

WORKING TOGETHER FOR GOOD

Randall Tremba

July 3, 2016

14th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

Galatians 6:1-16

My friends, bear one another's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ. So let us not grow weary in doing what is right for we shall reap a harvest, if we do not give up. And whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all.

* * *

On Sunday, July 4, 1976, the bi-centennial of our nation, I was 28 years old, one day short of 29. On that day I stood here for the first time as the 18th installed minister to serve this church since its founding in 1743. That makes today my 40th anniversary. But it's a bit confusing for that was not my first Sunday here.

As some of you know, I first stood here in April 1975, as a temporary supply preacher following the sudden resignation of the Rev. Frank Pyles. Even though I had been ordained to ministry by the Los Ranchos Presbytery of So. California in 1973, in 1975, I was adrift, living in Harpers Ferry and working 40 hours a week as a field hand in an apple orchard.

Frank Pyles knew me and suggested that the Session contact me for transitional assistance. I agreed to fill in part time while the church looked for a *real* minister. I had no interest in permanently serving this or any other church. At the time, I was nursing a broken heart, lost in an ocean of grief. I often felt like a rolling stone with no direction home.

Still, I accepted thinking it would be just a few months. But as the months went by I fell in love with this church, the congregation and Shepherdstown itself. I had a change of heart. I wanted to stay. And that eventually led to this second 40th anniversary date.

But let me just say, your funky, fun and funny surprise recognition of my first 40th anniversary last year in April (2015) was more than enough fanfare to last me a long while. So I asked the Session to forego any celebration this year and wait until my 50th or my retirement—whichever comes first.

So why the two 40th anniversary dates?

Due to a Presbyterian policy that (wisely, in my opinion) forbids supply preachers from immediately becoming installed pastors, I had to leave Shepherdstown for six months. And so I went back to California for a month in January of 1976. I caught up with old friends, including one named Paula, who wasn't actually old. She was 20 years old.

In February, I was asked to serve as temporary supply for two small Presbyterian churches outside Front Royal. I bought a motorcycle and went off to Buckton and Ninevah for five months while this church and its search committee debated whether to wait for the long-haired, scruffy, bearded hippie preacher or go looking for a better groomed candidate.

Much to my surprise, joy and relief, they waited. And so it was on Sunday, July 4, 1976, I stood here before a congregation swollen from its normal 30 or 35 souls to more than a hundred.

To think I had grown the church threefold before I even got started! The next Sunday, the congregation was back down to 35. And it stayed that way for many years.

Only a few are still with us from that Sunday 40 years ago. And needless to say they were all much younger then. Besides a certain 20 year old soon to become a bride in October, there were Mary Ann Strider, Loretta Krogstad, Melinda Landolt, Judy and Carl Moore, Yvonne Fischer, Suellen Myers, Linda Kelso and a sassy teenager named Mary Ellen Wright.

Prior to my first official Sunday, I spent two weeks alone at Holy Cross Abbey, a Trappist monastery outside Berryville. It wasn't required. I just had a hunch that extended prayer and fasting and silence was a good place out of which to begin my work.

My sermon that day was entitled "Spiritual Revolution" inspired by the story of Moses and the burning bush in which a voice says: *take off your shoes for you are standing on holy ground*. At the time I didn't know the story of this church serving as a hospice for the wounded and dying sons of our nation from the Battle of Antietam. I just had a hunch this was holy ground.

At some point in the service, I invited the children to come to the front pew. I can't remember what I told them. But I do remember inviting them to take off their shoes and socks because, after all, this was holy ground. Perhaps that explains the dramatic drop in attendance the following Sunday!

After the service an elderly woman named Mary Belle Willis, who looked ancient but was no doubt a mere 60, pointed her finger at me and said: *What's with this "revolution" talk? What's wrong with the word "revival?"*

And that pretty much set the tone for the next 40 years.

I love serving a congregation that's not afraid to point a critical or challenging finger at me. It's kept me on my toes. Forty years ago I had no clue as to who I was or what we were meant to do and be. So I learned to listen to all voices. I learned it takes a congregation to raise a pastor.

It took me a long while to figure out that we are a "school of love" called in our baptism to be compassionate and welcoming of all. It took us a while to figure out we were a "hospice" for many wounded and scarred by rigid and intolerant religion. It took us a while to figure out we could rescue and resettle a young Guatemalan refugee mother and her son detained in Texas in 1983. It took us a while to figure out we could be a safe and healing place for LGBT persons stigmatized and wounded by society and most churches. And it took us a while to figure out the many, many ways we can reach out and touch the world, near and far, with love

And that brings us back to the lesson for today.

My friends, bear one another's burdens. In this way you will fulfill the law of Christ (which is to say, the law of love). So let us not grow weary in doing what is right, for we shall reap a harvest, if we do not give up. And whenever we have an opportunity, let us work together for the good of all.

And that quite simply is my hope for this congregation long into the future.

* * *

Hymn 765
"Song of Hope"