

"Trainsition"

Psalm 9:11-20; II Corinthians 6:1-13; Mark 4:35-41

June 24, 2018

Mary Taylor Memorial United Methodist Church, Milford, Connecticut

The Rev. Dr. Brian R. Bodt, Pastor

Each year at Annual Conference, retirees are given a 90 second video to share with the roughly 1,000 members of Annual Conference. This was mine (show video, script below):

Forty years of ordained ministry in the New York Annual Conference has been a great trip. I'm a third-generation Methodist clergyman and Maryland native who became a Connecticut Nutmeg. I served - or was ***stationed***, as the British Methodists say - in New York at Asbury-Crestwood, Yonkers and Glendale, Queens; and in Connecticut at Huntington, Golden Hill, Bridgeport; The Council of Churches of Greater Bridgeport; and Mary Taylor Memorial, Milford.

For 23 of those 40 years I've been a 5 minute walk from the main line of Metro North Railroad. There's an old story about the Methodist preacher who went down to the railroad station every night to watch the trains leave town. The station master finally asked the preacher why, and the preacher replied "*Because these trains are the only thing that moves in this town that I don't have to push!*"

The cleric over-rated their self-importance but had the right medium. While I'll continue to be involved in the Church, one retirement interest is supreme. It's a simple ***switch***, really. (At this point, I quickly remove a clerical collar and robe to reveal railroad coveralls. As I don a striped engineer's cap, the camera pans back to show a toy Lionel train circling on a table.)

Proverbs 22:6 says it best: "***Train*** a child in the right way, and when old, they will not stray." (NRSV)

That about says it all, I suppose. Well, not quite. As last week I focused on one verse, so this week I do the same:

“God says, ‘At an acceptable time I have listened to you, and on a day of salvation I have helped you.’ See, now is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation.”

II Corinthians 6:2, quoting Isaiah 49:8

You see, friends, **today** is all we have. No one is guaranteed tomorrow. If one guessed that that is *one* reason I am retiring they would not be far off. Although we never know whether we’ll have another tomorrow, it’s pretty certain that, at 64, I have more “yesterdays” than “tomorrows.” So retirement provides an opportunity to do and experience things that cannot be possible while working full time.

But retired or working, in school or in the “school of life,” young or old, we **all** have **today**. “On a day of salvation I have helped you,” writes Paul, quoting Isaiah 49 in what scholars call the Second Servant Song. Who cares? The Israelites did. In the 6th century B.C. their country was overrun by Babylon. Their leaders were exiled. Their hope for national independence and religious freedom was cut off. One might think that what they needed was comfort. Nothing doing. Isaiah says, in effect, “Oh, so you think God should raise you up to restore the nation of Israel? Nope. God says, ‘I’ve got a better idea. I will give you as a light to the nations.’” (Isaiah 49:6)

It reminds me of the story Bishop Will Willimon tells of greeting a parishioner after worship and asking how she was. She expressed hurt and sorrow about difficulties in her life, and Bishop Willimon said he hoped she experienced comfort in the service and message. “No,” she replied with haste and annoyance. “I came looking for comfort, and instead Jesus gave me an assignment.” If being a Christian was easy, everyone would do it.

This urgency of **today** was Paul's point to the Corinthians, exiled not physically but spiritually, and a contentious lot if ever there was one. Need something to fight about? Ask the Corinthians. What food is religiously proper to eat? Is it moral for a man to live with his father's wife? (Spoiler alert: **NO!**) Who is wise? Who has the best gifts? Who is the best religious teacher? How are the dead resurrected? The Corinthians could throw down so fast it would make "The Jerry Springer Show" look like kindergarten. (If you haven't seen The Jerry Springer Show, think "Dr. Phil" meets "World Wrestling Federation.") If you want to get this straight from the Bible, take 15 minutes and read First and Second Corinthians.

To the quarrelsome Corinthians Paul said, essentially, "Stop it! Don't you Christians understand you're new creatures now? Don't accept the grace of God in vain! Don't sing 'Amazing Grace' at the funeral and then spit verbal nails in social media the next day."

If someone wonders "Is he talking about me?", of course I am, just not knowingly. But here's what I **do** know. Let me tell you my little sermon secret. I've said this before but it's worth saying one more time: all my sermons are really to myself. And this one is no exception. "**Now** is the acceptable time, **now** is the day of **salvation**."

This is why Paul pointed the Corinthians to the cross. If we could save ourselves, we would. We can't. God did it on the cross in Jesus Christ. I will always remember the argument I had, well into adulthood, with my mother in the presence of my father. The funny thing is, I cannot for the life of me remember what we were arguing about! But tempers rose and with them voices, until my father - a man whose faith was deep, tested in a career in law enforcement which once put him in the path of a meat-cleaver-wielding mad-man - stood and shouted "Remember the cross! Remember the cross! Remember the

cross!" And we were hushed and humbled by the depth of our Savior's love.

