

Comfort Zone”

The Rev. Drew Willard
UCC at The Villages, FL
August 13th, 2017

1 Kings 19:9-18

Matthew 14:22-33

*Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him,
“O man of little faith, why did you doubt?”*

Matthew 14:31[RSV]

Let us pray... O God,

Help us to find out where the areas of pain are – in the lives of individuals and in society,
that we may dare to step out of our comfort zone to help others as you did.

Amen

Again, I want to thank this congregation for the opportunity to go on
a three month sabbatical that allowed me to make a journey of thanksgiving –
to visit places and people who made a difference in my life for the good.
There will be a time later in the Fall when I will share an overview of my experiences
in an event dedicated for that purpose.
But there were so many layers of what happened that I am going to have to find
opportunities to touch on them through social media, Bible and book studies,
through films, and my sermons –
and you are going to have to *share with me* your experiences of events and
sermons of the guest preachers here for the thirteen Sundays I was away.
First, I want to talk about what is of a mutual interest for all of us as a congregation
of the United Church of Christ and that is the biennial national meeting
of the UCC General Synod...

About 3,000 people – including 670 voting delegates, attended
the 31st General Synod of the United Church of Christ
held at Baltimore, MD from June 30th to July 4th.

This gathering – held every two years, is a time when the UCC national staff
give their reports to our denomination at large.

Now, the staff structure of the UCC includes:

the Office of the General Minister & President, the offices of
Local Church Ministries, Justice & Witness Ministries,
Wider Church Ministries, as well as the Pension Boards
and other autonomous, but related organizations.

General Synod is the occasion for lifting up social and pastoral issues
for the church at large to consider in the form of resolutions –
15 were proposed and 13 passed;
A list of them is posted on the kiosk in the Narthex
and I welcome your interest to discuss them.

This gathering was also the time to recognize leadership transitions,
and this year, we saw – and heard, The Rev. Traci Blackmon elected
as the Executive Minister of Justice & Witness Ministries,
a position originally held by The Rev. Bernice Powell Jackson.

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Rev. Blackmon's magnificent voice filled the convention center's auditorium during her initial address to the Synod assembly, as she acknowledged the 60th anniversary of the United Church of Christ, formed by the union of two denominations: the Congregational-Christian Church with the Evangelical-Reformed Church. In her words to us, Rev. Blackmon also noted the upcoming 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation, this coming October 31st. On that day in 1517, the Reformation began when a monk named Martin Luther challenged the corrupt practices of the medieval Catholic Church; and when they would not change, the protesting factions broke away to become *Protestant* churches.

Rev. Blackmon also noted that June 30th, 1859 was the 158th anniversary of Charles Blondin's first roundtrip crossing of Niagara Falls – on a tightrope! One local newspaper promoted the event while their rival denounced Blondin as a madman; Regardless, a crowd gathered to see the spectacle. Charles Blondin – who was French, successfully crossed Niagara's tumultuous waters; *Slowly he turned* and easily crossed back to the crowd. He called out, "Who here believes I can cross over Niagara Falls again, but this time pushing a wheelbarrow?" They shouted back, "We believe, we believe!" And that's what he did! Then, Blondin called out again, "Who here believes I can cross over Niagara Falls a third time, this time with a man in the wheelbarrow?" The crowd was going nuts, shouting: "We believe! We believe!" And Blondin replied, "Okay! Then who will be my first volunteer in the wheelbarrow?" [Silence...] Well – would you go? That was Traci's point: We are living at such a time when we are being called to see what we really believe, to question what is going on, and get... in 'the wheelbarrow'!

<http://www.stjohnsparkville.org/day-3-getting-in-a-wheelbarrow.html>

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Our General Minister & President of the United Church of Christ,
The Rev. John C. Dorhauer – our equivalent of the Pope,
said this about The Rev. Traci Blackmon:

"Traci is a leader of the highest order...

She is a visionary who sees things before anyone else does.

*She is an organizer who empowers others to build movements
she sees as both possible and essential for the work of justice.*

She is braver and more courageous than anyone I know.

*She is a woman of strong voice and presence who inspires others
and engenders confidence.*

*She is a preacher of extraordinary ability,
and a woman of deep and abiding faith.*

*Her ability to do all of that has made her not just the pastor
of Christ The King UCC,*

but a leader known around the world as a difference maker."

Ordained in the African Methodist Episcopal Church,
and serving a UCC church in MO when Michael Brown was killed,
she came to national prominence helping to organize
the 'Black Lives Matter' movement.

