

“Do Right By Doing Good”

The Rev. Drew Willard
UCC at The Villages, FL
October 15th, 2017

Philippians 4:1-9

Matthew 22:1-14

*[In words attributed to the Apostle Paul...] Finally, my friends,
keep your minds on whatever is true, pure, right, holy, friendly, and proper.
Philippians 4:8*

Let us pray... O God,
Guide us to a good vision of what we can do in service to your will for us –
which is love in action.

Amen

This has been a year of spiritual journeys for me – geographical and otherwise!
Three of them have been in the past two weeks:
a college reunion, a church conference, and a political gathering.

Last week, I was at the US Military Academy at West Point, NY for my 40th Reunion,
and participated with other classmates who are clergy in a memorial service
honoring members of my class who had passed on.

What I didn't expect was that my classmate who was coordinating events,
would ask me at the last minute to do a blessing for the banquet –
with all 400 of us plus guests!

20 years of ministry count for something and I put together a prayer without notes
that acknowledged our shared experience, our diverse life paths,
and hope for what we could yet do for a better world.

I opened with a prayer that I used to pray when we – as the whole Corps of Cadets,
were gathered for a meal and then called to a time of silent prayer...

O God, strengthen me to your good purpose.

Don't let me let you down. In Jesus' name I pray... Amen

That prayer request is still in effect...

This week, I went to the UCC Florida Conference annual meeting and
attended some excellent workshops with contemporary insights.

The first was on “Boundary Training” by Conference staff member, Leigh McCaffery,
which was informative about how to keep churches

as safe places from unwanted advances and intimidation –
and this is for the sake of a congregation, staff, and clergy, too.

Good practices were discussed like:

identifying expectations and setting limits, being transparent about problems –
while keeping things positive and avoiding put-downs,
establishing consequences for inappropriate behavior,
and following through.

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Rev. Andy Bachmann – Associate Pastor for the United Church of Gainesville spoke about establishing a balance between spirituality and social action. He said congregations need to claim mission priorities in terms of belief.

He then told us how they do this at UC Gainesville,
where members are individually encouraged to say:

'I believe all people are loved by God and

I believe I am called to make this a more beloved community.'

So, this is the basis for how they respond to our denomination's call to
'Be The Church'.

Rev. Molly Baskette is known nationally within the UCC as
a regular contributor to the Stillspeaking daily devotional,
and she spoke about one of her church's best practices:
'public testimony'.

In her church at confession time, people are invited to share
a difficult situation in their lives – not as an unresolved wound,
but where there has been some healing,
proclaiming crucifixion *and* resurrection.

She characterized this as

'speak[ing] from the scar and not from the scab'.

So, this kind of sharing puts what Carl Jung called
the "shadow"-side of human personality, into context with
the "sunshine" promise of love, hope, peace, and joy;

And wouldn't that be nice if churches practiced this kind of safe space on a Sunday –
to feel safe enough to honestly share one's vulnerability without judgment.

In the midst of those 'concerns' of the church,
it is important to keep the 'joys' before you as well,
and Molly included this prayer as words of assurance:

Lord of life,

Thank you for making this world.

In case we forget to mention it from time to time, it is fabulous.

Thank you that:

Spring follows winter. Daffodils follow dark days. Crocuses follow the cross.

And as soon as something dies, something else starts trying to get born...

However, I had to come back early from Conference yesterday,
to do the invocation at a gala for the local political action committee
of the Democratic Party.

Just so you know to be fair, I did an invocation for a Tea Party gathering
way back in 2010 when I first came here.

So, my prayers are offered as an equal opportunity request
for people to do the right thing!

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In such prayers I try to acknowledge diversity of the audience I am speaking to,
and that I include people of different faiths or no faith,
while appealing to them as people of goodwill –
and encourage them to exercise that goodwill.

Though there are different opinions for what to do in dealing with life issues,
isn't our biggest challenge these days, just to agree
on what a particular problem is?

That holds true for churches, too.

A few years back, there was significant concern about our church's mortgage
and what to do about it.

There was talk about doing another capital fundraising campaign
or making drastic cuts in our budget.

Yet we were ultimately able to incorporate those payments into our General Fund.

There were a number of reasons for this, and they include:

Having a vision thanks to two church members with financial experience
who assured us that we could absorb those payments
without having to resort to a capital fund drive.

Another reason was that we were apparently doing something right,
which was evident in that we had consistently high
attendance and regular giving on Sundays, even in the summer,

This was sustained by a high level of commitment by our volunteers
participating in worship, fundraising, fellowship activities,
and mission projects.

