

“We Are One In The Spirit”

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1st Corinthians 1:10-18

Matthew 4:12-23

And he said to them,

"Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men."

Immediately they left their nets and followed him.

Matt. 4:19-20

Let us pray... O God, Help us to help each other become who we can be,
to live authentically and creatively, recognizing each others' gifts,
and helping to bring them forth for the sake of your Beloved Community.

Amen

The Gospel lesson today tells us that Jesus went throughout the land,
preaching about the Kingdom of God.

He found two sets of brothers who would pick up his message
and form the core of his disciples.

Jesus must have been a charismatic person, but I don't think he hypnotized people
such that they just dropped what they were doing to blindly follow him.

There must be more to the story...

The call of the fishermen, Peter and Andrew, James and John,
reminds me of that excellent film, “Dead Poets Society”,
in which a charismatic teacher challenges his students
to take an interest in poetry and make the most of their lives –
to ‘Seize the day!’, ‘Carpe diem!’

I think the disciples were young people, too – perhaps teenagers, and
because Jesus was older and took them seriously, they listened to him.

That film came out the summer before I started teaching at Blair Academy,
as a religion-intern for a private high school in northern NJ.

Needless to say, I encouraged poetry readings, coffeehouses,
and even standing on desks to recite stories in the spirit of that film.

One of my favorite quotes from Dead Poets Society was when the teacher –
played by Robin Williams, tells his English class:

“We don't do poetry because it's cute.

We read and write poetry because we're members of the human race.

And the human race is filled with passion.

Now medicine, engineering, and law are important and necessary for life.

But beauty, poetry, romance, love – this is what we stay alive for!

To quote [Walt] Whitman,

'Of the questions recurring, of the endless trains of the faithless,

of cities filled with the foolish, what good amid these, O me, O Life?

Willard, p.2

Answer: Life exists and Identity.

And the powerful play goes on and you may contribute a verse.'

'And the powerful play goes on and you may contribute a verse...'

What will your verse be?"

While I was at Blair I met a young man who was a senior –
and one of the shyest people I have ever known.

Generally, the students ate family-style at assigned tables,
but on Saturday mornings, it was cafeteria-style.

Keith Ewan was sitting all by himself when I sat down to have breakfast with him;
I got to talking with Keith and learned that he liked to write poetry.

I asked to see some examples that I might include with mandatory chapel,
which a couple weeks later I did – and the response the next day

was girls coming up to me, saying,

“Mr. Willard, who wrote that poem? It’s just like my poetry.”

One of the girls even gave me some of her poems to show to Keith.

He was “The Poet” from then on, and even organized a “poetry slam”

as an English class finals project, inviting teachers and students to participate.

Keith came out of his cocoon like a butterfly.

He got involved in the chapel youth group, and one time, I gave these teenagers,
paper and magic markers and let them draw.

This is what Keith Ewan drew...

To me, it’s like a seed pod bursting forth with color, dancing light,

and flame of the Spirit – a self portrait of an unassuming young man
with exceptional gifts... like any of us if we choose to share them...

Art and spirituality as a concept is not about self-expression, but faith expression –
which is at the heart of the conflict that the Apostle Paul was dealing with:

the competition between those early gatherings of the Church.

In 1st Cor. 1:12-13, Paul states,

They have said that some of you claim to follow me,

while others claim to follow Apollos or Peter or Christ.

Has Christ been divided up? Was I nailed to a cross for you?

Were you baptized in my name?

In Romans 12:10, Paul said that the only competition we ought to be doing
is to outdo one another by showing affection as brothers and sisters –

outdo each other by showing love and encouragement to one another.

When this happens, the Holy Spirit becomes tangible.

Like that familiar hymn,

“We are one in the Spirit; We are one in the Lord.”

Willard, p.3

That was my experience at a church summer camp in Delaware a long time ago
of people sharing their gift and no one was left out,
because they all had something to say.

