

“Life Finds A Way...”

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2 Corinthians 12:2-10

Mark 6:1-13

[The Apostle Paul said,]

*I was given a thorn in my body because of the outstanding revelations I've received
so that I wouldn't be conceited.* *2 Corinthians 12:7*

Let us pray... O God,

You have set before us the ways of life and death,

but even the way that leads to life can have perilous turns and deep valleys.

We celebrate the freedom we have in you to walk this path, this adventure of faith
as individuals and as a beloved community.

Amen

The Apostle Paul was talking about spiritual experiences –

not only as an internal event in our conscious and subconscious lives,

but also in our external physical existence in the world.

There are those miraculous co-incidences

where the right thing happens at the right time,

and healing insights come to us as

blessed assurances or painful lessons learned,

but there is a way through.

Each Sunday – as we begin our worship, the liturgist welcomes us, saying,

“Whoever you are or wherever you are on life's journey, you are welcome here.”

I am convinced that this spiritual journey includes both

a “via positiva” – a “positive path” and a “via negativa” – a “negative path”

that unfolds before each of us.

The “via positiva” is the joyful path with discoveries that amaze and confirm for us

that we are on the right track, going the right way.

The “via negativa” is the hard road of trial and error that we must cross

despite its hardships, where often the only joy may be in surviving it.

Even so, the life of being in Christ finds a way into our lives no matter where we are
on our journey.

Today's bulletin cover image is a reminder to me of such a spiritual experience

that happened at the US Military Academy, one cold, bleak day in late winter

when the sky is as gray as the stone walls of West Point...

Now, it being July 4th Weekend, why don't I take you on a little tour of that place

that still produces leaders for our country...

Willard, p.2

During the academic year, cadets gather each day to march in formation to the mess hall for meals.

The Fourth Classmen or freshmen “Plebes” must race back from class – often with no time to clean up, but still report for inspection.

Plebes are generally required to memorize various kinds of trivia called The Days: like the menu for each meal, movie titles, sports events, and show times, as well as news events – a skill that has been useful in the years since helping me memorize whole chapters of the Bible.

However on this particular day I could not recall some obscure information and this yearling or sophomore took a closer look and giggled me for my shoes, telling me,

“Drive around to my room with a 2-1” – which meant demerits and the possibility of punishment to ‘walk the area’ on weekend free time; I saluted and took my place on line.

Late February is called “Gloom Period” and though there was only months to go of my first year, I had had enough... I was broken and wanted to quit.

Then the drums started up and the company commander called us to attention and we marched off...

New South Barracks is on high ground, carved out of a rocky hillside, and we went trudging down the ramp towards the mess hall.

As we turned a corner, there to my left, was a broken wall – and upon it was the first, green grass of spring!

It was luminous... and it immediately lifted my spirit, and I thought... I can get-through the next-hour...

Today’s bulletin cover image shows a view of Thayer Road these days in the late afternoon, when the sun would

illuminate that canyon of gray buildings and those mighty trees defiant of the stone –

like the grass that grew despite that broken wall the abundant life Jesus promised us that finds a way...

We are living in times shaped by institutions created by those who came before us to lay the foundations for this land’s social, political, and economic structures.

Even so, that creative process continues to be shaped by the primal urgency of human beings to have the liberty to be oneself and justice – which for most of us, I hope, still means the American Way.

Yet for some of us, the recent Supreme Court decisions and popular response to current events, herald the beginning of the end – a crumbling of the walls of civilization as we know it.

Traditional marriage, cheap energy through oil, respect for civil authority, business practices unhampered by regulation and taxes, and American prestige worldwide, all seem to be under attack.

Willard, p.3

Yet for others, it seems like the Apocalypse is already here in the form of pink slips, foreclosures, police brutality, and anarchy, as well as global warming, worldwide economic recession, and extremist oppression against the vulnerable here and abroad.

Those walls that meant security for some may yet be breaking to provide opportunity... for us all.

