

A sermon delivered by the Rev. Dr. Janine Wilson, associate minister at the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, July 22, 2012, Pentecost 9.

“Center of Gravity”

Mark 6:30-34; 53-56; Psalm 23

+++++

This has been a week filled with shock and sadness as we have watched the unfolding of another outbreak of pointless violence; this time in Colorado. Let us begin with silent prayer for the victims, families, those who responded and those who will continue to work with the families and community. . . . May the words of my mouth and the meditation of all our hearts be acceptable to you O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer, amen.

+++++

I began my ordained ministry in Oklahoma. The dean of the school I had attended had encouraged me to consider taking a look at a particular church. I read their church information form. Out of curiosity, I called the chamber of commerce to ask a local a few questions. I explained I was considering a move from Kentucky and wondered what Oklahoma looked like. The woman told me about red bud trees in bloom, rolling hills and lush forests.

Wow, I thought – I love the geography of Kentucky. Oklahoma sounds like a great match. (If you have ever traveled to Oklahoma, you are welcome to begin chuckling now.) Yes there *are* red buds, but the bloom is actually purple. There are hills and they do rise and fall a little when you go up and over, but with the exception of the Wichita mountains in the southeast corner, OK hills are more like enthusiastic ant hills compared to Kentucky; and the trees in the area I was going to live in are closer to big bushes compared to trees east of the Mississippi.

I've often thought about inviting the friendly voice of that chamber of commerce to travel east for a week or two so she could experience a different kind of beauty – one she clearly had not yet had a chance to know. Both states are beautiful, just different.

Truth be told, though, when seeking to fulfill my call, thoughts of sightseeing were only sidebar images. What I needed to know a chamber of commerce could not have told me. I knew I wanted to serve God with a church full of people marked by compassion, mercy and courage. I knew I was compelled by some peculiar internal, not external, compass. There was a gravitational pull to be part of a church that echoed the emerging one we see in this morning's gospel – one with the compassion of Christ in the lead; a group of eager learners/teachers/doers in dialogue with each other and the community in which they lived; and everyone focused on the mercy of God.

Said casually, it all sounds like pie-in-the-sky. But every now and then, it comes to life and we catch a glimpse of Christ's church in action. The hard part is that we need to be open to go some of the darkest places. We need to know about the violence - from Syria to Colorado; to feel the hunger - from Columbus to Ethiopia; to shudder in the presence of hatred and discrimination locally and globally. *Then* we can begin to make change happen.

There is no doubt that we were called together in Christ to become the new community working in and for God's reign. The Apostle Paul put it this way: "*Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.*" (1 Corinthians 12.27) Eyes, ears, mind and heart – open and ready to receive and respond . . . that's what it means to be the community of the living God.

The church is called to be the real deal. I hoped to one day participate with those who held this as their goal. I also knew, however, that it was not just about what I wanted. Our individual journey of faith is important and yet it's not the only thing. Our call is not some kind of a divine set-up so every individual can assume the posture of "everyone for themselves." Our shared job description is to honor one another, listening for God's voice to be

heard in the center. Every voice matters. The stakes are high. One of our goals is to seek to interpret and reinterpret God's story together – as one body. Both parts are essential. In this morning's passage, Jesus makes it clear that every person matters, the disciples as well as the people who come for healing and wholeness. And we witness a core motivation for Jesus and his hands-on ministry with the crowds that just won't leave him alone.

Jesus knows everyone needs both direction and, at times, a break. So he suggests a retreat (similar perhaps to the one some of our own parishioners have taken this morning), a getaway without a nicely organized informational packet or the hint of a power point, App or Ipad. Together the disciples "*went away in the boat to a deserted place by themselves*" (Mark 6:31a), but as soon as the oars hit the water, the crowds close in on them again. Suddenly, Jesus cancels the retreat. His compassionate heart turns back to the greater needs of the people. This is not to say we are never to take a break from work; of course we are. God created the Sabbath for our wholeness and well being and an intentional space to build our relationship with God. It does however, pose another challenge for us – to make space to change our plans and be moved by compassion and mercy.

