

“Self Determination”

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UCC at The Villages
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1st Sun. in Lent

Romans 10:8b-13

Luke 4:1-13

*‘The Scriptures say that no one who has faith will be disappointed,
no matter if that person is a Jew or a Gentile.’*

Rom. 10:11-12

Let us pray... O God,

Help us accept others as they are – and be accepted in return for who we are.

Amen

Last week, I told you about how a local school board was considering a plan to drop all extracurricular clubs rather than permit the forming of a “Gay-Straight Alliance” or GSA club at Carver Middle School in Leesburg. The initial purpose of this club was to be an anti-bullying coalition for the students; But it appears the school board may delay making a decision – that is... until the student who made the initial request has moved on to high school. Then, the matter may be dropped or just become someone else’s problem at a later date.

I attended the meeting and was surprised to see no more than 30 people there, and only two students – one of them being a high school senior who had been invited to sit on the board itself.

It was significant that this senior had been introduced to us as an exceptional student with a long list of activities in which she was involved – including various clubs.

This begs the question of whether or not she would have become exceptional without such opportunities.

The other student was a middle-schooler who came to speak in favor of the GSA club – though she was not the student who had originated the proposal.

About 12 people spoke – including myself, urging the board to reconsider; There was one man who appealed to the board to go ahead and vote their conscience – but not shut down all the other clubs.

Most of us warned of the very real dangers of retribution that the gay students and those sympathetic to them, may face if all the extracurricular clubs are canceled. Such harassment could also lead to suicide.

This potential scenario at Carver Middle School, is a classic example of Rene Girard’s theories about scapegoating.

I spoke of Rene Girard last Sunday, who warns us that we are in the midst of an unfolding ‘revelation’ in which the social mechanism of scapegoating has been exposed as a false way of stopping violence to create a superficial peace.

Willard, p.2

It is through the unjust crucifixion of Jesus Christ that we know this is true
and it is by the legitimate sacrifice of forgiveness and compassion
that real change can come about.

The scapegoats in this instance are the gay middle school students
and others sympathetic to them.

In the meantime, I'm working on a letter to the editor of the Orlando Sentinel
which first broke this story.

It starts out like this...

When you know someone, it's a different deal.

When you know someone who is gay,

*then the big issues like gay marriage and gay ordination
are no longer academic questions for philosophers and theologians.*

*When you know someone, it's no longer academic –
it's a different deal for you.*

When you know and care about someone, it's "personal".

*When you know and care about someone who is gay –
you know them as a person.*

*When a society does not care about a group of individuals in its midst
as people deserving of dignity and respect,
then scapegoating and violence against the vulnerable soon follow.*

*Not providing a gay and straight coalition to prevent bullying –
which is being requested by the students themselves, is to ignore real dangers.*

*What is at stake is the integrity of individual people
and the integrity of a community.*

*Whenever we acknowledge and respect the basic humanity of anyone –
in this case, the personhood of gay children,
we promote honesty instead of pretending.*

*When a community recognizes and respects its gay citizens
as individuals who just want to be accepted for who they are –
isn't that "normal" for any human being?*

*School should be a place where children learn to find their voice –
not to parrot recitations, but to speak the truth.*

*When a person speaks from the heart,
then, their words are going to mean something – you can trust them.*

*When we are open to hear and accept someone who is trying to be honest,
aren't we affirming what we know to be true for ourselves?*

Willard, p.3

Isn't there danger when people are not allowed to be themselves?

Hasn't that played out violently from time to time

in American communities, from rural towns to big cities?

Haven't these situations been compounded by the availability of guns

and the woundedness of mentally ill people?

Isn't this unwillingness to accept others for who they are, the crisis at the core of such other issues as civil rights, equal rights, workers' rights...?

There's more I want to say on that matter, but that's enough for now.

What is generally true in such situations, is that no one wants to rock the boat of what has been accepted as "normal";

and this helps preserve the façade of the status quo.

Turning a blind eye to the injustice of having a scapegoat allows

a few to maintain their influence in a delicate balance of power – a false peace.

But to bring about change is to create empathy –

to go from seeing someone you have labeled as a "victim"

to seeing them as being like "you".

Rene Girard says we all want what our rivals want – we even want to be them,

but he also says the only one we can safely desire to be like

is Jesus of Nazareth who aspired to be like God.

That does not mean the all-powerful and frightening vision

of what ancient people thought a god should be like.

Instead, Jesus is the model of God who is a God of compassion and mercy,

of healing and forgiveness, of justice and peace;

When we copy Jesus' model of God, there is no danger

of envy or violence.

I have not yet discovered what Rene Girard's theory has to say about

who we are as individuals – only that desire corrupts us

and this corresponds to our inherent tendency to sin.

But to go to the source – the Bible itself,

we are told in Genesis 1:27 that...

'God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him;

male and female he created them.'

