

"The Way of Jesus: The Quest for Community"
A Sermon for University Congregational Church
Sunday, August 15, 2021
Rev. Paul Ellis Jackson

Traditional Word

²⁶ So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, ²⁷ for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. ²⁸ There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. ²⁹ If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise. – Galatians 3:26-29

Contemporary Word

"The best way to find yourself is to lose yourself in the service of others." – Mahatma Gandhi

Good morning. Welcome to the present. No, I'm serious. Today, we begin dealing with the present state of the Way of Jesus. I've used many resources this summer, along with the rich nuances of Diana Butler Bass and her book *A People's History of Christianity*. I've been introduced to many other new Christian thinkers this summer. One of my favorite contemporary theologians is Shane Claiborne.

Shane Claiborne is a Christian activist and author who is a leading figure in the New Monasticism movement and one of the founding members of the non-profit organization, The Simple Way, in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Claiborne is also a social activist, advocating for nonviolence and service to the poor. Listen to his words this morning as we leave the past and journey into our present and future.

Shane says that "It is a beautiful thing when folks in poverty are no longer just a missions project but become genuine friends and family with whom we laugh, cry,

dream, and struggle. One of the verses I have grown to love is the one where Jesus is preparing to leave the disciples and says, "I no longer call you servants.... Instead, I have called you friends" (John 15:15). Servanthood is a fine place to begin, but gradually we move toward mutual love, genuine relationships. Someday, perhaps we can even say those words that Ruth said to Naomi after years of partnership: "Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried" (Ruth 1:16-17)."

The significant difference between how our early Christ-following Jewish ancestors grew in their beliefs and ourselves is where we land in regards to Christian Ethics. Then we focused on charity, the spiritual practices of helping the poor and sick, or other ways of alleviating the lives of poor humans. It very rarely occurred to Christians that they might be able to change the actual conditions that created poverty, violence, and oppression. But to even have that conversation, we need to discuss the notions of tolerance and plurality in the United States.

To hear Diane Butler Bass put it: "Ever since Christianity became the majority religion in Europe, they found tolerance a difficult virtue to practice." (249). In fact, the church has been the purveyor of much of this intolerance through the ages. The Great wars of Europe fought in the name of their kingdom of "God," who, more often than not, is purportedly the *same* God. How do we reconcile all of this history of our faith with the staggering realities that face us each day: poverty, oppression of anyone deemed "different" or "uppity" or "difficult" or any other number of

descriptors we use to actively “other” people. To turn them into objects with which we can then more easily dispense. For if you truly see the Holy One in another human, you could never dispense with them—you could only treat them as you would treat God.

What does it mean when we read in Galatians this scripture: "26 So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, 27 for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. 28 There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. 29 If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise." – Galatians 3:26-29 Is there “true” equality? And what would it look like? And how about this: What do I have to give up to make us more equal? I think that’s the real question at the heart of many of our differences.

It is no secret that I love my community. I love all of the various contexts I belong to: The City of Wichita, this congregation, our choir, my theater work, my family, and that group of crazy friends that I call my tribe. There are others—and I am proud to belong to them all. I enjoy working and being with other people. I’m an extrovert, so I get energy from social encounters. My favorite work is that which helps others in some way. My first career was in Technical Education, and I am proud of the teaching I did and the lives I changed by helping people of all ages learn basic skills in the health professions.

It should also come as no surprise to you that I became the lead advisor for the Health Occupations Students of America chapter that flourished at the Wichita Area

Technical College during that time. I immensely enjoyed working with these students as they tried on the clothes of leadership: They put on the hat of the “chair,” or they served as the “scribe,” or they even were brave enough to stand for a year as the parliamentarian—my favorite, because I love teaching Roberts Rules of Order and then watching as new members of boards and committees learn how to use those tools to be part of a leadership community.

University Congregational Church provides training to its new board members each year, and I always love it when someone pipes up for the first time in a meeting with “point of order” or “I call the question.” These “rules” we have established allow us to get the work of the community done. And I believe we all know the work of THIS community, this congregation, is to bring around better Jesus’ idea of the perfect community—the beloved community—where everyone is indeed treated equitably—where we love God and neighbor—and where our actions match those words. Perhaps Mahatma Gandhi said it best: “The best way to find yourself is to lose yourself in the service of others.”

