



minister

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Welcome to Minister E-Zine!

By Debbie Kamm
Editor



Grace and peace to you and to those who are dear to you... and welcome to the first on line edition of MINISTER! It is a privilege to communicate with colleagues everywhere, using the often mysterious, sometimes quirky, yet usually dependable medium of cyberspace.

The first on line edition of MINISTER focuses on the sermons which blessed those who heard them "live" at the Ministers Council Preaching Pavilion at the Biennial in Denver, Colorado. The preachers – your colleagues – represent the multi-faceted faces and experiences and perspectives of our American Baptist family. It is my hope that you will be inspired, challenged, comforted, and blessed as you read the meditations of their hearts and delight in the rich harvest of their scholarship.

While the climate of the Biennial may have influenced how the preachers shaped their sermons, your colleagues have explored topics which are not tied to that event. An emphasis was placed on what it means to be Together In Ministry, and how this connectedness can and must serve to under gird us as we face the questions of what it means to be a denomination in the midst of re-definition and change. But more than anything else, these sermons open up oases for reflection and renewal, and truly give us reason to celebrate the history, the work, and the vision of the Ministers Council.



And celebration was very much part of the picture in Denver – as many of you

know, the Ministers Council is 70 years old and still going strong! One of the Pre-Biennial events was a



birthday party for the Ministers Council, complete with three huge cakes, festive decorations,

and a clown who delighted those in attendance. Check out pictures of the birthday party throughout this article... it truly was a delightful time for all present.

So... what is ahead for MINISTER e-zine? First, your articles/sermons/short stories/ poetry/ pictures are always MORE than welcome! Please feel free to submit them (in WORD format, if possible) as an attachment to me at this

address: djkamm@juno.com or via "snail mail" to: Debbie Kamm/34 Pleasant Street/Clifton Springs NY/14432. I would be delighted to hear from you! Second, your suggestions for future issues are also more than welcome. Some suggestions for future editions include: navigating the landscape of loss/ministry to the grieving; Christian-Muslim dialogues; maintaining healthy relationships; highlighting Together In Ministry groups; and celebrating milestones in ministry. What's on your minds and in your hearts, Sisters and Brothers? What topic would you like to discuss with your colleagues? Do you have a book or movie you're eager to discuss? Is there a particular "hot topic" impacting your life or the church you serve or the community in which you live? Please – let me hear from you! (In addition to the email address listed above, you can also use the "feedback" function at the bottom of the Ministers Council web site home page.)

And what is ahead for the Ministers Council? We might do well to remember the following words: "The Ministers Council was founded in 1935 by our forebears in the faith to **deepen** spiritual journeys, to **encourage** collegial relationships, and to **strengthen** professional effectiveness." Sometimes that holy work must be done in the midst of conflict and challenges, but that holy work must be done, nevertheless. Are there challenges which we, as individuals, as members of the Ministers Council, as a society, and as a denomination face? Absolutely! And some of the most significant discussions about what is ahead for the Ministers Council will occur during the 2005 Senate to be held at Green Lake, Wisconsin. At that meeting, your Senators will elect a new President: Rev. Alice B. Davis (whose Preaching Pavilion's sermon about "orderly chaos" and the "Butterfly Effect" you will find elsewhere on this site) is the candidate for this simultaneously demanding and rewarding office. Alice has said that in addition to working with other matters to be discussed and voted on at Senate 2005, she would encourage the Ministers Council to seriously consider and then implement ways in which we can support the General Board's Declaration on an Issue of Importance concerning ministry to children living in poverty.

There can be no doubt that Senate 2005 will be a defining moment in the history of the Ministers Council. The potential exists for discord and division as we attempt to navigate the turbulent theological waters in which we find ourselves

these days. But I believe in the power of prayer, and so in the days leading up to Senate 2005, I implore you to be intentional about the following:

Please be intentional about praying for Dr. Kate Harvey, the Executive Director of the Ministers Council, as she coordinates and prepares for Senate 2005.

Please also be intentional about praying for the Senators representing Ministers Councils from around the nation, that they might be given a clear sense of discernment and the overwhelming ability to listen carefully and caringly to one another.

Please be intentional about holding Senate 2005 in your prayers as the sessions unfold.

And finally, please be intentional about seeking ways in which you and I and we can develop new avenues of service and growth as we continue the holy work of deepening, encouraging, and strengthening our commitment to excellence in ministry, for we serve a Most Excellent God.

Debbie Kamm is a second generation American Baptist minister who has served churches in New York State and Vermont. She currently resides in Clifton Springs, New York, and is engaged in the ministry of caring for her father full-time.

God's Community: Communion in the Suffering and Rejoicing

By Rev. Mar Imsong
Scripture Texts: 1 Corinthians
12:25-27, Philippians 3:10



"Suffer and Rejoice Together," because we are of one Body. We cannot be happy when part of our body is suffering! I am Mar Imsong, Pastor at First Baptist Church of Bedford, MA. I am originally from Nagaland in northeast India. When American Baptist missionaries brought the Gospel there, what resulted was a dramatic change in their worldviews and perspectives. Turning to Jesus brings deliverance, restoration, transformation, and mission. The dramatic

growth of the church in Nagaland which now is largely Christian and largely Baptist has been supported all through the years by American Baptists. When India forced foreign missionaries to leave the area in 1956, Naga became orphans spiritually. But because the missionaries had built up the native leaders, Naga Baptists took up the responsibility to be self-governing, self-perpetuating, self-supporting and self-theologizing. A distinctive Naga Baptist so much different from American Baptist evolved in Nagaland. And what we are today is because of what our missionaries have done. It is because of these reasons Naga Christians still consider American Baptists as their "Spiritual Parents."

Sin for Naga Christians was living a life of fear and inter-tribal warfare. People lived in fear, separated from one another, contesting and attacking one another. Self-righteousness was their spirituality and religion. Exclusion was a way of life for the Nagas. But when the Naga people become Christians, the Naga concept of community life was expressed and realized in a much wider concept. Not only sin, but also salvation for Naga Christians, was communitarian. You can be saved only in relationships.

A Story: American Baptist Missionaries came and taught from the Bible and said to our forefathers, "If you do not believe in Jesus Christ, you are sinners and you will go to Hell! But if you believe in Jesus and get baptized, you will go to heaven of eternal joy and you will be saved." Theologically sound! Very much of a Baptist faith! But do you know what response those villagers in Nagaland gave to the missionaries? "We would rather go to hell because all of our people and loved one are there in Hell." Heaven will be a better place when both liberal and conservative Baptists are there together, singing at the top of our voices! A community of faith is important.

The Naga concept of community life fitted very well with the biblical view of KOINONIA or Communion, Sharing. Salvation becomes relevant only when the whole community become Christians. That is one of the reasons why there was mass conversion among the Nagas. When Naga Christians celebrate communion, whether one is a liberal or conservatives, politician or a businessman, freedom fighters or a Christian minister, rich or poor, we all come together as one Body in Jesus Christ. Communion is the time

when we are incorporated to the Body of Christ and we are also incorporated to one another. In the same way, the sharing or fellowship is extended to Christians, and especially to the American Baptist Churches (their spiritual parent). I have noted that the Naga Baptist tradition has evolved in very distinctive way. Christian theology and ministry is contextualized and indigenized in a very unique way. Theologically, Naga Baptists and American Baptists are different. Political theology of the Christians in Nagaland is very liberal and progressive because of the ongoing political unrest with the Indians and other human rights violation. But morally, Naga Christians are very conservative and differ a lot from many American Baptists. But no Naga Baptist will ever deny having fellowship or communion with American Baptists. Naga Christians are aware that they have major differences in theology with many American Baptists. But we consider such theological differences in contexts such as social, political, cultural, and economic. Can we limit fellowship and communion to only a select few? Do we have to confine our communion to a limited geographical location? Is it not true that in Christ there is not Greek or Jew, no Naga or American? (II Corinthians 12:12-13) What prevents you from having communion with fellow Baptists? Is it really a question of sin?