Having good vision goals or goals with a vision toward what is good,
leads to volunteers willing to dedicate their time and talent
and out of a desire to sustain this good work,
people are willing to respond with their treasure along with time and talent.

We are still a ways off from our Annual Meeting when the Nominating Committee
must present a roster of church officers and committee members.

Still, there are the day to day obligations of running a church
that we must continuously work to fulfill.

Our Constitution & By-Laws provide opportunities for ministry in the form of:
the Diaconate which is responsible for

the spiritual and pastoral life of the congregation,
Admin Ministry which is responsible for maintaining our church
as a safe and comfortable environment while managing resources,
Missions which implements the practical application
of our beliefs and teachings,

Finance & Stewardship which is responsible
for our economic investments, accounting, and disbursement of assets.

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Then, there are the roles of leadership and management that
the Nominating Committee is specifically charged to fill –
which our congregation confirms as a privilege during Annual Meeting.
These leaders then build their teams –
with advice and help from the Nominating Committee.
There are also a variety of standing committees and ad hoc committees
as well as the choir that have ongoing needs for volunteers.

This is the nuts and bolts of how a church community works –
and we get a glimpse of what it was like when the Church was young
from the Apostle Paul's letters.
Those letters became guides to reassure congregations through generations since
about how church folks worked things out back in the First Century CE,
to do what is right by doing good.

Throughout history, there has been a need to supplement those 'epistles' from
Peter, Paul, John, James, Timothy, Titus, Philemon, Jude, and the Hebrews.
Now and then, I think back to that prayer I prayed at West Point:
O God, strengthen me to your good purpose.
Don't let me let you down. In Jesus' name I pray... Amen

Such a prayer takes into account that I don't always do what is right,
but as I seek to do what is good – as I seek a vision that is in accord
with God's 'good purpose' to do what is most loving for all concerned,
then that will always be the right choice.
Amen

*In our lesson from Philippians 4:1-9, the Common English Version,
the Apostle Paul is encouraging the people of Philippi
to do what is right and good for each others' sake...*

¹Dear friends, I love you and long to see you.

Please keep on being faithful to the Lord. You are my pride and joy.

²Euodia [U-o'-dee-a] and Syntyche [Syn'-tih-kay], you belong to the Lord,
so I beg you to stop arguing with each other.

³And (Epaphroditus) [Epa'-fro-di'-tus], my true partner, I ask you to help them.

These women have worked together

with me and with Clement and with the others

in spreading the good news. Their names are now written in the book of life.

⁴Always be glad because of the Lord! I will say it again: Be glad.

⁵Always be gentle with others. The Lord will soon be here.

⁶Don't worry about anything, but pray about everything.

With thankful hearts offer up your prayers and requests to God.

⁷Then, because you belong to Christ Jesus,

God will bless you with peace that no one can completely understand.

And this peace will control the way you think and feel.

⁸Finally, my friends, keep your minds on whatever is

true, pure, right, holy, friendly, and proper.

Don't ever stop thinking about what is

truly worthwhile and worthy of praise.

⁹You know the teachings I gave you,

and you know what you heard me say and saw me do.

So follow my example. And God, who gives peace, will be with you.

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

Matthew 22:1-14

¹Once again Jesus used stories to teach the people:

²The kingdom of heaven is like what happened
when a king gave a wedding banquet for his son.

³The king sent some servants to tell the invited guests to come to the banquet,
but the guests refused.

⁴He sent other servants to say to the guests,
“The banquet is ready! My cattle and prize calves have all been prepared.
Everything is ready. Come to the banquet!”

⁵But the guests did not pay any attention.
Some of them left for their farms,
and some went to their places of business.

⁶Others grabbed the servants, then beat them up and killed them.

⁷This made the king so furious that he sent an army
to kill those murderers and burn down their city.

⁸Then he said to the servants,
“It is time for the wedding banquet,
and the invited guests don’t deserve to come.

⁹Go out to the street corners and tell everyone you meet
to come to the banquet.”

¹⁰They went out on the streets and brought in everyone they could find,
good and bad alike. And the banquet room was filled with guests.

¹¹When the king went in to meet the guests,
he found that one of them wasn’t wearing the right kind of clothes
for the wedding.

¹²The king asked,
“Friend, why didn’t you wear proper clothes for the wedding?”
But the guest had no excuse.

¹³So the king gave orders for that person to be tied hand and foot
and to be thrown outside into the dark.

That’s where people will cry and grit their teeth in pain.

¹⁴Many are invited, but only a few are chosen.