

I have been troubled. Not as a Solo Pastor, Plumbing, or Electricity, Presbytery or Presbyterian Women. No, what troubles me is that everywhere we turn, people are taking cuttings from one another, attacking one another. In the Holy Lands (of ALL PLACES), in Ukraine, in Congress, Presidential Politics, but also, in our own families and community. One form of depression manifests with a person cutting themselves, as if to prove I CAN STILL FEEL. I no longer want to look at Next Door or Facebook, for all of the Cuts. Not killing one another, just getting your licks in, trying to hurt the other. During HOLY WEEK we witnessed the punches, whipping, cutting, scourging, Christ endured for us, AND it seems we are doing this yet again. My point this morning is that rather than all of the little cuts, all the many wounds; what the world needs is PRUNING. I know very little about ROSES, my being transplanted to GV. However, the house we moved into had many many roses, so I have had to learn to Dead Head, and how to Drastically Prune. Which has given me a new appreciation of the watchwords of the Reformation, when Protestant Churches were coming into being, often called the Motto of the Presbyterian Church: "THE CHURCH THAT CALLS ITSELF REFORMED WILL ALWAYS BE REFORMED" there is an implicit noun... Always being reformed by GOD! not that we choose to make change of free will, changes within the Church come in relation to GOD.

Our sermon title came because we live in an era between extremes, with some believing RELIGION needs to be cut out as a bad word. I cringe every time there are legal advertisements for victims of Clergy abuse. Versus those who believe NEW AGE SPIRITUALITY has no roots, no depth. So instead of "GIVE ME THAT OLD TIME RELIGION" the meeting of the 2 we are left with is "GIVE ME THAT OLD TIME SPIRITUALITY."

The end of April was always the time when I would take Confirmation Classes to Jewish Synagogue, to Catholic Mass and to the other local churches for worship. My thought was that rather than ignoring the reality of other faiths, to allow these disciples to see alternatives, and better consider what is important to them in how we practice their faith. Without exception, the realization always came that at Synagogue, at Mass, at all of the other Protestant churches, there was a Call to Worship, Opening Hymn, Prayer of Confession and Assurance of Pardon, Scriptures, Sermon and Offering.

However, planning an ecumenical worship service with Catholic, Protestants & Non-Denomination churches, we encountered a problem. The Non-Denominational pastors asked why we followed structure instead of just changing it every week? What the Gloria Patri and the Doxology are? why we recite the Apostle's or Nicene Creeds? I tried to explain that reciting the Creeds, the Doxology, Gloria Patri, even the order of Worship, are all elements of REFORMED WORSHIP. Inquiring about their worship, this non-denominational church described the guidance of their 3 Elders, Men, who decide what is the will of GOD and what they would do about any issue. There may come times when we chaff at the reins of having a denomination, however, the Lord's Prayer, the Gloria Patri, the Doxology, Let There Be Peace On Earth, and the Reformed Order of Worship are like touch stones of security.

The world may be falling apart, there have been wars going on simultaneously, 3 of the last 4 weeks plumbing backed up, Electric circuits stopped, the sound system broke down, making it seem demons... HOWEVER we can be confident of where we are going, we are not just making everything up as we go.

What is so special about the Gloria Patri and Doxology? These are both forms of DOXOLOGY, a DOXOLOGY reminds us of who we are, where we come from, whose we are and where we are going. As it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be, World without end!

Phillip was told by an Angel to go South to the Deserted Road, that road from Jerusalem to Gaza. Now a year ago that may not have wrung any bells for us, but for those who have previously been to the Holy Lands or were studying maps, there is one road that winds from Jerusalem, passed Masada toward Gaza. And we know where GAZA is located, that is where the fighting has taken place.

Phillip sees a stranger in a Chariot and is told to go to him. This stranger represents CHANGE; not just a threat, Phillip is being asked to PRUNE his assumptions to the root. This man is not a Jew, he is an Ethiopian, meaning African. He could not be Circumcised, because the man is a Eunuch. He is a Priest of the Religion of Kandake serving the Ethiopian Queen, not GOD. STILL, Phillip is instructed by an Angel and the man is reading the Book of Isaiah!

In the Scriptures, ALWAYS pay attention to Questions. The Stranger asks, "How can I understand unless someone explains to me." The actual word is not EXPLAINS, but more DIALOGUES with me.

2nd Tell me, is the Prophet talking about himself or someone else? While Prophesied Centuries before, this is the passage about Jesus as the Suffering Servant! Who did not argue or complain, who suffered for us. Which allows Phillip to explain about Jesus. When the Priest asks about Water and Baptism. In the PC(USA) we have only 2 Sacraments, Communion and Baptism, and Baptism is Admission to the Table. The intriguing part, is that Baptism is rightly done 1)With encouragement of Session; In Worship; by a Pastor; but there are circumstances in life, and when Baptism occurs in the Spirit of Christ, it is not Wrong.

The John Passage comes from the Farewell Discourse of Jesus at the Last Supper. The most moving element of which is Jesus Words To ABIDE WITH ME AS I ABIDE WITH YOU. What does it mean to ABIDE WITH JESUS? Following the Gardening Metaphor, I believe it is about being ROOTED, once GRAFTED together, the rose cannot differentiate between the ROOT and Branches and FRUIT, all are interconnected as one. If Jesus had commanded ABIDE WITH ME OR ELSE that would have been one thing, BUT Abide IN ME... is not simply believing the right way, or the right things, there is a sense of GIVE & TAKE of Relationship. Which is NOT TO SAY EVERYTHING HAPPENS FOR A REASON. Instead, it is that No Matter what, GOD's Promise in Jesus is to work for Good.

All of this happens before the CROSS, which I believe was not PART OF GOD's PLAN, so much as THE PRIME EXAMPLE OF GOD'S COMMITMENT to wrestle life and hope from every place devoid of Life and Hope.

There have been countless authors over time, who have tried to make the CROSS into some sort of MAGIC to forgive us no matter how wretched we are. Which I believe domesticates with Piety what is beyond Control. INSTEAD, the CROSS means that GOD resolved to not sit back in heaven, But in Jesus Christ to be joined with our Ups and Downs, Hopes and Disappointments, such that we would know GOD's Commitment to us. THE CROSS WAS NOT THE INSTRUMENT MAKING IT POSSIBLE FOR GOD TO FORGIVE US! The Cross is TESTIMONY & EVIDENCE THE BREADTH & DEPTH of How much GOD ALREADY LOVES US through every disaster we make of our lives. JUST SO, The Resurrection is The ASSURANCE that NO MATTER how much tragedy we endure: Sin, Evil, Pain, Suffering, Death will not have the last word.

I heard a lovely story about a Father whose young wife had died, and on the evening after the Memorial, their young child asked over and over again "WHERE IS MOMMY?" Finally, the Father was only able to get the child to quiet down by their lying in the bed he had shared with his wife. In the dark the child reached out his hand to touch the Father's Face, saying "KEEP FACING TOWARD ME, IF YOU DO, I KNOW BOTH YOU & MOMMY ARE WITH ME." As the Father went to sleep, he whispered a Prayer: "DEAR GOD, I AM LOST AND KNOW NOT WHICH WAY TO GO, BUT IF YOU KEEP YOUR FACE WATCHING OVER ME, ABIDE WITH ME and I WILL NOT BE LOST."