

“Widening The Welcome”

The Rev. Drew Willard
UCC at The Villages, FL
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Ezekiel 37:1-14, Acts 2:1-21,
John 15:26-27, 16:4^{b-7}

⁴[God] then told... [Ezekiel] to say:

Dry bones, listen to what the LORD is saying to you,

⁵*“I, the LORD God, will put breath in you, and once again you will live.*

⁶*I will wrap you with muscles and skin and breathe life into you.*

Then you will know that I am the LORD.”

Ezekiel 37:4-6

Let us pray... O God,

We live in a world poisoned by fear, deception, and hatred
that periodically explodes into violence.

Breathe into us your life-giving Spirit; Fan the flames of passion for your Kingdom;
Plant hope within us as an example for future generations to follow
and reap a good harvest for your Beloved Community.

Amen

Another school shooting – this time at Santa Fe,
is the first since Parkland to have fatalities.

Another ‘killer mine canary’ warning us that
our social environment is toxic.

There were 10 others wounded, with more survivors, and families,
whose lives will never be the same.

This is just another symptom of a pervasive problem that
calls for a comprehensive approach – a set of responses.

This cultural crisis is not confined to our country –
think of lands torn apart by ethnic hostilities into open war,
some even in the midst of natural disasters.

We as Americans are just getting a taste of what many in the world have been
going through, in one form or another, for a long time.

Altogether, this ‘environmental’ crisis of manmade violence, seems insurmountable,
but our faith tradition provides us with a starting point:

... seek... first the kingdom of God, and [God’s] righteousness... [Matt. 6:33]

The Beloved Community and the Law of Rational Loving-kindness.

It is doubtful that most people see this pervasiveness as a spiritual problem –
let alone agree that the violence at work throughout the world is connected.

Yet not much will be accomplished until there is some agreement
about what the problem is.

In the meantime, people will continue to be confused and afraid,
building bigger walls of isolation.

It doesn’t have to be that way for everyone.

It doesn’t have to be that way for you...

Willard, p.2

Judaism has been dealing with this crisis throughout history – especially as a persecuted minority.

But even when things were going well for the people of Israel, they still had to deal with corruption – which is evident in many of the writings of the Prophets.

The Prophet Jeremiah became so associated with this kind of message, self-reflection and repudiation of social injustices, that his name became linked to such exposés as a “jeremiad”.

Ezekiel’s vision, however, is an alternative to God’s wrath.

Instead, it is an expression of God’s tender mercy promising the restoration of a people and their society.

This important exception begins with the imagery of a wasteland in which a scene of terrible mass violence – a valley of dry bones, is transformed.

Those bones are strung back together with sinews and re-covered over with skin, to be brought back to life.

It is too late to be naive about the crisis of gun violence in schools, but it is never too late to choose innocence.

We need to renounce the fear engendered by those who are served by division, and start working together in response to the pervasive problems of our society in a comprehensive manner.

Our society has become a spiritual wasteland – like the aftermath of a forest fire, but forest fires also make room for new growth, which can also mean a kind of spiritual reforestation.

Fire is the metaphor in the traditional story about Pentecost – the harvest celebration of First Fruits in the Jewish tradition and the Birthday of the Church in our own tradition.

Again, there is an enlivening of people as they are transformed from confusion to conviction, from indifference to dedication.

The people’s imaginations were set on fire with a joyful realization – which has to be rekindled with every generation.

We associate this kind of thing with fundamentalism that takes the form of speaking in tongues, altar calls, and revivals.

I don’t doubt the sincerity of those for whom that is an expression of their faith.

As Protestants of the United Church of Christ, we have a different style, our own rhythm and flow – but the same need for re-dedication is needed by a world desperate to see a spiritual response from us.

Willard, p.3

“Widening The Welcome” will be a theme we explore in the fall.

Our Diaconate is sponsoring this as a program initiative beginning with “Rally Day”.

