



Trinity United Methodist Church Newsletter



2084 Wilson Pike · Franklin, TN 37067 · 615.794.2665
Pastor Dennis Meaker: 615.794.2665 · djmeaker@gmail.com

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The Words that Divide Us

¹³ But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about those who have died, so that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. ¹⁴ For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have died. ¹⁵ For this we declare to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will by no means precede those who have died. ¹⁶ For the Lord himself, with a cry of command, with the archangel's call and with the sound of God's trumpet, will descend from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise first. ¹⁷ Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air; and so we will be with the Lord forever. ¹⁸ Therefore encourage one another with these words. 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 NRSV

The Church, the Body of Christ, is like a massive one story building. I'm talking really massive. Say, something the size of Connecticut. Arrayed around the edges of the building are doors to separate areas of the building. There are doors for Roman Catholics and Baptists; Episcopalians and Pentecostals; United Methodists and Church of Christ. Each Christian Tradition has its own door and its own area. Some of the areas are connected by corridors, but many are tightly shut off. Blocked by walls as thick as any found in any prison and with gatekeepers at the door. Yet, in the very middle of this structure that is the Church, the Body of Christ, is a courtyard where anyone is free to walk; a place where all Christians can come together. A place that is often empty because we refuse to come together.

I.

Many things separate us. At Vanderbilt Divinity School I was taught that it's more appropriate to speak of Christianities than Christianity. The Church, the Body of Christ is splintered; horribly fractured. And as you study the reasons for those divisions I think you will find that nothing has divided us over the centuries like our understandings of scripture.

Take, for instance, this passage from First Thessalonians. What do we do with 1 Thessalonians 4:13? If you belong to some traditions you explain that when Christ returns the faithful, and those who died in Christ, will be called into the sky and carried away to their heavenly reward while the rest of humankind is Left Behind with their salvation in doubt. "If the Rapture comes, grab the steering wheel because I'll be gone." So reads a common bumper sticker. The clear message being that the driver will be gone and you, the reader, might be available to grab the wheel.

Other traditions look at this curious passage from Paul like a mustard stain on their best white shirt. There it is, plain for all to see, but we really wish people would just ignore it and not judge us by this little embarrassment.

II.

Passages like the so-called rapture text tend to divide the Church. Like the Hatfields and McCoys we find ourselves broken into camps with labels like Evangelical or Liberal, Orthodox or New Wave, caught in never ending feuds with those who see these scriptures in different ways. At the same time that we are telling people that Christianity is about loving God and one another we can't get along with our brothers and sisters in Christ! We attack one another verbally or in the media, telling any who will listen that those folks **over there** are the wrong kind of Christians. Is it any wonder that the Church has become all but irrelevant in the world today? Who wants to be caught up in such arguments?

It's not that our differences don't matter. They do matter. Especially when, as happens with the Pat Robertsons and others, the Gospel message becomes one of hate. When the Gospel is perverted to support the anti-Semites, the gay bashers, the racial bigots, or those who kill abortionists, or when the Gospel is perverted to a message of hate, we have to speak up. If we preach and believe in a God who loves Justice and loves humankind we cannot remain quiet while poison is spread in the name of Jesus Christ. Our differences do matter.

But, even as we oppose the message that other Christians sometimes preach, we are called to remember that these persons are our brothers and sisters in Christ. They may be a branch of the family we want to forget but they are nevertheless our brothers and sisters in Christ. They are people like us who are called to be part of the body of Christ; the living presence of Christ in the world today.

I constantly need to remind myself of our shared heritage. You see, I have spent a fair bit of time in conflict with my brothers and sisters in Christ including those who see in this passage a special vision of God's plan for just a few. And while I could simply give a lecture about pre-millennial dispensationalism (the theology behind the Left Behind Books and the Rapture), I wanted instead to hear the Gospel for all our lives in this passage. And, as I studied this text, I believe I have found that common ground.

III.

Paul is writing to the Thessalonians. They have grown fearful. They have elected to follow Christ, but Christ has been slow in returning. People who joined the Church have died. And these deaths have created a theological problem. What is to become of these people who died? Are they cut off from Christ? Are they lost because they died before Christ's return?

The people of Thessalonica are struggling with a problem that each one of us knows well. Where is God in all of this? When things go wrong in our lives, where is God? When terrorists fly planes into the WTC, where is God? When a Mother of three is killed by a drunk driver, where is God? When the world seems turned upside down, where is God? That is a concern that that we all share. Where is God in all of this?

Paul's answer is in two parts that draws heavily on Jewish tradition. In the first part, Paul says God is always present. Not even death can separate us from God so don't worry about it. God has a plan and God is working towards the culmination of that plan. When Christ returns, the dead and the living will both stand before God. Christ defeated sin and death.

The second part of Paul's answer is found elsewhere in Thessalonians. In the meantime, while awaiting the return of Christ, you are called to be a holy people. You don't know the time and place of the return, but you are to be prepared. You prepare for the return of Christ by holy living; by loving God and loving one another. Most especially, your brothers and sisters in Christ.