Was it not God who initiated communion with Moses for the first time in Mt. Sinai? (Exodus 33: 9-11) Do you think Moses was sinless? Baptists love this word communion, don't we? It is not Eucharist, not Mass, not the Lord's Supper, but Communion. The term KOINONIA literally means, "sharing," and that is particularly important in connection with a covenant relation between God and his people. A covenantal relationship of sharing or fellowship between God and his people is KOINONIA. Are we talking about a communion with God! Yes! Well, how could that be possible? Even though Moses was a great leader, he was a short-tempered person; as a matter of fact, he was a street fighter. Did God compromise His holiness? Did God compromise His Lordship? Well, there was no compromise made by God in order for God to have fellowship with his people. It was because of God's grace and love that He could have fellowship or sharing with sinful humanity. God did not reduce His being or Holiness. In the same way, you are asked to come as you are and have fellowship and share with one another. Jesus also had communion with sinners. You do not need to

compromise your piety and holiness in order to have communion with fellow Baptists. We will be better Baptists only when we relate with one another - when we have communion with one another!

We are called to have communion in our suffering and pain. Our denomination is going through a lot of pain and suffering now. The Apostle Paul said, "Rejoice together and suffer together." Your experience of salvation can be experience to the fullest only when you are together! Whether it is joy or pain, right or wrong, in our strength and in our weakness, we are called to share with one another! We are called to have fellowship with one another! KOINONIA. Why do you fight between yourselves! This is what I hear: I am of the Apollos group; I am holier than the Cephas group. Well, I am of the Christ group, so I have much higher ethical and sounder biblical bases than Paul the Apostle group?" Why do you divide between yourself? If God can have fellowship with sinners and limited people like you and I, then why do you have problems in sharing with one another? Is Christ's body divided? Are we so different? If you think that you are right and someone else is so wrong, let it be so. Is that preventing us from having fellowship? Are we taking the role of a judge? Does it not judgment belong to God? Even Jesus is also a mere Advocate! (Romans 8:34) Can we not leave God to handle that issue? We should be able to have fellowship with one another! I am sure Scripture has the same message for us today for the Christians and fellow American Baptists: Suffer and rejoice together - have communion, share with one another.

Jesus demands that we share in his suffering. "Carry the cross and follow me daily," says Jesus. To follow in Jesus' footsteps means to share in his rejection and suffering. This is where true fellowship with Christ is found. It is here the power of the resurrection is felt. This is why Paul could write, "We have fellowship in his suffering in order that we may also share in his glory" (Romans 8: 17). We often speak of the necessity of the cross for Jesus, but we do not speak about the necessity of the cross for us. We want to talk about the glorious resurrection but not about the gruesome death. We celebrate Easter with lots of festivity, but not Good Friday when Jesus suffered and died. But Scripture says that unless we share in the suffering of Christ, we cannot share in his glory.

I know what it means by suffering, hunger, exclusion, and rejection. (I will save that sermon for another biennial preaching pavilion) The theology of suffering is very central in the Pauline epistles. The idea of suffering was not merely an ideological exposition in the writings of St. Paul, but it was Paul's practical experience, as well. Paul was beaten and imprisoned several times, and we know the story of how he was murdered in Rome because he was a Follower of Christ. Paul spoke about the fellowship found in the suffering of Christ in his letter to the Philippians. Paul invited them to have fellowship (Koinonia) in the suffering of Christ. Philippians 3:10: "I want to know Christ, and the power of his resurrection and sharing of his suffering by becoming like him in his death."

Paul wrote the Letter to the Philippians not from an ivory tower, not sitting in a beautiful park and enjoying the weather and the beauty of the nature. But Paul wrote this while he was in jail. He wrote from a prison cell. How much Paul must have longed to get out of the prison and continue his life! Yet while he was in the prison, he remembered Christ's suffering, so he wrote to the Christians in Philippi to share in the suffering of Christ.

Now, the Philippian church was not like any other church found in the New Testament. Philippi was an ancient Roman colony located in modern Greece. The title "Roman colony" was given to land occupied by veteran Roman soldiers who had served the Roman government faithfully and were loyal to the government. So in the all the Roman colonies, orthodox Roman culture, customs, and laws were observed strictly; the Latin language was strictly imposed to be spoken. Orthodox Roman dress was worn and all the ceremonies related to the Roman emperors were strictly observed. Paul was imprisoned and accused of teaching against the practices and culture of the Romans. Both the Christians in Philippi and Paul were undergoing suffering. They were co-sufferers in the suffering of Christ. They were able to participate and have communion in the suffering of Christ. They were not suffering in isolation; they were not suffering alone, but Christ was suffering with them, and they were all actively participating in the suffering of Christ. We have COMMUNION in the suffering of Christ.

Do not try to intellectualize and philosophize Suffering: Paul very clearly and boldly says, "I preach Christ crucified - a folly to the Greeks and a stumbling block for the Jews - but for those who believe it is the power." (1 Corinthians 1:17, 23-24.) Why was it foolishness to the Greeks? The Greeks were the educated and intellectual people. They could not understand with the intellectual and philosophical mind why an honest and humble person should suffer for other person's sins. Paul says that such rhetoric reduces the meaning of the cross and it become powerless. (1 Cor. 1:17b.) Do not intellectualize the meaning of the cross, because then it becomes meaningless and powerless. Do not overemphasize the Jesus of History or the historicity of the Gospel alone. What we need is also the Jesus Christ of faith. Paul reminds us that the Church has more than enough teachers, but what we need is a redeemer.

The Cross should also not be taken as a supernatural power. The cross was a stumbling block for the Jew because they expected a "Super Power Messiah." They expected a triumphal king who would destroy all their enemies, not one who died on the cross. Jesus was also misunderstood as a mere wonder worker, a miracle worker, or a magician. But Jesus was the Suffering Servant and the Lamb of God! Jesus came to serve, not to be served; He became the lowliest in order to become the greatest. The power of Jesus was to become powerless.

Finally: Have Communion in the suffering of Christ all the time. "We always carry around the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body." (2 Corinthians 4:10) We cannot keep the cross in our pocket. There are many pocketed cross Christians. They take out the cross according to their convenience. But we are asked to carry the cross always so that the life of Jesus may be revealed.

Christ was crucified once, but continues to be in our midst in the character of the crucified one. Christ continues to struggle against the sins of the world: against racism, against corruption, against the status quo, against economic exploitation, against military atrocities, against male domination, against domestic abuse, against our pride and ego, against ethnocentrism, against self-righteousness. We are called to share in the suffering of Christ.

"Rejoice in the Lord always, and again I say, Rejoice!" So says St. Paul. Rejoice even when you are suffering, because suffering is not a defeat. Our suffering and so also the cross of Our Lord Jesus Christ is a Victory. A complete reversal of value system is seen in the cross. Jesus inaugurated God's Kingdom through suffering and weakness, not through the might and power. The sufferer on the cross is the conqueror the victim is the victor. Let us have communion in both our suffering and rejoicing. Let us be willing to have communion with one another, especially in our time of pain and sorrow.

Mar Imsong is completing one year of pastorate at First Baptist Church, Bedford, Massachusetts. The Imsong's are originally from Nagaland of northeast India, a product of the American Baptist Missionary work. Married to Bendangla, they have three children Aren, Stephen and Kris.

Out of Chaos, Effective Butterflies

*By Dr. Alice B. Davis
Scripture Text: 1 Kings 17:8-16*



Have you ever noticed there are not many straight lines in nature? I thought about this many years ago as I was contemplating nature - I think when I was at the beach. Most of God's creation is made without the benefit of straight lines and 90° angles. It was a really interesting thought that has stayed with me over the years.

I made the mistake of mentioning this to a group of students I was working with at McCormick Seminary, trying to make a point about how our meditations on nature can lead us to reflect theologically about how God works in the world. Sharing my musings on straight lines with them, I discovered that one of the students was a physicist, who pointed out to me that there is no such thing as a straight line, and what we call a straight line is just a series of points on a continuum! You need to be careful when you raise theories like this and don't know the background

of the people with whom you're speaking. But the point is still made: the idea of a straight line is a human invention, and a very necessary one for how we build and create. I can't imagine what our world would be like without straight lines and 90° angles.

Yet, when I look at how we build things compared to how God creates, I think our great buildings and structures all built with straight lines and 90° angles must look to God like stick men drawings look to us compared to real human figures. How magnificent and complex is the world of God's creation, not made with many, or any, straight lines. And, as the student pointed out, how wonderful and creative is the human mind to invent the concept of straight lines so we can put together magnificent, human-made structures.