LGBT people can now legally marry everywhere in the United States of America;

Affordable health care legislation – flawed as it may be, still exists to provide medical help for people who cannot otherwise afford it;

Though no substantive discussion is being made for gun control yet, the recent killings in Charleston have provoked public rejection of the Confederate battle flag as a symbol of racism and betrayal.

The deaths of unarmed black men who resisted police authority have revealed underlying social conditions, whitewashed by years of neglect – and are provoking awareness to counter the denial of responsibility.

Immigrant families need not fear in the short term that their children will be deported.

Life – the abundant life that includes liberty and the pursuit of happiness, is finding its way for the sake of more and more people, pushing its way up through the cracks of hardened social-political systems.

As it says in our country's Declaration of Independence, in the language of 1776:

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.

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

However, we are starting to see push back – even by some who call themselves 'Christian' while promoting a 2-dimensional interpretation of scripture that takes a blind eye to institutional racism, militarism, & consumerism.

They are the modern scribes and Pharisees calling Christ to account for healing on the Sabbath, eating with sinners, and predicting the fall of the Temple.

The UCC has certainly made its voice heard on key issues of our day – like the General Synod resolution in 2005 to support gay marriage which saw many conservatives leave the UCC or withdraw financial support.

As if our denomination has not taken on challenges big enough, General Synod this year voted to divest from companies that do business in the occupied "West Bank" of Israel/Palestine.

Willard, p.4

Our church delegates also voted on such controversial issues as:

a call for Washington, DC's pro football team to drop "Redskins" as their logo because it demeans Native Americans;
and it was voted that there be a commemoration of the 100 years since the genocide of Armenian Christians by Turkish persecution.

There were also two resolutions passed seeking to challenge the 'new Jim Crow laws' related to the War on Drugs which led to a higher rate of incarceration for African-American males and the militarization of local police.

Now, these are sure to provoke defenders of the status quo at home and abroad.

So, are we as a denomination on the right track?

Is the UCC mixing politics with religion, or is it like a message I saw in Cleveland?

"When the worship ends, the service begins..."

Another side road that took me along the "via negativa" was when I was with my seminary's Arts Ensemble tour in January 1986.

We got snowbound in West Virginia and had to stay at a Days Inn.

I was sick with the flu and stuck in my own room.

I had the TV on and it was the first official observance of Martin Luther King Day with celebrations of his life and work through various celebrity performances.

But it was hearing a recording of King's words that helped me recognize

Dr. King was not just about liberating black people from racism;

He was about liberty and justice for all Americans – even the world.

It was as if I heard him speak for the first time...

And so even though we face the difficulties of today and tomorrow,

I still have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream.

I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up

and live out the true meaning of its creed:

"We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal."

I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia,

the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners

will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood.

Then, Dr. King echoed the words of our informal national anthem

written by Samuel Francis Smith entitled, "My Country 'Tis of Thee" – also called "America".

And this will be the day -- this will be the day

when all of God's children will be able to sing with new meaning:

My country 'tis of thee, sweet land of liberty, of thee I sing.

Land where my fathers died, land of the Pilgrim's pride,

From every mountainside, let freedom ring!

And if America is to be a great nation, this must become true.

Willard, p.5

“My Country ‘Tis of Thee” was first performed on July 4th, 1831
and we are familiar with these lyrics...

Garraty, John A., and Carnes, Mark C., ed. (1999). *American National Biography* 20. New York: Oxford University Press. p. 281.

1 *My country, 'tis of thee, Sweet land of liberty, Of thee I sing;
Land where my fathers died, Land of the pilgrims' pride,
From ev'ry mountainside Let freedom ring!*

But there is also an Abolitionist version to ‘America’ written in 1843
before the Civil War...

