

“True Holiness”

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UCC at The Villages, FL
August 23rd, 2015
13th Sun. after Pentecost

James 1:1-17

Mark 7:1-8,14-15, 21-23

*Every good gift, every perfect gift, comes from above.
These gifts come down from the [Abba] Father,
the creator of the heavenly lights,
in whose character there is no change at all.*

James 1:17

Let us pray... O God,

Help us not to expect perfection to be the same as holiness.

Help us rather to work to achieve maturity as loving human beings
and to see holiness in the ‘perfect gifts’ you send to guide us.

Amen

Perfection – just what does that mean?

That is a deceptive concept at best – especially when applied to religion.

It becomes a kind of measuring stick for behavior

that also serves as a punishing rod to ensure conformity.

Perfection does have its place in our lives to show us how well we are doing
in the performance of some *discipline*,

but for the sake of bringing out the best in us – not just to correct us.

It’s like setting a high jump bar to show an athlete the height yet to be attained.

However, perfection is more often used as a ceiling to keep people in place
so as not to get too high above everyone else.

There is a real danger when perfection gets equated with holiness.

Then holiness becomes a commodity

that must be protected from getting besmirched –

a ready-made model for reinforcing the concept

of humanity’s sinful condition.

So, we may find ourselves in an alternating push-pull situation,

caught between sinful nature and unblemished expectation.

What we really need is to be balanced between

self-acceptance for who we are and *self-appraisal* for how we can do better
and legitimately *self-determine* what we can be and do.

Holiness, then, is not so much about keeping something clean and out of reach,

as it is about getting one’s hands dirty in the messy process

of creating, healing, and saving the world –

like Jesus who touched people with leprosy to cleanse them from their disease

or when he confronted evil ‘unclean spirits’ to drive them out of people.

Have you ever changed a diaper? It’s a nasty business,

but love for the person just turns it into a necessary chore.

Willard, p.2

We start out making a mess,

but we have a Heavenly Guardian – who like a good mother,
is not afraid to deal with the complexities of who we are.

We are loved by God and if we are willing to receive the help that comes from God,
we can learn to clean up our own mess.

Given time and the willingness,

we can even gain enough wisdom to help someone else.

That is the ‘holiness’ that really means something and makes a difference –
not the sanctimonious conformity to a 2-dimensional faith

that hides behind Bible literalism to name, blame, and shame people.

Who are those ‘holy’ people that God has sent into your life?

How have you been such a ‘holy’ person who was blessed to be a blessing?

I had a chance to be reacquainted with such a person

on my ‘pilgrimage’ this summer and reminded of a lesson I learned
about holiness a long time ago in how to begin a story...

*And the storyteller Mobutu [who taught the storyteller Roger Robbennolt
who taught me], said that,*

*“When you tell a story, you should make a sacred space,
[because when someone has learned a story,
it comes from a sacred space inside of them
and should be received in kind];*

*And the storyteller said that when you tell a story you should light a fire
in the hope that the meaning of your story
will burn itself into the hearts of your listeners...”*

That is a litany I have used for more than 30 years to begin stories that I tell.

I first heard and learned it from Roger Robbennolt, a UCC minister,
who learned it from a South African political activist named Mobutu,
and I have adapted and added to it for my own style of storytelling.

I first met Roger Robbennolt at the Grunewald Guild,

a Christian conference center for the arts which is
in the middle of the Cascade Mountains of Washington state.

The theme that week was the ‘Middle Ages’ era of Church history,
and classes were presented on calligraphy, stained-glass window making,
along with Roger Robbennolt’s class on storytelling.

I saw him once more at a General Synod, probably Kansas City, MO in 2001,
but Roger has since passed away, about 10 years ago.

But I received a ‘gift’ last week at Chautauqua, when I met his wife, Pat Robbennolt –
who was also an ordained UCC pastor, and she was thrilled to hear that
someone was still using her husband’s litany that had been taught to him
by Mobutu and which others have since learned from me.

Willard, p.3

Her picture is on the cover of our bulletin along with a caricature I did of her
and the candle I had just lit after reciting Roger's litany.
Let me tell you a little more about how I met Roger Robbennolt...

In 1990, I was out of seminary with an MDiv degree,
and was in no hurry to enter pastoral ministry.
I had been determined to do something that combined art & ministry,
but there was no professional demand for such vocations
except for individual entrepreneurial ventures.

In the meantime, I worked as a substitute teacher in my home town of Plainfield, NJ
starting out with elementary school classes.

Now substitute teaching can be rough duty at best,
but I had a gimmick I used to get those kids' attention.
As they would come into the room, I would pick out some kid
with a stovepipe haircut or the bangle earring bling that was popular then,
and I would draw their caricature.

Then, I'd add a thought balloon and I would say,
"Maybe you know Jerome better than I do,
but we're going to assume something's going on there in his head..."

The kids would laugh, I would work out a sample problem,
and hang on for the next 40 minutes!

I enjoyed my time working with those children –
because every day for me there was some 'gift' as some kid showed me
they were trying to learn, trying to find their way in life.

I even did an improvised art class for kids and this came to the notice of the principal
who encouraged me to do an afterschool program
with the Department of Parks & Recreation.

So, I did a weekly drawing class with elementary school kids
at the Plainfield senior center, which had an arts and crafts room.

It was a great program and I made enough extra money to fly out to
attend this Christian conference center I had heard about in Washington.

Now, during this period, I was also experimenting with Biblical storytelling
and one time, I entered a talent show at the local movie theatre and
told the story of Moses and the parting of the sea.

I started getting heckled by some guy calling out,
"Hey, Jimmy Swaggart. Get off the stage!"

I just about got through it, but realized I had forgotten one line:
"And the LORD hardened their hearts..."

