

“The Reformation: Trick or Treat”

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1st Thessalonians 2:1-8

Matthew 22:34-46

*We didn't have any hidden motives when we won you over,
and we didn't try to fool or trick anyone.*

God was pleased to trust us with his message.

We didn't speak to please people, but to please God who knows our motives.

1 Thessalonians 2:3-4

Let us pray... O God,

Help us be discerning of what is true to the Good News you have given us
and what we can recognize as no longer valid doctrine from an earlier time.

As we go along on our journey of life, may we not be afraid to ask questions
trusting that you will give us the answers we need...

Amen

The 500th anniversary of The Reformation has arrived without any great fanfare –
no great enthusiasm for the rise of Protestant Christianity
and the historical role it has played in the world.

It was a terrible rupture between the medieval Catholic Church that culminated
in a brutal 30 Years' War, which left much of Europe devastated.

Yet from that time, we have seen a flowering of Christianity in many ways,
that would not have been possible if the Church remained the same.

This striving for how to respond to the liberating truth of the Bible is still unfolding –
even evident in the movements for Women's Rights and Civil Rights.

On October 31st back in 1517 CE, a German monk named Martin Luther,
nailed his 95 Theses on the door of the Wittenberg Castle Church in Germany –
to protest the medieval Catholic doctrine of 'indulgences'.

The basis for the practice of 'indulgences' began as a good idea –
urging reflection, repentance, and resolve not to do the bad behavior again.

There was a system of penalties and relief that include acts of
worship, pilgrimage, and monetary donations.

The problem is that this became an opportunity to extort money
under the guise of getting people to do good works
to shorten time in purgatory for themselves and loved ones
and insure their entrance into heaven.

It was said: *As soon as the coin in the coffer rings, The soul from purgatory springs.*
and with such bad theology of seeming to control access to Heaven,
the medieval Church conspired with 'the powers that be' of their day
to conquer the world and subjugate their own people.

This revenue helped pay for crusades and cathedrals – but as a burden to the faithful,
since Bingo hadn't been invented yet!

Willard, p. 2

Martin Luther was what we would call these days, a 'seeker' and he started his higher education by studying law and philosophy at college. But he loved God, and found no satisfaction until he went to seminary and became a professor, himself.

It was during this time, that he decided to challenge church authorities and oppose the corrupt system of indulgences.

He was right on time with others who sought change – not merely to reform, but even to break away and start their own church.

However even though the Lutherans started the Reformation, Calvinist Reformers felt they did not go far enough in rejecting Catholic traditions and dogma, so they started their own version of the Church.

Henry VIII wanted freedom from the Vatican's political interference, so he made the monarchy the protector of the Church of England, independent of Rome while retaining Catholic tradition and style – including the Latin version of the Bible.

The Church of England would eventually be known as the Anglican or Episcopalian Church.

But the Puritans who were Calvinist, likewise felt the Anglicans didn't go far enough, and so they were in opposition to the state sanctioned church.

Another offshoot in England was the Separatist movement, who were severely persecuted by English authorities, until they were allowed to accompany a commercial venture to the New World – as the Pilgrims.

In time, Catholics, Lutherans, Presbyterians, Puritans, Anglicans, and other groups seeking religious freedom would sail across the Atlantic to find religious freedom in North America.

Along the eastern seaboard and on the frontier, community churches would form as congregations, some calling themselves, the Christian Church and others, Disciples of Christ.

Maybe not so imaginative in what they called themselves, but this reflected their desire to get back to the basics.

These days, such evangelical devotion that founded diverse Protestant denominations – including our own, and even Baptists and their non-denominational affiliates, seems to be subsiding.

500 years of Protestantism – and there is hardly any fanfare in Western society for what has been achieved.

This seems to be just another symptom of the decline of the 'Church', while neo-Nazis, ISIS, and other extremists are on the rise here and throughout the world, with their practiced narrative.

Willard, p.3

Progressive Christian churches - like the United Church of Christ,
with their message of inclusiveness and liberation,
are the church of the future – that is... if we survive!

That being said, the ‘Good News’ of the Gospel of Jesus Christ
is competitive with any narrative that is out there in the marketplace of ideas.