1 *My country, 'tis of thee, Stronghold of slavery, of thee I sing;
Land where my fathers died, Where men man's rights deride,
From every mountainside thy deeds shall ring!*

2 *My native country, thee, Where all men are born free, if white's their skin;
I love thy hills and dales, Thy mounts and pleasant vales;
But hate thy negro sales, as foulest sin.*

3 *Let wailing swell the breeze, And ring from all the trees the black man's
wrong; Let every tongue awake; Let bond and free partake;
Let rocks their silence break, the sound prolong.*

4 *Our father's God! to thee, Author of Liberty, to thee we sing;
Soon may our land be bright, With holy freedom's right,
Protect us by thy might, Great God, our King.*

5 *It comes, the joyful day, When tyranny's proud sway, stern as the grave,
Shall to the ground be hurl'd, And freedom's flag, unfurl'd,
Shall wave throughout the world, O'er every slave.*

6 *Trump of glad jubilee! Echo o'er land and sea freedom for all.
Let the glad tidings fly, And every tribe reply,
“Glory to God on high,” at Slavery's fall.*

Jarius Lincoln, [ed.] *Antislavery Melodies: for The Friends of Freedom*. Prepared for the Hingham Antislavery Society. Words by A. G. Duncan. (Hingham, [Mass.]: Elijah B. Gill, 1843), Hymn 17 6s & 4s (Tune – “America”) pp. 28–29.

Some of these verses can be heard in the [Arizona State University](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/My_Country,_'Tis_of_Thee) recording of the Antislavery Ensemble.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/My_Country,_'Tis_of_Thee

The ancestors of the United Church of Christ were among the first to challenge
the institution of slavery as “abolitionists”.

That meant interpreting scripture by asking what would Jesus do or say in our time,
and not just conform to doctrine that keeps a blind eye toward injustice.

As a result, something is emerging –

that elusive Kingdom of abundant life that Jesus promised, is finding its way
into our conscious lives and into our social commerce,

We are re-discovering Christ the Liberator and the Kingdom that is possible
as a Beloved Community on Earth as it is in Heaven.

Willard, p.6

UCC also passed resolutions that were not so controversial, but still significant –
a call for full communion with the United Church of Canada
which I thought already existed; and
a call to reaffirm a previous resolution that
the United Church of Christ become a “Peace Church”, like being ONA.

This 1985 “Pronouncement” speaks of implementing the practice of a “Just Peace”
in terms of an inward and outward journey...

*Committing Ourselves to the Inward Journey of Just Peace practices
we as individuals are called to:*

- *Support nonviolent direct action*
- *Take independent initiative to reduce threat*
- *Use Cooperative conflict resolution*
- *Acknowledge responsibility for conflict and injustice, and seek repentance and forgiveness*
- *Promote the advancement of democracy, human rights, and religious liberty*
- *Foster just and sustainable economic development*
- *Work with emerging cooperative forces in the international system*
- *Strengthen the United Nations and international efforts for cooperation and human rights*
- *Reduce offensive weapons and weapons trade*
- *Encourage grassroots peacemaking groups and voluntary associations*

In the words of the Pronouncement:

*“We call all local churches to the outward journey of political witness,
enabling all members to join the search for the politics of a Just Peace.”*
[...as in doing civil discourse about issues]

“We call all local churches to the outward journey of community witness.”
[We are already doing this.]

*“We call for local churches to make their convictions known in their communities
through public forums, media, and presence in the public arena.”*
[We are already doing this, too.]

“War can and must be eliminated.”

<http://ucefiles.com/pdf/11-RESOLUTION-MARKING-THE-THIRTIETH-ANNIVERSARY-OF-THE-JUST-PEACE-PRONOUNCEMENT-BY-RECOMMITTING-OURSELVES-TO-BE-A-JUST-PEACE-CHURCH.pdf>

This all may seem idealistic, but look how things are unfolding.

American society is headed where the United Church of Christ already is.
The Episcopal Church in our country has just voted to allow gay marriage
like the Presbyterian Church (PCUSA) did not so long ago.
The world is changing despite the desperate and brutal resistance
trying to push it back.

We are ONA, do Sacred Conversations on Race,
and we could be a “Peace Church”, too.

The Bible is there for us, though, as guide – especially when we have to venture
onto those painful side trips of the via negativa.

Bible storytelling has been that guide for me – and as a via positiva, in and of itself...

