“The Essence of Christianity”

Joel 2:1-2, 12-17; II Corinthians 2:5:20-6:10;
Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

(Part I of VIII in the sermon series, “The Essence of Christianity”)

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From the Pulpit
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A sermon delivered by The Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Ash Wednesday, February 18, 2015, dedicated Jane Carter and to the memory of Marcus Borg to whom I dedicate this Sermon Series & always to the glory of God!

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

Le Chambon-sur-Lignon is a small farming village in south central France. Residents have been primarily Huguenot or Protestant since the 17th century. During World War II, the French Huguenots made the village a haven for Jews fleeing from the Nazis. They hid Jews within
the town and countryside and helped them flee to neutral Switzerland. It is believed that between 1,000 and 3,000 Jews were hidden in LaChambon - a town of only 3,000 people during World War II.

Aware that Jews were being murdered and later wiped out in the gas chambers of concentration camps, French Protestant Christians in a tiny mountain town took action to save as many people as possible. They turned their community into a hiding place for Jews from all across Europe. Magda Trocme, the wife of the local pastor in the Reformed church, explained how it all began.

Those of us who received the first Jews did what we thought had to be done – nothing more complicated. It was not decided from one day to the next what we would have to do. There were many people in the village who needed help. How could we refuse them? A person doesn’t sit down and say I’m going to do this and this and that. We had no time to think. When a problem came, we had to solve it immediately. Sometimes people ask me, “How did you make a decision?” There was no decision to make. The issue was: Do you think we are all brothers or not? Do you think it is unjust to turn in the Jews or not? Then let us try to help!
When asked of the risks she faced, Magda Trocme replied:

*In the beginning, we did not realize the danger was so big. Later, we became accustomed to it, but you must remember that the danger was all over. The people who were in the cities had bombs coming down and houses coming in on their heads, and they were killed. Others were dying in the war, in battles. Other people were being persecuted, like those in Germany. It was a general danger, and we did not feel we were in much more danger than the others. And, you see, the danger was not what you might imagine.*

*You might imagine that the people were fighting with weapons in the middle of the square, that you would have had to run away, that you would have to go into a little street and hide. The danger was not that kind at all. The danger was in having a government that, little by little, came into the hands of the Germans, with their laws, and the French people were supposed to obey those laws. (Courage to Care, ed. C. Rittner and S. Myers, 102).*

Early in the war, the police arrested Magda’s husband Rev. Andre Trocme and his associate pastor, Rev. Edouard Theis. Although they were later released, the Gestapo continued to monitor all their activities. In the summer of
1943, the Gestapo forced Rev. Trocmé into hiding for ten months by offering a reward for his capture. Many knew his whereabouts but no one turned him in.

In 1982, documentary filmmaker Pierre Sauvage—who was born as his parents were sheltered in Le Chambon—returned there to southern France to film “Weapons of the Spirit” (1989). He interviewed many people forty years after the Holocaust, asking simply, “Why did you hide the Jews at risk to your own lives?” The overwhelming response was that they did what they did because it was the right thing to do. It had to be done. They did not regard themselves as heroes nor did they want others to see them that way. Almost everyone in the community took part in the effort. Even the children were involved. When a Nazi official came to organize a Hitler Youth camp in the village, the students said they would not do that. They told him that: “We will not do that. We make no distinction between Jews and non-Jews. It is contrary to the Gospel teachings of Jesus.” The Nazi left and never tried again.

Reflecting on his film and the amazing people he met returning to LeChambon after 40 years, Pierre Sauvage believes that the villagers’ courage must never be forgotten.
If we do not learn how it is possible to act well even under the most trying circumstances, we will increasingly doubt our ability to act well even under less trying ones... If Jews do not learn that the whole world did not stand idly by while we were slaughtered, we will undermine our ability to develop the friendships and alliances that we need and deserve. If Christians do not learn that even then there were practicing Christians, they will be deprived of inspiring and essential examples of the nature and requirements of their faith. If the hard and fast evidence of the possibility of good on earth is allowed to slip through our fingers and turn into dust, then future generations will have only dust to build on. If hope is allowed to seem an unrealistic response to the world, if we do not work towards developing confidence in our spiritual resources, we will be responsible for producing in due time a world devoid of humanity – literally. (Ibid. 135).

Magda Trocme also saw the rescuers as teaching a lesson. After the war, she told an interviewer: “When people read this story, I want them to know that I tried to open my door. I tried to tell people, ‘Come in, come in.’ In the end, I would like to say to people, ‘Remember that in your life there will be lots of circumstances that will need a kind of courage, a kind of decision of your own, not about other people but about yourself. I would not say more.’”
In the end of “Weapons of the Spirit,” Pierre Sauvage interviews the farmer who first hid his parents, “Why did you do it? Why did you hide my family?” The man, then in his 80’s looks into the camera and responds, “I don’t understand your question.” Pierre Sauvage reframes the question and asks again. The man answers, “Jesus tells us to love our neighbors. Why would I not do what my savior tells me to do?” He looks right into the camera and his serious look changes to a smile. He reaches out his hand to Pierre and holds him. There is in this farmer of LeChambon an inner resolve that comes from a place in the heart.

This place in the heart is the essence of Christianity.

The story of LeChambon is a wonderful illustration of what a Christian community looks like. Under pressure to do the right thing, courage rises up. Growing out of a biblical understanding of “loving thy neighbor” in the vision of Christ, a community of 3,000 farmers grounded in the faith of Jesus Christ and way of our Savior steps forward to save 1,000 Jews while 6 million are being wiped out in genocidal madness in the Holocaust.

In his book, The Heart of Christianity, recently deceased theologian Marcus Borg writes, “What is the heart of Christianity? What is most central to Christianity and being
a Christian? It is this. How does the heart of Christianity beat within all of us who are baptized into Christ?’

In the weeks ahead, Rev. Corzine and I will look into the texts of the season and the season of the heart of Christianity. We will look deeply into the essence of Christianity. As “Essence” is defined as “the intrinsic nature or indispensable quality of something that determines its true character,” the “Essence of Christianity” will come to light in this season as Beloving, Following, Justice, Compassion, Hope, Love and Resurrection Faith.

We begin our Lenten journey on a snowy day in winter. As we begin “Lent” - which means “springtime” in Latin - we will experience this season opening us to the springtime of our souls. Our hope and prayer is that you spend these 40 days in holy preparation of your soul for the Resurrection of Christ which awaits us on Easter Sunday. As we dig through the snow planting seeds and desiring growth in the springtime of our lives of faith, may we be open to awakening. May we open the doors of our souls – as Magda Trocme did so many years ago. May we open the door of our hearts to Christ as he comes knocking. May we say, “Come in, come in.”
As Magda reminds us, “Remember that in your life there will be lots of circumstances that will need a kind of courage, a kind of decision of your own, not about other people but about yourself.” Thanks be to God for this opportunity to walk into the heart of our faith – into the essence of Christianity. Amen.

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