I have tried to provide opportunities for such activity of art & Spirit
to be incorporated into whatever I have done ever since.

When I was at Lancaster Theological Seminary as a student,
I experimented with coffeehouses and a “vespers”-style chapel-time.
I learned about Biblical storytelling from a friend who attended the very first
Network of Biblical Storytellers Festival Gathering in Maine.

That same friend asked me to do a series of drawings for him, illustrating
Walter Wink’s progressive version of ‘turning the other cheek’,
‘giving up the shirt off your back’, and ‘going the extra mile’
as nonviolent, non-cooperative responses to oppression.

Visual art, song and storytelling – it’s all part of how I understand ministry
and interwoven with what it means to me to be a Christian,

It’s all part of the same Spirit
of love, creativity, authentic living, eternal life now.

It’s fun, too, but we don’t do art in church to simply entertain;
Art in all its forms, together with God’s Word can become God’s ‘sword’
to fight against narrow-minded interpretations
that would domesticate the Good News –
a weapon to ‘overcome evil with good’, as the Apostle Paul also said.

Art & spirituality have been used throughout the history of the Church
as a source of experience and instruction about Christ.

Cathedrals in the Middle Ages were decorated with sculptures, tapestries,
icons, and stained glass windows, and – with the pageantry of rituals,
these have all served to illustrate Biblical themes
and inspire awe for illiterate and literate people alike.

Here at UCC at the Villages, we are already using the arts...

It would be hard to imagine a service these days
without the beautiful music performed by our choir and accompanist.

It would be hard to imagine our worship these days without a PowerPoint
presentation that has everybody looking up when we pray and sing.

When Glenn Bateman did the Children of God sermon last Sunday,
he used imagination and creativity to stimulate *your* imaginations
to creatively respond, about what our gifts from God are.

When I do Biblical storytelling, it is to help bring the stories of Jesus alive for you
to affirm the power of God’s truth & love over ignorance, fear, and doubt.

Willard, p.4

On February 15th – very soon, we will host the Festival of Art & Spirit –
and we have invited some exceptional individuals,
in whose lives art & spirituality have been at work, to share their gifts.
Let me tell you how this project came about...

While promoting the idea of creating a Liturgical Artist registry for our Conference,
I contacted Charles McCollough – who visited here on a book tour in 2007.
I especially appreciate his use of the human form in his sculptures
to illustrate Biblical narratives and teachings – like clay parables, themselves.
It so happens, he has written another book on his most recent sculptures,
based on the theme of Jesus' 'radical' teachings about peace & justice –
which he will discuss here, and have some of these works on display.
When I expressed an interest to have him come here,
Bill Wealand – as acting conference minister, asked me to help
line up Charles' visits to other churches in our Conference.

Two years ago, I attended a program called Gladdening Light at Winter Park,
featuring Dominic Crosson, and wondered if they'd consider hosting Charles.
I contacted the director, Randy Robertson, who said they would not be doing
that event this year, but – if we were interested,
he could do a PowerPoint presentation on the history of art & spirituality.
Mr. Robertson had toured with nationally acclaimed author,
Madeleine L'Engle, to present, "The Glorious Impossible",
a program about Christ's life as depicted in the paintings of Giotto.
With regard to paintings, it was suggested I should contact Duain Vierow,
a retired Lutheran missionary and award-winning painter.
Duain enthusiastically offered 15 of his paintings to be featured here
as an installation for three months.

Another coincidence – or convergence, came about by contacting June Keener Wink
to order a ceramic chalice.
In the process, I asked about her interest in art & spirituality
and learned that she often did a class on sacred movement
as a preparation for Bible studies led by her late husband, Walter Wink.
Then, I asked if she would be interested in doing a workshop...
in Florida... in February... and she agreed! [Hopefully, it'll be warm by then...]

It will be an exciting day filled with opportunities for spiritual adventure:
to see, learn, and do new things – especially about art as faith expression.
This is not an arts & crafts show, or a lecture, or a performance,
though there will be elements of all of these things.
There will even be the opportunity to actually re-create and do some art...

