

Berlin Congregational UCC / Easter 7 / 5/12/24 / Psalm 1 / Colossians 1.24-27

“Christ in You, the Hope of Glory”

During the message, when you hear me say: “Christ in you” please respond: “the hope of glory.” (PRACTICE)

And please find your bulletin insert from Jordan Harrell with “but only one is Christlike” response - that’s your part as we go through it now, building on Paul’s emphasis on “Christ in you.”

READ RESPONSIVELY

So, then, “Christ in you... the hope of glory”

Friends, I suggest we hear these words in the context of loss and grief, e.g., the Colossians anticipation of losing Paul, in prison, probably martyred soon, they knew, or, more to the moment, your loss of your settled pastor, or any of the losses and griefs you may be feeling in your own life right now.

Our lives are full of losses; our faith promises hope... always hope.

In the context of the Harrell quote, we also feel the loss of the Bible to fundamentalists, who have turned off almost an entire generation by making it into what H L Mencken called “a paper pope,” who make it into an idol like the golden calf in the Exodus, a *book* that is worshipped instead of worshipping God.

Instead, we are called by our faith to read our precious Holy Bible with great care, and to mine and refine its raw ore to get the nuggets that are there to be refined.

I'm inviting us to "take back the Bible," and rescue it, with Abraham Heschel, from the hands of its admirers.

I'm inviting us to engage with our fundamentalist neighbors with the affirmation, with Leander Keck, that if we take the Bible seriously we can't take it literally.

I'm inviting us to not throw out the baby with the bathwater, but rather to carefully read the holy words of holy scripture, diligently care for the "baby" as we let go of the bathwater.

Then we can distill the essence of God's word, the essence of Christ's love, and the essence of the Spirit's light, not missing Christ, coming into our hearts and off the page...

"Christ in you..."

I think it was Karl Barth who said faithful Christians, civic-minded Christians, need to carry the Bible in one hand, and a newspaper in the other – a custom as essential and urgent now as it was in Barth's 1930s Germany.

Barth, Bonhoeffer, Niemoller, and the Confessing Church of Germany did not speak up enough to challenge the tide of racist authoritarianism that ignored the Sermon on the Mount, and look what happened.

Today we are just as much at risk as then, with the idolatry of Christian nationalism. We cringe at what we read in the paper. Talk about losses:

America's loss of innocence, loss of civility, loss of trust, loss of truth, loss of integrity, loss of the vision of America as a melting pot:

“Give me your poor tired masses yearning to be free,” wrote Emma Lazarus, inspired by the Statue of Liberty.

As much as reading the news can be distressing and depressing, we need, indeed, to follow it as closely as the Bible, with Barth, so that we can discern what’s Christlike in virtue, in direction, in truth...

“Christ in you...

The ancient Celtic Church got it right. Saints like Brigid and Columba respected the word of God in the Bible, but did not equate the word with the words; neither did the gospel of John: “in the beginning was the Word... and the Word became flesh.” Christ is the Word, not the Bible.

In fact the Celtic saints talked about the big book – nature - and the little book – scripture.

In other words, they looked first to the natural world to discern God and the inherent unity of humankind, just as we did when we marveled at the eclipse last month. Wow, what a wonder! And a reminder that two seemingly diametrically opposed states – Vermont and Texas – are both part of our national identity, indivisible, according to the Pledge to the flag. And with the eclipse, we somehow know that. We somehow sidestep the polarization and realize our inherent oneness in spite of our differences.

Some of you may remember the late Rev John Nutting, VT Conference minister who, from Jurgen Moltmann, distinguished one-ness from unity. VT and Texas may not be united, but we are “one” in our constitutional connection in our “United States.”

In the same way, the Colossian church receives blessing and encouragement from Paul in prison. Beyond all your losses, worries, and consternation, you know, from him, you have “Christ in you...

In conclusion, friends, the Bible gives us Paul’s commission: “to make the word of God fully known” even though it can seem hidden. We reveal that hidden word, make it fully known, in our behavior, in exhibiting Christlike virtue and direction, maybe especially in our losses, in our suffering.

For when we feel the pain of loss or division or anxiety, we know the suffering of Paul, and of Christ, and, in the same breath, we know resurrection too.

And I encourage us to not shy away from difficult conversations with neighbors and friends and family who will challenge our Congregationalist perspective on the Bible, especially in this election season.

When we take a deep breath and share our faith that to take the Bible seriously we can’t take it literally, that we don’t have to accept polygamy, slavery, or patriarchy as norms or values for the present day, that we have a criterion for how to read and practice the Bible’s ethic: we always ask of a biblical text: is it Christlike?

May we then go forth with courage and conviction, comfort and direction in Paul’s assurance: “Christ in you.... Amen.