Her goal then – and now as Executive Minister of Justice & Witness Ministries, is,
according to an article about her on the UCC.org webpage:

*to figure out the desire, direction and priorities around social issues,
and listen to all the voices involved so [as not to] leave anybody behind.*

At Eden Theological Seminary, President Dorhauer was Traci's instructor,
and she had this to say about him,

*"In addition to serving as Acting Conference Minister in our region,
John taught a White Privilege class and I was one of his students.*

*Our class was small, intense, and at times, uncomfortable,
as stretching often can be. Yet, John stayed with it.*

And he pressed us. And he challenged us. He walked with us.

And he was changed with us.

*These 'on the ground qualities' are some of the reasons I am excited
about John's leadership at this particular time in the life of the church.*

*To have the honor of serving the church with him,
and all of the leadership team, excites me."*

http://www.ucc.org/news_traci_blackmon_to_lead_ucc_justice_and_witness_ministries_10212015

Traci went into action that week, walking with 200 of us to

the local ICE headquarters – Immigration and Customs Enforcement,
to march and stand before them for an “educational demonstration”,

That day, we put shoes on the ground in support of a resolution passed at Synod,
stating that the United Church of Christ is an ‘immigrant welcoming church’.

There, we heard Traci and others speak to the plight of an undocumented
person named Guillermo Morales who was arrested on his way to work.

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Detained since April of this year, he originally fled violence in El Salvador, seeking a better life here as an artist and handyman.

Guillermo is a father of 4 and grandfather of 7, with no criminal record, and was arrested on his way to work.

When you know somebody, it makes a difference, and Guillermo Morales provides a name and a face for the plight of people who came to America seeking a better life, but there is no news yet about Guillermo who is still in a place of detention...

There was news yesterday about Traci Blackmon at Charlottesville, VA who spoke at a prayer service on Friday and

participated in counter-demonstrations on Saturday as white supremacists gathered there to protest the dismantling of a statue of Confederate general, Robert E. Lee –

<http://www.cvilletomorrow.org/news/article/28161-spate-of-counter-protests-prayer-services-schedule/>

Traci narrowly missed being attacked when violence did break out against counter-protesters and even clergy.

<https://www.facebook.com/traci.blackmon/videos/10213139851192271/>

<https://www.facebook.com/traci.blackmon/videos/10213140515248872/>

By her words and deeds, Traci is showing us

how to get out of the 'boat' of our comfort zone to face root problems of the issues before us as a society and the world.

She is modeling what it means to follow Jesus.

Another part of my sabbatical was to seek resources to help me re-discover and re-claim Jesus the Liberator who is often hidden in mystery, yet present in the swirling mists of life's stormy waters.

500 years ago, Martin Luther spoke of *theologia gloriae* – the 'theology of glory' and *theologia crucis* – the 'theology of the cross', contrasting them to say that God is revealed, not through triumphalism, but through suffering.

Yet, the emphasis on Luther's concept 'being saved by grace, not of works', had opened the door for a lot of bad behavior by Christians through history – like slavery, the Holocaust, and the ongoing abuse of our environment.

About 80 years ago, Dietrich Bonhoeffer – a Lutheran pastor from Germany, became actively engaged in resisting the Deutsche Evangelische Kirche, or the so-called "German Evangelical Church",

which rose to prominence during the Nazi dictatorship of the 1930s and '40s.

While he was a postgraduate student at Union Theological Seminary in NYC, Bonhoeffer was significantly influenced by African- Americans.

Through a fellow seminarian, he was welcomed to become a Sunday school teacher at the Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem.

This was during an era called the Harlem Renaissance when

African-American culture was flourishing in the arts – and religion.

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Through his contact with Pastor Adam Clayton Powell, Sr.,

Bonhoeffer was able to see the failure of America's churches to integrate,
but also see the possibilities for racial reconciliation and –
the Christian responsibility to advocate for those who are oppressed.

Along with a love for Negro spirituals and empathy for his black friends,

Bonhoeffer took these insights back with him to Germany as war drew near.

Williams, Reggie. *Bonhoeffer's Black Jesus*, Baylor U. Press. pp. 12

<https://www.google.com/search?q=dietrich+bonhoeffer&oq=dietrich&aqs=chrome.2.69i57j0l5.4965j0j8&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8>

In the meantime, here and abroad,

there is a very real danger of escalating rhetoric that boils over into violence,
seeking vulnerable scapegoats to blame, and then, putting off serious dialogue
in an appeal for 'later' which really means 'never'.