Humility. It sometimes seems to me that humility is a casualty of our modern age. Everyone seems so sure about everything. I don't get it. Someone asked me the other day "What should I say in my conversation to so-and-so?" It took me 5 minutes to answer, because the answer was nuanced and the implications were many and complex. Why is everyone so certain about everything? It reminds me of the old story of the student who announced confidently "'**S**ugar' is the only word in the English language where 'S-U' sounds like 'S-H.'" Replied the teacher quietly, "Are you **sure**?" The Attorney General of these United States confidently quotes Romans 13 out of context about obeying the governmental authorities while ignoring, as Jesus said, "the weightier matters of the law." Social media posts pulse with righteous indignation at Mr. Sessions. Everybody's right, it seems. While I fervently disagree with Mr. Sessions Biblical scholarship as well as the Administration's immigration policy, only recently reversed, of separating children from parents accused of illegal entry; and while I wonder why he – as a United Methodist Christian – has chosen to lift this passage and not a number of others that make it clear that God is our Sovereign and that God consistently aligns with people who are marginalized and oppressed, and holds to a higher standard those in leadership and in power; and while I wonder how Jesus' understanding of children being worthy to come to him fits into Mr. Sessions world-view of these immigrant children – while I wonder about these things, I hear few reminding us that Mr. Sessions is not only a human being but a brother in Christ for whom Christ also died.

Sometimes even in our humility we aren't humble. There's an old story about the rabbi, the cantor and the sexton standing in the sanctuary on Yom Kippur, the Jewish Day of

Atonement. The rabbi beats his breast and says “Lord, be merciful to me, for I am nothing.” The cantor beats his breast and says “Lord, be merciful to me, for I am nothing.” The sexton beats his breast and says “Lord, be merciful to me, for I am nothing.” The rabbi leans over to the cantor and says “Look who thinks he’s nothing!”

That lack of humility, that braggadocio, is often rooted in fear: fear of the ‘other,’ fear of change, fear for our well-being, fear rooted in insecurity.

Fear is at the heart of today’s Gospel story. Certainly the disciples had reason to fear. They were caught in a storm on the Sea of Galilee, and their lives were in danger. On the one hand, who could blame them? As it happens, Jesus could. Granted, it was early in Jesus’ ministry with the disciples when this story appears, only $\frac{1}{4}$ of the way into Mark’s Gospel. Still, by that point, Jesus has cured a madman, healed Peter’s mother-in-law, healed many more who were sick in body or spirit, healed a leper, healed a man whose friends lowered him to Jesus through an opening in a roof, stood up against the temple authorities who said he **shouldn’t** have healed the man because it was against religious law, stood up against self-righteous religious leaders who didn’t like who Jesus ate with, cured a man with a withered hand and (again) stood up against self-righteous religious leaders, and cured more who were sick in body and soul. So one might not be surprised that in today’s Gospel, having calmed the storm, Jesus asked the disciples “Have you still no faith?”

What about us? Have we faith? Are we ready, **today**, to receive the day of salvation? Even if we experienced salvation long ago, are we ready, **today**, to renew and refresh it? That’s what it means to sing *“O God, our help in ages past our hope for years to come, our shelter from the stormy blast and our eternal home!”*

Is today the day of salvation? That's what it means to sing
*"Jesus! The name that charms our fears that bids our sorrows
cease; 'tis music in the sinner's ears, 'tis life, and health, and
peace."*

Is today the day of salvation? That's what it means to sing
*"Lift high the cross, the love of Christ proclaim till all the world
adore his sacred name."*

Is today the day of salvation? That's what it means to sing
*"Blessed Savior, Thou wilt guide us, Till we reach that blissful
shore; Where the angels wait to join us in Thy praise
forevermore."*

Is today the day of salvation? That's what it means to sing
*"Then let our songs abound and every tear be dry; we're
marching through Emmanuel's ground to fairer worlds on high."*

Is today the day of salvation? That's what it means to sing
*"To God be the glory, great things he hath done! So loved he the
world that he gave us his Son, who yielded his life an atonement
for sin, and opened the life-gate that all may go in."*

Is today the day of salvation? Because that is what it
means to sing *"I've heard an old, old story, how a Savior came
from glory, how he gave his life on Calvary to save a wretch like
me; I heard about his groaning, of his precious blood's atoning,
then I repented of my sins and won the victory. Oh..."* Not yet!

In all the transitions of our lives, salvation is at hand in
Jesus, who

- was in the beginning with God (John 1:1-4)
- was the Word made Flesh (John 1:14)
- is the image of the Invisible God (Col. 1:15-17)
- is mediator between us and God (I Cor. 8:6)
- is head over all Things (Phil. 2:9-11)

- is the Light of the World, the Good Shepherd, the Bread of Life, the Way, the Truth and the Life, the Resurrection and the Life, the Prince of Peace and the Lord of Lords and the Lord of Love.

In **that** Jesus we find victory: the victory of knowing our true identity as sons and daughters of the Most High, victory over fear of change and loss and death; victory of keeping the law by loving God with our all heart and mind and soul and strength and our neighbors as ourselves, because in **these** are all the law and the prophets; and seizing **today** to do these things because **today** is the day of salvation. Today is **THAT** day. May to be ever so! Amen!