

## “Peace Sunday”

The Rev. Drew Willard  
UCC at The Villages, FL  
December 7<sup>th</sup>, 2014  
*First Sunday in Advent*

*[In explaining the parable of the sower – which is really about people’s hearts, Jesus said,*

*“The seed scattered on good soil are those who hear the word and embrace it.*

*They bear fruit, in one case a yield of thirty to one, in another case sixty to one,*

*and in another case one hundred to one.”*

*Mark 4:20[CEB]*

Sheldon Skurow the spiritual leader of Temple Shalom and I met this week  
with Imam Abdurrahman Sykes of ISLAM, Inc.  
at a Panera restaurant in Winter Garden  
to talk about our respective messages for today.  
We came up with a general theme about the ‘heart’...

As we were getting ready to go, a woman who was sitting nearby,  
came over and thanked us for talking about ‘the Lord’.  
Her name was Heidi – a colorful character in her outfit and her disposition.  
She said she attended a charismatic church and loved to dance.  
We noticed she brought her own food and drink –  
so she came to that place just to be around people.  
She was probably in her late 60s, and just a free spirit!  
It was refreshing for each of us to meet someone who was  
so welcoming and joyful.  
This was someone who was living life from her heart!

The heart is a key theme in a set of stories found in the Gospel of Mark 2 to 5  
which follows Jesus through the events of a single day –  
which happened to be a Sabbath day.  
Jesus was confronted at various times in which he taught and demonstrated  
the importance of having an open heart –  
and the danger of being hard-hearted...

Now, those *self-righteous* religious experts of Jesus’ day  
were no different than those of our own time.  
No matter what the religion may be, there will always be those  
who are convinced beyond a shadow of a doubt that beliefs  
must be taken literally and followed precisely.  
These were the people with whom Jesus most often got into trouble –  
especially as he was trying to get people to get out of their head  
and start living according to their heart.  
At one point though, the Gospel tells us that Jesus’ family was at home  
when they heard him arguing with some of these experts  
and because he sounded so angry, they went out to restrain him!  
Yes, even Jesus could get angry.

Willard, p.2

Jesus was accused of being evil –

and he responded in kind, giving the accusation right back to them!

Now this is one of those texts that are difficult to understand,

but I think you will see what I'm getting at...

According to Mark 3:28-30 in the Revised Standard Version, Jesus said,

[28] *"Truly, I say to you,*

*all sins will be forgiven the sons of men[and women],*

*and whatever blasphemies they utter;*

[29] *but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit never has forgiveness,*

*but is guilty of an eternal sin"—*

[30] *for they had said, "He has an unclean spirit."*

We Christians certainly can get caught up in worrying about whether or not

we did the "unforgivable sin" –

or use this as a handy way to condemn others.

However, I believe faithful people must dig beneath a shallow reading of scripture

to see what more it has to say and how it can speak to our world in our time.

Here's another way of interpreting those verses to make sense of them –

especially about what it has to say about the 'heart':

Then they said,

*"It is he who has the evil spirit."*

And because of this Jesus was furious, saying,

*"All the sins and curses committed by humanity will be forgiven.*

*But misrepresenting 'good' by calling it 'evil',*

*is to blind to the Spirit of what is 'good';*

*And that cannot be undone by anyone – except oneself!"*

[Ezekiel 18:25-29 supports this.]

What I believe this means is that we will not be judged so much for *what* we do,

but rather for how we *choose* to do what we do – the habit of our hearts.

A hardened heart cannot be forgiven,

only because it is not open to truth and love and therefore, change;

And isn't truth and love what we hope is at the heart

of what Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are about?

So friends, may we as Christians and Jews and Muslims

agree to not treat each other as evil.

May we acknowledge that our respective faiths claim belief in one God –

a God who is a living being and who will hold us responsible

for how we represent God, regardless of the labels we use.

And as we recognize that which is good, true, and loving in others,

may we welcome them no matter who they are or where they are

on their life's journey –

even those who bring their own food to Panera and love to dance!

Amen