Willard, p.5

June Wink will lead two practical exercises, including:

sacred movement – like Tai Chi, to get everybody relaxed,
as a lead-in to a Bible study that will ask participants
to first, act out the story, then use self-drying clay to interpret this story
which is about Jesus' healing of a paralyzed person in Mark 2.

There are some wonderful connections,

such as this story from Mark 2 is one of the first Bible stories I learned to tell;
and Charles McCollough's sculpture – about turning the other cheek,
is based on Walter Wink's re-interpretation of that teaching.

Walter Wink – June's husband, has been described

as one of the most influential progressive theologians of the last 60 years,
so this is a real privilege and rare opportunity.

The key word is “opportunity” – the Festival is an opportunity

to learn from presenters who are known nationally – and even internationally,
for their vocation of art & spirituality.

It is an opportunity through the generosity of our presenters that they are willing
to help us because of their love for the arts as faith expression.

This will also be an important opportunity for new people to come see who we are
and what we are about as a church with a progressive voice,
creatively proclaiming God's Kingdom through Christ.

Though we need church volunteers to help, this will also be an opportunity for you
to attend and just enjoy the day and try something new –
perhaps come out of your cocoon and fly.

You don't have to be artsy to get something out of the Festival of Art & Spirit.

This will also be an opportunity to see how we are connected

with Jesus' disciples through the Holy Spirit –
present in the Beginning at Creation,
and still at work in new ways that speak to our time,
like being 'open & affirming' of 'justice & peace'.

The powerful play goes on and we can contribute a verse...

We are one in the Spirit, we are one in the Lord

and they will know we are Christians by our love.

Yes, the world will know we are Christians by our creativity –
which is God's love in action.

Amen

Our lesson today from 1st Corinthians 1:10-18 shows a very human side to the early Church as being not too different from our own. People gravitated toward charismatic leaders then just like we can be drawn to political leaders these days.

[10] My dear friends, as a follower of our Lord Jesus Christ,
I beg you to get along with each other.

Don't take sides.

Always try to agree in what you think.

[11] Several people from Chloe's family have already reported to me
that you keep arguing with each other.

[12] They have said that some of you claim to follow me,
while others claim to follow Apollos or Peter or Christ.

[13] Has Christ been divided up? Was I nailed to a cross for you?
Were you baptized in my name?

[14] I thank God that I didn't baptize any of you
except Crispus and Gaius.

[15] Not one of you can say that you were baptized in my name.

[16] I did baptize the family of Stephanas,
but I don't remember if I baptized anyone else.

[17] Christ did not send me to baptize.

He sent me to tell the good news without using big words
that would make the cross of Christ lose its power.

[18] The message about the cross doesn't make any sense to lost people.
But for those of us who are being saved, it is God's power at work.

Matthew 4:12-23 [RSV]

- [12] Now when he heard that John had been arrested,
he withdrew into Galilee;
- [13] and leaving Nazareth he went and dwelt in Caper'na-um by the sea,
in the territory of Zeb'ulun and Naph'tali,
- [14] that what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled:
[15] "The land of Zeb'ulun and the land of Naph'tali,
toward the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles --
- [16] the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light,
and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death
light has dawned."
- [17] From that time Jesus began to preach, saying,
"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."
- [18] As he walked by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers,
Simon who is called Peter and Andrew his brother,
casting a net into the sea; for they were fishermen.
- [19] And he said to them,
"Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men."
- [20] Immediately they left their nets
and followed him.
- [21] And going on from there he saw two other brothers,
James the son of Zeb'edee and John his brother,
in the boat with Zeb'edee their father, mending their nets,
and he called them.
- [22] Immediately they left the boat and their father,
and followed him.
- [23] And he went about all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues
and preaching the gospel of the kingdom
and healing every disease and every infirmity among the people.