Diane Butler Bass posits that modernity came to an end in August of 1945. Seventy-six years ago this month, the United States dropped two nuclear devices on the cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. We all remember the awesome and terrifying words that the leader of the project, J. Robert Oppenheimer, had uttered on the successful first explosion of an atomic bomb: “I am become death., the shatterer of worlds.” Scripture from the sacred Bhagavad Gita. The Modern age had opened with the great hope that all war could be abolished; the era closed with the fear that

instead, war could end everything. Many Christians of the age were confident that the atomic bomb was the harbinger of the end times, while just as many hoped, it might instead usher in a new spiritual beginning. Patrick Allitt, a renowned historian of this era, wrote: "But nearly all agreed that they were standing at one of the crossroads of history, faced with choices that would have consequences not only in the everyday world but for the future of the entire civilization." (279)

Little more than a year before Allitt wrote that sentence, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, passionate resister of the Nazi regime, was rotting in a Nazi jail under arrest for his suspected involvement in a plot to assassinate Adolf Hitler. Bonhoeffer was best known for his 1937 book, *The Cost of Discipleship*, where he elaborated on what it meant for him to follow the Way of Jesus: He believed that the Way of Jesus "will liberate [humankind] from man-made dogmas, from every burden and oppression, from every anxiety and torture which afflicts the conscience."

In Bonhoeffer's day, the established German church became a willing slave to Nazi ideology. Swastikas hung from pulpits, and many preachers openly support the aims and tactics of the regime. Many....most....of the established clergy were willing participants in using the pulpit to strengthen Nazi ideals and further persuade the people of Hitler's intentions. If any of this sounds familiar, it should, because it has been happening in our country for many years now. There is a strategic use of the church to pursue political goals that I thought would never happen in our country—and yet we've allowed it to occur.

Bonhoeffer had such a deep love for his country that when he saw how the Nazis were perverting the gospel for their death-dealing ways, he could not stand aside, safe in some foreign country, while the church he loved was brutalized and overtaken by zealots of death. He returned to Germany towards the end of the 1930s to begin resisting Nazi influence in the church. He worked with the Confessing Church movement, trying to weaken Nazi control of his beloved German church.

As you can imagine, the Gestapo distrusted Bonhoeffer and forbade him from lecturing, writing, or making speeches, and on April 5, 1943, they arrested him on false charges. Two years later, on Sunday, April 8, 1945, after allowing Bonhoeffer to lead his fellow prisoners in worship, the Nazis led him away and hanged him.

Part of Bonhoeffer's legacy was his assertion that perhaps Christianity, as we have thought of it, is over, that maybe all religions were dying (and given what he was witnessing in 1940s Germany, it would be easy to see why he thought that). Bonhoeffer thought that religion no longer made any sense and that it may have been "the garment of Christianity," something the faith wore, but not really the faith. He asked an essential question of us all: What is a religionless Christianity?

It seems that Bonhoeffer found Christianity to be on the verge of a significant change—on a scale not seen since the Protestant Revolution. In his question about a "religionless Christianity," it seems he was trying to acknowledge the passing of the current "Christian" pattern of the church that might give way to a more vital form of "The Way of Jesus." One that might give life to more Christ-centered forms of spiritual practices, prayers, hospitality, and forgiveness. For Bonhoeffer,

Religionless Christianity would not be primarily a religion of salvation where humans would not escape the suffering of the world; but instead, he wrote: "God is the 'Beyond' in the midst of our life.". Bonhoeffer did not live to see his project finished, but the task he began of refashioning a new Christianity, one that honored it's being sustained through modernity but refashioning it anew for a new age—that had barely started.

It appears we are at another crossroads in the United States. Are we going to remain a democratic republic, or will we allow ourselves to be sold a bill of goods that will actually bring about an authoritarian form of government? Did you know that about one-quarter of all citizens of the United States pine for a dictatorship? Some of the latest research shows that instead of strengthening democracy, a large number of us would rather have us become a fascist dictatorship. Our friends and neighbors harbor these dark dreams. Oh, they'll tell you all sorts of reasons for their beliefs, but they want a strongman leader, not a government of the people, by the people, and for the people. I would advise us all to be very cautious in the coming months and always make sure we are getting our news from journalists, who abide by a set of professional ethics that demand they seek the truth, as opposed to entertainers and commentators who have no such ethical boundaries—their only concern is their bottom line. Always try to find your truth in facts, not falsehoods.

This brings me to today's question. Where do we go from here? Next week we've planned a very laid-back service. We're calling it the Dogs Days of August Sunday and asking you to wear your most comfortable jeans or shorts. It's going to

be a simple service as we finish this summer's sermon series, and I reflect on my thoughts about where we go from here—not just this great congregation but our entire community. Where does University Congregational Church want to take the Christian story next? How do we want to live the Way of Jesus in a new world? How can we use our faith and our religion to keep the forces of Empire, the forces of systems of oppression, at bay? Think about it.

Several years ago, this congregation was gifted by the presence of Renee Macdonald. Renee is leaving Wichita this week to begin her new life and career in Philadelphia. I've asked Renee if she would end today's worship with a special choral benediction.

Somewhere Over the Rainbow here....

Pastoral Blessing after....

RESOURCES USED:

Holy Bible, NRSV

Diana Butler Bass. *A People's History of Christianity: The Other Side of the Story*, HarperCollins, New York, NY, 2009.