A series of presentations will follow, each Monday at 4:00 pm from mid-October to November.

This will be an exploration of our shared value of inclusiveness in the form of radical welcome.

Besides being Pentecost Sunday, today is Mental Health Sunday which is a reminder to recognize and advocate for people who struggle with mental and emotional disorders – like depression.

There is an innate fear of someone who has mental problems that often leads to stigmatizing and scapegoating ‘them’ – when like anyone, they need our acceptance and affirmation on their journey to mental health.

This Sunday is also when we receive donations for our national offering to “Strengthen The Church”.

This fund serves to help in church plantings – which means establishing new congregations of the United Church of Christ.

This congregation benefitted from this specific UCC resource in helping to get us planted here in The Villages-area.

My belief about the UCC is that –

if we last long enough for the next generation to discover us, we will be the Church of the future.

Another challenge I hope for us to explore has the potential for addressing some of the root causes of this toxic environment.

Perhaps you have heard about ‘white privilege’ as a controversial topic that sounds threatening to the very fabric of American society.

It is a threat to the status quo, but not in the way you might expect, and in fact, it is the key to dismantle social gridlock.

First of all, ‘white privilege’ is not the same as ‘white supremacy’ – or even racism.

It is simply a social condition that is reinforced by our social institutions and cultural activities.

Yet, ‘white privilege’ can be exploited to serve ‘white supremacy’ and institutional racism.

However, ‘white privilege’ can also be a tool for social transformation as it is guided by spiritual inspiration to take the noble path of becoming that Beloved Community that is possible.

Willard, p.4

Being white in America has the quality of ethnic transparency –
which some might characterize as ‘normal’.

Great! Because this means white people can be a bridge
across borders of tribal ethnic hostilities.

Germanic, French, Italian, English, Scandinavian, and Celtic peoples
have all blended together at some point thinking they had become American
while retaining and treasuring their heritage.

This is why people want to come here as refugees –
not to become ‘white’, but to become ‘American’, to become accepting
as well as accepted for one’s differences as a human being
to escape and even triumph over age-old ethnic hatreds.

However, what’s desperately needed these days for the transformation of this society,
is for ‘white’ people to take the noble path of using their ‘white privilege’
to advocate for people of all human diversity.

There is risk and certainly there will be those who take advantage out of self-interest,
but that long ‘arc of the moral universe’ ultimately ‘bends toward justice’.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Theodore_Parker

If we ... *seek... first the kingdom of God, and [God’s] righteousness...*
the things we need as a society will follow.

The Counselor that Jesus spoke of will come as we seek to do God’s righteousness –
which is radical loving-kindness, radical forgiveness, radical hospitality.

The Counselor is the Holy Spirit of Love and it is the transformative resource
at work through all people of goodwill to break up the pavement,
dig up the rocks, bush hog the brambles – and change hearts
so that the Beloved Community can be planted and take root.

Amen

Our first lesson comes from Ezekiel 37:1-14 and describes a vision of hope that comes to the Prophet Ezekiel from God...

¹ Some time later, I felt the LORD's power take control of me,
and his Spirit carried me to a valley full of bones.

² The LORD showed me all around, and everywhere I looked
I saw bones that were dried out.

³ [God] said,
"Ezekiel, son of man [& woman], can these bones come back to life?"

I replied,
"LORD God, only you can answer that."

⁴ [God] then told me to say:
Dry bones, listen to what the LORD is saying to you,

⁵ "I, the LORD God, will put breath in you,
and once again you will live.

⁶ I will wrap you with muscles and skin and breathe life into you.
Then you will know that I am the LORD."

⁷ I did what the LORD said, but before I finished speaking, I heard a rattling noise.
The bones were coming together!

⁸ I saw muscles and skin cover the bones, but they had no life in them.

⁹ The LORD said:

Ezekiel, now say to the wind,
"The LORD God commands you to blow from every direction
and to breathe life into these dead bodies, so they can live again."

