

Sermon: **Yes We Can!**

February 1, 2009

1 Corinthians 8:1-4, 8-13 & Mark 1:21-28

by the Reverend Steve Clunn

Corinth wasn't some backwater town in Paul's day. It was literally a hub of commerce; so important to the Roman Empire in transferring goods from the Ionian Sea to the Aegean Sea, that Rome chose Corinth as their regional capital over the city of Athens. Those of you who went on the Greece trip a few years back might remember that.

So, as a well off, culturally diverse city, albeit a small one, the issues of the fledgling Christian church there were a microcosm into the tensions of the emerging Christian Church everywhere.

The issue of eating meat that had been sacrificed in the temples of Greek and Roman God's was at once, an issue of faith and money. Christians, like their Jewish forbearers, didn't believe that any other God, other than the one, true God, even existed.

People who practiced the faith of worshipping multiple God's, were asked to offer animal sacrifices in their temples. The priests of those temples would then re-sell the meat of those animals at the market, raising money for the temple.

Often this sacrificed meat would be sold at a lower cost than you could buy an animal fresh at the market. So the temple system helped to provide cheaper meat for those who couldn't afford more.

Some of the Christians thought that since those other God's didn't really exist, buying and eating that meat really didn't matter. Other Christians thought that because the meat was offered to the God's of the temples, their faith demanded that they avoid that meat all together. This debate, led to some pretty nasty divisions in the early Christian Church, so those Christians in Corinth turned to Paul for a definitive answer.

Paul didn't give them an answer, but something deeper to think about. He seemed to agree with the folk who claimed that eating the sacrificed meat really wasn't an issue. He gave that side the title of being the more knowledgeable.

Yet he reminded them that being right at the cost of hurting the faith of others was not acceptable. Again, as Paul had done so many times in Corinth, he reminded them that their faith was about working together for the common good, not about being the last one standing at the end of the day with the best understanding of faith.

In the first chapter of the Gospel of Mark, we here of Jesus' early ministries and encounters with the religious leaders of his day.

In today's reading we hear of his entering the synagogue and teaching, with authority, not as a student; and of his healing of the man with an unclean spirit.

For me, the unclean spirit can be seen today as metaphor for Church's fearfulness and anxiety; something, from which we all need to be healed.

One commentator on this passage wrote, "The people of Capernaum were amazed at Jesus' power to teach with authority and cast out demons. Jesus embodied God's wisdom, announcing surprising reveals on behalf of God's promised reign. Such wisdom comes from relationship with God, who equips those who are called with the power to do God's will."

The power to do God's will. How many of you are feeling particularly empowered these days?

My guess is that most of us are feeling pretty disempowered, weak, ineffective right now. Why do you think that is?

(Allow for the congregation to answer... my guess – the bad economy [I was right])

Why – why are letting that strip us of our real power? Do we as a congregation actually believe in "prosperity theology?" That God prospers the faithful and withholds prosperity from the unfaithful? Is that what we are about? I sure hope not!

In all my years of ministry, I have never been as frightened about the future the Church. At certain moments, it's downright debilitating.

But I've begun to realize that my fear is part of the problem. If you've already received our February newsletter, the Spire, you may have read the story I quoted from The Rev. Dr. Sharon E. Watkins' sermon at the National Prayer Service the day after the Inauguration.

She said, "There is a story attributed to Cherokee wisdom: One evening a grandfather was teaching his young grandson about the internal battle that each person faces. 'There are two wolves struggling inside each of us,' the old man said. 'One wolf is vengefulness, anger, resentment, self-pity, fear... The other wolf is compassion, faithfulness, hope, truth, love ...' The grandson sat, thinking, then asked: 'Which wolf wins, Grandfather?' His grandfather replied, 'The one you feed.'"

I have found myself feeding the wolf of fear lately. Fear over finances and budgets, over potential institutional stability, over what we might lose in the years to come.

Why? Why have I been so fixated on scarcity when I totally reject the prosperity God for the God of the power of Love? By doing so, haven't I made the true scarcity one of a scarcity of hope?

Yes, I acknowledge that we are facing the toughest economic times of my lifetime, but there are some of you who have been through worse. I acknowledge that we as a church, just like we as a culture, have spent beyond our means and we need to become even better stewards of our resources than we have been in the past.

Yet I categorically reject the idea that the risks we have taken financially were bad ones; unfruitful.

I look around me and I see a congregation that is doing more than we have ever done before. We are helping to lead our annual conference and already the future annual conference in terms of progressive, inclusive and justice focused ministry.

