

“Deep Forest”

The Rev Drew Willard
UCC at The Villages
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Acts 17:22-28

Matt. 18:15-20

[The Apostle Paul said,]

“ ²⁶From one ancestor [God]made all nations to inhabit the whole earth,
and ... allotted the times of their existence and
the boundaries of the places where they would live,
²⁷so that they would search for... and perhaps grope for... and find [God]–
though indeed [God] is not far from each one of us.” Acts 17:26-27

Let us pray... O God,

As we enter the deep forests of our existence,

be with us to guide and sustain us along the way

and may we grow in understanding and wisdom

to help others as we have surely been helped.

Amen

The United Church of Christ lectionary has suggested themes
about the environment for the coming month.

There has been a trend – even among evangelical Christians,
and especially the “Emergent Church” movement,

to reflect on the role of God’s creation in our tradition.

This Sunday, the theme is ‘Forests’ – next Sunday, September 11th,
the theme is ‘Land’ of which I will preach about as “Homeland”.

It was said about the forests of northeastern, colonial America,
that a squirrel could climb up into a tree in Manhattan
and go from tree to tree as far as Albany, NY
without touching the ground.

Indeed, I have seen some of those forests that are so deep
you can’t see through to the end of them.

That was true at one time about the woods behind my grandparents’ house
in Canton, MA on Pleasant Circle –

a place I described to you in my last sermon here.

Those woods are gone, but the memory of them and their significance remain.

Imagine those deep forests of long ago –

and being in them at day’s end, alone, without shelter or even light.

The forest then becomes a place of the unknown –

the territory of danger and fear.

Yet even a trace of light in the forest brings hope.

Willard, p.2

A forest can also become a place of discovery –
so that the further in you go, the more you find new things to learn.
In such a forest, there is no fear of being lost –
and it is in this way, that I like to think that is what happens for you
Sunday to Sunday in the experience of Christian worship here.
So, as you go along there are new things to discover and learn
about God, about other people, the world, and oneself.

The forest seems to have been represented in the design
of ancient Egyptian temples which have a long approach to the altar area,
lined with rows of huge columns like immense trees –
as if remembering a time when that desert land had ancient forests.
If you've ever been in a large European cathedral with a long nave & columns,
it would put you in mind of a road lined on both sides with evergreens.

Instead of a columned temple or a forest, the Apostle Paul found himself in
the city of Athens that was like a forest with shrines
dedicated to the various gods of ancient Greece.
But one particular altar caught his eye –
one that was dedicated "To An Unknown God"
and he used this example as an invitation
to talk to the Athenian Greeks about the God he knew.

The God I know has been most evident when I am out on the road
and truly at the mercy of God as well as people I meet along the way.
I would like to tell you about some of the things that happened
on my road trip that were part of my own deep forest path...

I want you know the 'tobacco blessing' my car received from you all
held up just fine – because on the morning of my fourth day out,
an ominous light came up on my dashboard.
The handbook said it could be a false alarm from a loose gas-cap
or a problem with an engine efficiency that could mean bad mileage –
and at \$3.75 a gallon in some places, that could be a big problem.
I stopped at a Honda place in VA confirming there was likely no real danger
of hurting the engine, but it would cost \$100 to check out & be sure.
I made it as far as my parents' home in PA where I went to
an auto-mechanic that my Dad knew.
It took all of 10 minutes for him to find that a tube in the air-filter system
had been disconnected the last time I had work done on my car
and they forgot to put it back on.
He wasn't going to charge me, but I gladly paid him to change the oil.

Willard, p.3

The purpose of my trip was prompted by the passing of my father's sister,
my Aunt Ginny.

And so I visited her grave and those of my grandparents, and my uncle
to pay my respects, along with my good friend, Joel Pratt,
to visit his wife's grave, too.

And I made a point to become reacquainted with my aunt's side of the family –
my two cousins and their children and grandchildren.

I really had a good chance to do that, to have a meal, to sit and talk with them –
especially my Cousin David who is a Viet Nam veteran.

And I even made a point to do something I haven't done in a while –
to draw caricatures and cartoons that I just gave away to entertain.

I'll say more about that in a minute.

By the way, two Sundays ago, both cousins and friends came out to hear me
preach at the United Church of Christ in Canton, MA.

It was a 'paid gig' where I recited and preached about
Jesus' Sermon on the Mount – and it really is a "three point sermon".

From Massachusetts I went to upstate New York
to visit one of the great "lights in the forest for me" – Chris Farlekas.
Chris – a career journalist, is in his 80s now and recently suffered a stroke
that has made it difficult for him to stand and walk by himself,
so these days he's had to use a wheelchair.

I went out 'to spring him' out of rehab for a couple hours –
and our first stop was the Colonial Diner
for some good food and conversation.

Then, we took in a movie at the local cinema –
a remarkable film called "The Help"
which has a lot to say about prejudice and the durability
of the human spirit during a time not so long ago.

Chris asked me to come back the next day to draw people in the rehab program
and at first I said no, thinking I needed to get along to PA.

But I thought better of it and came back the next day
and drew several people...

Chris himself helped encourage his fellow residents – and his helpers as well.
He even engaged a couple of the administrators in conversation
as they struggled with the possibility this rehab would be closed
due to budgetary constraint, always lurking like a wolf for such facilities.

But Hurricane Irene was looming on my horizon
and after visiting my brother & his family in NJ,
I pressed on to NC – well inland when the storm made landfall.

Willard, p.4

A week ago this very hour, I was in church – not to preach, but to be fed myself, as I attended Victory Church in the Stone Mountain area of Atlanta, GA. It is a predominantly African-American congregation of about 5,300 members that espouses the same call of welcome that we do as a church of the UCC to ‘whoever you are or wherever you are on life’s journey’.

No paper bulletins, but two screens on either side of a stained glass window, featuring a central cross and representations of prophets, old and new. The service began with singing – the lyrics posted above, with a choir of about 50 men and women dressed in black. There was liturgical dancing by a group of young adult and teenage women in flowing red dresses who did a dramatic, interpretive dance – very impressive and I was told this was not their ‘first string’ team. Worship leaders guided the singing and prayers – and they do their announcements *after* the service. The pastor is not present until the closing of what we would call our joys & concerns. Then, he would preach the sermon which would be followed by the offertory, followed by an altar call for personal prayer and healing, and concluding with the benediction.

This was the occasion for me to hear one of the finest preachers of the UCC, The Rev. Dr. Kenneth L. Samuel.

I heard him preach at the 2005 General Synod held in Atlanta and I have appreciated his many contributions to the Stillspeaking daily devotions online ever since.

And he presented one of the most insightful interpretations of the Book of Job I have ever heard.

Job was a righteous man who raised a good family, but apparently he erred by taking it easy – resting on his laurels. He counted his blessings, but failed to make his blessings count outside of his family circle.

He failed to be available for God’s grace to work through him in that as blessings come to you, they are also meant to be blessings that come through you to help others.

A woman named Betty – sitting with a group who helped serve a full breakfast before the service, invited me to sit with her. She and others asked me if I ‘enjoyed’ the service – and that was true, though far be it from me to say I was there to be entertained. Yet it was an experience of immersion in the style of holiness that is unique and universal at the same time – God in Christ.

Willard, p.5

And my visit there was an important part of my personal sojourn
into that deep forest of discovery that has brought me back home
to UCC at The Villages and how we celebrate God in Christ.

Let me close with this final vignette –
I frequently stopped to stretch my legs or get something to eat & a cup of coffee
and somewhere in PA on my journey north towards Harrisburg,
I stopped at a diner for breakfast.

At the counter next to me was a man in his late 40s or early 50s,
dressed in a short-sleeved white shirt, long tie and black pants.
He had a cup of coffee and a plate with two pieces of toast
which he spread with jam.

I asked what he did and he said he was a telecommunications engineer,
but he was out of work.

His job had been outsourced to intelligent young people who came here
for an education, but went back overseas to where the jobs were.
He bore no grudge to them, but seemed resigned to this situation.

He told me he was in town for a funeral – the funeral of a friend
with whom he had been having this same discussion
about jobs and the economy just a week before.
I tried to encourage him – thinking maybe he could teach,
but he said that in the world of technology, things move too fast
and you can't keep up if you've been out of the loop for a while.

We are facing what may become a new Dark Ages
in which opportunities for education and funding will be limited
and so will career options even for those who have knowledge.

But just as the Apostle Paul ventured out into a world
that could be very hostile and limiting, he brought the light
of the knowledge of a God who could be known –
a God who goes with us wherever we go,
to heal, liberate, and transform the world itself
through us if we let God.

We must take stock of who we are as individuals and as a faith community
to inspire this next generation to go on their own
vision quests for what can yet be
and not to be afraid to enter the deep forests of life.

Amen

*In today's lesson from the Book of Acts, 17:22-28,
the Apostle Paul takes advantage of an opportunity
to do some sight-seeing in Athens
and – in the process, gains a theological insight
about the Athenians and their practical approach to religion...*

Acts 17.22-28

²² Then Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said,
'Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are
in every way.

²³ For as I went through the city and
looked carefully at the objects of your worship,
I found among them an altar with the inscription,
"To an unknown god."

What therefore you worship as unknown,
this I proclaim to you.

²⁴ The God who made the world and everything in it,
he who is Lord of heaven and earth,
does not live in shrines made by human hands,

²⁵ nor is he served by human hands,
as though he needed anything,
since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath
and all things.

²⁶ From one ancestor he made all nations to inhabit the whole earth,
and he allotted the times of their existence and
the boundaries of the places where they would live,

²⁷ so that they would search for God and
perhaps grope for him and find him—
though indeed he is not far from each one of us.

²⁸ For "In him we live and move and have our being";
as even some of your own poets have said,
"For we too are his offspring." '

Matt. 18:15-20

[Jesus said,]

- 15 'If another member of the church sins against you,
go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone.
If the member listens to you,
you have regained that one.
- 16 But if you are not listened to,
take one or two others along with you,
so that every word may be confirmed
by the evidence of two or three witnesses.
- 17 If the member refuses to listen to them,
tell it to the church;
and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church,
let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax-collector.
- 18 Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven,
and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.
- 19 Again, truly I tell you,
if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask,
it will be done for you by my Father in heaven.
- 20 For where two or three are gathered in my name,
I am there among them.'