

14 Pentecost
September 6, 2020

In the name of the God of all Creation,
The God alive in each of us as God was alive in Jesus,
And the Power of God known in the Spirit.
Amen.

Ken Clawson was Director of Communication for President Richard Nixon at the time Nixon resigned from office during the Watergate scandal. Ken Clawson was also my wife's ... Caren's ... college roommate's husband. Long before I met Ken I had heard him at a press conference explaining a sudden shift in policy matter by saying, "Events have overtaken circumstances."

Anyhow, I was reminded of Ken's explanation, "events overtaking circumstances," yesterday. The "circumstances" were my writing a sermon for this morning. The "events" were a terminally ill homeless man who needed a motel room for a few days until his family could pick him up and take him home. So, instead of writing a sermon, the events overtook the circumstances, and I spent much of yesterday arranging assistance for Gus.

Oh ... I wrote a sermon. It is right here. It is about the gospel reading we just heard. It is about the rules of engagement in a church fight. Since Caren and I spent a couple of decades as consultants to congregations in conflict, it is a subject I know well. It may not be a "great" sermon, but it is a sermon.

However, in the middle of the night, I awoke with the thought ... "How is this sermon about church conflict Good News?" "Good News" in the sense of the literally meaning of "gospel." In the midst of this COVID-19 pandemic ... on a holiday weekend ... with schools and colleges opening up ... with social and political unrest, and protestors and counter-protestors killing each other in the streets ... with a heightened awareness of the effects of systemic racism, and white privilege, and our involvement in it ... in a time of a soaring stock market, yet economic uncertainty for the essential workers who really put in the long hours of physical work ... in the midst of all this, how is a sermon about how to address a disagreement in a congregation "Good News?" I realized I had to some "Good News."

So, this will be brief ... and I hope it is "Good News." Interestingly, although our gospel reading from Matthew is about a disagreement in a church, the other readings have much to offer us in the midst of the issues facing the world around us. In our reading from the Book of Exodus we heard the story of that first Passover, and followed by a reaffirmation by Paul of Jesus' words when he quoted the Hebrew Scriptures "Love your neighbor as yourself."

The first reading tells us about the foundational ritual of the Jewish faith in the Passover Festival. This recalls the Exodus from oppression under the Egyptian Pharaoh. Remember also, it was the Passover Festival in Jerusalem that drew Jesus to the Holy City where he went to

protest the oppression of the Roman Empire, and the illicit Temple authorities upon the Jewish people. The theme of Passover and escape from oppression is picked up by Christians in the remembrance of the Last Supper and the symbolism of Jesus as the Passover Lamb sacrificed to free humanity from the bondage to sin.

The Passover ritual has been celebrated every year for thousands of years. Because I am Jewish, I have had the wonderful privilege of attending many Passover celebrations ... in people's homes, in synagogues, and even in my church in Toledo led by a family where the father and three sons were Jewish, and the mother was Episcopalian.

The Passover begins with the questions, "Why is this night different from all other nights?" Then the story that we just heard in our first reading is told. There are ritual symbols ... and a full meal. There are various blessings of cups of wine. But the story is always the same ... a story of freedom out of oppression ... all kinds of oppression ... in all kinds of places and times.

Jesus went to Jerusalem for the Passover Festival. It was there that he was crucified. And it was there that he was Resurrected. Jesus was Jewish. His followers were Jewish. So, the story of his death and resurrection was put into the context of a Jewish world, and the Passover celebration. That is our ... Christians' ... Holy Eucharist. It is the story of freedom from oppression.

In a world where COVID-19 deaths are disproportionately high in the communities of people of color. In a world where Blacks are being killed unjustly. In a world where income inequality starves those who provide the essential work, while the top one percent literally have more money than they know what to do with ... in that world there is oppression. In a world where systemic racism denies a person opportunities just because of the color of their skin ... that is a world where there is oppression. That is why our Holy Eucharist ... our remembrance of Jesus ... his death and resurrection ... is much more than taking a piece of bread and a sip of wine. It is our participation in the ritual that says we are the ones empowered to address the oppressions of our time.

How do we do that? If we are to take seriously what Jesus took seriously, how are we to address all forms of oppression in our own time? I believe is that what we should wish for every person and nation comes from what Paul says in this morning's reading. The only debt we should carry, he says, is the never-ending debt to "love your fellow human being." "Love your neighbor as yourself." Loving your neighbor fulfills any and every other divine command, for genuine love "does no harm to its neighbor." And, earlier in the Gospel of Matthew, in the Sermon on the Mount, we heard Jesus give the instructions that we're to love not only our neighbor, but even our enemy.

The Good News is that we participate ... week after week ... in this holy meal. It is a ritual that has been a part of the Christian faith for two thousand years. Remember, however, that our Holy Communion is based upon the Passover ritual. Most scholars date the events of the story we heard this morning to the thirteenth century before Jesus. That means that people have

been using ritual to remind them of God's power to overcome oppression for over three thousand years old.

On the one hand, the Jewish celebration of the Passover, and the Christian's celebration of Holy Communion, is a ritual. Some people participate in that ritual for the sake of the ritual itself ... and may even argue about its particulars. On the other hand, there are those who see the ritual as a vessel that carries God's truth ... a truth which drives the forces of good against those of oppression. When the ritual becomes that kind of vessel it empowers us all to participate in the Good News.

Yes, events overtook the circumstances yesterday. At times I was annoyed by the fact that I had to spend time addressing something other than what I had planned to. However, I know full well that God sometimes interrupts our plans to show us what is really needed. I really don't think we needed to hear about how to be fair in a church fight ... as necessary as those rules are. Sometimes we need to hear that the oppression in the world takes all forms. Sometimes we need to hear ... at least I need to hear ... especially if we take seriously what Jesus took seriously ... that we are to love our neighbor as ourselves ... our homeless, terminally ill neighbor ... even if he is annoying.

I'm going to end with a portion of our reading from Paul:

"Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. The commandments, "You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not covet"; and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, "Love your neighbor as yourself." Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law."

I believe this is Good News.

Amen.