Compassion and mercy are also found in the center of our call. The shepherd calls, we get up and go. It is not new news – but it can be hard work to follow our call. Still, we are the community that is challenged to respond to the pain. And when we do, there is often a surprise: the healing goes two directions – to the other person and to us. When God creates something new in the other person, God also creates something new in us.

Carolyn Maull McKinstry, author of *While the World Watched*, was a survivor of the Birmingham, Ala., bombing – that terrible Sunday morning in 1963 when the Ku Klux Klan set off a bomb in the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church. She begins her story describing the harsh things she remembered, including protesting with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

“For twenty years after . . . I tried hard to forget the senseless deaths, the inhumane injustices, the vicious German shepherds, and children getting arrested right on the streets of downtown Birmingham. . . . For almost five decades I had not been able to muster the courage, nor the composure, to publicly record the stories that have become such a dark part of our nation’s past. I had struggled to forget these stories, to rid them from my head and heart. They proved too horrible, too painful, to dredge up to memory.

“But now, as I see new generations coming and old generations passing, I feel compelled to remember, to write down in permanent in my eyewitness account of just what happened while the world watched . . . lest I forget. Lest we all forget . . . I hope this story will challenge you to re-examine your life; your daily living; your values; and your relationship with God, Our Creator. As you consider the events on these pages, may you choose to love, and may you commit yourself to live a life of reconciliation—first with God and then ultimately with those who share this world with you.”ⁱ

It’s a difficult story to hear; beyond imagination to have lived. She could have left the crisis behind her – gone up the mountain to rest and just stay there. No one would have blamed her, but she didn’t. Instead, the time came when she knew her call was to follow Jesus back down the mountain. There were people who needed her to promote peace and healing. And so she tells us:

“The deaths of my four girlfriends left me with a pain I cannot describe. But something beautiful has come of it, and that’s the vision God has given for reconciliation. My passion is to see people learn to work together and appreciate the diversity God created among us. This has become a calling for me, and I think about it all the time . . .

“In the 1960s, it seemed as though reconciliation was primarily about blacks and whites. But today it’s even broader, and it really comes down to interactions between individuals. The core of the issue is still the same . . . I also believe that one good deed

begets another good deed and that if we all adopt a spirit of love toward our neighbors and toward each individual we encounter, we can slowly make this world a better place – a place of reconciliation, as God intended.”ⁱⁱ

One of the deepest ironies about McKinstry’s story is that she was only a girl when all this happened to her. But isn’t it children who adopt a spirit of love and openness the best? I think so.

Consider, what happens here in children’s time. Mark Williams begins teaching some important lesson, but designs it in a way that the children can quickly hijack the outcome. They are so eager to engage the lesson that they don’t always defer back to the leader as they could. What they teach us while they are learning is always surprising. Without a clue, they invite all of us to witness the joy of what can happen when people truly adopt one another and listen.

To a child, listening to a Bible story or lesson is still a creative event. Every time a lesson starts, the children give us a brief glimpse of how our tradition grows, and how it continues to inspire. One of the coolest parts is that they unknowingly teach us how God makes things new.

The tragedies and atrocities in our world will not go away tomorrow, but we can take heart knowing our call individually and as God’s community, is to live as children of the living God, guided by compassion and trust.

If there are laws and practices we need to change to make our communities safe - it is time to get up and change them, now! If there are people who are hungry - it is time for us to feed them, now! If there are relationships that need to be mended - it is time to let the healing begin, now!

God calls us to commit to do the real work, the hard work – to follow and then get up and lead. We can *and we must* go where the Good Shepherd leads, *then* God’s peace will reign.

To God be all glory, now and forever, amen.

ⁱ Carolyn Maull McKinstry, *While the World Watched: A Birmingham Bombing Survivor Comes of Age During the Civil Rights Movement* (Tyndale House Publishers, Inc, 2011), p. ix-x.

ⁱⁱ *Ibid*, p.269-270.

Copyright 2012, First Congregational Church, UCC