

‘Receive The Holy Spirit’

The Rev. Drew Willard
UCC at The Villages, FL
April 9th, 2013

Acts 5:27-42

John 20:19-31

Jesus said to them again,

"Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I send you."

And when he had said this, he breathed on them, and said to them,

*"Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven;
if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."*

John 20:21-23

Let us pray..O God,

Help us to breathe in your Spirit of love & truth.

Help us to breathe out and speak out about who you are
and the Beloved Community that is possible.

Amen

Easter reminds us as Christians that

there is more to this life than we know;

The love of God is stronger than death;

And God so loved the world as to suffer along with us
for the sake of justice & peace.

The public observance of the Holocaust after Easter reminds us as Christians
that even those who call themselves ‘Christian’ can be just as
narrow-minded, indifferent, and cruel as anybody else.

It is also important to note that along with Jewish people,

Christians were among those who were

persecuted, imprisoned, and executed by the Nazis.

That universal perspective is included in the ad promoting
the Interfaith Holocaust Remembrance Event this week,
hosted by Temple Shalom.

It states that:

*In addition to the 6 million European and Russian Jews
murdered by the Nazi's during the Holocaust*

of whom 1.3 million were children,

6 million others were killed including

*Priests, Reverends, Pastors, Nuns , academics,
students and other civilians, Gypsies, Jehovah's Witnesses,
Gays, Lesbians, Blacks living in Germany,
the handicapped and mentally ill,
captured US and allied soldiers...*

In many ways, the Holocaust was a war against the Jews,
but it was also a crime against us all.

Willard, p.2

The article encourages us to attend this program in order to..

*keep the memory of these events alive,
so that this terrible episode of inhumanity and immorality
never again repeats itself
for persons of any religion, race, sexual orientation,
political belief or medical condition.*

This is a really important statement and it harkens back to
the climate that existed at one point in the post WWII era
which saw the rise of the interfaith and ecumenical movements,
as well as the founding of the United Nations.

Our heritage as a denomination was part of that era's unifying spirit
in which Evangelical & Reformed joined with Congregational-Christian
churches to become the United Church of Christ.

That zeal for cooperation has dissipated in the decades since WWII
as the World Council of Churches and National Council of Churches
have diminished in their influence.

The UCC and other 'mainline churches' have likewise struggled for survival.
Our greatest challenge is indifference as the next generation
turns from 'organized religion', though spiritual crises remain.

While I was stationed in Germany in 1979,
I had the opportunity to visit Nuremberg.

This was where the International Military Tribunal of the Allies tried
23 of the most senior Nazi leaders for crimes against humanity,
The trial lasted from November 1945 to October 1946.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nuremberg_Trials

Nuremberg was also famous for Nazi rallies and
my tour group visited the arena where these rallies took place.

I had expected something really dramatic,
but found myself vaguely disappointed by how small
the arena actually appeared to be.

It was like visiting my junior high school as an adult
and walking those halls that had been so scary in my youth,
only to find them not so big anymore.

Still, I could imagine the book burnings, the mobs shouting slogans,
and brazen banners with swastikas in that place.

I wondered how people could be so deceived as a group,
how a group of people could be so wrong in their thinking,
how their mindset could be so caught up in an evil spirit?

Willard, p.3

How come the Holy Spirit was ignored in Germany back then—
a culture that is historically 'Christian'
and brought on the Protestant Reformation itself?

How could the Bible Belt of America also have been
a society built on slavery and segregation?

How could the American South simultaneously, be known for its hospitality,
yet deny access to restaurants, restrooms, and lodging
to a group of people just because of the color of their skin?

How can a community ignore the bullying of children in its school system
and silently endorse prejudice against gay people?

It is the evil spirit of fear—the fear of change and the fear of the unknown
that permeates a society until people of goodwill stop waiting
for justice because they won't settle for less than the truth.

How rare it is to see the Holy Spirit allowed to do its work
of transforming a group into a 'beloved community'.

But when it does happen, the number of people involved doesn't matter—
the odds against it doesn't matter.

There's a story I heard about the Orthodox Christian Church,
during the great debates about whether icons—
or sacred images of Christ and the saints, may be used for prayer,
or condemned as idolatry.

Though the authorities of the church were being swayed to reject icons,
there was one saint who opposed their iconoclasm.

It was said that he by himself, represented the whole church—
that his position was true and correct.

In time, his stand prevailed and iconography was re-affirmed
at the Second Council of Nicaea in 787 CE (AD).

Perhaps—like Thomas, we have a need as Christians to see Christ.

Don't we need to see him still at work in our world?

There is an icon of Christ, discovered in the 1960s,
after being lost for almost 1200 years,

covered up with plaster to protect it from the iconoclasts.

Its style looks very different from icons you will see these days.

It's a very striking image of Christ, a powerful portrait which is called,
'Christos Pantocratur'—Christ Almighty.

It is the image on our bulletin cover today.

Willard, p.4

Despite the centuries, it has re-emerged to bear witness
to the enduring quality of truth, like Jesus Christ the Liberator himself—
waiting to be discovered, or re-discovered, with every generation.

