

“Neighborhoods”

The Rev. Drew Willard
UCC at The Villages, FL
January 18th, 2015
2nd Sun. after Pentecost

Genesis 1:1-11

John 1:43-51

Nathan'a-el said to him, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?"

Philip said to him, "Come and see."

John 1:46

Let us pray... O God,

Help us to see those worlds within worlds, invisible to us until we look to see
the good that was there all the time before our very eyes.

Amen

There is humor in the Bible, though it is not always so obvious,
and sometimes, it needs a little help to be recognized
as to whether it is funny, “Ha-ha”, or funny, “A-ha....”

One example of Biblical humor comes from the Gospel story about
the call of Nathaniel.

In his excitement at having met Jesus of Nazareth,
Philip tells his friend Nathaniel about this fellow who is like
one of the prophets of old.

However, Nathaniel brushes him off saying,

“Can anything good come out of Nazareth?”

“Can anything worthwhile come from there?”

Sometimes, when telling this Bible story,

I will add the audience’s geographical reference:

“Can anything good come out of Boston?”

“Can anything good come out of Wisconsin?”

“Can anything good come out of The Villages?”

This would get a laugh from those who recognize their civic pride
may be a little inflated.

Yet one time I told this story at a UMC church in Leola, PA,
where I served as youth minister, and told how I thought that line
about Nazareth was funny, the senior pastor, The Rev. Alfred Johnson
responded that it wasn’t funny to him at all.

Pastor Johnson – who was African-American and serving a predominantly white,
traditional, agricultural community in the area of Lancaster, PA, said to me,
“What if it was, ‘Can anything good come out of South Philly?’ –
which is where I’m from?”

“Can anything good come out of Wildwood? Summerfield? Leesburg? Oxford?”

Willard, p.2

Kind of depends on what neighborhood – or ‘village’ we are from,
as to how we view *those* people from someplace else.

Seems like there is always some kind of rivalry going on –
that especially revolves around sports.

For most communities, these rivalries get played out
at the big football game on Thanksgiving.

I’m from Plainfield, NJ – mostly African-American when I was in high school,
and our arch rival was predominantly white and affluent Westfield.

They would beat us year after year, yet I don’t remember us as a team
having any particular animosity toward Westfield –
more of a grudging respect.

They were unbeaten, throughout their football seasons for many years –
I recall a string of victories numbering more than 30 games! 48 in fact!

Their success certainly owed a lot to the leadership of their coach,
Gary Kehler – with a career record of 172-26-7.

When he *finally* retired, there was a special award for him at half-time
at the Thanksgiving game – which happened to be at Plainfield that year.

Like I said, there was a lot of respect we had for the Westfield team
and for Coach Koehler, but that year, after the half-time ceremony...
Plainfield beat Westfield!

If only the Army team would rise from the ashes in the same way!

That scenario of competition between ‘neighborhoods’
gets played out in just about any way that people are affiliated
whether that is by street to street, town to town, state to state,
nation to nation, corporation to corporation, religion to religion.

The bad thing about such competition of ‘us’ against ‘them’
is the illusion of a ‘winner’ with the expectation we all have to conform.

Such a literal, black & white view of people can leave us blind
to what others are really like – and how we are the same.

There can be whole worlds within worlds, otherwise invisible
to each other’s distinctive gifts as well as how we are the same...

I have shared this story before about when I was invited
by an African-American friend, Edna Stewart, to attend a talk
given by a guest preacher at a very large AME church in Augusta, GA.

The speaker had a very harsh message – comparing white society
to the oppressive behavior of the Egyptians and Romans.

I was the only person of my complexion there amidst about a 1,000 in attendance,
but I never felt personally threatened.

Willard, p.3

As we were leaving my friend apologized, and I told her there was no need –
in fact, I felt honored to witness the pain of her community felt
in the shadow of lingering racism.

When I have told this story, I also mention that – as we went downstairs to go out,
there on the wall was a life-size portrayal of Jesus, blond and blue-eyed –
a sure sign of racial and religious tolerance! Hope, yet!
Usually, I don't tell this part, though...

It was not long after this, that Edna invited me to go to her church,
a small church in a part of Augusta I had never been before.
The whole building was as long as our sanctuary, but not as wide;
The pastor was a tall, sturdy man in white robes
with a ready mustachioed smile.

He worked in a factory in addition to ministering to his congregation,
like the Apostle Paul who was a tentmaker as well as evangelist.
I don't recall his name or what he talked about that day,
but that he had a good message and I felt very welcome there.

Then I found myself invited to the wedding of this pastor's daughter
which was held at that church, followed by the reception.
I remember that it was just a beautiful service and a joyful celebration afterwards,
the bridesmaids in lovely pastel green dresses.
It was dreamlike and I recall realizing
I was seeing this African-American community as a parallel world –
a side of Augusta that was hidden from view.
I was sorry that I was only just beginning to experience it,
because the time had come for me to leave and go north to seminary...

I had been attending a huge Presbyterian Church –
which was a predominately white congregation of at least 600 members
with one Laotian family.

