'Bible standards'  
means to warn people to repent or they will go to hell.

At times during the interview, one of the guests quoted scripture  
and there is power in these words that seemed to make their case,  
compelling the audience to listen.

But then Russell Brand would break in with humor  
yet with equally compelling appeal, to the nature of Christ's message  
as one of 'tolerance and love and truth and beauty and acceptance.'

This got applause... which suggests to me that there was a consensus  
in that audience – and perhaps secular society itself,  
about the nature of Christ.

Though Russell Brand's language is not appropriate by 'Sunday school' standards,  
he could pass for a 'sweaty Galilean' not only in looks,  
but by how he demonstrated compassion  
to challenge the monolithic legalism he encountered.

He even got a hug out of one of his Westboro guests at the end of the show.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OBA6qlHW8po>

Willard, p.5

I believe the apostles of long ago did their job well enough,  
proclaiming not just literal conformity to religious law,  
but a recognition of God through the incarnation of Christ  
as loving, merciful, and humble enough to face all that human beings face  
now in this world – even persecution and violent, senseless death.

We need to thank the apostles for their faithfulness in telling Jesus' story  
and thank those who have followed his example  
through the generations ever since.

We need to thank Jesus for the sacrifice he made by dying on a cross  
to reveal a loving God who cares for us now and  
who has prepared a 'kingdom of light' for us,  
a 'paradise' for us in the time to come.

The Creator of the Universe for a time had been a sweaty Galilean.

As Floridians, we can be just as sweaty –  
let's try to be as humble, merciful, and loving.

Thank you, Jesus!

Amen

*Our scripture lesson today comes from Colossians 1:11-20(CEV),  
and is part of Paul's guidance to the church of Colossae [Ko-law'-say]  
by clarifying doctrine and encouraging good conduct.*

*These verses affirm the role of Christ  
as God's Son presiding over all of Creation...*

[The Apostle Paul said,]

- 11 [God's] glorious power will make you patient  
and strong enough to endure anything, and you will be truly happy.
- 12 I pray that you will be grateful to God for letting you have part  
in what he has promised his people in the kingdom of light.
- 13 God rescued us from the dark power of Satan  
and brought us into the kingdom of his dear Son,  
14 who forgives our sins and sets us free.
- 15 Christ is exactly like God, who cannot be seen.  
He is the first-born Son, superior to all creation.
- 16 Everything was created by him,  
everything in heaven and on earth, everything seen and unseen,  
including all forces and powers, and all rulers and authorities.  
All things were created by God's Son, and everything was made for him.
- 17 God's Son was before all else, and by him everything is held together.  
18 He is the head of his body, which is the church.  
He is the very beginning, the first to be raised from death,  
so that he would be above all others.
- 19 God himself was pleased to live fully in his Son.  
20 And God was pleased for him to make peace  
by sacrificing his blood on the cross,  
so that all beings in heaven and on earth would be brought back to God.

Luke 23:33-43

[33] And when they came to the place which is called The Skull,  
there they crucified [Jesus], and the criminals,  
one on the right and one on the left.

[34] And Jesus said,  
"Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do."  
And they cast lots to divide his garments.

[35] And the people stood by, watching; but the rulers scoffed at him, saying,  
"He saved others; let him save himself,  
if he is the Christ of God, his Chosen One!"

[36] The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him vinegar,  
[37] and saying,  
"If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!"

[38] There was also an inscription over him,  
"This is the King of the Jews."

[39] One of the criminals who were hanged railed at him, saying,  
"Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!"

[40] But the other rebuked him, saying,  
"Do you not fear God,  
since you are under the same sentence of condemnation?"

[41] And we indeed justly;  
for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds;  
but this man has done nothing wrong."

[42] And he said,  
"Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."

[43] And [Jesus] said to him,  
"Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise."

Inspired by Luke 23:32-43

AND JESUS WAS LED ALONG TO BE TAKEN AWAY WITH TWO OTHERS –  
WHO WERE TERRORISTS.

AND WHEN THEY CAME TO THE PLACE CALLED, ‘THE SKULL’,  
THEY WERE CRUCIFIED,  
ONE ON JESUS’ RIGHT AND ONE ON HIS LEFT.

THEN, JESUS SAID,

“BELOVED GUARDIAN!

FORGIVE THEM, BECAUSE THEY DO NOT KNOW  
WHAT THEY ARE DOING!”

HIS GARMENTS WERE DIVIDED UP  
BY THOSE GAMBLING FOR THEM.

AND A MOB STOOD BY, WATCHING...

AND THEY TREATED HIM WITH CONTEMPT AND THE LEADERS SAID,  
“OTHERS WERE SAVED BY HIM; LET HIM SAVE HIMSELF!”

“THAT IS, ‘IF’ HE IS THE MESSIAH OF GOD, THE CHOSEN ONE.”  
THEY TREATED HIM WITH CRUELTY.

AND THE SOLDIERS CAME UP

AND BROUGHT SOUR WINE TO HIM, SAYING,

“IF YOU ARE THE KING OF THE JEWS, SAVE YOURSELF!”

FOR A SIGN WAS INSCRIBED,

“THE KING OF THE JEWS HIMSELF’.

EVEN ONE OF THE CRUCIFIED EVILDOERS FOULMOUTHED HIM, SAYING,

“ARE YOU NOT HE MESSIAH? SAVE YOURSELF! AND US!”

BUT THE OTHER ONE RESPONDED, SILENCING HIM BY CRYING OUT,

“AREN’T YOU AFRAID OF GOD?

WE ARE ALL CONDEMNED!

FOR US IT IS FAIR;

WE ARE GETTING WHAT WE DESERVE FOR WHAT WE DID.

BUT HE DID NOTHING WRONG!

JESUS! REMEMBER ME WHEN YOU ENTER YOUR KINGDOM!”

AND JESUS SAID TO HIM,

“I TELL YOU THE TRUTH,

TODAY...WITH ME... YOU WILL BE... IN PARADISE...”

In the news recently:

Two West Point graduates were married Nov. 2nd

This was the US Military Academy's first wedding between two men –

Larry Choate III, class of 2009, married Daniel Lennox, class of 2007

<http://nypost.com/2013/11/03/two-men-married-at-west-point-chapel-for-first-time//>

This is a year after The U.S. Military Academy's Cadet Chapel at West Point hosted its first same-sex marriage also in November.

Penelope Gnesin and Brenda Sue Fulton, a West Point graduate,

exchanged vows in the regal church in a ceremony

conducted by a senior Army chaplain.

<http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2012/11/30/west-point-same-sex-marriage/1738665/>

Today, we celebrate with Lou Cummings & Mike Noss

their recent wedding, recognizing 18 years as a committed couple.

Such commitment demonstrated by gay couples is transforming society itself

by demonstrating that the legitimacy of a marriage

is based on an ethic of love and not simply a legal document.

The Rev. Frank Schaeffer a UMC minister was convicted of violating church law by officiating the same-sex wedding for his son.

When reprimanded,

Pastor Schaeffer responded like the Apostle Peter in Acts 4:19-21, saying,

“I will never be silent again. This is what I have to do.”

The United Methodist Church will come around to where the UCC already is –

and so will the other churches and religions in time,

transformed even as society is transforming to a growing consensus that God is a God who is open and affirming of justice & peace.