A further clue as to what that may mean is the occasion of

Moses meeting God in a burning bush.

When Moses asks by what name he is to refer to God

when he talks to the Hebrew people, God tells him,

"I Am That I Am" or "I Will Be Who I Will Be".

Isn't that a model for what each of us should aspire to be like ourselves?

To simply be ourselves – to say, 'I am somebody'.

Willard, p.4

In the Gospel lesson today,

Jesus is confronted in the desert by Satan the accuser,
who attacks him by questioning his identity, saying,
“If you are the Son of God...”

Twice, Jesus quotes scripture in response to the devil’s challenges,
saying, “It is written...”, “It is written...”, but the third time he says this:

And Jesus answered him,

"It is said, `You shall not tempt the Lord your God.'"

Luke 4:12

Though these words can be found in Deuteronomy 6:16,

it is presented as if he is speaking for himself:

“Stop tempting the One Who Is, your God” or “Stop tempting me.”

So, when any of us speak for ourselves, when we speak from the heart –
there is no second best, no desire that can compete,
and temptations come to an end.

Encouraging people – not only to learn facts about the world we live in,
but to find their voice and speak the truth,
that is what our schools should help our children to do.

A parable with the situation in Lake County can be found in the film,

“Dead Poets Society” with Robin Williams,
as an English teacher who inspires his students
to be ‘free thinkers’ using poetry as a way to get them to ‘Seize the day’
and “make their lives extraordinary”.

During one class he quotes a poem from Walt Whitman from Leaves of Grass –

*“O me! O life!... of the questions of these recurring;
of the endless trains of the faithless... of cities filled with the foolish;
what good amid these, O me, O life?”*

*Answer. That you are here - that life exists, and identity;
that the powerful play goes on and you may contribute a verse.*

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

What will your verse be? ”

When you know someone,
it’s a different deal in how you judge them.

When you know yourself ,
you won’t be tempted to settle for second best to the truth.

When you know God through Jesus’ example,
you know others deserve to be loved, just like you.

Amen

Romans 10:8-13

10:8 All who are acceptable because of their faith simply say,

“The message is as near as your mouth or your heart.”

And this is the same message we preach about faith.

9 So you will be saved, if you honestly say,

“Jesus is Lord,”

and if you believe with all your heart that

God raised him from death.

10 God will accept you and save you,

if you truly believe this and tell it to others.

11 The Scriptures say that no one who has faith will be disappointed,

12 no matter if that person is a Jew or a Gentile.

There is only one Lord, and he is generous

to everyone who asks for his help.

13 All who call out to the Lord will be saved.

Luke 4:1-13

4:1 When Jesus returned from the Jordan River,
the power of the Holy Spirit was with him,
and the Spirit led him into the desert.

2 For forty days Jesus was tested by the devil,
and during that time he went without eating.
When it was all over, he was hungry.

3 The devil said to Jesus,
“If you are God’s Son, tell this stone to turn into bread.”

4 Jesus answered,
“The Scriptures say, ‘No one can live only on food.’”

5 Then the devil led Jesus up to a high place
and quickly showed him all the nations on earth.

6 The devil said,
“I will give all this power and glory to you.
It has been given to me, and I can give it to anyone I want to.
7 Just worship me, and you can have it all.”

8 Jesus answered,
“The Scriptures say: ‘Worship the Lord your God and serve only him!’”

9 Finally, the devil took Jesus to Jerusalem
and had him stand on top of the temple.

The devil said,
“If you are God’s Son, jump off.
10-11 The Scriptures say:
‘God will tell his angels to take care of you.
They will catch you in their arms,
and you will not hurt your feet on the stones.’”

12 Jesus answered,
“The Scriptures also say,
‘Don’t try to test the Lord your God!’”

13 After the devil had finished testing Jesus in every way possible,
he left him for a while.

Luke 4:1-13

- [1] And Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan, and was led by the Spirit
[2] for forty days in the wilderness, tempted by the devil. And he ate nothing in those days; and when they were ended, he was hungry.
[3] The devil said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become bread."
[4] And Jesus answered him, "It is written, `Man shall not live by bread alone.'"
[5] And the devil took him up, and showed him all the kingdoms of the world in a moment of time,
[6] and said to him, "To you I will give all this authority and their glory; for it has been delivered to me, and I give it to whom I will.
[7] If you, then, will worship me, it shall all be yours."
[8] And Jesus answered him, "It is written, `You shall worship the Lord your God, and him only shall you serve.'"
[9] And he took him to Jerusalem, and set him on the pinnacle of the temple, and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here;
[10] for it is written, `He will give his angels charge of you, to guard you,'
[11] and `On their hands they will bear you up, lest you strike your foot against a stone.'"
[12] And Jesus answered him, "It is said, `You shall not tempt the Lord your God.'"
[13] And when the devil had ended every temptation, he departed from him until an opportune time.