All of this came back to me when I began to explore, at a very amateur level, some of the writings about the relatively new scientific field of chaos theory. Chaos theory moves beyond the human search for the laws of nature, beyond the Newtonian approach that searches for definable rules that govern the mechanics of nature, to look at those forces and actions in nature that are to us unpredictable, in order to see what we can learn from that unpredictability. As one scientist put it, chaos theory explores the interpenetration of determinacy and randomness—or, in English, chaos theory studies the connection between order and chaos.

Chaos in scientific terms is seen in those systems that operate through dynamic forces in such a way that we are unable to predict the outcome. Dynamic systems are those that are impacted by a lot of different forces, like the weather, which involves the sun, wind, movement of the planet, and a host of other forces. The whole idea of chaos theory emerged from the studies of a meteorologist, Edward Lorenz, who in 1961 was running computer simulations in order to try to better predict the weather. I won't try to explain much of all that has developed, because I really can't, but there are some interesting outcomes of this initial work and the studies that came out of it that tell us some new and fascinating ideas about the connections between what seems like chaos to us and the order that we need to survive.

So here are some very amateur, thumb-nail sketches of a few of those theories:

1) One of the first theories to arise from chaos studies is that very minute differences in conditions at the beginning of a dynamic set of factors can result, over the long run, in major differences in the outcome. A very small change in the initial condition of a system involving a number of different factors will result in wide variances in the outcome. This is called the "butterfly effect," because the example that is often given to explain this theory is that the flap of a butterfly's wings in one part of the world might set into motion a chain of events that creates a hurricane in another part of the world.

2) Another theory discovered by looking at unpredictable systems is that the unpredictability is limited to certain bounds. When the different possibilities of a particular dynamic system are calculated out to high levels and repeated, what happens is that patterns develop, showing that there are limitations to the options that can result from a given set of conditions. This constraint of any unpredictable system is called the "strange attractor," because it acts as a limitation to the possible outcomes. I use the example that the butterfly's flap will only cause certain types of changes in a given system—for example, it wouldn't cause the moon to fall out of the sky, because that is out of bounds for the given set of events that the butterfly's flaps would cause.

3) A third theory for us to consider is when dynamic systems are computed out to high scales, while they start with a pattern, they eventually end with what seems like unpredictability, or chaos. But the further you push the equation, windows of order appear in the midst of the chaos. This is explained as windows of "self-organization," or patterns of order, that arise in the midst of the system of chaos.

4) Finally, there is a global pattern to chaos. I know that sounds like an oxymoron, but what it means is that in all dynamic systems, there is some regularity. There is a mathematical constant that can be found in all chaotic systems. The variable, called Feigenbaum's Number, is 4.692016090. I really don't get exactly what this means, but what's interesting for me is that this number is a constant throughout all dynamic systems—in everything from the dripping of a faucet to how the clouds pile up, from how your coffee swirls around in your cup to how measles will spread in a population. There is one unifying constant behind it all. There is an order behind

all of what we define as chaos. Well, if that doesn't get you thinking about a God who doesn't need to use straight lines to create, I don't know what will!

We don't often think about chaos as the scientists do, as something to measure or examine. But we do feel chaos in our lives. Chaos, those times when we cannot predict what will happen, those times when everything around us seems out of order. Chaos, those times when we can't control the outcome of the events that seem to play havoc with our existence. We feel chaos when people around us can't agree on anything, when all of the things that you've been working on just seem to fall apart, when sickness or death disrupt the orderliness we try to attain in life, when all of our life's plans are changed by one small event we hadn't counted on. It feels like chaos to us when we are struck by events we didn't ask for and couldn't predict, things that change the outcome we had planned, when we can't see what the outcome will be because there are all of these other things that keep coming in, seeming to take our lives out of our own hands. When all of our best laid plans.....

I believe the widow of Zarephath must have felt that kind of chaos in her life. She was a widow, with a child, trying to make a living until her son became old enough to care for her, when this drought hits the land. Drought is one of those things we can't predict, putting our lives into chaos. This woman, as a widow, was more vulnerable than most, because she didn't have anyone else to help her through the troubling situation she was in. She was down to her last bit of flour and oil, and she knew she and her son were going to die. I can't imagine what that must have felt like, but I believe it must have felt like chaos to her.

While she was musing on her impending death, along comes a stranger, Elijah, who asks her for a drink of water. Now she of course didn't know Elijah had been sent to her by Elijah's God. She lived in the land where Baal was worshipped. Jezebel's father, Ethbaal, ruled in that land. And just like the rest of us are inclined to do, she would have been expected to worship the god that was the god of her upbringing. But the true God, the one God, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, sent the prophet Elijah to this poor widow in a foreign land where they worshiped a foreign god, so that Elijah could be nourished.

This God who doesn't create with straight lines and who is not bound by our cultural or religious differences saw something in this poor widow that made God know that she would do what was necessary to protect Elijah from the drought.

For Elijah to ask this poor widow from the land where Baal ruled for a drink of water was pretty outrageous in itself, in the middle of a drought. But without responding or raising a question, she went to get the stranger the drink of water that he asked for. That was the response Elijah needed in order to know she was the one chosen by God to help him. That was the small act of kindness that set into motion a series of blessings that she would receive. God knew something about this woman before God sent Elijah to her. God looked beyond her faulty understanding of who God was to the goodness that was in her heart. You see, God didn't send Elijah to her because of her correct theology, but because of the goodness of her heart.

This offering of the drink of water to a stranger in the middle of the drought was what let Elijah know she would also be willing to share with him her last flour and oil, in her mind bringing her death and her son's death that much closer. But she did it out of the goodness of her heart and with the hope that maybe, just maybe, Elijah's God could do something that no one else could do.

And she was blessed. Just like Elijah said, the flour and oil did not run out before they again had rain, and she and her son were able to survive off of the land. She was blessed, beyond just living, because when her son got sick and died, Elijah was there to bring him back to life. She was blessed beyond the raising of her son again so he could care for her in her old age, but also because her faith in Elijah's God put her name in Scripture, and even more than that, put her name in the book of everlasting life.

But she was not the only one who was blessed by her one small act of kindness. Elijah got to live, too. But not only that, Elijah was able to perform the first raising from the dead miracle found in the Bible, letting him, all of Israel, and everyone else know what a great prophet he was. And not only that, but Jesus was also blessed by her one small act of kindness, too. Jesus was able to use her as an example to the religious leaders—who were straight line thinkers—to

show that this act of kindness and her faith that followed from it was more important to God than the theological correctness they sought after. Not only that, but each and every one of us is also blessed by her act of kindness because we have her example to help us learn the lesson that Jesus taught.

Her one little butterfly flap toward kindness, toward goodness, coming even in the midst of the chaos of her life, set into motion the series of events that made a magnificent difference in the outcome for her, her son, for Elijah's life and ministry, for Jesus' testimony to the Jewish leaders and for us even now. One little butterfly flap of kindness, an offer of water to a thirsty stranger in the middle of a drought, had a drastic and unpredictable outcome. One little flap towards goodness, driven by a good heart in a woman with little understanding of the God we serve.

I guess you see where I'm going with this. Jesus never told us it was our job to try to understand all there is to understand about God. Jesus never told us it was our job to try to predict what God will do next. Jesus never told us it was our job to keep everything in order or to control how everyone thinks about God. That's straight line thinking. Jesus never told us life would be neat and orderly, that we would always agree, or that the chaotic storms would not come into our lives. If you think that's the way life is supposed to be, that's straight line thinking.

What Jesus told us to do was to feed the hungry, provide drinks for the thirsty, invite the stranger in, clothe the naked, and tend to those who are sick and imprisoned. What Jesus told us to do is to go out into the world and share the good news that the kingdom of heaven has come near. What Jesus told us to do is to share the Gospel with the whole world, teaching the world all the things Jesus commanded, and highest among those commandments is to love God and love each other.

God is not looking for correct theology from us. What God is looking for is good hearts, like the widow of Zarephath - good hearts trying to do God's will of loving all God's children. Trying to find correct theology is straight-line thinking. Exploring theology is a good thing, but you see, we will never get it completely right. If God were

looking for people with correct theology, there are a lot of great people who would never make it into the kingdom.

