

“Love Sunday”

The Rev. Drew Willard  
UCC at The Villages, FL  
*3<sup>rd</sup> Sun. Advent/Love Sun.*  
December 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2018  
Luke 2:1-7

This is the 7<sup>th</sup> time that the United Church of Christ at The Villages has hosted an integrated service of worship that includes clergy from Judaism and Islam.

This is technically not an interfaith service, but a Protestant service in which there is enough flexibility to welcome – and weave in, other faith traditions.

It is a model for other communities to follow in a time where there is so much ethnic fear and sectarian distrust.

Together, we Christians, Jews, & Muslims, are part of the Abrahamic faith tradition, which refers to our shared ancestor of Abraham... which is to say, Abraham & Sarah are the spiritual forebears for Jews & Christians, and Abraham & Hagar are the spiritual forebears for Muslims.

Our general theme for this year’s Love Sunday is “Refugees, Pilgrims, & Hospitality” given that this is a significant not only here in America, but throughout the world.

Each of our faiths has a story to tell about what it means to be on a journey as a ‘pilgrim’ or as a ‘refugee’, and therefore, what it means to experience ‘hospitality’ – or hostility.

Pilgrimage happens to be part of the shared experience of UCC at The Villages and Temple Shalom.

Temple Shalom had been meeting at a Methodist church 3 miles away from here, and when their building was completed just a mile further up CR 101, they did a “kadimah” – or pilgrimage, to carry their Torah – their Bible, from one place of meeting to the next.

Before this building was constructed, we of the UCC had land here on CR 101, and when we heard that the congregation of Temple Shalom would be walking by, our members showed up, wearing their Sunday best with signs saying, ‘Welcome!’ and with bottles of water to hand out. That friendship has continued through the years.

Pilgrimage is such an important part of Islam, that it is one of their most basic principles, called the 5 Pillars of Islam: *faith, prayer, charity, fasting at Ramadan, and pilgrimage to Mecca.*

Willard, p.2

There are many journeys being made these days – not simply as a pilgrimage of faith, but as desperate flights away from persecution, violence, famine, and poverty. Journeys made in such extreme circumstances, may very well become pilgrimages at some future time to remember the epic crossing of some wasteland.

In Christianity, the Christmas story includes both kinds of journeys, beginning with the forced trek of a peasant family along with all the people of Galilee and Judea who were dominated by their Roman overlords to be counted like a commodity.

Then there is the journey of the three kings – often represented as the three ethnic streams of humanity: black, white, and brown, who come as pilgrims to witness and pay homage to a newborn baby, a heavenly hope for the Savior of human-kind, and to shield that hope from a corrupt king.

The story ends with another journey – the flight of that peasant family as refugees to Egypt, seeking to escape the violence of that corrupt king.

The United Church of Christ itself has a history of refugees, too – whose tradition we as a country celebrated not too long ago.

Separatist pilgrims – The Pilgrims, were harassed in 15<sup>th</sup> Century CE England where the official religion was the Anglican Church of England.

First, they fled to the Netherlands, but poverty drove them back to seek the grudging permission of King James, who allowed them to join a commercial expedition – the Mayflower.

I am very proud of that part of our church's history because our Pilgrim forebears were good guests of the Native people who saved them through their great generosity and hospitality.

Another reason for pride – even more so, is because the Pilgrims and the Wampanoags did not compel one another to become Native or European, but each retained their cultural integrity. Their alliance lasted 50 years on the strength of the friendships that had been forged, but undone by those who could only see 'us' or 'them'..

Willard, p.3

I will close with a song about refugees:

“Away and in Danger” by Shirley Erena Murray

adapted from <https://www.hopecublishing.com/find-hymns-hw/hw5787.aspx>

*Away and in danger, no hope of a bed,  
the refugee children, no tears left to shed  
look up at the night sky for someone to know  
that refugee children have no place to go.*

*The babies are crying, their hunger awakes,  
the boat is too loaded, it shudders and breaks;  
humanity's wreckage is thrown out to die,  
the refugee children will never know why.*

*Come close, little children, we hold out our hand  
in rescue and welcome to shores of our land -  
in touching, in healing your fear and your pain,  
with dreams for your future when peace comes again.*

Amen

The UN High Commissioner for Refugees defines...

*A refugee is someone who has been forced to flee his or her country  
because of persecution, war or violence.*

*A refugee has a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of  
race, religion, nationality, political opinion  
or membership in a particular social group.*

*Most likely, they cannot return home or are afraid to do so.*

*War and ethnic, tribal and religious violence are leading causes  
of refugees fleeing their countries.*

*Two-thirds of all refugees worldwide come from just five countries...*

*Syria [6.3 million], Afghanistan [2.6 million], South Sudan [2.4 million],  
Myanmar [1.2 million], Somalia [< 1 million]*

There are at least 13.5 million people who are refugees – or about 2%  
out of the 7.5 billion people on Earth.

This does not include 2 million Yemenis displaced within their own country  
or the thousands from Central America seeking asylum here.

Inspired by Luke 2:1-7

NOW, THE TIME HAD COME

WHEN A DECREE WENT OUT FROM CAESAR AUGUSTUS

THAT A CENSUS BE TAKEN OF THE EMPIRE.

THIS WAS THE FIRST CENSUS,

WHEN QUIRINIUS WAS GOVERNOR OF SYRIA.

AND EVERYONE HAD TO JOURNEY OUT TO BE ENROLLED,

EACH TO THEIR OWN HOMETOWN.

AND SO, JOSEPH WENT UP FROM THE GALILEE

OUT OF THE TOWN OF NAZARETH TO JUDEA,

INTO THE CITY OF DAVID, WHICH IS CALLED BETHLEHEM,

BECAUSE HE WAS OF THE HOUSE AND LINEAGE OF DAVID.

HE WAS TO BE ENROLLED WITH MARY, WHO WAS ENGAGED TO HIM –

WHO WAS ALSO PREGNANT.

BUT WHEN THEY ARRIVED AT THIS PLACE,

‘THE TIME HAD COME’ FOR HER TO GIVE BIRTH.

AND SHE BROUGHT FORTH A SON, HER FIRSTBORN CHILD.

AND THEY WRAPPED HIM UP IN SWADDLING CLOTHES

AND LAID HIM DOWN IN A FEED-TROUGH,

BECAUSE THERE WAS NO PLACE FOR THEM IN THAT TOWN –

NOT EVEN A GUEST ROOM.