And, you cannot love your brothers and sisters in Christ if you insist on standing apart from them. A truth that I took away from my years at Vanderbilt is that the differences in our religious beliefs are very important. When you talk about your understandings about God, whether coming from the many different Christian traditions or the many other religious traditions, you are talking about those things that provide a framework for your life. These beliefs are like boards in the floor we stand on. They can be changed, but only slowly or we fall. Don't expect someone to change their thinking easily and we shouldn't be shocked if they refuse to even try. These differences are important. Yet, even though we stand in different places, we can talk to one another with respect.

If you are part of the tradition that looks at 1 Thessalonians and sees in it a grand vision of a pre-millennial rapture that is fine. But, as you talk about your beliefs with others, I urge you to not discount the beliefs of your brothers and sisters who do not see the vision you see. Instead, listen to them as they talk about the Gospel that they hear in these scriptures. Their beliefs might be different from yours, but they are just as deeply felt and held.

If you are part of a tradition that does not subscribe to the pre-millennial rapture or some of what is called the evangelical traditions, don't discount the beliefs of those who do. Listen to your brothers and sisters and seek to understand, even if you could never come to believe as they do. Remember, you share common ground with them. Like them, you are seeking to know how and where God fits into all that surrounds us.

The church, the Body of Christ is like that vast building the size of Connecticut. Each of us tucked away in our own little corners, caught up in our own concerns, many of us not talking with one another at all. Yet, at the center of that building is that open courtyard. A place where we can all walk together if we will only try.

What's the Least I Can Believe and Still be Christian?

Several years ago Dr. Martin Thielen, a United Methodist Pastor here in the Tennessee Conference, wrote a book titled, "What is the Least I Can Believe and Still be a Christian?" The title is not really descriptive of the thrust of the book but comes from a question Dr. Thielen was asked by a parishioner contemplating a profession of faith. Dr. Thielen uses the question as a jumping off point to discuss things that are not central to Christian belief and things that he believes are central to Christian belief.

Beginning on April 12, the Sunday after Easter, I will begin a ten part sermon series loosely based on Dr. Thielen's book. The first five sermons will focus on propositions that you do not have to believe to be a Christian. The second five will focus on propositions that I believe are central to Christian Faith. The titles for these sermons are listed below:

- *You do not have to Believe that God Brings Catastrophes into Our Lives.*
- *You do not have to Believe that Women Cannot be Preachers or Leaders of the Church.*
- *You do not have to Believe that Christians Never Doubt.*
- *You do not have to Believe that "Bad" People Will be 'Left Behind' by God.*

- *You do not have to Believe that Everything in the Bible Should be Taken Literally.*
- *To be Christian, You Must Believe in Christ.*
- *To be Christian, You Must Believe in the Church, the Body of Christ.*
- *To Be Christian, You Must Believe in the Holy Spirit.*
- *To be Christian, You Must Believe in God's Love for the World.*
- *To be Christian, You Must Believe in the Resurrection.*

One reason I offer sermon series is to provide an opportunity for you to be able to invite people to our Church. It is sometimes easier to invite people to come and visit the Church when you can tell them what the sermon will be about. A sermon series offers people an opportunity to get to know us over a series of weeks and experience what it is like to participate in our ministries. I encourage you to take this opportunity to invite others to "Come and See" what Trinity United Methodist Church is like.

72+U The Mission and Ministry of the Tennessee Conference and Trinity UMC

After this the Lord appointed [seventy-two] others and sent them on ahead of him in pairs to every town and place where he himself intended to go. ² He said to them, "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest. Luke 10:1-2

The mission of the Memphis and Tennessee Conferences of the United Methodist Church is to Discover, Equip, Connect and Send lay and clergy leaders who shape congregations that offer Jesus Christ to a hurting world, one neighborhood at a time. The values underlying this mission are:

Unrelenting love for all people
 Integrity
 Excellence
 Faithfulness and Fruitfulness
 Innovation

Luke 10:1-2 describes the beginning of the first missionary effort of the Disciples of Jesus Christ. Some translations state that Jesus sent forth 70 disciples, others say that he sent forth 72. The Tennessee and Memphis Conferences, under the leadership of Bishop William McAlilly have adopted that scripture as a map for our own mission in our communities. The Bishop has invited us to view our communities as our mission fields, seeking to bring the Gospel to everyone in our communities.

In the coming months I will bring you more information about this mission initiative and how we might be a part of it.

The Poverty and Justice Bible

The Poverty & Justice Bible is a bible that highlights each passage of scripture that deals with the issues of poverty and justice. There are more than 2000 references in scripture to poverty and justice, as opposed to four or five on such controversial subjects as homosexual acts or marriage. Yet many Christians seem to think

that helping the poor is a pointless and even harmful act. As an on-going part of this newsletter, I will be providing citations to passages from the Old and New Testaments each week that deal with what scripture tells us about poverty and justice. If you are interested in learning more about *The Poverty & Justice Bible* you can check on Amazon.com or go to www.Justicebible.org.