If we look back throughout the history of Christianity, we find so many great church leaders who misunderstood the breadth and depth of the love, mercy and grace of this God we serve who doesn't need straight lines in order to create. The great early church father, Tertullian, believed "every woman opened the door to the devil," in accordance with the religious thinking of that time. We can recall the great inquisitions and witch hunts of the 15th - 17th centuries, when church leaders thought the most important thing for them to do was to rout out witches and burn them at the stake; and because women were the weaker sex, 90% of those burned at the stake were women. David Chidester, in his book, *Christianity: A Global History* (San Francisco, CA, HarperSanFrancisco, 2001), pointed out that not only witches were burned at the stake, but Christians who denied the existence of witches were considered heretics and burned, as well. The German Christian church, with a few outstanding exceptions like Karl Barth and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, backed the German Reich. Chidester quotes one church leader who said that "faith in the Reich is the German form of Christianity in the 20th Century."

In our own country, Thomas Jefferson believed Africans were "inferior to whites in body and mind." The Christian church leaders used the Bible and biblical authority to try to teach slaves they should be happy slaves—thank God they didn't buy it. The Christian leaders banned slaves from gathering together to worship God. The Christian leaders after slavery refused to let black people into their houses of worship. And those liberals who did still made us sit in the balcony or in the back. Chidester said the Christian system "represented an invisible system of behavioral control" to keep slaves in slavery and blacks where they belonged. Thank God they didn't buy it.

We can look back now and see their biblical and theological perspectives were just wrong. In my weaker moments, I like to believe none of them would get to heaven. Don't get me wrong - I don't think all of them will, because some of the leaders were driven by evil, intentionally mis-

leading others away from God. But most of them were good-hearted people with misguided understandings. I think they'll get their reward, too, because my Bible tells me we serve a God who is able to keep us from falling and to present us faultless before the Throne of Glory, with exceeding joy! This is the only wise God and our Savior, Jesus, to whom we give all dominion and power, glory and honor.

This God doesn't need straight lines to create and doesn't expect us to understand that. This God can use people with good hearts and incorrect theology. Our job is not to try to make everybody understand the Bible like we understand it, to understand God the way we understand God, because all of us only see through a glass darkly. That's the wonderful thing about being Baptist, we don't demand we all think alike—we don't engage in the kind of straight-line thinking that tries to put everyone's understanding of God into the same theological—straight-line—box. Our job is to do the things Jesus told us to do. Our job is to be the curve in the straight-line thinking world. Now let me apologize to any scientists in this group for the liberties I'm about to take with chaos theory, which come from my theological reflections on what we're learning about our God, who doesn't need straight lines to create.

You see, when we start flapping in the right direction, the direction towards God, doing the things Jesus commanded us to do, our actions are the dynamic forces that can result in making a tremendous difference in this world. When our actions proceed from love, the "strange attractor" theory tells us they will not go out of the bounds of love. When we do acts of kindness, mercy and love, even if we can not see the results of what we do, these acts will always produce the fruits consistent with their intention—a good encouraging word, a helping hand, an offer of forgiveness, a move to stop injustice. On the other hand, acts away from God, mean and unkind words, unforgiving hearts, arrogant self-righteousness, hate, oppression, all things that God hates, will lead the world away from God. Our job is to keep on trying to curve the world back to the goodness of God. Our job is to keep on flapping in the direction of goodness, love, mercy, grace, unity.

Chaos theory also tells us the storms we face in life will not last forever, and that what seems like

chaos now will sooner or later settle down to a time of peace and rest. There will always be "windows of self-organization," or times of peace and a break from the chaos. But chaos is still all around and will come again in our lives. Our job is to keep on flapping in the right direction, even in the middle of our chaos. And chaos theory tells us what we already know: that what seems like chaos is not really chaos, just unpredictability, and that there is a constant behind all that happens, even when we don't understand it fully. That "constant" from a theological perspective is not a number, but is God, who I am convinced knows there is no such thing as chaos, because God knows all, sees all and is in control of all of it. God's job is to know all there is to know. Our job is to keep on flapping in the right direction, even in the middle of what seems like chaos, doing our best in the middle of the troubles, woes, storms, and problems to keep on doing the good God calls us out to do - Keep on helping others who are in trouble. Keep on working towards the kingdom of heaven on earth, as it is in heaven. Keep on preaching truth to power. Keep on holding up the blood-stained banner. Keep on keeping on, and don't feel no ways tired. Because God will give us the strength when we need it to keep on through the storm and rest from the chaos when we need that, too.

Just imagine with me, that if one little butterfly flap in the direction of goodness could have such a powerful effect as the flap of kindness made by the widow of Zarephath, what would be the outcome of our ministries if we, working together in ministry, as American Baptists called out as a people of passion, prayer and power, all start coordinating our flaps of goodness in the same direction? If we started flapping together towards more justice in the world, towards more peace in the world, towards more healing, more hope, more joy? If working together in ministry, we started flapping for justice for the homeless and for better funding for our schools, producing hurricanes of righteousness to change our country? If churches started flapping wings in solidarity, behind more funding for research for mental illness and AIDS, creating tornadoes of healing and hope? If we coordinated the flaps of the churches in our regions to address local issues of children in poverty, creating tsunamis of love, care, health and wholeness? If we synchronized all of our flaps towards justice, we could create floods and tidal waves of peace around the world!

Oh, the storms will keep on raging. Chaos will not be removed from our lives. Our job is to keep on flapping our butterfly wings in the direction of goodness. Now there may be some of you men, or women, too, who are a little uncomfortable seeing yourselves flapping like a butterfly. So if it makes you feel better, imagine yourself flapping with the wings of an eagle, because you see it doesn't matter what you flap or how you flap, what matters is you just keep on flapping towards the goodness of God.

There's a song sung in the African American tradition that helps us to understand what it means to keep on flapping when the going gets rough. It goes like this: "I don't feel no-ways tired. I've come too far from where I started from. Nobody told me the road would be easy, but I don't believe God brought me this far to leave me." God has brought us through storms before, American Baptists, and I don't believe God is going to leave us now. Our job is to keep on flapping....

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The Core of the Christ Community

By Dr. Joe Kutter

Scripture Text: John 13:1-17



What if Jesus really does know what he is talking about? I read C.S. Lewis a long time ago and I bought his argument that Jesus is more than a teacher. He is Messiah, the Christ, the Anointed One of God. Like so many of you, I have given my life to this simple creed, "Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God." It's more than a creed; it is "credo," the fundamental assertion of my life. However, if Jesus is all of that and more, then maybe I should pay attention to him as teacher.

He really was a Rabbi, a master teacher of the faith. So, because he is Lord, I propose that we simply try to pay attention to him as "The Teacher." So for this lesson, we are going with Jesus and the disciples to the Upper Room. The writer John sets the stage. He tells us "It was just before the Passover Feast."

Thousands upon thousands of the faithful had gathered in Jerusalem to celebrate "The Passover." This is the celebration that transported the Jews back to Egypt, back to the days of tyranny and cruelty and slavery. As the story was told over and over again, every man and woman became a slave in Egypt. And then comes Moses and the plagues and the most terrible event of all, the Angel of Death sweeping through the empire taking the first born son of every family. But the Children of Israel had painted the blood of the lamb on their doorways and over those doorways, the angel had "passed over." Finally, the will of the Egyptian tyrants was broken and Pharaoh decided to let God's people go! And God's people went! They packed up and walked out of Egypt and through the Red Sea and across the Forty Year Wilderness and finally into the Promised Land. And so they learned to sing, freedom, freedom, freedom! And the memory of their oppression instilled a commitment to justice and righteousness.

Ah - it must be human nature! While they forever cherished the experience of freedom, they soon forgot their commitment to justice. And when they forgot their commitment to justice, they lost their freedom. Read Amos: "Let justice roll down like the waters and righteousness like an ever flowing stream." Read Micah: "What does the Lord require of you but to love justice and to do mercy and to walk humbly with your God?" The message was absolutely clear: when justice is diluted, when justice is denied, freedom always goes away. Without justice, freedom is always reserved for the oppressor and that is not freedom.

So the people had gathered to celebrate Passover. They had come to Jerusalem to celebrate their journey to freedom. However, they were no longer free. Now they lived under the tyranny of the Roman Empire. The Romans controlled the government, controlled the temple leadership, and exacted a rate of taxation that left much of the population barely alive. So here they were, thousands upon thousands of Jews - including

Jesus and his disciples - celebrating the freedom they did not have and yearning for that justice which was merely a distant memory.

