

“Prepare The Way”

The Rev. Drew Willard
UCC at The Villages, FL
April 15th, 2018
3rd Sun. of Easter
Acts 3:12-19
Luke 24:36^b-48

[The Apostle Peter said,]

God raised [Jesus] from death, and all of us can tell you what he has done.

Acts 3:14^b

Let us pray... O God,
No matter where we are on our life's journey,
we know you love us and that we are welcome here.
Strengthen us to the task before us to be a progressive voice
in our community in this time.
Thank you for the help you send and the privilege to serve you.

Amen

It has been almost a full year since I set off on my sabbatical as a 3 month journey
which took me to Washington state in May and to Washington DC in August,
with a road trip in between, going as far as MA, up and back from FL.
It took 2 years to plan, with the encouragement of the Pastoral Relations Committee
and Peggy Reineking as our advisor.
They enabled me to submit an agenda to our Governing Board
and a proposal for a Lilly Grant.

Originally, I planned to do the road trip first, then go to DC,
and finish with a hike on the pilgrimage road of El Camino in northern Spain.
The grant did not come through, but there was enough flexibility in my plan
that I was able to proceed.
I applied to be an artist-in-residence at The Grunewald Guild for a 3 week stay
with free room & board and studio time to work on a project.
That included paraphrasing the last three chapters of the Gospel of Mark
to produce a script for nine readers with nine drawings for power-point.
The finished project was presented at our Maundy Thursday service.

That was one example of the kind of grace or ‘God-winks’ or happy accidents
that can happen when you set out on a spiritual journey.
Serendipitous adventures can unfold with the people you meet,
but first you have to have a plan that you can deviate from –
or from which you can deviate...

Most summers, I have attended the Network of Biblical Storytellers festival,
but in recent years, I have traveled to other venues for spiritual retreat.
About 4 years ago, I attended the Wild Goose Festival –
which is kind of a Christian “Woodstock” in Asheville, NC.
The next summer, I served as a UCC chaplain at the Chautauqua Institute
near Buffalo, NY.

Willard , p.2

When I didn't have such a retreat program to attend,

I have made my own sabbath time in the form of road trips.

In 2007 before coming here, I went on the road to tell Bible stories

at 19 different stops that included churches, coffeehouses,

a seminary, a friend's home, and even as one of the activities
at the General Synod held in Hartford, CT.

I have hoped some of you would consider going to such places yourselves
for your own spiritual formation, your own 'life's journey'...

I want to build on last week's message "If you build it, they will come..."

and by that I mean to say, "Prepare ye the way..."

"Prepare the way for the Lord" –

first, by making room in your own heart

for unseen possibilities,

second, by building relationships of Christian fellowship

nurtured within these walls,

and third, by going out beyond these walls

to help prepare the ground for the Church to be planted

with new people in new ways.

Sometimes we need help to prepare the way in our own hearts –

Jesus' parable of the sower speaks of the different kinds of
spiritual grounding in human hearts

and the generosity of God in sowing seeds of faith, hope, and love.

However, it is implied that help is needed in preparing the ground
for one another.

Hearts that are paved over to become streetwise

have to be broken up to have empathy.

Hearts that are shallow have to have someone dig down deep

to get rid of the rocks of indifference and ignorance.

Hearts that are overwhelmed by grief or fear or addictions

have to be rooted out with therapy and active concern.

Hearts that are prepared in this way are the same as

hearts that are already like the good soil that is receptive.

Our scripture lessons today are especially about preparing the way
of peoples' hearts...

In the Gospel lesson from Luke,

two disciples are on their way from Jerusalem,

inconsolable after the terrible events of Jesus' crucifixion and death.

A stranger joins them with whom they talk as they walk

and they invite this stranger to come in with them upon their arrival home.

This stranger takes bread, blesses it and breaks it...

just as they recognize who this really is, as he disappears.

Willard, p.3

They race back to Jerusalem and before they can tell their good news,
the other disciples tell them that Jesus appeared
to Peter and others on the shores of Galilee.

As they are still speaking, Jesus materializes in their midst
to comfort, reassure, bless – and send them forth...

*“Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer
and on the third day rise from the dead,
and that repentance and forgiveness of sins
should be preached in his name to all nations,
beginning from Jerusalem.*

You are witnesses of these things.

