

I have often shared that I have not always been a Presbyterian, having spent my first thirty-plus years as a Methodist, and whether that was the second generational result of the influence of my late Women's Christian Temperance Union paternal grandmother — and she was "Christian" in the best sense, — I do not know, but I joke that I became a Presbyterian so that I could have a beer with my burger or pizza — or when I am more serious, I say I became a Presbyterian by accident.

The accident was that when U S Steel transferred me from Pittsburgh to Gary, Indiana, in early 1975, Carol and I tried several area Methodist churches, and none of them clicked with us, so we joined the church in the small community in which we lived, Ogden Dunes Community Church, which was Presbyterian, and I have been a Presbyterian with varying degrees of enthusiasm ever since, even encouraging the Presbyterian denomination to lower its standards so far that I could become a minister.

The last church that Carol and I had attended as Methodists was in Mt. Lebanon, a suburb south of Pittsburgh, and the minister there, Winston Trevor, was the person I held up as my role model when I threw up my hands, said "I give" to God, and "I dare you" to the Presbyterian Church. He was a wonderful preacher, but also a very humble and kindly man; he was probably the second best preacher I had known, but the finer preacher lacked those other qualities. Even if I privately think I measure up to them as a preacher, I certainly do not measure up to Winston in his personal qualities.

I have to add a footnote that I shared with [Glen Walker] the other day: Fear of visiting hospitals and nursing homes, I think, delayed by a few years my entering ministry, yet once after I had working in Gary but while visiting in Pittsburgh, I visited Winston in the hospital!

Now, the Mt. Lebanon Methodist Church had 2200 members, as I recall, and Winston had three associates, the third of whom was hired when Carol and I were members (by the way, my younger son was baptized there). Adrian — her last name escapes me — was the first woman minister I ever knew. She was barely five foot tall and was our age or even a year or so younger, but she was an incredibly fine preacher. When I talked with Winston one time he indicated his appreciation for her preaching gifts, and lamented that he had three associates, all of whom wanted time in the pulpit that he could not grant them, but that she was clearly the best preacher of the three.

"The best" enough so that when I was the head of the pastoral nominating committee at Ogden Dunes in 1980 into 1981, the attempted assassination of Ronald Reagan occurred the day we voted to pick our candidate, the first person I contacted and asked to apply was Adrian, even though she was still a Methodist.

She said, "No," and while some years later, Ogden Dunes did hire a woman pastor, it probably would have shocked them in 1981, had our committee presented an unmarried woman in her thirties as our candidate.

But the point I am trying to make is that within the context of the '70's and early '80's, for a pint-sized woman to stand behind a pulpit and deliver the Word — to deliver the Word with a gift seldom seen in her male counterparts — was quite astounding and completely unexpected.

Which takes me to our reading from the Gospel according to Luke, Mary's wonderful "Magnificat." Scholars speculate that under the customs of her time, Mary would have been fourteen or fifteen years old when Jesus was born, though despite my gray hair I was not there and do not actually know. But this Mary, from whom no one would have expected such wisdom, articulates an attitude of appreciation *all* Christians should emulate — especially we who would prepare the way, — an attitude that is probably already within us, but perhaps too easily ignored.

Our Advent theme is that we are all called to be John the Baptists, called individually and called collectively as Christ's Church and as congregations therein. Called, in the words of the prophet Isaiah we read [and George sang] last week, to "prepare the way of the Lord." We have discussed how "preparing the way" will not be done by *speaking words*, but through, as I modify them slightly, the words of John's father, Zechariah, through:

⁷⁵ . . . serv[ing] him in holiness and uprightness in his presence, all our days,

Which, I suggested, requires us to seek to:

soften the hearts and open the minds and souls of others to receive the message of the "Good News," to receive Jesus — and to see the Jesus within us.

by:

showing kindness and unexpected generosity and understanding and forgiveness.

And last week, we talked about preparing the way within ourselves by:

working to grow in knowledge, reflecting, and "wrestling" with God, so that we better know and understand Him, and what he expects of us.

What I have to say today sort of falls into all of these categories, which is to say that in the lyrical and elegant words the writer of Luke tells us were delivered by an, if not under-sized, like Adrian, certainly an *unexpected* proclaimer, this young woman, Mary, we find — or should led to be find — within ourselves *attitudes* that can prepare us, and help us be *what we need to be*, to prepare the way for others. And we should write her words — no, *read* her words — from deep in our hearts and minds and souls:

My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.⁴⁸ for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; ⁴⁹ for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name.

My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.⁴⁸ for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.

Mary's words are words of joy and awe and thanksgiving, of wonder and gratitude, attitudes that I believe are a *result of being* what I hope we all seek to be, believers in and followers of Christ, even as we seek to be John the Baptist's.

They are attitudes that I believe are part of the Christian's DNA, but they are attitudes we can too easily hide and put aside — and even forget? — if we are not careful. Where, for instance, are joy and gratitude when we are self-righteous with others? And when we are self-righteous, not only are we off-putting to others, making it easy for them to reject anything we might offer, but we fail to display important characteristics of Jesus himself whom we carry within us, characteristics that the writer of Luke is trying to present us through Mary — *humbleness; humility*. As I so often say, the Bible is not a weapon with which to hit others over the head; it is a gift through which we can seek to understand God and what God wants of us . . . and God does not want us to be self-righteous. We shall not “prepare the way” for others by being self-righteous.

Beside, far more than any threat of punishment, *rejoicing* and being grateful to God lead us to commit less often the sin that we inevitably do commit. Feeling thanks to God for being Savior — thanks to God for salvation from our sins — is the most potent force to lead us to follow the way that Christ would have us follow, the *way* in the sense of the *manner* of the Lord.

And if we are not ourselves attempting to *follow* that way, we will be dismal failures, if we think that we can *prepare* the way for others.

The season of Advent is not only a time of preparation, as we have been discussing, but of anticipation, of anticipation of, well, of *joy!* So, as we move from Advent in five days — OK, lets say four days and about eight hours, because we worship on Christmas Eve to welcome Christmas — as we move from Advent to the day which we anticipate, let us prepare to rejoice, not only on that evening and day, but throughout life, for God has looked with favor on all of us by sending His Son, and even if we have forgotten all our reason for joy, whether others always so realize the reason for this same joy, we should readily say that: We are blessed! God has looked with favor upon us. Thanks be to God!

And filled with this gratitude, let us never cease to want others to be filled with rejoicing as are we, rejoicing in awe and gratitude of what God has done. When we engage in those acts of:

showing kindness and unexpected generosity and understanding and forgiveness

They will carry much more impact when joy and gratitude shine through in how we do them.

When joy and gratitude fill our hearts, they are likely to fill our *beings* in a way that may well open the hearts and minds of those we encounter — so, adopting — no, so *rediscovering within us* — the attitudes described in the unexpected words of this young woman is a wonderful way of being John the Baptist's. With joy and awe and gratitude we can prepare the way — and it will be clear that Christ is within us, waiting to be seen as he wants to be seen.

Let our souls, like that young woman's, magnify the Lord.

Amen