

Lamentations 3: 19-26
2 Timothy 1:1-14
October 2, 2016
Hamilton Union Presbyterian Church
World Communion Sunday

Today we join millions of Christians around the world in celebrating “World Communion Sunday.” We may yawn and let it pass as one more institutional observance. We are, after all, in the post-modern, post-Christian, post-everything world. There is no longer any acknowledged central unifying understanding which gives us a sense of identity. Around the world and particularly in this country, we seem to have lost touch with the stories which give life a common meaning and purpose. In the United States as conservative columnist George Will observed, we seem to have lost connection with the virtues and values with which our founding fathers and mothers created this great nation. This is not about conservatism and liberalism. It is about the loss of a common understanding about who we as a nation are and what our purpose is.

In 1920, in the wake of the disillusionment and spiritual desolation which followed World War I, the poet W.B. Yeats described the loss of any coherence to the human community:

Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are filled with passionate intensity.
(From *The Second Coming*)

This is what happens when the human community loses connection with its founding stories. We lose touch with the spiritual, moral and ethical values and virtues which build community, cooperation and a willingness to live our individual lives for the good of all people. In Yeats' words, *the falcon cannot hear the falconer*.

I am hopeful that there will be a return to a common understanding of the virtues and values of our nation and in the world community. But I am equally convinced that this reintegration and re-centering will not happen without our participation. When sanity returns it will be because people of different perspectives and interpretations come together and unite in a desire to restore a common vision.

On this World Communion Sunday I propose that what Yeats said of Europe in 1920 is equally true of the Christian community. In a recent column, conservative columnist David Brooks cited the loss of influence of what he calls "moderate religion." That's us. That's what used to be called "mainline Protestantism" and is now called, ruefully, "*old-line Protestantism*."

This loss of influence has been documented to death. The causes are many and often beyond our control. It is easy to beat our breasts at the rise of secular culture and to rail against the false material values, the decline of morality and the increasing irrelevance of organized religion to life. But the fact is, it has happened and there is no end in sight to the decline. If David Brooks is correct about the loss of influence of people like us as a significant cause of the disintegration of the center, what are we to do about it?

There are Christians who believe that if people just went back to church, America would regain its place as the moral leader of the world. As much as we may love our country, the church does not exist to promote the well-being of America. We have been called into being to

proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ and the Kingdom of God. According to Jesus, the Kingdom of God is not a location. It is an expression of the unity of creation under the rule of the Creator. The Bible teaches that nations, in the words of Isaiah, “are vanities.” Nation worship is a form of idolatry. We may and we must work for the best our nation can be. But this is not our highest aspiration.

Yet to make such a statement can lead us to feel overwhelmed and despairing about the capacity of a congregation like Hamilton Union to make any difference in the spiritual wilderness which is contemporary post-everything America. We may feel as Jeremiah in his lamentations that the glory has left the community of the faithful. We have been cast aside and must simply await our own demise as an inevitable consequence of the decline of the larger community. Yet do we want to come under the indictment of W.B. Yeats of those *best who lack all conviction?*

What saves Jeremiah in the passage we heard is his return to the founding inspiration of the people of Israel:

But this I call to mind and therefore I have hope:
The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases.
His mercies never come to an end.
They are new every morning.
“The Lord is my portion,” says my soul,
“therefore I will hope *in him.*”

Recalling God’s faithfulness reminds Jeremiah that Israel’s founding story is of God’s faithfulness. All of the prophets exhort God’s people to return to the story of God’s faithfulness most clearly shown in the Exodus from Egypt. Time and time again there have been times of feeling lost and without hope. Time and time again God has been faithful in restoring God’s people. Yet it has always been when people remember and trust the story of God’s faithfulness

and are emboldened to witness to the power of God as superior and more worthy than the worldly values of wealth and power that the restoration happens.

The same message lies at the heart of Paul's second letter to Timothy. Paul is once again in prison for proclaiming the good news of Jesus. He has lost his freedom of movement but has something more valuable—the inner freedom that comes from knowing that due to God's redeeming grace in Jesus no human power can separate him from God's love. He exhorts Timothy never to stray from that founding story in his ministry. Indeed Paul invites Timothy to share in his suffering *in order that Timothy can experience the same inner freedom.*

Friends, on this World Communion Sunday, let us be re-kindled in our faith to be courageous witnesses. Let us see the communion we are sharing as a sharing in Jesus' suffering in order that we may come to experience the freedom to witness to our faith in this troubled age. Let us decide today *not to be among the best who lack all conviction. Rather let us be the best and filled with courage and joy. Amen.*