It was Passover Time and Jesus and the disciples had gathered for the evening meal. We know the rest of the story. We know this was the last meal they would share together. And Jesus knew that, too. "Jesus knew that the time had come for him to leave this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he now showed them the full extent of his love."

Now we learn the devil has already prompted Judas to betray Jesus. And Jesus knew he was about to be betrayed. So what does he do? He gets up from the table, perhaps walks off to the side of the room, and takes off his outer clothing. Now, wearing only his undergarments, he wraps a towel around his waist. He pours water from a pitcher into a bowl and washes his disciples' feet. Nothing is said about excluding Judas from the ceremony! Is he really going to wash Judas' feet? Did he really do that? Nothing is said to the contrary...

So Jesus moves around the table. The table probably sits close to the floor. The disciples are stretched out on cushions, resting on their left elbows. With their right hand, they take the bread and dip it into the main dish. So Jesus has to move from person to person, and for each person he must get down on his knees to wash their feet. You cannot wash feet standing up! You must assume the posture of humility, the posture of prayer. To wash the feet, you kneel and for a moment allow the other person to assume the posture of your superior!

What is this about? At the very least, it is about hospitality. It is about making your neighbor feel "at home" or better than "at home." Your neighbor, your guest, becomes your special guest. Your neighbor is honored by your hospitable service. So, person by person, Jesus moves around the table, kneeling and moving the basin, kneeling and moving. Has he come to Judas yet?

Jesus comes to Peter, and Peter asks the question, "Lord, are you going to wash my feet?" Jesus replies, "You do not realize what I am doing, but later you will understand." Peter says, "You shall never wash my feet." And Jesus replies, "Unless I wash you, you have no part with me."

What? What is he talking about? "Unless I wash you, you have no part with me." This is Joe Kutter's best guess. When Jesus washed their feet, he said two things. First, he said, let me show you how important you are. Let me show you how much I love you. I think he was saying that you, each one of you, is a child of God, a son or daughter of the King of the Universe and you are of ultimate value to me. A little later we see how long and strong that love was as he dies on the cross. First, see how much I love you and see how truly valuable you are to God.

Remember the season! It's the Passover Season. It is the season to celebrate freedom and justice in a time when freedom and justice have been swept away by tyranny. As the Roman Empire was telling them about their worthlessness, Jesus was proclaiming their eternal dignity.

What else did he say? We'll get there in a moment. Just remember that he was arguing with Peter. A little later Peter promised to die for Jesus and Jesus told him that before the night was out, Peter would deny him, Jesus, three times. It happened. Three times that night, Peter had golden opportunities to say, "Jesus is my Lord." Instead he said, "I do not know him."

Not only did Jesus wash Judas' feet - he washed Peter's. Then he put on his clothing and returned to his place. Now listen again to his instruction.

John 13:12-17 (NIV)

"Do you understand what I have done for you?" he asked them. "You call me 'Teacher' and 'Lord,' and rightly so, for that is what I am. Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you. I tell you the truth, no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them. (The Holy Bible: New International Version)

First, he said, "This is how important you are." Second, he said, "This is how humble you must be with one another." If you are worthy of having your feet washed by Jesus, you must also be humble enough with one another to be a foot washer.

So, how shall we get along with one another? I remember a Maundy Thursday service a long time ago when I proposed that we wash one another's feet. One lady quickly said, "I don't care what the Bible says, I'm not taking my panty hose off for anybody!" That killed it!

The Apostle Paul caught this same notion in the Letter to the Ephesians, chapter 5, verse 21. "Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ." Then he applied it to real life. He told husbands and wives to be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ. Then he told parents and children to be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ. And then he pushed the most radical revolution of all when he told masters and slaves to be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ. Did you hear that? Just as the slave is to be subject to his master, the master is to be subject to his slave out of reverence for Christ. The master is supposed to wash the slave's feet!

Can you see a new vision for freedom and justice emerging? Justice happens when we take care of one another and when we take care of one another freedom happens and when freedom happens, Passover becomes true all over again.

But, what about Peter? This man denied his Lord! What about Judas? Jesus washed their feet too.

A little later that night, Jesus offered another word about the nature of his community. He spoke it in the form of a commandment and this is it: He said he was giving us a new commandment, that we love one another just as he has loved us.

And how did he love us? He washed our feet. He died on the cross. He forgave us our sin. He promised us eternal life. How shall we love one another? Sisters and brothers in Christ, how?

Joe Kutter is Pastor of the First Baptist Church of Topeka, Kansas. He also serves as President of Ministers Council, ABCUSA. He and Peggy are the parents of four terrific children and grandparents to two awesome grandchildren.

No Longer Strangers

By Rev. Manuel de la Fuente

Scripture Text: Ephesians 2:12-22



Good Morning. I greet you on behalf of the Asian American Baptist Caucus which I represent in this Biennial. I bring you good news from the Caucus. For this past two years our Caucus conferences have been very well attended. In September of last year in Oakland, California, we had more than 130 participants. It was the first time that we have said no to some folks who still wanted to register as we have reached the maximum of what the venue can accommodate. During this Biennial, the business session of our convocation was packed with around seventy Asian American Baptists. The dinner that evening was sold out to approximately 100 members, friends, and guests of the Caucus.

We have a growing constituency and we are planning to hold our first Asian American Baptist Convention in 2006. We are inspired, our hearts are filled with joy, and we want to share this good news, these blessings with you, we might focus on the miraculous events the Lord is doing in our midst. It is not often ethnic minorities have the chance to speak, so I thank the Ministers Council and Kate Harvey, its Executive Director, for this invitation to speak on God's behalf.

Let us pray: Have mercy upon us, O Lord, and help us. Speak to us and give us a message. Remind and inspire us once more of the truth which is in Christ. Amen.

After pastoring Calvary Baptist Church for three and a half years, we held our first membership class, a series of four sessions, with about ten to twelve people attending. Two decided to be baptized and two others who were already baptized asked to be given the Right Hand of Fellowship. There was a spirit of excitement leading to the day of baptism as it has been years since the last baptism. Two Sundays ago, we celebrated that joyous event. A Jamaican woman and a young Yugoslavian/Serbian kid were baptized.

We also gave the Right Hand of Fellowship to two Haitian women - one from Canada, the other, from France.

This was going to be my first baptism so I did not really know what to expect. As I immersed the first candidate in the water and when he came out of that water symbolizing the new life in Jesus Christ, the multicultural congregation of Calvary spontaneously rose to their feet and gave a thunderous applause and a joyful affirmation. The same thing occurred with the second candidate. As we gave the Right Hand of Fellowship to the two women standing side by side with the newly baptized members, there was a joyous and celebrative spirit in the air.

There was a joyful spirit in the hearts of everyone as we went to Coffee Hour – which after three years had evolved into a weekly potluck buffet luncheon. Some of our Anglo-American members came up to me during the luncheon and said, “Pastor, this is wonderful - this spirit of joy and celebration being expressed in baptism.” She continued, “But I just wanted to share with you that all of baptisms in the past – it was different. We were as quiet as could be, since that was our understanding as how it should be.” Call it cultural difference. Call it a difference in emphasis between solemnity and celebration. But this is Calvary Baptist Church of Clifton, New Jersey, now.

What was once a basically Euro or Anglo-American church, and a mono-generation church, has become an international, multicultural church, and a multigenerational church, as well. Members and friends of Calvary come from a variety of races, ethnicity, nationalities and culture. We are Yugoslavians, Jamaicans, Haitians, Filipinos, African Americans, a variety of Hispanics from Puerto Rico, Costa Rica, Dominican Republic and others, and several other mixtures of races or ethnicities.

The worship service is a blend of traditional and contemporary music and style, and formal and casual structure. The participants are intergenerational: senior citizens, adults, young adults, youth, children. The children have brought so much life to the church. Their laughter, music and their mere presence have been so much of a blessing. There is something for everyone.

Every year at Pentecost, we celebrate International Sunday. We invite many visitors as we celebrate our unity in Christ in the midst of diversity of culture, race and ethnicity. We come with our respective ethnic or cultural attires, and the worship service reflects the variety and richness of our cultures. The Scripture readings and musical numbers are presented in different languages.

