

“Progress and Progressives”

The Rev. Drew Willard
UCC at The Villages
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Ecclesiastes 1:2,12-14, 2:18-23

Luke 12:13-21

‘With all my wisdom I tried to understand everything that happens here on earth.
And God has made this so hard for us humans to do.’

Ecclesiastes 1:13

Let us pray... O God,
When it seems like it is the last straw – when our patience is about to give way,
may we hold out just a little longer for your guiding hope and life-giving grace.
Amen

The scripture lessons today were awfully depressing,
so I’m going to have to tell you some jokes...
Actually these are riddles and not jokes –
and I don’t really want you to call out the answers...
OK, here’s one for you ‘Gator fans’:

Q: What do you call an alligator in a vest?

A: An Investigator

Q: What do you call a fake noodle?

A: An Impasta

Q: What do you call a three-footed aardvark?

A: Why a yardvark, of course!

Q: Why are frogs so happy?

A: They eat whatever bugs them

Q: Why did the birdie go to the hospital?

A: To get a tweetment.

Q: Did you hear about the guy who got hit in the head with a can of soda?

A: He was lucky it was a soft drink.

Q: How do you make holy water?

A: You boil the hell out of it!

<http://www.jokes4us.com/miscellaneousjokes/cleanjokes.html>

Well, that worked/didn’t work as well as I hoped!

My point was, sometimes we have to step back when life gets overwhelming and
take refuge in humor to get perspective –
especially when the temptation is to take things too seriously.

Stress, depression, angst are all part of modern life because of the ambiguity of change –
we are always in a state of change and often it seems,
there’s little we can do about it...

Willard, p.2

Ecclesiastes – a word that means “Preacher” or “Teacher”

could have been writing about the futility of life in our time.

You work hard to put something away,

but then somebody’s always figured out how to take it away from you.

Now, when you were first went out on your own,

you needed money for gas, food, rent.

In time, you needed money for clothes, dating, a wedding, a mortgage, kids, health care,
a pet or two or three...

Then, waiting in the wings are taxes, more medications, and specialized treatments,
or perhaps a move to downsize and go to a ‘home’ that’s no longer one you own.

After a while, with all the stuff that you accumulated through the years,

you reluctantly have to pick and choose what you keep, what you give to your kids,
what you bring to the Hospice thrift store

or the church yard sale (in October).

In a way, it’s like the Jersey Shore after Hurricane Sandy or sand castles at the beach,
worn down by the waves and carried off by the winds of time.

Jesus *seems* to criticize the effort to put something away for the future,

pooh-poohing the idea of building bigger storehouses and expanding sales
in order to kick back and take one’s ease and live large.

It’s as if ‘eat, drink, and be merry’ was to be scorned in favor of the alternative,

which is... what? To mortify oneself, be miserable, and self-righteous.

Unfortunately, that perspective has had its place through much of the Church’s history
with Puritanism having a notorious part of our country’s beginnings –

characterized by witch hunts, ‘scarlet letters’,

as well as genocide against the Native people.

What has passed for Christianity in recent decades – and even over the centuries,
has come up for review in our time.

Modern theologians are questioning long-held assumptions,

just like those in the late Middle Ages who challenged the belief
that the Earth was flat;

Or those in more recent times who disagree that Church doctrine
should not have precedence over teaching ‘evolution’ in public schools.

The wheels of progress are still turning, grinding inexorably toward human freedom,
life eternal, the abundant life, the Beloved Community, God’s Kingdom

finally come to be on Earth as it is in Heaven –

but those-wheels-are-slow-and-we’re-not-there-yet...

The uncivil discourse of society in recent years

has turned the word, ‘liberal’ into kind of a slur.

However, the term ‘progressive’ seems to be an acceptable alternative.

It implies that progress is the goal which opponents of the ‘progressive agenda’

can’t easily dispute without seeming... well, without seeming like

they’re not progressive themselves.

Willard, p.3

Things certainly haven't been progressive politically these many months,
and it would seem that with various incidents of blatant violence
our society appeared to take some giant steps backwards.
Still there is progress being made.

As conservative as The Villages can be politically,
our local community is demographically more diverse – more “liberal”,
in comparison with our neighboring communities.

The Villages is a microcosm of American society in all its broad cultural variety –
and that's progress for Central Florida.

A few months ago,

Leesburg's Board of Education was challenged to really see the bullying
that GLBT students were going through, when a young student tried
to form a Gay-Straight Alliance Club.

That board resisted making this kind of change –

just as communities in this region resisted the Civil Rights movement;

Yet, the school board finally had to endorse that club;

And though it remains to be seen if there will be new opposition –
just the fact that Leesburg talked about these issues
was progressive for that community.

Many people are worried about the threat of radical Islam –

which is at the heart of the national security debate

about monitoring our electronic communications.

There certainly are dangerous terrorists out there, but remember that extremism –

which can be Christian as well as Muslim,

is intolerant of the rights of women and gay people
whom Progressive Christians – like the UCC, have advocated.

Is there any doubt in your mind that these quests for human liberation

will not be going away until justice prevails?

It won't matter where that struggle takes place in the world

and it won't matter how long that struggle will take.

The internet has seen to that – and so has Jesus Christ as one who was unjustly
accused, abused, and put to death, yet prevailed against such powers.

I believe that reality is a combination of various forces working at the same time,
and that God is not a puppet-master controlling everything.

I do believe that there is a reason for everything – in the sense that
the natural world operates by cause and effect.