Maybe progressive Christians need to do a better job
of using social media on the internet - like Martin Luther did,
translating the Bible into the vernacular and then,
putting it out there like he and others did with Gutenberg's printing press.

Maybe progressive Christians need to do a better job embracing
its artists, storytellers, composers, singers, performers
to play the prophetic role they played in the past.

We need to be re-encharmed and re-enThused...

Seems like we are due for another paradigm shift
which contemporary theologians like Phyllis Tickle and Brian McLaren,
have described as the ‘Emerging Church’,
common ground for ‘Born Again’ evangelicals and ‘Mainline’ progressives.

What seems to be emerging as common ground, is a ‘love ethic’
of conscience for social and environmental justice,
as a new perspective for getting back to the basics.

We had been seeing that in our wider society with popular support
for gay marriage and immigrants, until recently with the rise of a populist tide.

Will there be a lasting, progressive transformation of Church and Society?

It remains to be seen, but I still believe the UCC is the church of the future...

The General Synod of the UCC is a biannual meeting, when our national organization
gathers with congregational representatives; and
in 2003, a marketing campaign was initiated – primarily, to
distinguish our church from the more conservative fundamentalist
denomination, Church of Christ.

The Church of Christ emphasizes the literal interpretation of the Bible and
specifically forbids any practices not mentioned in the New Testament,
such as the use of musical instruments in worship.

Making that distinction began with
how we pronounce the name of our denomination.
We are the UNITED CHURCH__ of Christ.

Hopefully these slogans are familiar to you – as they serve to tell others
who we are and what we are about:

Willard, p.4

*'Never place a period where God has placed a comma' [Gracie Allen]–
because 'God is still speaking' [Ron Buford].*

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

'Our faith is 2,000 years old. Our thinking is not.'

Here are some terms, specifically associated with being a member of the UCC:

We are 'covenantal', not 'creedal' – we covenant together
to agree about big things like baptism,
while 'living with [our] questions' about what that means.

We have a consensus here at UCC at The Villages, that we are ONA –
meaning we are 'open & affirming' of LGBTQ people,
but it also means being 'open & affirming' of 'justice & peace'.

Historically, our ancestors' commitment to justice
meant an early role in the fight to abolish slavery,
including the successful trial defense of Africans found captive
on the slave-ship, Amistad in 1840.

We support inclusive language – language that does not exclude women,
such as the New Century Hymnal which we use every Sunday;

These are new lyrics sung to old melodies in order to be more eloquent
about the things of God.

Another term associated with the UCC is 'environmental justice'

to alert our society about how pollution endangers
impoverished communities,

Our church has also taken a justice stand on behalf of Hispanic immigrant people.

Not all UCC congregations are where we are in alignment with such ideals,
and there are others that are further along on that path for liberation.

Let me say how much of a relief it has been for me to serve this congregation
in what I am learning and in what I have reclaimed about what it means to me
to be a Christian. Here are some of those gifts...

I have wondered why the perfect Son of God was so cruelly treated by human-kind –
Why was he so unjustly accused, tortured, and crucified?

I have come to the conclusion that the 'original of sin' of any real consequence
is when Adam said, "She did it!" and put the blame on Eve.

It is this vicious cycle of scapegoating that we do, that Jesus came to expose
when he confronted the powers that be of his time.

Therefore, I believe Jesus didn't die 'for our sins' – he died because of them.

Willard, p.5

'Sin', therefore, is a "given" for human-kind – but so is forgiveness:

We just have to claim it... and change, by seeking to do the most loving thing the next time and in any given situation.

The Great Commandments to love God and to love others as oneself, is another way of saying the Golden Rule:

'Do unto others as you would have them do unto you' – but there is also an "or else!"

It follows that there will be judgment,

but for the 'habit of our hearts – rather than our deeds alone.

The 'unforgivable sin' is a 'hardened heart' that is blind to the Spirit of what is good, which can only be undone by oneself through empathy.

The key concept of salvation for Martin Luther was from the Apostle Paul:

by grace [we] have been saved through faith[...] not because of works, lest any [one] should boast.'

Grace comes as a gift from God – a 'treat', so to speak, but the Book of James warns us that there is a 'trick' as well:

'Faith without works is dead'.