An international buffet luncheon, where one can taste in a very concrete and palatable way the “international-ness” or “multi-cultural-ness” of the church, follows the worship service. After the sumptuous meal comes the cultural program: songs, dances, readings, narrative and other creative cultural presentations. Every year there is always a surprise group. Last year, it was the Jamaicans as they came in with their colorful national colors of green, yellow and black. This year, it was the Anglo-Americans. For the first time since we started this more than three and a half years ago, they had a cultural presentation. They showcased American heritage through literary reading and a narrative dialogue of rural Alabama - of what it was decades ago – of what it was like growing up in rural Alabama.

After all those activities, fellowship, and food, it could be exhausting and you would think we’ve had enough. Oh no, not yet! - especially the Yugoslavians – for there is still a soccer/football match to be played. When the weather is excellent, playing soccer could be a weekly thing. That’s okay, but the problem is the Yugoslavians always ask me to play with them.

Playing soccer has served as a form of *koinonia*, a deep fellowship event between me and the Yugoslavians, between everyone who plays and even those who linger on: men, women and children who watch the game and those who do their own thing or play their own games. When I first played with them, there was automatic bonding. I was very careful and cautious not to hit them. Later, I started playing more aggressively - nudging, pushing, and shoving. At one point, I must have decked their Yugoslavian/Serbian pastor not only once, but two or three times! At half-time, I knew they were talking about me as they gave me those odd glances. I thought to myself, “Oh no, this is not good.” Finally, one of them came up to me and said, “Pastor, everyone was saying you have

changed. Before you were so careful not to hit us, but now you're good, you are now like one of us!" And then he gave me a big sideways hug.

Before the Yugoslavians joined the church, they had been renting a room in the building for ten years. Finally I asked them, "Why be content with just a room when you can have the whole place? Let us be one." They had insecurities: the English language, losing their culture, etc. And finally, their bottom line argument: "Pastor, you don't understand, we're not from this country." I did not even have to answer that one. In my silence and by my facial expression, they knew I was not from this country, either. I exactly knew how they felt - their insecurities and their desire to belong and have a home. I reached out to them and before long we have become one. We are really like a family now. Praise the Lord!

Koinonia – That wonderful and beautiful fellowship which is made possible by Jesus Christ, who binds us together as a family – a bigger family. In the midst of a divided and even polarized American society, in the midst of a variety of divisions and people at war. When a local church not only proclaims the Gospel but lives that Gospel, that good news of reconciliation, doesn't that tell us something very significant? It tells us that since the Lord Jesus Christ can unite the diverse people in a local church like Calvary Baptist, he can unite people anywhere else in the United States and anywhere else in the world, for that matter. Jesus is our hope – and Jesus is also where we must start.

We even had a Muslim family from Turkey who worshipped and fellowshipped with us for about a year before they returned back to Turkey. They told me that they love the Christian message and that the fellowship is warm and genuine. One of the things they valued at Calvary was the fact they could worship together as a family - that they need not be separated as is the case when they go to a mosque. We did have a good and promising dialogue before they left.

In the passage we read earlier, the characters involved - the Jews and Gentiles being reconciled and made as one - were not just different in the sense of classification, they were divided by years and years of enmity – of deep seated hostility. There was mutual prejudice. They avoided each other in as much as they could. The Jews

considered themselves superior and showed contempt for and arrogance towards the Gentiles. Commentaries and bible reference books say that during biblical times, whenever Jews traveled from Jerusalem to Galilee, they avoided going through Samaria – a Gentile Province – by taking a boat to cross to the other side of the river, then walking up and crossing back over upon reaching the boundary of Galilee. It is a longer route and took more time – but the Jews would rather do that than walk through Samaria.

To illustrate this - this is like people in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, who like to visit upstate New York. The logical thing to do is to drive through New Jersey. But since it seems Philadelphians hate New Jerseyans that much, they would rather take a barge to New York City/Manhattan and drive up to upstate New York from there - or maybe even take a plane just to avoid New Jersey.

But of course, Jesus was different, a principled non-conformist. When he traveled to Galilee from Jerusalem, he walked through Samaria and even engaged a Samaritan woman in conversation. "Through the cross, Jews and Gentiles have been reconciled to God, by which he has put to death their hostility... We and they are no longer foreigners, no longer strangers, but fellow citizens and members of God's household." Jesus is the main foundation or cornerstone, and we are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.

It is easy to say "death to hostility in Jesus Christ," but when we have not experienced that ourselves, how can we preach it? Enmity, hostility, prejudice... we cannot see these things with the naked eye. These are perceptions - these are value judgments and feelings. How do we take them out of ourselves, out of our systems? I had years of hostility, enmity, anger and hatred with my father. I never imagined I would live to see the day we will become friends. But Jesus made it possible. I don't even know where that enmity went.

Through my local church, the Lord Jesus Christ has given me a song to sing and a message to preach. The Lord has given us at Calvary an inspiration and a hope. For me, there is a prophetic voice that says, "This is the kairos of the multicultural church; this is the coming, this is the time of the multicultural church. This is the direc-

tion the Lord wants us to take.” There has been a demographic change in our communities and our society. The harvest is plentiful – it is ripe for the taking. Some other churches or Christians may have planted the seeds and nurtured these people. Let us reach out to the people around us – those who desire to respond to the Gospel of Christ.

When we think about our local, national and global life, the root cause of our problems is relational in nature. There is a secular spirituality, there is a value judgment of certain people and peoples who think and believe that they are more superior and destined to be more privileged than others. But we have to fight together to fight the things that hold us in bondage, because our freedoms are connected as oppressors and oppressed, as privileged and as victims. Sometimes - or perhaps oftentimes - we as a church, as Christians, get eaten up by the seduction and power of materialism. We lose our own religiosity as we get anxious about power, wealth and property. We lose out on the essential things, the meaningful things, of life: the warmth of friendship, the beauty of color and nature, the power of gentleness, the strength of tenderness are too often taken for granted and spoiled in our anxiety for selfish vanities and worldly pursuits. We shall become Christians when we rejoice for the right reasons, when we rejoice for the essential things in life. We shall become Christians when the sight of a sunset means more to us than the sight of a new car.

We can say, “Lord, you cannot just remain critical about our fallen-ness. Give us a model of this kingdom you want to build. Give us an image, an illustration, a picture that we can see and understand and follow. At one time Jesus said, “Look at the birds... and the lilies of the fields...” Many years ago in the Philippines, when we would buy white rice, we would need to do additional cleaning before cooking it. This was because the threshers then were not that good and could not thoroughly clean the brown skin off the rice. Usually the women (mostly the mothers) would put the rice on a big native container and they would toss the rice in the air and the breeze would blow the chaff away. Some of the smaller grains of rice would get blown to the ground.

One time, my mother called me and said, “Manuel, come here watch the birds when they come when I am cleaning the rice.” Behold, my mom was doing the cleaning, and as some of the rice fell to the ground, I could hear the birds chirping and singing as they came. They seemed to be singing good news. And the chirping got louder as more birds came and shared the food. They ate and shared, continually chirping and singing. They wanted to tell everyone who could hear, “There is food here - there is life here - there is love and joy. Come!”

In that picture, I saw what the kingdom of God is like. There was no insecurity of being left out. There is room, and food, freedom and life for everyone. There were no powerful birds or only a few birds dominating the others. There was only love and sharing.

Or what about that illustration of the kingdom of God likened to a mustard seed? The mustard seed is so very small, but when it grows, it has big branches, and birds can perch in its shade.

What about our churches, associations, regions and denomination? As we witness to the world about Jesus Christ as the reconciling hope, our guarantee that it works or will work is when we can live that event here and now.

Look at the birds, and then look at our churches. Because of Christ we have become truly a family.

We’re no longer strangers ... we’re sisters - we’re brothers - we’re friends. Amen.

Manuel de la Fuente serves as Pastor of a multi-cultural church; Calvary Baptist Church of Clifton, New Jersey, (3 1/2 years) and is the incumbent President of the Asian American Baptist Caucus. He is a product of American Baptist Missionary work in the Philippines. His wife Miriam and their three kids: Michael, Tim and Kathleen are all active in the ministries of their church.