[Luke 24:46^b-48]

He was charging them to get ready to go forth
on a mission of reporting to others what they had heard and seen.

In our lesson from Acts, Peter had regained composure from his grief and shame,
and now assumed a role of leadership among the disciples,
even performing healing and teaching as Jesus had done.

Peter essentially reports what Jesus had said to the disciples in that upper room:

*My friends, I am sure that you and your leaders
didn't know what you were doing.
But God had his prophets tell that his Messiah would suffer,
and now he has kept that promise.*

So turn to God! Give up your sins, and you will be forgiven.

[Acts 3:17-19]

Peter and John would be arrested for this – and subsequently freed,
demonstrating that they were willing to face opposition with conviction that
they believed in what they were doing.

Some are still called to fill such a role, though this is not expected of everyone.

Peter and John were skilled to heal and teach, to baptize and share the Lord's Supper
as apostles – those sent out as missionaries.

In the Gospel of Luke, the disciples recognize [Jesus] as he simply breaks bread.

This suggests that this was done in some personal way that was unique.

As Jesus' companions on their travels and life together,

they had not only heard and seen what Jesus had said and done,
but also simply observed him in the midst of his daily routine.

Their mission would be to go out and share the good news

that Jesus suffered and died, but rose again to show us eternal life is ahead,
and that God loves us and is with us;

We are challenged to give up what is false and hurtful,
and we are promised that we will be forgiven.

They were also equipped as witnesses of just being around this marvelous person,
whom they would come to learn to imitate...

Willard, p.4

In recent years, some of you have ventured out locally
to share your witness of God's love...

Last year, we as a church collaborated with Young Performing Artists, Inc.
of the community of Royal to do 'epic readings' of great speeches
in the African-American tradition, including the Gospel of Mark.

We also do a Little Free Library project with Young Performing Artists.
For several years now, a number of you have been doing an after school program
of Creative Arts at Wildwood Elementary.

Some of us are participating in the "Carpenters For Christ" initiative
of New Hope UMC – which benefitted one of our members, too.

About 5 years ago, some of us visited the Lock Street area of Dade City
to learn more about the immigrant farm-worker community there,
who call their neighborhood Calle de Milagros – the Street of Miracles.

After a 3 year 'gestation period' of meeting at Temple Shalom,
our congregation was born into this building – so to speak,
when we walked a mile down the road on August 15th, 2010.

Since then, some of us have visited our Jewish neighbors from time to time,
on their Sabbath and special occasions like the Feast of the Tabernacles
and just this week with the Holocaust observance.

In return, our Jewish friends have been here
for the Community Thanksgiving Service and anytime there was a prayer vigil.

Our connection with Temple Shalom and the Tri-County Interfaith Association
led to a number of interfaith worship events
like the quarterly Interfaith Prayer Service for Peace.

In times past, some of us participated in charitable marches in The Villages-area
like the CROP Walk and more recently the march for MS research.

However, we are seeing more and more marches for social justice
in support of an emerging love ethic – and many of you are getting involved...

Yesterday, we had a special presentation about the UCC Mental Health Network
and resources available to guide us to become a WISE congregation
that is Welcoming, Inclusive, Supportive, & Engaged for Mental Health.

This event was presented by The Rev. Judy Johnson
who is coordinating this outreach for the UCC Florida Conference;
and it was organized and hosted by Becky Dunning, our Parish Nurse,
as part of a Health Education initiative.

There are possibilities with becoming a 'WISE' congregation,
that could enhance our Shepherds Program, reaching out to anyone
struggling with a challenge of body, mind, & spirit.

We are doing a Home Bible Study that will start out
at Ken & Jo Rhoades' home and move to other's homes.

It will be an effort to equip participants to go deeper into a Bible text,
and this could also be the occasion for bringing new members.

Willard, p.5

We had a fellowship event – ironically, a ‘murder mystery’, that was fun,
while celebrating creativity at the same time.

Fellowship & fund-raising – including cruises, are opportunities to share with others
about who we are and what we are about as progressive Christians.

We were still getting calls about suitcase donations after the deadline;

This program that Bea Hester started to help women’s shelters,
is one of many Missions projects.