Willard, p.7

It says in Mark, that the people of Jesus' hometown took offense at what he said,
and he wasn't able to accomplish much there, because they weren't open to it...
In the Gospel of Luke, we get more insight about what happened
when Jesus went back to Nazareth to preach at his home synagogue...

[From Luke 4:16-21, my paraphrased translation]

*And Jesus came to Nazareth where he had been brought up
and as it was his habit on the Sabbath day, he went to synagogue.
And he got up to read publicly and was given the scroll of the Prophet Isaiah,
and unrolling the book, he happened to find the place where it is written:
'The Spirit of the One Who Is God rests upon me,
to anoint me to preach good news to poor people;
I am sent to proclaim amnesty for captive people
and the recovery of insight to proud blind people;
I am sent to heal in order to forgive;
and
I am sent to proclaim a year of reconciliation with the One Who Is God.'*

*Jesus rolled up the scroll to give back to the attendant and sat down
while the eyes of everyone in the synagogue were riveted upon him;
And he began to say to them,*

"Today, these words are fulfilled as you hear them..."

[They were amazed at first, but then took offense, and tried to kill him.]

The Gospel of Mark goes on to say:

And [Jesus] marveled because of their unbelief.

And he went about among the villages teaching.

*And he called to him the twelve, and began to send them out two by two,
and gave them authority over the unclean spirits. [Mark 6:6-7 CEB]*

Jesus sent the disciples out on a journey with the confidence that the abundant life
of being in fellowship with Christ would go with them, be there for them
to help them find their way – like the landmark of a great tree
or a pleasant field of grass to rest, no matter if the road be rough or smooth.

Amen

Our first lesson is 2 Corinthians 12:2-10

and comes from the Common English Bible.

The Apostle Paul describes spiritual realities that some are privileged to have – including himself, but there is something more important to have...

[2] I know a man in Christ who was caught up into the third heaven
fourteen years ago.

I don't know whether it was in the body or out of the body.

God knows.

[3-4] I know that this man was caught up into paradise
and that he heard unspeakable words that were things
no one is allowed to repeat.

I don't know whether it was in the body or apart from the body.

God knows.

[5] I'll brag about this man, but I won't brag about myself,
except to brag about my weaknesses.

[6] If I did want to brag, I wouldn't make a fool of myself
because I'd tell the truth.

I'm holding back from bragging so that no one will give me any more credit
than what anyone sees or hears about me.

[7] I was given a thorn in my body
because of the outstanding revelations I've received
so that I wouldn't be conceited.

It's a messenger from Satan sent to torment me

so that I wouldn't be conceited.

[8] I pleaded with the Lord three times for it to leave me alone.

[9] He said to me,

“My grace is enough for you, because power is made perfect in weakness.”

So I'll gladly spend my time bragging about my weaknesses
so that Christ's power can rest on me.

[10] Therefore, I'm all right with weaknesses, insults, disasters, harassments,
and stressful situations for the sake of Christ,
because when I'm weak, then I'm strong.

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

Mark 6:1-13

[1] [Jesus] went away from there and came to his own country;
and his disciples followed him.

[2] And on the sabbath he began to teach in the synagogue;
and many who heard him were astonished, saying,
“Where did this man get all this? What is the wisdom given to him?
What mighty works are wrought by his hands!

[3] Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses
and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?”

And they took offense at him.

[4] And Jesus said to them,
“A prophet is not without honor, except in his own country,
and among his own kin, and in his own house.”

[5] And he could do no mighty work there,
except that he laid his hands upon a few sick people and healed them.

[6] And he marveled because of their unbelief.
And he went about among the villages teaching.

[7] And he called to him the twelve, and began to send them out two by two,
and gave them authority over the unclean spirits.

[8] He charged them to take nothing for their journey except a staff;
no bread, no bag, no money in their belts;

[9] but to wear sandals and not put on two tunics.

[10] And he said to them,
“Where you enter a house, stay there until you leave the place.

[11] And if any place will not receive you and they refuse to hear you,
when you leave, shake off the dust that is on your feet
for a testimony against them.”

[12] So they went out and preached that men should repent.

[13] And they cast out many demons,
and anointed with oil many that were sick and healed them.