

“Hard Teachings”

The Rev. Drew Willard
UCC at The Villages, FL
June 22nd, 2014
2nd Sun. after Pentecost

Romans 6:1-11

Matthew 10:24-39

[Jesus said,]

‘Are not two sparrows sold for a penny?

And not one of them will fall to the ground without your Father's will.’

Matthew 10:29

Let us pray... O God,

Help us to understand the hard teachings in ways that help us

share how believing in you helps to make our lives easier – even joyful.

Amen

I am going to take a break from my usual style of delivering the sermon
and step down from the pulpit to just talk to you.

I wanted to just talk to you today, because you are going to have a chance to talk
after the service at our Quarterly Town Hall meeting...

We are all going to talk about “church” after church,

but I’m wondering how often any of us talk about church outside of church.

When we are out and about, do we talk about church,

or are we reluctant to say too much, for fear we may know too little?

Each Sunday, don’t we hear the liturgist say,

‘Whoever you are or wherever you are on life’s journey, you’re welcome here?’

I love that phrase, because it acknowledges that we are all on a journey
that can be both geographical and spiritual – we’re pilgrims.

Dolores Bail has planned two cruises for our church in 2015 –

3 days to Savannah over New Year’s and a 7 days in mid-April to Bermuda.

You might say these are planned just for fun and fellowship,

but they can also be the occasion for adventures of the Spirit.

Anytime you are out among other people – standing in line at the supermarket

or golfing with neighbors or going out on a cruise, you have something to offer.

Anytime you talk to somebody about their life, these become occasions

for sharing hope in a loving God who even cares for little birds.

There are some hard teachings about Christianity that are difficult to understand,
let alone defend, so I want to speak to you today about three things

and give you something to talk about:

What does it mean to be a Christian?

What does it mean to be a Christian in the UCC?

What does being a UCC Christian mean to you in your life?

Willard, p.2

What does it mean to be a Christian?

That question gets answered anytime we are around other people. At its most basic level, whether or not somebody is 'Christian' would be whether or not they follow Jesus Christ's teachings and example. Traditionally, Christians were distinguished by everybody else by being baptized – being marked with water like a tattoo that leaves no stain after promises are made to follow Jesus Christ's teachings and live by his example.

Christians also observe a special meal of bread & drink to remember Jesus' self-giving love for humanity and to nurture the continuing community of faith as a church.

Evangelical fundamentalists say that a person needs to be born again and profess Christ as Savior as a personal relationship just like it is written in John 3:16...

'For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, so that whosoever believes in him, has eternal life...'

Traditionalists of Roman Catholicism, Eastern Orthodoxy, and Mainline Protestantism include the belief in the Trinity – God is Three Persons with the same essence.

The Great Commissioning at the end of the Gospel of Matthew is that Christians are to go out into the world and baptize people in the name of the Father, Son, Holy Spirit – Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer.

A friend of mine, whom I describe as a 'Cosmic Christian' – a Christian for the whole world, says it is all about 'love', and that the most important verse in the Bible is from Matthew 25...
"When you did it for the least of these, you did it for me."

I believe all these ideas are correct about what it means to be a Christian, and I try to weave them together in my life and in my message.

What does it mean to be a Christian in the UCC?

We have a beautiful Statement of Faith that builds on the Apostles' Creed formula of the Trinity to include our relationship to God as a faith community and as individuals.

The motto of the UCC is taken from Jesus' words in John 17...

'That they may all be one.'

Now, that is not to say, "That they may all be the same", so that allows for mature ecumenical and interfaith dialogue.

We are 'Christians' alongside people of faith or no faith who are nevertheless people of conscience and goodwill.

There are plenty of people who profess a faith who are without conscience or goodwill.

Willard, p.3

The Good News according to the UCC took a prophetic turn
by bringing us out of the anonymity of being mistaken
with the conservative 'Church of Christ' denomination
by simply getting us to emphasize 'United' and pause when we say,
"The UNITED Church_of Christ".

We also borrowed a posthumous and endearing quote
from comedienne Gracie Allen to her husband George Burns,
'Don't put a period where God has placed a comma...'

To this, UCC advertising expert, Ron Buford, added,
'[because] God is still speaking...'

This challenged our denomination to look deeper into its tradition and heritage,
and to our historical connection to the Pilgrims –

The Pilgrims of the Mayflower and Plymouth Rock.

We have a quote from the Pilgrims' pastor when he commissioned them
as they set forth on their se journey to the New World,

*'I Charge you before God and his blessed angels
that you follow me no further than you have seen me follow Christ.*

*If God reveal anything to you by any other instrument of His,
be as ready to receive it*

*as you were to receive any truth from my ministry,
for I am verily persuaded the Lord hath more truth and light
yet to break forth from His holy word.'*

I love that story and I tell it often:

When the Pilgrims arrived in the New World in early winter,
it was too late for them to plant crops and game was scarce.

The Native people kept their distance,
until one day when one of them appeared out of the forest.

Now, we might have expected them to look at Mayflower in the harbor and say,
"This wooden island has come from the place of rising Sun!"

but instead, this native named Samoset, said words to this effect,
"Greetings, Englishmen!" and later he even asked them for a beer!

A peace was forged between the Wampanoags and the Pilgrims that lasted 50 years –
such that Europeans didn't become Native and Natives didn't become European,
open and affirming of each other.

That is the model for us – that is who we are as a Christian community!

We continue to be bridge-building between people of goodwill while
being true to our own roots as Christians.