I think there is fate at work, too – some things are meant to be.

There's chance – or luck, that follows the principles of probability.

Then, there's the will of men & women who are strong and clever,
to do what they darn well please.

Willard, p.4

Yet, in the midst of them all, God must weave acts of grace
without leaving any trace, except as God chooses to be revealed.

These interventions of grace prompt us to find insights:

that it makes sense to be kind to others –

like God evoking Abraham's compassion for Sodom and Gomorrah,
that the belief in God opens us up to unforeseen possibilities of hope –

like when the disciples witnessed the Resurrected Christ,

that God is still speaking, still creating, still moving in our time –

as evident in the lives of those who struggle for human freedom,
justice & peace.

It is through grace – and even a little humor, that God shows us a way
when we thought there was no way...

But that grace can be missed in the pursuit of a materialistic lifestyle
and the myth of the 'self-made man' – or woman.

We can be blinded by our own abilities or inabilities
as the measuring stick for our worth – inflated or deflated.

We can convince ourselves that success is all up to us or failure is all because of us
in a mechanistic, merciless, material world.

Men and women can fall into the trap of becoming workaholics as a result,
neglecting relationships with family & friends.

There was a song by Harry Chapin, "The Cat's in The Cradle",
that speaks to this situation of such a man:

*My son turned ten just the other day
He said, "Thanks for the ball, Dad, come on let's play
Can you teach me to throw", I said "Not today
I got a lot to do", [the boy] said, "That's ok"
And he walked away but his smile never dimmed
And said, "I'm gonna be like him, yeah
You know I'm gonna be like him"*

<http://www.lyricsdepot.com/harry-chapin/cats-in-the-cradle.html>

If we align ourselves with God's will for us to love others as well as ourselves
and be open to the love of God for us through acts of grace,
then, we are no longer prisoners to materialism.

We can go ahead, then. and build bigger barns, 'eat, drink, and be merry',
because we are also working to bring that about for poor people, too,
and to free captives, heal those who are sick, and cast out evil spirits.

This is what Progressive Christians seek,

yet Progressive Christians have to guard against self-righteousness, too.

No one individual or group is immune to being arrogant –

no one has the answers to all the problems out there.

But God pushes us to learn...

Willard, p.5

*There was a man who died and went to heaven,
and there at the pearly gates, St. Peter meets him and says,*

"Right! Here's how it works:

You need 100 points to make it into heaven.

*You tell me all the good things you've done,
and I give you a certain number of points for each one,
depending on how "good" it is.*

When you reach 100 points, you get to come in."

"OK," the man says,

"I attended church every Sunday."

"That's good", says St. Peter,

"that's worth one point"

"One point?" he says.

"Well, I gave 10% of all my earnings to the church,"

"Well, let's see," answers Peter,

Willard, p.5

"That's worth another point. Did you... do anything else?"

*"Another point? Gosh! How about this: I started a soup kitchen in my city
and worked in a shelter for homeless veterans."*

Peter says,

"Commendable! That's certainly worth two points, "

"Hmmm..." the man says with a little exasperation and some perspiration,

*"I was married and loved the same woman for 50 years
and never cheated on her, not even in my heart."*

"That's splendid!" says St. Peter,

"that's worth three points!"

"THREE POINTS!!" the man cries,

"At this rate the only way I'll get into heaven is by the grace of God!"

And St. Peter says,

"Come on in!"

<http://www.makeitclearnow.org/rekhumor.html#index>

Amen

*Our lesson today comes from Ecclesiastes 1:2,12-14, 2:18-23
whose author was an anonymous “Preacher” or “Teacher”
assumed to be Solomon, Israel’s wisest king.*

*Even though the tone of this text takes the view that ‘the glass is half-empty’,
it is still better for us to respect and trust God...*

2 Nothing makes sense! Everything is nonsense.

I have seen it all— nothing makes sense!

12 I said these things when I lived in Jerusalem as king of Israel.

13 With all my wisdom I tried to understand
everything that happens here on earth.

And God has made this so hard for us humans to do.

14 I have seen it all,

and everything is just as senseless as chasing the wind.

18 Suddenly I realized that others would someday

get everything I had worked for so hard, then I started hating it all.

19 Who knows if those people will be sensible or stupid?

Either way, they will own everything I have earned by hard work and wisdom.

It doesn’t make sense.

20 I thought about all my hard work, and I felt depressed.

21 When we use our wisdom, knowledge, and skill to get what we own,
why do we have to leave it to someone who didn’t work for it?

This is senseless and wrong.

22 What do we really gain from all of our hard work?

23 Our bodies ache during the day, and work is torture.

Then at night our thoughts are troubled. It just doesn’t make sense.

Luke 12:13-21

[13] One of the multitude said to him,

"Teacher, bid my brother divide the inheritance with me."

[14] But he said to him,

"Man, who made me a judge or divider over you?"

[15] And he said to them,

"Take heed, and beware of all covetousness;

for a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions."

[16] And he told them a parable, saying,

"The land of a rich man brought forth plentifully;

[17] and he thought to himself,

'What shall I do, for I have nowhere to store my crops?'

[18] And he said,

'I will do this: I will pull down my barns, and build larger ones;

and there I will store all my grain and my goods.

[19] And I will say to my soul,

Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years;

take your ease, eat, drink, be merry.'

[20] But God said to him,

'Fool! This night your soul is required of you;

and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?'

[21] So is he who lays up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God."