

“Bridges”

The Rev. Drew Willard
UCC at The Villages, FL
Epiphany Sunday
The Baptism of Christ

Acts 10:27-48

Matthew 3:13-17

‘34 Peter then said:

Now I am certain that God treats all people alike.

*35 God is pleased with everyone who worships him and does right,
no matter what nation they come from.*

*36 This is the same message that God gave to the people of Israel,
when he sent Jesus Christ, the Lord of all, to offer peace to them.’*

Let us pray... O God,

Thank you for the wide diversity of being human and the adventure of
bridging our differences to discover how we can live together in peace.

Amen

It is not fun being in the “middle” –

whether that is social situations, arguments, or war zones.

The person in the middle gets to be everybody’s target!

You are always struggling to figure out where you stand

as they try to find out whose side you are on – until you know who you are.

Then, you can be a “bridge” – or a “bridge-builder”.

There are always risks when you find yourself in the middle –

especially in a hostile situation where you are initially treated with distrust.

You run the risk of being misunderstood, looking foolish, or worse –

if the proper efforts haven’t been made to observe basic courtesies.

That can be a problem when you travel to another country

where people speak a different language,

or passing through a different neighborhood –

or anytime you find yourself to be in the minority.

That has often happened to me in my life where I found myself in the middle –

and from time to time, I have been a bridge-builder...

What has helped me in such times – which can be pretty lonely,

are stories about people who are “bridge-builders” –

people caught in the middle who somehow found their way through.

Often in the process of making the best of such situations,

people discover they all can benefit when they bridge their differences.

One of my favorite ‘bridge-builder’ stories is about Francis of Assisi

who tried to bridge the gulf between Christian crusaders

and Muslim defenders in the Holy Land.

Willard, p.2

It so happened that Francis had gone along with a European army
that had invaded Egypt during the Crusades – to see what they were about.
The Sultan of Egypt was willing to make concessions for peace,
but was distrusted and refused.

When Francis heard about this, he offered to go to speak to the sultan
and convert him to Christianity if he could.

He was given permission reluctantly, and – with no protection,
he went out anyway.

Francis was unsuccessful in his evangelizing,
but the purity of his conviction – that Jesus was the “bridge” to salvation,
was recognized and respected.

He was escorted back to his people,
and given a safe conduct pass to visit Jerusalem.

To this day, the followers of St. Francis – the Franciscans,
are the caretakers of the western Christian shrines in the Middle East.

Our scripture lesson today is such a story about “bridge-building” –
though the details and outcomes are quite different.

The Romans were very tolerant of other religions as a practical policy,
but not committed to any particular religion.

Cornelius was a Roman army officer who was an exception,
as he had taken on the habit of praying to God and helping the poor.

On an earlier occasion,

the Apostle Peter had received a vision

in which something like a huge blanket came down from heaven,
with a variety of animals considered unclean by Jewish Kosher standards.

Peter was told to kill and eat by a voice he perceived as God.

He refused several times, and was finally told not to judge
what God had made ‘clean’.

Later, Peter was told in a dream to expect visitors who were non Jewish,
and when they show up, they ask him to go with them, and he does.

These are messengers from Cornelius

and after Peter meets him and hears how Cornelius
had been instructed to seek him out,

Peter is convinced that this situation explains his vision.

Peter understands this to mean that he is to be open
to welcome people who come to him –

no matter where they came from or who they are.

Peter was an observant Jew and by welcoming Cornelius
as a non-Jewish follower of Christ,

together, they helped build an early bridge between their cultures.

Willard, p.3

The story of Jesus' baptism is about building "bridges", too –
between God and humanity.

The imagery of the skies opening up and the Holy Spirit
reaching down in the form of a dove to rest upon Jesus,
doesn't exactly conform to that of a 'bridge',
still it is about reaching across the separation to make a connection
between heaven and earth.

As a youth, I attended a Billy Graham Crusade in NYC's Madison Square Garden
and I went forward for the altar call to give my life to Jesus.

Afterwards, a young man sat with me to counsel me and he told me
how there was a great chasm between God and humanity which was sin.
Then he said the cross was a bridge between the two.

I have since come to believe that God is never separated from us,
rather we separate ourselves from God –
by how we look at the world, by how we make our choices, by our sin.

We can be blinded by guilt to think that we can never be acceptable
because of something we did; or be shamed by others for who we are;
or we can be isolated by individualism and think
we aren't responsible to anyone else;
or insulated by materialism and think only *things* matter.

Jesus opened people's eyes to face their guilt,
he took people seriously to take away their shame,
he brought people into community to end their isolation,
and created empathy through his own suffering.