A vision of Christ – informed by the African-American experience,

as well as a correlation with the experiences of Jews, Muslims,
Hispanic immigrants, Native Americans, LGBTQ people,
women in general, as well as white male allies, is emerging.

It is a vision emerging to guide us ahead to that beloved community that is possible
despite racism, despite terrorism, despite the threat of nuclear holocaust,
despite the potential apocalypse of climate change.

One of the most important resources I found in the course of my travels, is

Jesus and The Disinherited by Howard Thurman – a copy of which it is said
that Martin Luther King, Jr. carried with him.

Referring to those who condemned Jesus despite his good works, Thurman wrote:

'...if a man [or woman] continues to call a good thing bad,
[they] will eventually lose [their] sense of moral direction.'
which is the unforgivable sin, or as Thurman puts it:
'[someone] who lies habitually becomes a lie...'

In a conversation I had this summer about current events,

a woman said to me to this effect, that there is an intentional effort
to discredit the media and – with the news of each new crisis
or salacious scandal, we are tempted to turn away, to hide,
to stop talking, stop engaging one another –
especially those with whom we disagree.

We must keep talking, keep seeking the truth – checking your sources,
and keep pushing ahead for justice' sake.

Again, according to that article about the Rev. Traci Blackmon

our new Executive Minister of Justice & Witness Ministries,
her goal is – and our goal ought to be:

*to figure out the desire, direction and priorities around social issues,
and listen to all the voices involved so [as not to] leave anybody behind.*

Let us strive to do at least that much – to keep our balance in 'the wheelbarrow'...

Amen

*Our lesson today from 1 Kings 19:9-18 tells about how
Elijah fled into the wilderness to escape the wrath of Queen Jezebel,
and in the midst of his fear, God found him and spoke to him...*

⁹ There [Elijah] went into a cave and spent the night.

The LORD's word came to him and said,
"Why are you here, Elijah?"

¹⁰ Elijah replied,

"I've been very passionate for the LORD God of heavenly forces
because the Israelites have abandoned your covenant.
They have torn down your altars,
and they have murdered your prophets with the sword.
I'm the only one left, and now they want to take my life too!"

¹¹ The LORD said,

"Go out and stand at the mountain before the LORD. The LORD is passing by."

A very strong wind tore through the mountains
and broke apart the stones before the LORD.
But the LORD wasn't in the wind.

After the wind, there was an earthquake.

But the LORD wasn't in the earthquake.

¹² After the earthquake, there was a fire.

But the LORD wasn't in the fire.

After the fire, there was a sound. Thin. Quiet.

¹³ When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his coat.

He went out and stood at the cave's entrance. A voice came to him and said,
"Why are you here, Elijah?"

¹⁴ He said,

"I've been very passionate for the LORD God of heavenly forces
because the Israelites have abandoned your covenant.
They have torn down your altars,
and they have murdered your prophets with the sword.
I'm the only one left, and now they want to take my life too."

¹⁵ The LORD said to him,

"Go back through the desert to Damascus and anoint Hazael as king of Aram.

¹⁶ Also anoint Jehu, Nimshi's son, as king of Israel;
and anoint Elisha from Abel-meholah, Shaphat's son,
to succeed you as prophet.

¹⁷ Whoever escapes from the sword of Hazael, Jehu will kill.

Whoever escapes from the sword of Jehu, Elisha will kill.

¹⁸ But I have preserved those who remain in Israel, totaling seven thousand—
all those whose knees haven't bowed down to Baal
and whose mouths haven't kissed him."

Matthew 14:22-33

- 22 Then [Jesus] made the disciples get into the boat
and go before him to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds.
- 23 And after he had dismissed the crowds,
he went up on the mountain by himself to pray.
When evening came, he was there alone,
- 24 but the boat by this time was many furlongs distant from the land,
beaten by the waves; for the wind was against them.
- 25 And in the fourth watch of the night he came to them,
walking on the sea.
- 26 But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, saying,
“It is a ghost!” and they cried out for fear.
- 27 But immediately he spoke to them, saying,
“Take heart, it is I; have no fear.”
- 28 And Peter answered him,
“Lord, if it is you, bid me come to you on the water.”
- 29 He said,
“Come.”
- So Peter got out of the boat and walked on the water
and came to Jesus;
- 30 but when he saw the wind, he was afraid, and beginning to sink he cried out,
“Lord, save me.”
- 31 Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him,
“O man of little faith, why did you doubt?”
- 32 And when they got into the boat, the wind ceased.
- 33 And those in the boat worshiped him, saying,
“Truly you are the Son of God.”