If anyone questions you as to whether the United Church_of Christ
is an authentic church, or they try to label and pigeonhole you politically,
you tell them, "We are the church of the Pilgrims".

We are the Pilgrim church!

Willard, p.4

What does being a UCC Christian mean to you in your life?

Let's start with this expression we use every Sunday to begin our services:

"No matter who you are or where you are on life's journey, you are welcome here."

Jesus' Sermon on the Mount is a good place to start
and it begins with the Beatitudes or the "Be" Attitudes
which describes the journey of the "victim" as a "hero's" journey.

There are going to be times
when we are poor in body, mind, and spirit

There are going to be times
when we suffer and are humbled by life.

There are going to be times
when we are starving for our daily bread, good health, justice,
or just a friendly word.

There are going to be times
when it is up to you to be merciful, up to you to keep things positive,
up to you to at least try to build peace –
even when there is unpopular backlash.

The Sermon on the Mount from Matthew 5-7

like any great sermon has three points and Jesus said, in words this to effect:

1. You have heard that it was said, 'One Way',
but I say to you, 'God is still speaking.'
2. Don't pray, donate, or serve just for show,
because God is with you wherever you go.
3. Do unto others as you would have them do unto you –
or else!

What does this mean for you? That's part of your journey to find out.

A pilgrimage that is part of my journey continues this week
as I go up to Asheville, NC to attend the Wild Goose Festival –
a progressive Christian art & music fest.

I'll be leaving on Wednesday, June 25th which happens to be the 57th "Birthday"
of the UNITED Church_of Christ, and will be back the following Tuesday.

Monica Peidl is going to the UCC National Musicians Network next month
to learn what trends our denomination is developing in the area
of worship liturgy and sacred music.

Next year, I will be going on my first ever Sabbatical,
starting around this time in June, for 12 weeks up to early September.

There will be several pilgrimages within my Sabbatical journey –
including our denomination's General Synod in Cleveland,
participation in events at the Chautauqua Institute near Buffalo, NY
and the Network of Biblical Storytellers Festival Gathering in Washington, DC.

Willard, p.5

One of my goals for next year's Sabbatical,
is to get you excited about your own journey –
to get you to go to a conference or a retreat
that will build you up spiritually, mentally, or physically health
and continuing education wherever you are on your life's journey.

In the meantime, let us continue to cruise like the Pilgrims on their sea journey
remembering that we are part of the Great Commission
to bring the Good News of Jesus Christ to all the world.

We are a Pilgrim church and we at UCC at The Villages seek to welcome
everyone, no matter who they are or where they are from on their life's journey.

We are all on that journey and we are all challenged to grow
in the belief and knowledge that we are on the same path
of becoming a true human being as it is for being a true Christian.

Amen

I invite you now to reflect on your journey so far...

*Our lesson today comes from Romans 6:1-11,
where the Apostle Paul summarizes some of the most important concepts
of Christian theology in this letter to the church established in Rome.
He is defending his position that salvation is not earned, but is a gift of God's grace,
and that a person is transformed by baptism to be free from the power of sin
to dominate.*

[6:1] So what are we going to say?

Should we continue sinning so grace will multiply?

[2] Absolutely not! All of us died to sin.

How can we still live in it?

[3] Or don't you know that all who were baptized into Christ Jesus
were baptized into his death?

[4] Therefore, we were buried together with him through baptism into his death,
so that just as Christ was raised from the dead
through the glory of the Father, we too can walk in newness of life.

[5] If we were united together in a death like his,
we will also be united together in a resurrection like his.

[6] This is what we know:

the person that we used to be was crucified with him

in order to get rid of the corpse that had been controlled by sin.

That way we wouldn't be slaves to sin anymore,

[7] because a person who has died has been freed from sin's power.

[8] But if we died with Christ, we have faith that we will also live with him.

[9] We know that Christ has been raised from the dead
and he will never die again. Death no longer has power over him.

[10] He died to sin once and for all with his death,
but he lives for God with his life.

[11] In the same way, you also should consider yourselves dead to sin
but alive for God in Christ Jesus.

Let us be guided and challenged by these words.

Matthew 10:24-39

[Jesus said,]

[24] "A disciple is not above [their] teacher, nor a servant above [their] master;

[25] it is enough for the disciple to be like [their] teacher,
and the servant like [their] master.

If they have called the master of the house Be-el'zebul,
how much more will they malign those of [that person's] household.

[26] "So have no fear of them;

for nothing is covered that will not be revealed,
or hidden that will not be known.

[27] What I tell you in the dark, utter in the light;

and what you hear whispered, proclaim upon the housetops.

[28] And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul;
rather fear [the one] who can destroy both soul and body in hell.

[29] Are not two sparrows sold for a penny?

And not one of them will fall to the ground without your Father's will.

[30] But even the hairs of your head are all numbered.

[31] Fear not, therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows.

[32] So every one who acknowledges me before men,

I also will acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven;

[33] but whoever denies me before men,

I also will deny before my Father who is in heaven.

[34] "Do not think that I have come to bring peace on earth;

I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.

[35] For I have come to set a man against his father,

and a daughter against her mother,

and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law;

[36] and a [person's] foes will be those of [their] own household.

[37] [The one] who loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me;

and [the one] who loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me;

[38] and [those] who [do] not take [their] cross and follow me
[are] not worthy of me.

[39] [Those] who [find their] life will lose it,

and [those] who [lose their] life for my sake will find it.

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just like it is written in John 3:16...

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