*⁶I'll tell you
what it really means
to worship the LORD.
Remove the chains of prisoners
who are chained unjustly.
Free those who are abused!
⁷Share your food with everyone
who is hungry;
share your home
with the poor and homeless.
Give clothes to those in need;
don't turn away your relatives.
Isaiah 58:6-7 CEV*

Isaiah is speaking to the People of Israel who have returned from Babylon. The people want to know why God does not honor their worship. Isaiah tells them that worshipping God is much more than attending synagogue services, ritual fasting or observing feast days. The true worship of God is found in how we live our lives in relation to one another.

*What if I could speak all languages of humans and of angels?
If I did not love others, I would be nothing more than a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.
²What if I could prophesy and understand all secrets and all knowledge? And what if I had faith that moved mountains? I would be nothing, unless I loved others. ³What if I gave away all that I owned and let myself be burned alive? I would gain nothing, unless I loved others.
⁴Love is kind and patient, never jealous, boastful, proud, or ⁵rude. Love isn't selfish or quick tempered. It doesn't keep a record of wrongs that others do. ⁶Love rejoices in the truth, but not in evil. ⁷Love is always supportive, loyal, hopeful, and trusting. ⁸Love never fails! Everyone who prophesies will stop, and unknown languages will no longer be spoken. All that we know will be forgotten. ⁹We don't know everything, and our prophecies are not complete. ¹⁰But what is perfect will someday appear, and what isn't perfect will then disappear. ¹¹When we were children, we thought and reasoned as children do.
But when we grew up, we quit our childish ways. ¹²Now all we can see of God is like a cloudy picture in a mirror. Later we will see him face to face. We don't know everything, but then we will, just as God completely understands us. ¹³For now there are faith, hope, and love. But of these three, the greatest is love. 1 Corinthians 13 CEV*

Paul is telling the church at Corinth, and telling us, that it is how we live our lives as the Body of Christ that matters. Paul insists that we live lives turned outward and with regard to those around us. He calls for a love so profound that it encompasses everyone we encounter.

Prayer Ministry

The following persons have agreed to be part of the prayer ministry at Trinity UMC:

Elva Beard	Sarah Jordan	Kenneth Stevens	Judy Richardson
Larry Eastwood	Mac McAfee	Patricia Stevens	Charles Wilson
Leslie Eastwood	Rachel Newman	Sam Richardson	

The members of the prayer ministry of Trinity United Methodist church covenant with one another to pray daily for:

- Those concerns on the prayer list of the Church and for healing of body and spirit for all persons listed;
- For each ministry of the church that each ministry would work to bring the Gospel to those within our community and most especially to bring the Gospel to those who have not yet accepted Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior;
- For all the members of the Trinity UMC community that they be led and enabled to live as the Body of Christ;
- For our local community and all its needs, especially for those who are struggling with the burden of poverty;
- For our nation and our world that God help lead the people of the world to live in peace with God's Kingdom.

If you would like to be a part of this ministry (or if you have already spoken to me about it and were inadvertently left off the list) please let me know and I will see that you are added.

Up-Coming Sermons

March 22nd: Sermon: **Create in Me A Clean Heart.** Which one of us has a clean heart? The Bible in large part is the story of humanity's unclean heart. The bible tells us that even the most unlikely people are capable of causing great harm. My texts are Psalm 51:1-12 and Jeremiah 31:31-34.

March 29th: **Palm Sunday.** Palm Sunday will be a service of Lessons and Hymns. We will reflect upon Christ's entry into Jerusalem, the initiation of the Lord's Supper, and the Passion and the Crucifixion. Communion will also be celebrated.

Worship Leader's Schedule

March 22

Julia Moore, **Liturgist**

Hal & Rachel Newman, **Greeters**

Larry Eastwood & Linda Robinson, **Ushers**

March 29

Rodger Klein, **Liturgist**

Linda Robinson & Pat Moran, **Greeters**

Marty Bauguess & Tommy Cotton, **Ushers**

Announcements

In a few weeks, we will be celebrating Easter. If you would like to honor a friend, family member or honor a loved one in memoriam, please use the sign-up sheet on the bulletin board. **The order for lilies must be placed by March 29.**

This **Sunday, March 22**, we will have a **workshop after church** for those who want to participate in creating our **Sesquicentennial quilt**. For those who will be sewing, you will receive fabric and instruction. You will be able to take your fabric(s) home for completion. For those who will be painting one of the designs, you will want to bring your apron or painting smock. We will provide the supplies needed for you to paint your design(s).

Lunch will be provided. We encourage all ladies to participate in this fun, historic, memorable project. Please join us!

Our **Easter Egg Hunt** will take place **Saturday, April 4 from 10:00 AM to 12:00 PM**. We will now begin collecting individually wrapped candy and will soon need volunteers to serve before, during and after this wonderful occasion. Please invite your neighbors and friends to come and experience the fun to be had that day!

March Birthdays

Pat Moran, Marty Bauguess, Tom Moore, Jeff McKernan, Herb Haynes, Ava Fetting

Happy Birthday to each of you!