Lift Up Your Eyes Together in Ministry

By Rev. Jane Moschenrose
Scripture Texts: Psalm 121,
Acts 2:39-42



(As a young woman; stylish hat, no suit jacket)

Even as a young girl, I was always my grandmother's child. The grand old lady lived to be 103, and every time I visited her she would take my hand and say, "Let's read the scripture." And she would sit comfortably in her rocking chair and pull her afghan over her knees – and pick up her big black leather KJV Bible and say, "I will lift up my eyes unto the hills, from whence comes my help..." Not until later, when her eye sight was dimmed by old age, did I realize Gramma wasn't reading the text at all. She was reciting it from memory, word for word, comma for comma, pulling the ancient words out of her memory as easily as the recipes she had stored in her brain many years ago. No one ever knew what she did to create a pineapple upside down cake from scratch, and few ever understood how deeply the word of the Lord had been etched into her heart, either.

Oh, how young I was then! -- A little foolish and a whole lot self centered. She wanted me to read with her, and I did, at least through the first verse. But I never finished the psalm with her, because I had trouble believing that it could be true. I could not understand then why Gramma believed it, either. She had such a hard life to be saying things about the Lord keeping watch over us by day and night. She outlived 2 husbands and a third one died the same week as 2 of her children. She endured The Great Depression, which cost them the family farm, and 2 world wars which called her two surviving sons into far off places to fight a soldier's fight. And yet she still said: "I will lift up my eyes unto the hills, from whence comes my help? My help cometh from the Lord, the maker of heaven and earth. He will not suffer thy foot to be moved; he who watches over you will not slumber. He who watches over Israel will neither slumber nor

sleep. The Lord is your keeper; the Lord is your shade at your right hand. The sun shall not smite you by day, nor the moon by night. The Lord shall preserve you from all evil; he shall preserve your soul. The Lord shall preserve your going out and your coming in from this time forth, and even forevermore."

She would lean back into her rocking chair and smile, as though she were resting in God's peace, (unseen to me,) as if the real world we live in didn't matter and the ultimate test for all of life was whatever the Lord had to say. The whole world, her whole world, might be crashing around her, but she was fine. Her faith was as solid as the rocking chair she sat in. She baffled me. I spent too much time worrying that her faith was bigger than her common sense. Maybe it was.

One August, Gramma and I went to the State Fair. The sun was beating down on us, like the devil himself, at over 90 degrees. Gramma laughed, because the temperature was high, but not quite as high as her age in years. None of us realized the impact of the heat. Gramma no longer wore sun bonnets, and she always thought that a lady would not slurp on a glass of water in public. The heat wore her down. She became dizzy, stumbled and broke her ankle.

Later on in the soft security of a hospital bed, with ice on her ankle and bruises on her arms, her mind a little confused, Gramma looked up to me and said, "let's read the scripture, dear." And she recited the same words, the same song of hope she had always said, and the irony of it all really hit me, harder than ever before. I wanted to yell at her: "Oh Gramma, don't you get it? Today is the perfect day to see that your life is the opposite of what your favorite scripture claims to be true! There was no shade from the sun today, and there was no inexplicable, unseeable force to prevent you from falling, or becoming confused from dehydration!"

But then, I am my grandmother's child. I held my tongue and I kissed her wrinkled cheek. My own prayer that day, if I really prayed at all, went something like this: "Lord, if you are up there looking down on us, or down here helping us along, you are doing a really lousy job."

(Middle-aged woman – suit, conservative scarf, key chain around wrist)

That was twenty years ago. Now that I have my own daughter, the world and everything in it has changed. One of the greatest and most blessed ironies of my life is that the many times I heard her recite the psalm, I accidentally memorized it myself, though I've worked to change the old language to more contemporary English in my head. And I've studied commentaries and such to try to figure out what this psalm really means.

The first people to know this psalm thousands of years ago sang it together as they traveled over the hills from villages to Jerusalem to worship the Lord at the Temple. They had good reasons to keep their eyes on the hills. There were many dangers and there was much to fear. Bandits and thieves hid in the shadows and wild animals lurked behind the bends. Sometimes there was no roadway at all, and the people took their chances, walking the road by faith and not by sight. Palestine was overrun by the popular pagan worship of their day. There was an altar to a pagan god or a shrine of the religion of the cults on every hilltop. All along the way, the faithful pilgrims were enticed to turn their feet away from the worship of the Lord. Like snake oil salesmen, the pagan preachers lured the travelers to their shrine, promising them what they could not offer -- cures for the body and healing for the soul, protection from the heat of the sun and the evil that awaited them under the light of the moon.

Our journey is not much different. We too are on a pilgrimage. We have trials. Life is complex; we have stress and contradictions and unresolved issues, too numerous to count. We have our pagan shrines today, too. We hear many voices calling out for our money and time and commitment. They make false promises and elicit hopes which they cannot fulfill. Some of the voices clamoring for our attention are religious voices, which only make discernment more difficult. Our church is divided by competing messages. One is the voice of separation for the sake of purity: we can only be what God wants for us and fulfill His purposes for us, when we hang onto traditional thinking and scriptural interpretation about right and wrong, rather than buying into the current culture's understanding. The other is the voice of acceptance: We are here to do God's mission together, and our diversity, even in moral matters, should not take our energy and attention away from doing God's

mission – we can accept those with whom we cannot agree in the interest of fulfilling God's mission together.

How do we cope in such times? We each have to answer the question. I have chosen this way. The road is straight and narrow. The hillside is no doubt a slippery slope – there is much to fear. I insulate myself by acknowledging only one truth and not more than that. I pray that God will protect us, even when it often appears that God is absent from our daily grind.

We often like to sing, "Amazing Grace how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me..." The 3rd verse is particularly relevant for us today: "Through many dangers, toils, and snares, I have already come. 'Twas grace that brought me safe thus far, and grace will lead me home."

(Elderly woman, red hat, purple scarf, sit in rocking chair)

Well, well. Now I am a Gramma, too. Times have changed over the years that separate me from her, but at the end of the day, I am still her child. I once was so sure of myself, so sure that my perception of things was right, and was the absolute truth. If anyone had any concern or question about the way we should live as people of faith, well, I was sure of the answer. I was sometimes wrong; I was never in doubt.

Then life happened. Two husbands later, along with more disappointments than I can count, and bumps and bruises and bangs along the road – well, the pain has tempered my perceptions. The aggravation in my soul has humbled me, as well. I've learned that which I am so sure of one day, at another juncture in my life journey, I will see entirely differently. My perceptions change with time. And when I finally realized my perceptions are not the full and total truth about a matter, I was more able to cope with ambiguity and paradox, and the fact that I see things through a mirror but dimly. Today, I would rather be in right relationship than to be right about something; I choose covenant over law and freedom over the liability of proof. My study of the scriptures shows me that Jesus did not exclude people, he welcomed all into relationship, even those who had little insight and understanding of themselves. I've learned that the hard work of remaining in dialogue with those I disagree with

leads us **all of us** to greater growth and understanding, and, I believe, a clearer understanding of God's truth.

My Gramma's psalm is still mine: "I will lift up my eyes unto the hills..." However, my understanding has changed since I first knew this text, and I hope that I have matured and not just grown older. I now understand why Gramma could have inner peace and right relationship with God even in the midst of great chaos and trauma. Her sense of wellness did not depend on everyday life experience. Her favorite psalm taught her that no trip or fall or injury or illness or accident or any other kind of trauma – no kind of evil- will ever be able to separate us from God's purposes for us. Nothing that happens to you has the power to dilute God's grace in you or divert God's will from you. That's why my Gramma was always at peace, even though everything on her body and in her world might have been falling apart. Her spirit rested in God, and God protected her spirit from harm and any sort of separation from God. She trusted in the big picture, which she could not see, but knew God had in control. She trusted that God's purposes for her would be fulfilled no matter what.

So she didn't have to fear anybody or anything. She regularly reminded me that on the day of Pentecost, when the Spirit of God was most fully present, the believers stayed together and prayed and studied and learned from one another - not because they were in agreement about everything, but because the Spirit was among them, and they worshiped the same God.

And when the Spirit is most fully among **us**, we will be united in that Spirit, and have no fear. "I lift up my eyes to the hills – from where will my help come? My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth." Thanks be to God. Please pray with me.