I sang in the choir, went to Bible study, and helped with the youth ministry
and really enjoyed the senior minister and the associate –
who was a recent graduate from seminary.

I especially remember he did a marvelous dramatic monologue as Paul.
On my last Sunday there, the associate pastor did a prayer of blessing,
to send me forth and even gave me a chance to speak to the congregation.
I remember afterwards there was a crowd of people wishing me well
and among them was Edna Stewart – and her minister was there, too!
That was truly an honor,
because he would have rushed over after his own service to be there.
For a brief moment, those two worlds intersected...

Willard, p.4

If I had stayed in Augusta, I would have worked to
bring those white Presbyterians and black Methodists together –
not to mix everyone up into a hodgepodge of sameness.
But to allow each community to meet each other on their own terms
with respect for their distinctive gifts –
and see how they were very much the same.

I feel that way about our relationships
with the Jewish congregation of Temple Shalom and
the farm-worker community of Calle de Milagros.
Our outreach to the Muslim community is a little more limited,
but just as significant.
We are preparing a Creative Arts program
for children who are students of Wildwood Middle School and
the Angel Tree party we did for the children of prisoners' families
is another opportunity to encounter those worlds within worlds
that have been otherwise invisible to us.

We are so blessed as a community to have these kind of connections –
these kind of neighbors.

I hope you see these activities we have done with them
as opportunities for spiritual growth and social change.

As the old hymn goes,

‘We are one in the Spirit. We are one in the Lord.

And they'll know we are Christians by our love, by our love.

Yes, they will know we are Christians by our love’

“Can anything good come out of Wildwood? Dade City? Oxford? The Villages?”
Come and see!

Amen

Our lesson today from Genesis 1:1-13 describes the creation of the habitats in which all living creatures of sea, air, and land would make their homes and find their niche.

^{1:1}When God began to create the heavens and the earth—

²the earth was without shape or form, it was dark over the deep sea, and God's wind swept over the waters— ³God said,

“Let there be light.” And so light appeared.

⁴God saw how good the light was. God separated the light from the darkness.

⁵God named the light Day and the darkness Night.

There was evening and there was morning: the first day.

⁶God said,

“Let there be a dome in the middle of the waters to separate the waters from each other.”

⁷God made the dome and separated the waters under the dome from the waters above the dome. And it happened in that way.

⁸God named the dome Sky.

There was evening and there was morning: the second day.

⁹God said,

“Let the waters under the sky come together into one place so that the dry land can appear.” And that's what happened.

¹⁰God named the dry land Earth, and he named the gathered waters Seas.

God saw how good it was.¹¹ God said,

“Let the earth grow plant life:

plants yielding seeds and fruit trees bearing fruit with seeds inside it, each according to its kind throughout the earth.”

And that's what happened.

¹²The earth produced plant life: plants yielding seeds, each according to its kind, and trees bearing fruit with seeds inside it, each according to its kind.

God saw how good it was.

¹³There was evening and there was morning: the third day.

John 1:43-51

**JESUS RESOLVED TO GO THROUGHOUT THE GALILEE
AND HE HAPPENED TO FIND PHILLIP, AND SAID TO HIM,
“FOLLOW ME!”**

**PHILLIP HAPPENED TO FIND NATHANIEL AND SAID TO HIM,
“THE ONE WHO MOSES WROTE ABOUT IN THE LAW
AND THE PROPHETS IN THEIR WRITINGS –
WE HAVE STUMBLER UPON HIM!
JESUS JOSEPHSON, FROM NAZARETH!”**

**NATHANIEL SAID,
“NAZARETH! CAN ANYTHING WORTHWHILE
COME FROM THERE?”**

**PHILLIP SAID TO HIM,
“COME SEE FOR YOURSELF!”**

**JESUS SAW NATHANIEL COMING TOWARDS HIM AND SAID ABOUT HIM,
“LOOK HERE! AN ‘ISRAELITE’
IN WHOM THERE IS NO TREACHERY!”**

**BUT NATHANIEL SAID TO HIM,
“NOW HOW WOULD SOMEONE LIKE YOU
KNOW ANYTHING ABOUT ME?”**

**JESUS ANSWERED HIM,
“BEFORE PHILLIP CALLED YOU,
YOU WERE ‘UNDER THE FIG TREE’; I SAW YOU.”**

**AND NATHANIEL ANSWERED HIM,
“O RABBI! YOU ARE THE SON OF GOD!
YOU ARE A KING!
YOU ARE AN ISRAELITE LIKE ONE OF US!”**

**BUT JESUS ANSWERED HIM,
“BECAUSE I SAID TO YOU,
‘I SAW YOU UNDER A FIG TREE’, DO YOU TRUST ME?
YOU WILL SEE GREATER THINGS
THAN THIS!
I TELL YOU THE TRUTH,
YOU WILL SEE THE HEAVENS
HAVING BEEN TORN OPEN
AND THE ANGELS OF GOD ASCENDING AND DESCENDING
IN THE PRESENCE OF ‘THE SON OF MAN’ –
THE TRUE HEIR OF HUMANITY!”**