When our current president decided in his first week of office to restore the rights of due process to prisoners, even enemy non-combatants; I remembered that you helped to move legislation forward to our Annual Conference calling for the closure of Gitmo and any facility that didn't follow the rights that we hold dear for ourselves and our society.

When I read the Corinthians passage for this morning and recalled standing among the ruins of ancient Corinth, I remembered how you helped to send 19 of us to Greece to experience our faith. Know that some of the people who went could have never even imagined being able to afford a trip like that... you helped make that possible.

How many over the years have experienced the life changing event of going on a mission trip because of the support of this congregation? How many families lives have you helped change because of the three Heifer Project arks you've given in the last nine years?

How are you changing lives in Nicaragua on a daily basis through your support of our missionary?

As we feel forced to cut back on staff, I also note that we just celebrated one of the most theologically uplifting Christmas pageants I've ever seen. How will we continue to inspire the more than 27 children and youth now involved in our programs?

The question that I am facing in my own life right now is simply this; can I deal realistically and yet hopefully with the times we find ourselves in? Can I stop feeding the wolf of fear and anxiety and instead feed and the wolf of hope and love, even in difficult times?

If I truly believe in a God that is love, and present, and caring, and compassionate for what we face; then I already know what the answer to my questions is. I guess I just need to learn how to live it out better.

I threw my back out this past week shoveling snow and found myself on the sofa with a heating pad, my laptop, and an old episode of “The West Wing” playing on the television.

It was the episode were a long-shot congressman with a lot of idealism, Matthew Santos, ends up being encouraged to run for President. I want to share the words of his announcement for candidacy; and re-work some of the ending to make it apply to us as a congregation.

Here goes. “Hope is real... In a life of trials; in a world of challenges, hope is real!
In a country where families go without healthcare; some go without food; some don’t even have a home to speak of... hope is real! In a time of global chaos and instability; where our faiths collide as often as our weapons; hope is real!

Hope is what gives us the courage to take on our greatest challenges” and fears, “to move forward together.

We live in cynical times, I know that, but hope is not up for debate. There is such a thing as false science; such a thing as false promises. I am sure that” we’ll “have our share of false starts in” the days that lie ahead. “But there is no such thing as false hope. There is only hope.

And with your help and hard work and the hopes of good people all” around us, “I hearby announce” that I will do all in my ability to keep us moving forward as a people of hope.

So, can we live in hope? Yes we can! I certainly hope so! Amen.

Normally, I’d end my sermon here, but yesterday, just after we celebrated Bob Slater’s mother, Lois’s life, I pulled this letter out of my mailbox. I call these kind of moments “divine serendipity.

I’ve redacted some things out to protect this person’s identity.

I normally share this kind of mail with the Church Council, but this is something we all need to hear; for we often don’t realize all of the ways we touch the lives of others around us every day.

(The following is a Letter sent to First UMC, Schenectady, dated January 27, 2009):

I am writing you to give testimony about my journey and how the First United Methodist Church has helped me. Since coming to the Capital Region area, I have come a long hard way. I came to the church fighting all kinds of vicious circumstances while struggling to remain sober. Without exception, your staff and programs welcomed me. After struggling through many homeless shelters, vulgar and unsafe jobs, “people, places and things”, I

consider myself one of the fortunate ones that am able to be helped by the First United Methodist Church.

The First United Methodist Church became part of my support system. A “Safe-House” environment and real help for me while I struggled to become responsible for seeking solutions to my problems. The daily bread, toilet paper and soap along with other donated item being freely available are the kind of spirited things that enabled me to maintain inner peace. Peace of mind and peace in my mind. All those flames of anger went out, replaced with hope & joy.

I came to First United Methodist Church already having skills, talent, education and a burning desire to get back to being a productive and responsible member of society. As simple as this may sound, it speaks volumes to the importance of the world fulfilling its obligation to the poor. The First United Methodist Church is one of the places where I began to heal from all things that were terrorizing me. A healing that goes far beyond a strictly psycho-medical approach. My “healing” has been a holistically whole. All areas of my fractured life started coming together in miraculous ways. Thank GOD for that! Amen!

Now I am living in my own apartment... going on 6 months. I spent the first 30-days sleeping on the floor though I have a broken back. The Home Furnishings Program fulfilled its goal. The gentleman who runs the programs showed compassion & mercy towards my situation.

There are not words to say how much that program and the church helped me. Now I am back to my volunteer hobby of building and donating “fully programmed” used computers (including the printer) to indigent & poor families. The Methodist Church has been steadfast with support. Grateful is what I am for these First United Methodist Church people doing God’s work... and for keeping God’s spirit and principles before all our personalities or social stigmas. (end of letter)

Now... Amen!