¹⁰ As soon as I said this, the wind blew among the bodies,
and they came back to life!

They all stood up, and there were enough to make a large army.

¹¹ The LORD said:

Ezekiel,
the people of Israel are like dead bones.
They complain that they are dried up
and that they have no hope for the future.

¹² So tell them,

"I, the LORD God, promise to open your graves and set you free.
I will bring you back to Israel,

¹³ and when that happens, you will realize that I am the LORD.

¹⁴ My Spirit will give you breath, and you will live again.

I will bring you home, and you will know that I have kept my promise.
I, the LORD, have spoken."

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

*Our second lesson comes from Acts 2:1-21 tells about the Day of Pentecost
when the Holy Spirit inspired the disciples and gave birth to the Church...*

- ¹ On the day of Pentecost all the Lord's followers were together in one place.
² Suddenly there was a noise from heaven like the sound of a mighty wind!
It filled the house where they were meeting.
³ Then they saw what looked like fiery tongues moving in all directions,
and a tongue came and settled on each person there.
⁴ The Holy Spirit took control of everyone,
and they began speaking whatever languages the Spirit let them speak.
⁵ Many religious Jews from every country in the world were living in Jerusalem.
⁶ And when they heard this noise, a crowd gathered. But they were surprised,
because they were hearing everything in their own languages.
⁷ They were excited and amazed, and said:
Don't all these who are speaking come from Galilee?
⁸ Then why do we hear them speaking our very own languages?
⁹ Some of us are from Parthia [Par'-thee-ah], Media [Meh-di'-ah],
and Elam [Ee'-lam]. Others are from Mesopotamia [Meh-sopo-ta'-miah],
Judea, Cappadocia [Ca-pah-doch'-eeya], Pontus, Asia,
¹⁰ Phrygia [Free'-jya], Pamphylia [Pam-fee'-liah], Egypt,
parts of Libya near Cyrene, Rome, ¹¹ Crete, and Arabia.
Some of us were born Jews, & others of us have chosen to be Jews.
Yet we all hear them using our own languages
to tell the wonderful things God has done.
¹² Everyone was excited and confused. Some of them even kept asking each other,
"What does all this mean?"
¹³ Others made fun of the Lord's followers and said, "They are drunk."
¹⁴ Peter stood with the eleven apostles
and spoke in a loud and clear voice to the crowd:
Friends and everyone else living in Jerusalem,
listen carefully to what I have to say!
¹⁵ You are wrong to think that these people are drunk.
After all, it is only nine o'clock in the morning.
¹⁶ But this is what God had the prophet Joel say,
¹⁷ "When the last days come, I will give my Spirit to everyone.
Your sons and daughters will prophesy. Your young men will see visions,
and your old men will have dreams.
¹⁸ In those days I will give my Spirit to my servants, both men and women,
and they will prophesy.
¹⁹ I will work miracles in the sky above and wonders on the earth below.
There will be blood and fire and clouds of smoke.
²⁰ The sun will turn dark, and the moon will be as red as blood
before the great and wonderful day of the Lord appears.
²¹ Then the Lord will save everyone who asks for his help."

Let us hear the Word of God and take hope...

John 15:26-27, 16:4^b-7

[Jesus said,]

²⁶ But when the Counselor comes, whom I shall send to you from the [Abba] Father, even the Spirit of truth, who proceeds from the [Abba] Father, [this Counselor] will bear witness to me;
²⁷ and you also are witnesses, because you have been with me from the beginning.

^{4b} I did not say these things to you from the beginning, because I was with you.

⁵ But now I am going to [the One] who sent me; yet none of you asks me, 'Where are you going?'

⁶ But because I have said these things to you, sorrow has filled your hearts.

⁷ Nevertheless I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Counselor will not come to you; but if I go, I will send [the Counselor] to you.