So in that way, Jesus is a bridge to connect you with God, with other people,
and with yourself – not by giving you another system to judge yourself by,
but by seeing and recognizing you are already accepted by God
who is always there for you –
especially when you are in the *middle* of a life crisis.

As you allow God to accept you as you are,
you can accept and forgive and love yourself, too.

Then, you can start seeing yourself in other people in their variety and diversity
as acceptable and worthy of forgiveness and love, as well.

Freed of the burdens of guilt, shame, ignorance, and indifference,
we can live creatively, empowering one another and being empowered
to live authentic lives, and not making excuses or blaming others.

No one goes hungry in a world like that. No one is forgotten.
No one is unimportant.

Willard, p.4

Such a world – that is possible as a social reality,
is what Martin Luther King called the Beloved Community and
what Jesus Christ called the Kingdom of God –
'on Earth as it is in Heaven'.

Next week and in the weeks to come,
we are going to take stock of where we came from as a church,
what we have achieved and what we hope to accomplish.
You are going to see the result of the work of many people
who strove to establish the presence of a progressive congregation
of the United Church of Christ here in the Villages-area.
Sometimes, there were sharp divisions and some people got caught in the middle,
but there was a common commitment to bridge those differences
and be the United Church of Christ here at The Villages.
Next Sunday, we are going to celebrate our church's 10th Anniversary,
when we will acknowledge our first pastor, our charter members,
and donors, our Florida Conference, and the UCC,
but there will many whom we just won't have time to name.
Even at the risk of not naming everyone,
I would like to acknowledge some of those who have made a difference
and continue to do so here at UCC at The Villages.

Dolores Bail has dynamically pulled together the people and
organized resources to prepare for our 10th Anniversary Celebration;
Dolores doesn't do anything halfway and the results will be evident
in doing justice to telling our story.

We are putting forward our best next Sunday –
like Glenn Bateman who will do a Children of God Sermon and
you know he puts his heart into anything he does;
and by the way, check out the news clipping we have posted about him
to give you an idea of his drive for excellence.

Jerry Fabian took up leadership of the Building Committee
when he was desperately needed and he carried the construction
of our church building through to completion.

Barbara Fabian along with Jerry have seen to it that the kitchen is well-used,
and made sure the kitchen is used well,
for the many fellowship activities conducted here.

You see the same love and commitment to make this church happen in
the Stewardship Drive every year, thanks to Ray Peidl and Phyllis Lachman.

Willard, p.5

You see compassion put forth in our Pastoral programs with leadership by Becky Dunning, Ed Johnson, Joanne Bateman, and Joyce Christie who coordinate a network of help so that we are a healthy church, a safe church, a church that seeks out those who might otherwise be forgotten.

You see the passion put forth in our worship every Sunday thanks to Monica Peidl as our music director working with a great group of volunteers who serve as our choir. And that goes for our professional instrumentalists Cheryl DeJonge, Joyce Brooks, and Jean Venters, as well as our church members who are talented musicians.

Charlie Stanley is the chair of our Deacons, who work behind the scenes to make sure there is a multiplication of bread and even turning water into wine if that's what it takes, besides coordinating for liturgists, ushers, bulletins, and flowers. Nancy Bell, Maureen McCoy, Mabel Prescott, Mike West & Tom Meier, Carl & Bonnie Kusky, Bea Hester, Pat Brown, Harv & Jackie Kramme, are among those whose names have become familiar over the years, and there are new names that are becoming just as familiar as we bridge ahead into the next season of our life as a congregation.

You see the same loving commitment of the Spirit – of the Holy Spirit, at work in the Administrative, Missions, Education, and the WHO ministry teams, Finance & Stewardship, the Fundraising committee, Justice & Peace, the work of our office manager, Penny Timson, and office helpers, prayer shawl makers, Banner Guild, and especially those who step up to be leaders.

There is one person who has been above and beyond a true 'bridge-builder' for this church, whom I have found indispensable for her wise counsel, leadership, and diligence, and who often expresses her gratitude for help received – and that is Jo Posillico, our Moderator.

Thank you. Thank you, Jo. Thank you, all, for the "bridges" you have built allowing for the next generation of volunteers and leaders to go forward.

It has occurred to me that – just as we need bridges within our congregation, we need to have an outward focus as well.

We can serve as a bridge to our wider community by sharing what we do best – and I'm convinced that this means sharing who we are.

An example is the Gift of Years book study to be led by Barbara Mann with 50 people enrolled, including 15 people from the community.

Willard, p.6

What is that message that we would send?

Our church's mission statement is a good place to start, which is as follows:

We believe God is still speaking and calls us

to worship as a Christian community;

[to] be open and affirming;

[to] share God's love, wisdom and compassion,

as revealed in God's holy word,

[to] celebrate the sacraments of baptism and holy communion,

[to] provide spiritual education,

[to] support missions in the community, nation and world.