The Community Garden provides an opportunity for contact with the public,
associating us with “people who grow things”.

Admin which generally deals with maintenance issues,

installed a Peace Pole with a prayer for peace in four languages.

Finance & Stewardship helps us with resources to make it all happen,
while representing us as a church as they interface

with the people of financial institutions,

The Women’s Spirituality Group brings in people from outside the church.

The Men’s Prayer Breakfast meets at a restaurant in town,

and our Vietnam Documentary study has brought in outsiders, too.

As we enjoy our choral and instrumental music each Sunday –

along with our office manager, Penny Timson’s music videos,

we need to see music as a form of ministry outreach, too.

Mike West our music director, recently sang in a concert at North Lake Presbyterian,
one of the churches in our area – just another way we touch our wider world.

For the first time, I told a Bible story at the Florida Storytelling Association
annual festival – not a religious event, but definitely open to spirituality.

Any time you go to the bank, the dry cleaners, talk to a check-out clerk,

or kid at a fast food drive-through, you have the occasion to “Be the Church”
in unexpected ways, even to help them as they help you.

No doubt, I have missed some ministry that we are doing here –

like whatever else Ted Balsler is doing, which simply affirms that
there are plenty of opportunities to serve at UCC at The Villages.

At this time, I want to recognize our leadership who work with me to serve you...

Tom Ohlson, Moderator; Billie Navojosky, Vice Moderator;

Mary Grace Royal, Diaconate; Tom Van der Bussche, Admin;

Sandy Lynch, Missions; Jim Stephens, Finance & Stewardship.

It is important for you to know them and their ministry teams –

not just to get their help, but to help them, too.

Nobody can do this work alone. To suppose otherwise is “atheistic” thinking.

God supplements our time, talent, & treasure as we do what we can do.

Jesus’ greatest fear was that he would suffer and the disciples wouldn’t get it.

Jesus’ greatest joy was to see his disciples beginning to do what he was doing.

Amen

*Our lesson today from Acts 3:12-19 –
as found in the Contemporary English Version,
tells of a miraculous healing performed by Peter and John,
in which they cured a man born crippled.
This miracle – as well as preaching about Jesus’ resurrection,
would get them jailed for disturbing the status quo...*

- [12] Peter saw that a crowd had gathered, and he said:
Friends, why are you surprised at what has happened?
Why are you staring at us?
Do you think we have some power of our own?
Do you think we were able to make this man walk
because we are so religious?
- [13] The God that Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and our other ancestors worshiped
has brought honor to his Servant Jesus.
He is the one you betrayed.
You turned against him when he was being tried by Pilate,
even though Pilate wanted to set him free.
- [14] You rejected Jesus, who was holy and good.
You asked for a murderer to be set free,
[15] and you killed the one who leads people to life.
But God raised him from death,
and all of us can tell you what he has done.
- [16] You see this man, and you know him.
He put his faith in the name of Jesus and was made strong.
Faith in Jesus made this man completely well
while everyone was watching.
- [17] My friends, I am sure that you and your leaders didn’t know
what you were doing.
- [18] But God had his prophets tell that his Messiah would suffer,
and now he has kept that promise.
- [19] So turn to God! Give up your sins, and you will be forgiven.

Let us be challenged and guided by these words...

Luke 24:36^b-48

[36] As they were saying this, Jesus himself stood among them.

[37] But they were startled and frightened,
and supposed that they saw a spirit.

[38] And he said to them,

“Why are you troubled, and why do questionings rise in your hearts?

[39] See my hands and my feet, that it is I myself; handle me, and see;
for a spirit has not flesh and bones as you see that I have.”

[41] And while they still disbelieved for joy, and wondered, he said to them,

“Have you anything here to eat?”

[42] They gave him a piece of broiled fish,

[43] and he took it and ate before them.

[44] Then he said to them,

“These are my words which I spoke to you, while I was still with you,
that everything written about me in the law of Moses
and the prophets and the psalms must be fulfilled.”

[45] Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures,

[46] and said to them,

“Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer
and on the third day rise from the dead,

[47] and that repentance and forgiveness of sins
should be preached in his name to all nations,
beginning from Jerusalem.

[48] You are witnesses of these things.