

“Hands-On Faith”

The Rev. Drew Willard
UCC at The Villages, FL
January 13th, 2013
Baptism of Christ Sunday

Acts 8:14-17

Luke 3:15-22

*‘Peter and John then placed their hands on everyone who had faith in the Lord,
and they were given the Holy Spirit.’* Acts 8:17

Let us pray... O God,

May our faith be the kind that plays out in living our lives –
not simply as a moral scorecard of good behavior, expecting joy.

May others see you at work in our world through us,
as we reach out to share your compassion in a “hands on” way.

Amen

Last Sunday, thousands of people gathered at Tarpon Springs in Pinellas County,
about 90 miles south of The Villages, for the Annual Epiphany celebration –
especially, for the cross diving event at the Tarpon bayou.

That’s when the archbishop of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America
threw a wooden cross into the waters where about 50 teenage boys
scrambled until one of them retrieved it.

This tradition symbolizes the emergence of Christ from his baptism in the Jordan
and means that the boy who brings it ashore – and his family,
will be blessed throughout the year.

When I was at Lancaster Theological Seminary in Lancaster, PA,
I had the opportunity to learn about the Greek Orthodox Church,
and frequently attended services at Annunciation Church.

The Orthodox have a very specific order of worship – called the Divine Liturgy,
which has changed very little since the days when the early Church father,
John Chrysostom, shortened it from 8 hours to 4 hours.

I loved the rich experience of their traditions that include incense, iconography,
and the interweaving of English and Greek in the words of the service itself.

I especially loved the baritone plainsong of the priest, Fr. Alexander Veronis,
who literally sang throughout the service –

very similar to how Sheldon Skurow leads worship at Temple Shalom.

Fr. Veronis influenced my style of storytelling, such that any time there is
a theophany – when God or an angel is speaking,

I use plainsong reminiscent of the Orthodox style of chant.

Willard, 2

Their religious tradition places an emphasis on engaging all the senses –
smell, sight, sound, taste, and touch.

Holy Communion is celebrated every Sunday
and even guests may approach the priest at the end of the service
to kiss a hand-held cross and receive a piece of gift bread.

Their congregation also “passes the peace” during their service
and there is a lot of standing-sitting-standing
and crossing themselves from right to left –
which is opposite of Roman Catholics who bless themselves, left to right.

Like the Roman Catholic ‘Mass’, the Orthodox ‘Divine Liturgy’ requires
the use of a prayer-book – or missal.

I found I could follow along fairly well, thanks to my Greek studies,
but when we had to turn to a different part of the prayer book,
and that’s when they’d lose me
till someone helped me find the right page.

However – after attending the Greek church for awhile,
I realized there was a structure to the service that remained the same
and that this was an important factor
to help the congregation know where they were during worship.
So, if someone were blind, they could hear and know where they were.
If someone were deaf, they could see and know where they were –
just as all of them were immersed in the narrative of the Liturgy.

There were two processions that occurred –
where acolytes carrying the cross, candles, and staffs representing angels
would proceed ahead of the priest.

In the first procession, the priest held aloft a large copy of the Gospel,
emblazoned with gold, representing Christ coming into the world;
And in the second procession,
the priest carried the Chalice containing the communion elements,
now, as Christ approaching Jerusalem.

As I began to recognize the significance of these events of the Liturgy,
I realized how it compared with the Protestant style of worship
as we practice it each week.

Willard, p.3

In the traditional Catholic Mass and the Orthodox Divine Liturgy,
the story of Christ is told and retold, Sunday to Sunday.

In the Protestant service, it is the path of the believer that is told and
re-experienced.

Every week in our service,

we begin with praise and prayers inviting God to be with us.

This is followed by a time of confession for us to open our hearts to our God –
not as defendants before a harsh judge,

keeping score of all your misdeeds and neglect,

but rather as the true friend who holds you responsible to your best self –
and doesn't let you off the hook.

Then, we respond with joy, singing the "Gloria" – "Glory to God"
with thanksgiving as we offer our gifts

and sing the "Doxology" – the "Blessing".

We hear the songs and stories of our faith and the pastor's sermon

to inspire us for how we ought to go out and live the Good News.

With our joys & concerns through prayer,

we invite God to intercede for us, our loved ones, and our world;

and with the Benediction, we are sent forth to help make a difference.

Today as we received our new members,

we heard the questions asked at our own Baptisms –

whether answered by us directly,

or answered for us if we were baptized as infants

and so, we had the opportunity to recommit ourselves to Christ.

It so happens that the second Sunday in January

is when we celebrate the Baptism of Christ, which –

is an epiphany or realization of when

Jesus was recognized as the Son of God.

Also in the season of Epiphany, the third Sunday of January is when

progressive churches remember the life and work

of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

On the third Sunday in January 1987, I had attended Annunciation Church,

and was amazed to see an icon – a sacred picture of Martin Luther King.

prominently displayed in front of the pulpit

where an icon of an Orthodox saint would normally be.

The Greek Orthodox were celebrating Martin Luther King Day!

This was a remarkable and daring thing for Fr. Alexander Veronis to do –

but not unexpected by his congregation.

Willard, p.4

In the 1960s, he demonstrated his leadership in that community,
helping to organize opposition to a KKK rally.

Despite a threat to Fr. Veronis' family of four little children,
he persevered and the community prevailed
preventing the Klan event from taking place.

So, even a church steeped in centuries of tradition can make a difference today,
when it is willing to grapple with the issues.

How much more so, can a church that is informed by tradition,
but not tied down to it, make such a difference?