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A Shared Sense Of Purpose

By Rev. David Chapman

Scripture Text: Exodus 17:8-16



Time and time again in this life, we see people brought together in a common bond to fight a common foe because they realize a common goal. In the late 30s to the mid 40s, the lives of millions were threatened and the freedom of the world lay in peril – the United States of America led a coalition made up of Great Britain, France, Russia, and many smaller nations to make up the Allied Forces that fought against and defeated Germany, Italy, and Japan. The concept of freedom did not have the same meaning for all the allies, but the threat to the freedom they knew caused them to come together with a shared sense of purpose.

In the 50s and 60s we saw another coalition form - this time, the coalition consisted of groups of people who would fight for freedoms denied them in a land in which a document called the Declaration of Independence stated: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness."

To see this promise fulfilled, groups with acronyms such as SCLC, NAACP, SNCC, CORE, and others came together. Though varying in age, philosophy, race, education and profession, individuals came together with a shared sense of purpose. Others, though not to be applauded, for they were and are evil, also have come together with that same shared sense of purpose: Adolph Hitler and Benito Mussolini and the top terrorists of our day, Osama Bin Laden and Abu Mussab Al-Zarqawi. The thought ringing in my spirit and soul is this: if evil people can come together, surely those of us who call ourselves the Children of God ought to be able to work together with a shared sense of purpose. The Holy Scriptures are replete with examples of folk coming

together with a shared sense of purpose: Nehemiah and the remnant of Jerusalem; Jehoshaphat, Ahab and the King of Edom; Esther and Mordecai; Paul with Priscilla and Aquila - people of God who came together with strengths and weaknesses to accomplish a God given purpose. Our text today reveals the varying dynamics between and the importance of the people of God having a shared sense of purpose as they travel to a God appointed destination. Come with me now to Rephidim so we might observe the people of God and find help in our time of need...

The first thing we encounter is a God anointed, God appointed leader giving directions to another God anointed leader who does what he's asked to do. Moses said to Joshua, Choose some of our men and go out to fight the Amalekites. This wasn't hard for Joshua to do, because he not only had a shared sense of purpose with Moses, it was obvious he had great respect for him also.

Purpose is achieved much easier when the people of God respect God appointed leadership. This is true from the local church level to the national level. When respect is absent, there is often rebellion, confusion, and division. Now, I know from time to time we encounter leaders whose actions make it hard to give the level of respect that should cause one to follow. But if the God ordained purpose is still in view, then the purpose, not the person, can take priority and move us to do that which we know is right. One must be able to see past the person and see the purpose.

So Joshua goes down into the valley to command an ill equipped, poorly trained army - a group of people who for almost 400 years were slaves, not warriors. We must also note that those fighting for Israel were probably not all Israelites. Numbers 11:4 refer to the "rabble;" (NIV) the King James Version calls them the "mixed multitude." Yet in this text, we hear of no division or attempt to separate those who are fighting in Israel's army. The situation was too grave for them to worry about who was fighting by their side as long as they knew they were on the same team, with a shared sense of purpose, under the banner of the one true and living God. What mattered was they were a people standing together, fighting a bitter foe whose

aim was to see they didn't get to where God wanted to take them or accomplish what God determined for them to accomplish.

The foe we face is much more formidable than the foe Israel faced. The devil's job is to kill, steal, and destroy everything and everybody that God would use to see God's purpose fulfilled on this earth. Knowing that we face such a foe ought to have every Christian on this planet make every effort to band together. But what do we too often hear and see? "They are not of us - they're not white, not black, red, brown, yellow, Charismatic, Pentecostal, Baptist, (Regular, Southern, Freewill, National, American or otherwise.) Then we've got the Liberal-Conservative, Democrat-Republican thing going on. I've found none of this in my Bible. But I did find a conversation between Jesus and John one day as recorded in Mark 9:38-40. "Teacher," says John, "We saw a man driving out demons in your name and we told him to stop, because he was not one of us." "Do not stop him," Jesus said. "No one who does a miracle in my name can in the next moment say anything bad about me, for whoever is not against us is for us." I also recall Paul in 1 Cor. 1:13 asking, "Is Christ divided?" But the scripture that impacts me the greatest is John 17. In the streets between the Upper Room and Gethsemane - following the institution of the Lord's Supper and just before the agony of Calvary, Jesus prayed that the Church would be one as He and His Father were one. How can we allow the incivility of our society and its politics to influence the Church as it does?

Unity in spirit is strength, but most important, as Psalm 133:3 tells us, unity commands God's blessing. And it was the blessing of God that was causing Israel to prevail. Moses, Aaron, and Hur had gone up on the hill. While Joshua and the Army of Israel fought in the valley, Moses, Aaron, and Hur were on high in prayer. Here, we are reminded the weapons of our warfare are not carnal and that we wrestle not against flesh and blood but against spiritual forces of evil. There is no doubt Amalek had the better army, but Israel had God and God had given them leaders with a shared sense of purpose.

Knowing that Israel could not overcome Amalek by their own effort, Moses stood on the hill with his hands lifted up to heaven holding what repre-

sented the power and authority God had bestowed upon him. But even Moses couldn't do it by himself. He began to tire. When his hands went down, Amalek prevailed over Israel. How many of us find ourselves in Moses' situation? We are equipped with the power and authority God has bestowed upon us by God's Spirit, but we come to realize the flesh is not up to the task. We grow tired and weary. The road to fulfilling God's given purpose becomes difficult; victory seems to be slipping away. But thanks be to God! There by our side stands Aaron and Hur - a church officer, a clergy colleague, a family member or a friend. Have you received a call during what seemed to be your darkest hour? And the person on the other end of the line says, "All of a sudden, you were on my mind, and I felt I needed to pray for you." Having that shared sense of purpose, they don't need to be asked - they step up and do what needs to be done. But what if? What if they were too busy criticizing? What if they refused to step up because someone else did? He's a liberal, he's a conservative, she's a fundamentalist! It's getting so ridiculous in church circles these days that who you voted for for President is used to define you more so than whom you confess as Lord.

What if Aaron and Hur were envious of Moses or jealous of Moses' elevation by the Lord? What if Moses was too proud to accept help? What if he were afraid to allow Aaron and Hur to step into his sphere of authority? But that's "what if!" It didn't happen! Aaron and Hur stepped up - one on one side, the other on the other side! We need folk who have a shared sense of purpose in Christ to step up. Labels, finger pointing, and self-righteous attitudes are hindering our quest for victory. Joshua and Israel in the valley, Moses, Aaron and Hur on the Hill--- And here is the Victory! God is working in the midst of a people who are united by a Shared Sense of Purpose. If someone tells me that they have received Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, then we should have a Shared Sense of Purpose.

People continue to come together to accomplish what seemed to be the impossible. It happens every day. Many groups from all walks of life come together with a shared sense of purpose. Even in the world of fiction we see this purposeful coming together in distinctly different groups. Right here, I'm reminded of J.R.R Tolkien's tales of the Hobbits - most recently made into a trilogy of films. The storyline in all three films is one of

good against evil. The diverse groups that come together in a place called Middle Earth are the Hobbits, Dwarfs, Elves, and Men. They fight an evil force headquartered in a place called Mordor.

The hobbits, dwarfs, elves and men have come together in what is called the "Fellowship of the Ring." The destruction of the ring will destroy the evil of Mordor. The task of the ring's destruction falls on a hobbit by the name of Frodo Baggins. He is accompanied by one Sam (Wise) Gamgee, who has pledged to aid Frodo to the end. The scene I'm reminded of is near the end of the third film. Frodo and Sam have reached Morod. They are on Mount Doom, close to the volcano of fire in which the ring can be destroyed. For all those who have come together with the shared sense of purpose, the destruction of evil - the destruction of the ring - was vital. But the task has taken its toll on Frodo. He is completely exhausted - he can't go another step. As he is lying among the rocks and the intense heat of Mount Doom, the real hero of this story (in my opinion), Sam Wise, kneels beside Frodo and says, "Mr. Frodo, I can't carry it, (referring to the ring, for only Frodo could carry it to its destruction) - but I can carry you!"

I hear somebody in heaven saying, "You can't carry your sin, but I can and will bear it for you." Thank God we have a Savior who can carry our sin. I can't carry your sin, and you can't carry mine. But I can carry you - and hopefully you are willing to carry me. Let us go together to where God wants to take us. Because we are free of sin and are equipped with the power and authority of God, let us move forward with a Shared Sense of Purpose.

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