So, what is faith and works together? Love – rational lovingkindness it makes sense to be kind, and that is the only fair standard for how human beings should be judged.

To be 'born again' is traditionally how Christians talk about being saved – and becoming a new creature in the process.

But as a youth, I understood this to be like a butterfly coming out of its cocoon – "give up what is false and hurtful to be who we were created to be".

LGBTQ people are paragons of this, because they risk everything – the loss of family, friends, career, and even life, to claim and be who they are.

Apart from church doctrine, I believe this is where Jesus was coming from, and that "when you know somebody, it makes a difference."

To gain 'eternal life' also means to live an authentic life, now – and there is a social dimension to this, too.

I have found that the term, 'beloved community', is an inclusive synonym for 'God's Kingdom' as a social reality that is possible, 'on Earth as it is in Heaven'.

Regarding how this works with other religions through interfaith dialogue, religious doctrines are generally incompatible – like every human family has their own unique story.

However, these stories are complementary and work together.

People of other faiths have their job – and we Christians do, too.

Our job is to help others meet God through Christ.

As we befriend and are befriended by people of other faiths, they befriend Christ through us.

Willard, p.6

When we hear the sacred story of another religion as 'story',
then we can find empathy with them –
and that is how we undo the unforgivable sin of
'my way or the highway' prejudice.

In this way, we can find that 'beloved community' we seek,
'open & affirming' for 'justice & peace' now as well as in the time to come.

The late theologian Phyllis Tickle said that every 500 years or so,
humanity goes through a kind of rummage sale, when idols are cast out
and spiritual relationships are restored.

The Axial Age of the 6th Century BCE was such a time
when those who guarded access to ultimate reality were challenged
and the great prophetic religions emerged:

Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism, the first Greek philosophers,
a reformed Hinduism, Zoroastrianism, and religious Judaism.

What these great world religions all share – along with Christianity and Islam,
is the common value of rational loving-kindness:

That it makes sense to be kind – the Golden Rule.

Islam may very well be in the midst of their own 'Reformation'
beginning with the Arab Spring.

We can only hope it leads them to a social transformation
of healing for all our sakes.

Christianity is due again for such a transformation –
and may a just and more peaceful one emerge this time, God willing.

Hopefully you will receive my insights as a treat and no trick,
as you continue on your journey, living with the questions you ask
and finding your own answers...

Amen

*Our lesson from 1st Thessalonians 2:1-8 as found in the Common English Version,
and attributed to the Apostle Paul, recounts the challenges of
bringing the good news of Christ to the people of Thessalonica...*

- ¹My friends, you know that our time with you
wasn't wasted.
- ²As you remember, we had been mistreated and insulted at Philippi.
But God gave us the courage to tell you the good news about him,
even though many people caused us trouble.
- ³We didn't have any hidden motives when we won you over,
and we didn't try to fool or trick anyone.
- ⁴God was pleased to trust us with his message.
We didn't speak to please people, but to please God who knows our motives.
- ⁵You also know that we didn't try to flatter anyone.
God himself knows that what we did wasn't a cover-up for greed.
- ⁶We were not trying to get you or anyone else to praise us.
⁷But as apostles, we could have demanded help from you.
After all, Christ is the one who sent us.
We chose to be like children or like a mother nursing her baby.
- ⁸We cared so much for you, and you became so dear to us,
that we were willing to give our lives for you when we gave you God's message.

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

Matthew 22:34-46

34 But when the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sad'ducees,
they came together.

35 And one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question, to test him.

36 "Teacher, which is the great commandment in the law?"

37 And he said to him,

"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul,
and with all your mind.

38 This is the great and first commandment.

39 And a second is like it,

You shall love your neighbor as yourself.

40 On these two commandments depend all the law and the prophets."

41 Now while the Pharisees were gathered together,

Jesus asked them a question, 42 saying,

"What do you think of the Christ? Whose son is he?"

They said to him,

"The son of David."

43 He said to them,

"How is it then that David, inspired by the Spirit, calls him Lord, saying,

44 "The Lord said to my Lord,

Sit at my right hand, till I put thy enemies under thy feet'?

45 If David thus calls him Lord, how is he his son?"

46 And no one was able to answer him a word,

nor from that day did any one dare to ask him any more questions.