Two of my personal heroes of the Church met one day,

Fr. Alexander Veronis, the Orthodox priest of Annunciation Church,
and Rev. Loretta Witmer-Roberts –

who had been my youth minister at Plainfield Congregational Church in NJ.

Fr. Veronis asked Rev. Roberts who was pastor of the UCC church in Bernville, PA,

“How old is your church?”

and without blinking an eye, Lori said,

“2,000 years!”

Both of them shared a 2,000 year old faith – if not the same practice of it,
and both shared the same Spirit, active in Civil Rights.

Lori Roberts herself, had heard Martin Luther King speak at her college
and she was inspired to get involved in the Civil Rights movement
and eventually to become an ordained minister.

Indeed, she was one of those ministers who had laid their hands upon my head
at my ordination.

Friends, we as members of the UCC,

are connected with that same Spirit that informed those first disciples,
and as followers of Christ,

we have the power to heal those who are sick, cast out demons,
and prevail against empires.

The UCC is no less than Roman Catholicism, Eastern Orthodoxy –

or Southern Baptists for that matter, in terms of our heritage,

spiritual authority, and potential as a Christian community of faith.

And we already have in our history, a vision of Christ –

not only as personal Savior, but as Liberator,

and the spiritual forbears of the UCC include those

who fought for the abolition of slavery in the 1860s

as well as for Civil Rights in the 1960s.

Willard, p.5

Yet these time-tested faith traditions have much to teach us,
so long as we are willing to live up to our mission
as a church that is Open & Affirming –
'open and affirming' of God's truth wherever we may find it.
Then, we can even re-discover truth in the ancient songs and stories
of our sister faiths and all people of goodwill
and be touched by the love of God in ways
that we cannot yet imagine.

Perhaps the greatest gift of all that I received from the Orthodox
is a prayer that is used as a response within their litany of confession.
It is a prayer that is foundational to Orthodox spirituality;
It is a prayer that has great personal significance to me;
It is a prayer that has deep roots in the human experience –
that first prayer, 'Help me! Help me! Help me!'
It is called the Jesus Prayer – "Kyrie Eleison", Lord, have mercy...

Kyrie, eleison! Kyrie, eleison! Kyrie, eleison!

Another version of this prayer is called the Trisagion – the Thrice Holy...
Agios o Theos! Agios iskuros! Agios athanatos! Eleison umas.
Holy is God! Holy and mighty! Holy and immortal! Have mercy on us...
Amen

Acts 8:14-17

- 14 The apostles in Jerusalem heard that some people in Samaria had accepted God's message, and they sent Peter and John.
- 15 When the two apostles arrived, they prayed that the people would be given the Holy Spirit.
- 16 Before this, the Holy Spirit had not been given to anyone in Samaria, though some of them had been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus.
- 17 Peter and John then placed their hands on everyone who had faith in the Lord, and they were given the Holy Spirit.

Luke 3:15-17, 20-22

- 15 Everyone became excited and wondered, "Could John be the Messiah?"
- 16 John said, "I am just baptizing with water. But someone more powerful is going to come, and I am not good enough even to untie his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.
- 17 His threshing fork is in his hand, and he is ready to separate the wheat from the husks. He will store the wheat in his barn and burn the husks with a fire that never goes out."
- 21 While everyone else was being baptized, Jesus himself was baptized. Then as he prayed, the sky opened up,
- 22 and the Holy Spirit came down upon him in the form of a dove. A voice from heaven said, "You are my own dear Son, and I am pleased with you."

Greetings to

Maestro Pasquale Velerio, the Church on the Square Choir, congregation & guests

I am Rev. Drew Willard, pastor of the United Church of Christ at The Villages,
located 1 mile north on CR 101 from the intersection with CR 466,
and our services are at 9:50 am on Sunday.

I bring you greetings from my congregation.

It is a privilege and a pleasure to be with you again,
and I believe it will be a pleasure for you, too, this morning.

Today, I am going to share with you some of my favorite Biblical narratives –
a recitation of stories about Mary Magdalene from Luke and John.

I've translated/paraphrased these texts to unpack labels we may take for granted
and have done some connective commentary for the sake of the telling.

One liberty I will take to assume that the Beloved Disciple –
traditionally thought to be the Apostle John, could've been Mary Magdalene.

My selection of one story in particular,
goes against contemporary feminist scholarship
by associating Mary Magdalene with the Woman caught in adultery.

Still, that story serves to ground the other texts by presenting a portrait
of a person who undergoes a conversion to belief –
not as someone who has been convinced intellectually,
but as someone who has been helped in their hour of their desperate need.

This is a love story – a story about Mary Magdalene & Jesus –
though it is not the “DaVinci Code” thesis that Jesus was married
and had children by Mary Magdalene.

Knowing what Christians have done regarding relics of the saints,
I am inclined to believe Jesus would have known
how any of his descendants would have been treated,
so being who he was, he would've practiced self-restraint.

But what the world responded to in that book, was the ideal of romantic love –
as a form of the love that God has for human-kind.

This is to believe that – of all the human-beings that have ever lived,
you are known and loved by the One Who Is God.

There was a period in the Middle Ages from 1150-1250 AD,
that chivalry and courtly love flourished in Europe, helped by troubadours
inspired perhaps by stories of the Holy Grail and legends of Mary Magdalene
brought back from the Crusades.

The authorities thought things were getting out of hand
and soon after, the Inquisition arose to suppress such thinking.

Perhaps it is time to start singing the songs of the love of God again...