I see the key concept that makes us unique in the Christian community is that we are 'open and affirming'.

It is not only critical that we survive financially,

but that we have a clear mission for what we're surviving to do.

I'm convinced that to be *open and affirming* is a metaphor for being *born again*.

In Jesus baptism, he has an experience of self-discovery

in which the skies opened and he is affirmed by God

to be a unique individual with a very specific mission in this life.

This message of self-actualization

leads to a community that is open and affirming,

transforming individuals and communities in the process.

and the arts can play a significant roll

promoting the expression of faith.

In time, we will send people out like the apostles of old

to bridge across barriers and chasms that others thought impassable.

Someday, we will raise up ministers to be ordained

and God willing, help start planting churches again in Florida.

We already have made bridges towards other faith communities

and finding inroads within our own community, our conference,

denomination, and beyond, sharing the Good News

that God is still speaking and telling us to be open & affirming

of what makes for a just and peaceful world

just as Jesus promised, 'on Earth as it is in Heaven'.

Amen

R1: Our lesson from Acts 10:34-43 tells about Peter's moment of insight – when he realized that the meaning of a dream he had about diversity was guiding him to welcome people who were not Jewish into the fellowship of the early Church...

R2: As Peter entered the house [of Cornelius, the Roman commander in Caesarea], he was still talking with Cornelius.

Many people were there, and Peter said to them,
“You know that we Jews are not allowed to have anything to do with other people.

But God has shown me that he doesn't think anyone is unclean or unfit. I agreed to come here, but I want to know why you sent for me.”

R1: Cornelius answered:

Four days ago at about three o'clock in the afternoon I was praying at home. Suddenly a man in bright clothes stood in front of me. He said,

“Cornelius, God has heard your prayers,
and he knows about your gifts to the poor.

Now send to Joppa for Simon Peter.

He is visiting in the home of Simon the leather maker,
who lives near the sea.”

I sent for you right away, and you have been good enough to come. All of us are here in the presence of the Lord God,
so that we can hear what he has to say.

R2: Peter then said:

“Now I am certain that God treats all people alike.

God is pleased with everyone who worships him
and does right, no matter what nation they come from.

This is the same message that God gave to the people of Israel,
when he sent Jesus Christ, the Lord of all, to offer peace to them.

You surely know what happened everywhere in Judea.

It all began in Galilee after John had told everyone to be baptized.

God gave the Holy Spirit and power to Jesus from Nazareth.

He was with Jesus, as he went around doing good
and healing everyone who was under the power of the devil.

We all saw what Jesus did both in Israel and in the city of Jerusalem.

Jesus was put to death on a cross.

But three days later, God raised him to life and let him be seen.

Not everyone saw him.

He was seen only by us, who ate and drank with him
after he was raised from death.

We were the ones God chose to tell others about him.

God told us to announce clearly to the people that

Jesus is the one he has chosen to judge the living and the dead.

Every one of the prophets has said that all who have faith in Jesus
will have their sins forgiven in his name.”

R1: While Peter was still speaking,

the Holy Spirit took control of everyone who was listening.

Some Jewish followers of the Lord had come with Peter,

and they were surprised that the Holy Spirit had been given to Gentiles.

R2: Now they were hearing Gentiles speaking unknown languages and praising God.

Peter said,

“These Gentiles have been given the Holy Spirit, just as we have!

I am certain that no one would dare stop us from baptizing them.”

Peter ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ,

and they asked him to stay on for a few days.

R1: Let us be guided and challenged by these words.

Matthew 3:13-17 [DWW]

Now Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan
for John to baptize him.

However, John refused, saying,

“I need to be baptized by you, and yet you come to me?”

But Jesus said to him,

“Let it be this way now.

It is right for us to observe all the customs.’

So, John permitted him to be baptized.

Then, just as Jesus emerged from the water...

Look here! The skies opened up to him and the Spirit of God –
the Lifebreath of Holiness, descended like a dove to rest upon him.

Now listen! A voice from the heavens spoke,

“This is the One who comes from me –

This is One who is beloved, in whom I delight!”

Matthew 3:13-17 [RSV]

[13] Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to John,
to be baptized by him.

[14] John would have prevented him, saying,

"I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?"

[15] But Jesus answered him,

"Let it be so now; for thus it is fitting for us to fulfil all righteousness."

Then he consented.

[16] And when Jesus was baptized, he went up immediately from the water,
and behold, the heavens were opened and

he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove, and alighting on him;

[17] and lo, a voice from heaven, saying,

"This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased."