

“Lost & Found”

The Rev. Drew Willard
UCC at The Villages, FL
September 11th, 2016
17th Sun./Pentecost
New Members Reception

1 Timothy 1:12-17

Luke 15:1-10

[The Apostle Paul said,]

“Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.”

This saying is true, and it can be trusted.

1 Timothy 1:15^a

Let us pray... O God,

Thank you for sending Jesus as our savior
from shame, illness, and oppression.

Thank you for those people who serve as your angels, your messengers
of healing, mercy, and liberation.

Thank you for their example that we may be messengers of your Good News
through our words and deeds.

Amen

Are you saved?

Or didn't you know you were lost?

Brings to mind young people in polyester with a Bible in hand
going door to door asking,

“Are you saved? Do you know you're going to Heaven?”.

That kind of evangelism gets associated with conservative fundamentalists –
to their credit, really...

It takes a certain kind of person to do that –
which is admirable when it is sincere.

Mainline Christians have generally shied away from this kind of outreach
with some discomfort that the style of it comes across
as shallow and manipulative.

I happened to watch on TV years ago an ‘altar call’ led by Jerry Falwell,
the Moral Majority activist and founder of Liberty University
in Lynchburg, VA.

A crowd of people who had just given their lives to Christ were standing together –
and almost immediately, there were men going through that crowd
with offering baskets, the kind made of felt with a wooden handle.

To me, it was sending the wrong message
of mixing one of the most intimate moments of a person's life
with a compelled donation, like a cheapened transaction.

We all know a church needs money
and that the world itself demands much more than that,
but such crude mind-games get recognized over time as insincerity.

Willard, p.2

I actually saw Rev. Falwell in person at a talk he gave to a group of about 50 people at a small church in Lancaster, PA.

He asked everyone to bow their heads, close their eyes, and raise their hands if they had been saved; and I realized that this was to ferret out the liberals and atheists who may have slipped in.

Then he preceded to talk about a portion of a verse, Mark 14:7 [or Matthew 26:11] *... you always have the poor with you...*

Well, he only mentioned the first part. The rest of it goes like this:

For you always have the poor with you, and whenever you will, you can do good to them; but you will not always have me...

and he talked at length, making a point how the poor in America were much better off than the poor in other parts of the world.

I suppose there is a logic in a very superficial way to what he said, but it was a rebuke to those communities protesting back in the mid 1980s – as if to say, “Why are you complaining?”

Well, people are still complaining and taking it to the streets and not just here with “Black Lives Matter” and “Occupy Wall Street”, but the “Arab Spring” and ISIS related conflicts and atrocities.

What happened on September 11th, 2001 has its roots in the seed bed of poverty – not only of groups of people locked out from economic opportunities which gave support to the rise of religious extremism, but the same kind of spiritual poverty demonstrated by Rev. Falwell and other ‘My way or the highway’ groups like ISIS and the Taliban.

Regarding the tragic events of September 11th, Rev. Falwell said,

"I really believe that the pagans, and the abortionists, and the feminists, and the gays and the lesbians who are actively trying to make that an alternative lifestyle, the ACLU, People For the American Way, all of them who have tried to secularize America.

I point the finger in their face and say 'you helped this happen.'"

He later retracted that statement and apologized to gay people.

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

Rather than where should the blame go, we should be asking,

“Where is the need?” Where is the need for economic opportunity?

Where is the need for meaningful work that demands discipline and allows workers to create things and measure achievement?

Where are the educational opportunities? Where are the ideas to try something new?

Where is the commitment of time, talent, and treasure?

Where is the willingness to reach across the abyss of religious, ethnic, cultural, class, and generational divisions?

Where is the will to love as God would have us do– even the will to love our enemies?

Wouldn't it have been great for Jerry Falwell to have had a change of heart?

Willard, p.3

Early Christians presumed the world needed Jesus
and they sought to bring the faith to all the cultures they encountered
like the Romans, the Greeks, the Ethiopians, the Armenians,
meeting them at *their* level, on *their* terms.

The apostles used parallels with the Jewish Scriptures –
which learned people of the ancient times would have been familiar with.

The apostles looked for predictions of a messiah in pagan prophecies
and for parallel teachings in the wisdom of pagan philosophers.

They looked for signs in nature or cultural customs
to demonstrate the universality of the Gospel's truth.

In 2004, the United Church of Christ launched its "Stillspeaking" campaign
as a help for us 'mainline protestants' to get more comfortable with
the idea of talking about our faith without feeling phony.

We say,

'Don't place a period where God has placed a comma,
for God is still speaking'.

'No matter who you are or where you are on life's journey,
you're welcome here.'

We are 'open & affirming'. We seek 'justice & peace'...

Our message includes the traditional 'good news' of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount
telling about God's Kingdom on Earth as it is in Heaven,
which is what the Apostle Paul was talking about when he spoke of
the Body of Christ and the love of 'God in Christ'
and how Martin Luther King, Jr. spoke of Beloved Community.

We are also witnesses to the story of the Crucifixion and Resurrection of Jesus Christ
as 'good news' of liberation from the vicious cycle of scapegoating,
and the unjust retribution of so-called 'redemptive violence'.

Even more so, we have a God who goes looking for us in the midst
of our poverty, illness, desperation, loneliness, despair
to bring forgiveness, healing, liberation, wholeness...

We have a God who came to Earth to suffer and die as those who die
at the hands of a violent enemy, yet as God, who prevailed over death
even used humor to transform the disciples from fear to joy.

We encounter that God – not only in the Bible stories and church traditions
of baptism and communion, but also fellowship as a congregation
Sunday worship, Sunday school, fundraising fellowship, and missions.

We encounter that God in nature, history, and the culture around us
even the kaleidoscope of media news, entertainment, and
the disputes of politics, religion, and science.

Willard, 4

The Good News is there – not just as something we have to look for,
but seeks us out to believe or not, like knowing that the Sun shines
even on an overcast day...

But the best vehicle for that Good News of the love of God to made known –
is through people.

The best way on September 11th for finding the lost,
was by going up the stairs as far as they could go
to check the hallways, to look and see if there was anyone
trapped and who needed help.

On our bulletin cover today is a picture of such a person doing that,
a firefighter named Mike Kehoe climbing up the steps of the North Tower
of the World Trade Center, as others climbed down,
telling him, ‘Good luck!’

Hundreds of firefighters and policemen were killed that day
along with many others who did not get out of the Twin Towers...

A reporter who had seen this picture the next day
was able to track down the Fire Station No. 28 and the name of this fireman.

When he inquired about who he was and how he died,
the other firemen told him that Mike Kehoe was alive, and sleeping upstairs!

They insisted on waking Mike Kehoe who told them what happened and how
his crew was to get up to where the plane actually hit to reach the people there.

http://www.mirror.co.uk/news/uk-news/911-firefighter-mike-kehoe-my-pal-150697#ICID=sharebar_facebook

At the 28th floor, they heard the explosion of the South Tower collapsing,
and their team leader, Roy Chelsen told them,

‘Let’s just get these people and let’s get out of here.’

http://www.nytimes.com/2011/01/13/nyregion/13chelsen.html?_r=0

In two minutes, they went down 28 flights of steps
and 30 seconds later, the North Tower came down.

Mike Kehoe and the others he was with, survived,
but six firefighters of another crew from Fire Station 28 did not.

<http://articles.latimes.com/2001/sep/22/news/mn-48541>

9/11 is seared into our national memory and so are the lives of so many
who died that day in America and of those whose lives
who have been taken in the 15 years since
in the continuing violent struggle of cultural hatred.

Yet we must not forget the Good News of those who went searching
for people who were lost and alone, where the need was greatest...

Willard, p. 5

Christianity started out as a community of people who believed
that the world needed the Good News to be saved.

Christianity has a unique mission for the sake of humanity and the world,
but we are not alone in this work as we collaborate and cooperate
with other people of goodwill.

Anybody who demonstrates selfless acts of mercy born of sincere forgiveness,
of love that responds to hatred
with patience,
of love that responds to neglect
with generosity, to injury with healing, irresponsibility with wisdom,
to oppression with liberation that seeks the common good,
then they are bearing witness to the same Spirit of rational-lovingkiness
that is 'God in Christ'.

Our Jesus is a fireman who goes up into the burning building of who we are
to rescue us and bring us out into the sunshine.

Our God is that voice in the midst of our world's burning troubles who says,
'Let's just get these people and let's get out of here'
to rescue all who will listen to bring us into eternal life.

Amen

Our lesson today from 1st Timothy 1:12-17 tells about how the Apostle Paul as a young person, came from antagonism against Christians to be transformed to enter a life of Christian activism...

[The Apostle Paul said,]

¹² I thank Christ Jesus our Lord.

He has given me the strength for my work
because he knew that he could trust me.

¹³ I used to say terrible and insulting things about him, and I was cruel.

But he had mercy on me because I didn't know what I was doing,
and I had not yet put my faith in him.

¹⁴ Christ Jesus our Lord was very kind to me.

He has greatly blessed my life with faith and love just like his own.

¹⁵ "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners."

This saying is true, and it can be trusted.

I was the worst sinner of all!

¹⁶ But since I was worse than anyone else, God had mercy on me
and let me be an example of the endless patience of Christ Jesus.

He did this so that others would put their faith in Christ
and have eternal life.

¹⁷ I pray that honor and glory will always be given to the only God,
who lives forever and is the invisible and eternal King! Amen.

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

Luke 15:1-10

¹Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear him.

²And the Pharisees and the scribes murmured, saying,
“This man receives sinners and eats with them.”

³So he told them this parable:

⁴“What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he has lost one of them,
does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness,
and go after the one which is lost, until he finds it?

⁵And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders,
rejoicing.

⁶And when he comes home,
he calls together his friends and his neighbors, saying to them,
‘Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep which was lost.’

⁷Just so, I tell you,
there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents
than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.

“Or what woman, having ten silver coins, if she loses one coin,
does not light a lamp and sweep the house and seek diligently
until she finds it?

⁹And when she has found it,
she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying,
‘Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin which I had lost.’

¹⁰Just so, I tell you,
there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”