Willard, p.4

Later that week, one of the kids at school recognized me and said,

“Were you the man at The Strand?”

I said,

“Yeah. I guess those kids didn’t want to hear my story.”

She said,

“Well, I was telling them to be quiet,
because I wanted to hear what you had to say.”

That was helpful, but I had begun to question why I was even bothering to do what just seemed to be a hobby.

That summer I flew out to Washington and attended The Grunewald Guild and it was when Roger Robbennolt did his ritual opening and closing of his stories that I realized he had given me a tool or rather he had taught me a skill for how to allow ‘holiness’ to happen.

Roger Robbennolt told us many stories from his own life, how he grew up despite an abusive stepfather and with thanks for a nurturing aunt.

He also told us how he had come to tell stories of his life during a children sermon when a little Vietnamese boy asked something that prompted a visceral remembrance.

Pat says that it was a good thing that she was preaching that day, because it shattered him, but also opened him up to become a storyteller and author.

In our class at Grunewald,

Roger told us how he had been asked to give a storytelling presentation at a community college whose students were required to attend a mandatory class on Friday afternoons.

Needless to say, anyone given that onerous task was not treated well by this particular audience.

He showed up early and got the stage crew to help him set up and he said, “I want the house lights turned off, just the emergency lights on, so they’re stumbling to their seats!

On stage, I want only the floor lights on when I’m up there so I have lots of shadows, lots of company!”

He finished 5 minutes early and got a standing ovation!

I came back from that experience, and my youth minister,

Loretta Witmer-Roberts asked me to help out at the annual meeting of the UCC Southeastern Pennsylvania Association.

She wanted me to do a program with the teenagers in the host church basement while the adults conducted their business meeting upstairs.

You guessed it – they were notorious for making it tough on anyone they perceived as ‘babysitting’ them.

Willard, p.5

I had a costume and a candle and I entered the room reciting Roger's litany
and those teenagers were caught up in the story.

I taught them about the paralyzed person who was lowered through the roof
and healed by Jesus.

I only got one volunteer who dared tell the story, but that was still a success
because it's a big thing for teenagers to speak in front of their peers.

We have to create that sacred space in our lives for God to enter in,
for 'holiness' to happen –
especially in a world where no place seems to be sacred anymore.

We have the stories of Jesus that enable us to suspend our disbelief
in things like gravity and even 'the powers that be' –
just long enough to glimpse the possibilities of a better world.

I had the opportunity to show Rev. Pat Robbennolt how her husband's storytelling
made a difference in my life and that his influence continues to live on
when I use that litany to bring others into a story,
and when those who learned it from me pass it on like a lighted candle.

And the storyteller said...

Amen

*Our lesson this morning is James 1:1-17, using the Common English Bible translation,
and is attributed to James, the leader of the early church at Jerusalem
and who is thought to be the brother of Jesus.*

*In this passage, James describes the human condition
and God's willingness to help us attain the goal of maturity...*

[1] From James, a slave of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ.

To the twelve tribes who are scattered outside the land of Israel. Greetings!

[2] My brothers and sisters, think of the various tests you encounter
as occasions for joy.

[3] After all, you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance.

[4] Let this endurance complete its work so that you may be fully mature,
complete, and lacking in nothing.

[5] But anyone who needs wisdom should ask God,
whose very nature is to give to everyone without a second thought,
without keeping score.

Wisdom will certainly be given to those who ask.

[6] Whoever asks shouldn't hesitate.

They should ask in faith, without doubting.

Whoever doubts is like the surf of the sea, tossed and turned by the wind.

[7] People like that should never imagine that
they will receive anything from the Lord.

[8] They are double-minded, unstable in all their ways.

[9] Brothers and sisters who are poor
should find satisfaction in their high status.

[10] Those who are wealthy should find satisfaction in their low status,
because they will die off like wildflowers.

[11] The sun rises with its scorching heat and dries up the grass
so that its flowers fall and its beauty is lost.

Just like that, in the midst of their daily lives, the wealthy will waste away.

[12] Those who stand firm during testing are blessed. They are tried and true.
They will receive the life God has promised to those who love him
as their reward.

[13] No one who is tested should say,
"God is tempting me!"

This is because God is not tempted by any form of evil,
nor does [God] tempt anyone.

[14] Everyone is tempted by their own cravings;
they are lured away and enticed by them.

[15] Once those cravings conceive, they give birth to sin;
and when sin grows up, it gives birth to death.

[16] Don't be misled, my dear brothers and sisters.

[17] Every good gift, every perfect gift, comes from above.

These gifts come down from the [Abba]Father, the creator of the heavenly lights,
in whose character there is no change at all.

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

Mark 7:1-8,14-15, 21-23 [RSV]

[1] Now when the Pharisees gathered together to him, with some of the scribes, who had come from Jerusalem,

[2] they saw that some of his disciples ate with hands defiled, that is, unwashed.

[3] (For the Pharisees, and all the Jews, do not eat unless they wash their hands, observing the tradition of the elders;

[4] and when they come from the market place, they do not eat unless they purify themselves; and there are many other traditions which they observe, the washing of cups and pots and vessels of bronze.)

[5] And the Pharisees and the scribes asked him, “Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with hands defiled?”

[6] And he said to them,

“Well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written, “This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me;

[7] in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the precepts of [humankind].’

[8] You leave the commandment of God, and hold fast the tradition of [humankind].”

[14] And he called the people to him again, and said to them,

“Hear me, all of you, and understand:

[15] there is nothing outside a [person] which by going into [someone] can defile [them];

but the things which come out of a [person] are what defile [them].”

[21] For from within, out of the heart of [a person], come evil thoughts, fornication, theft, murder, adultery,

[22] coveting, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, foolishness.

[23] All these evil things come from within, and they defile a [person].”