I love the character it portrays, a blend of humility and ferocity,
all of creation held in balance.

If you covered up the side of the face to your right, you would find
the other side with a gentle expression like a lamb—
the right eye focused upward, asking God for a blessing.

Cover the side to your left and the other eye looks directly out,
with arched eyebrow—fierce like a tiger;

Yet there's a swelling under the eye, as if he is tearing up.
When you look at both expressions blended together,
Jesus appears to be just about to smile.

Balance is a sign of the presence of the Holy Spirit.

We can see it in groups where there is disparity, yet unity—
variety without division. Balance. Mutuality. Peace.

In those early days of the church, Christians were at odds with Jewish society
and both lived under the oppression of the Roman Empire.

The Jewish community had to be careful not to upset the Romans.

The Christians were likewise suspect—even perceived as a threat.

In our scripture lesson today,

the apostles were on trial with the Jewish authorities and
told not to teach about Jesus—but they stood their ground.

One of the Pharisees reminded his colleagues that previous cults disintegrated
after the leader was killed, and this group of Jesus' followers
would likely do the same—unless God was behind it.

The apostles were beaten, then set free, told not to preach again,
but they joyfully left the prison and defiantly proclaimed the good news.

What gave those first apostles the courage to proclaim the story of Christ
and be a vision of God's Kingdom as a Beloved Community?

How did they maintain their hope
in the midst of an oppressive, intolerant empire?

The Gospel lesson gives us a clue, saying Jesus breathed upon the disciples
and gave them the Holy Spirit.

Our most basic need is to breathe—and when we can't breathe,
our bodies tell us to do something about it.

Justice & peace. Truth & love. We can't go very far without them
before our hearts tell us to do something about it.

Amen

Our scripture lesson today is from Acts 5:27-42.

*After the Resurrection, Jesus' disciples were known as "apostles" –
or "missionaries", and they met with opposition...*

²⁷ When the apostles were brought before the council, the high priest said to them,

²⁸ "We told you plainly not to teach in the name of Jesus.

But look what you have done!

You have been teaching all over Jerusalem,
and you are trying to blame us for his death."

²⁹ Peter and the apostles replied:

"We don't obey people. We obey God.

³⁰ You killed Jesus by nailing him to a cross.

But the God our ancestors worshiped raised him to life

³¹ and made him our Leader and Savior.

Then God gave him a place at his right side,
so that the people of Israel would turn back to him and be forgiven.

³² We are here to tell you about all this, and so is the Holy Spirit,
who is God's gift to everyone who obeys God."

³³ When the council members heard this, they became so angry
that they wanted to kill the apostles.

³⁴ But one of the members was the Pharisee Gamaliel,
a highly respected teacher.

He ordered the apostles to be taken out of the room for a little while.

³⁵ Then he said to the council:

"People of Israel, be careful what you do with these men.

³⁶ Not long ago Theudas claimed to be someone important,
and about four hundred men joined him.

But he was killed.

All his followers were scattered, and that was the end of that.

³⁷ Later, when the people of our nation were being counted,
Judas from Galilee showed up.

A lot of people followed him,

but he was killed, and all his followers were scattered.

³⁸ So I advise you to stay away from these men.

Leave them alone.

If what they are planning is something of their own doing, it will fail.

³⁹ But if God is behind it, you cannot stop it anyway,
unless you want to fight against God."

The council members agreed with what he said, ⁴⁰ and they called the apostles back in.

They had them beaten with a whip

and warned them not to speak in the name of Jesus. Then they let them go.

⁴¹ The apostles left the council and were happy,

because God had considered them worthy to suffer for the sake of Jesus.

⁴² Every day they spent time in the temple and in one home after another.

They never stopped teaching and telling the good news that Jesus is the Messiah.

John 20:19-31

[19] On the evening of that day, the first day of the week,
the doors being shut where the disciples were, for fear of the [Judeans],
Jesus came and stood among them and said to them,
"Peace be with you."

[20] When he had said this, he showed them his hands and his side.
Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord.

[21] Jesus said to them again,
"Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I send you."

[22] And when he had said this, he breathed on them, and said to them,
"Receive the Holy Spirit. [23] If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven;
if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

[24] Now Thomas, one of the twelve, called the Twin,
was not with them when Jesus came.

[25] So the other disciples told him,
"We have seen the Lord."

But he said to them,
"Unless I see in his hands the print of the nails,
and place my finger in the mark of the nails, and place my hand in his side,
I will not believe."

[26] Eight days later, his disciples were again in the house,
and Thomas was with them.

The doors were shut, but Jesus came and stood among them, and said,
"Peace be with you."

[27] Then he said to Thomas,
"Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand,
and place it in my side; do not be faithless, but believing."

[28] Thomas answered him,
"My Lord and my God!"

[29] Jesus said to him,
"Have you believed because you have seen me?
Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe."

[30] Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples,
which are not written in this book;

[31] but these are written that you may believe
that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God,
and that believing you may have life in his name.