

Edina Morningside Community Church
United Church of Christ
Wednesday, July 22, 2015
Rev. Howard K. Bell
Be Transformed

I am a passionate person. I believe that all of you who have worshiped with me these past nearly three months, all of you who have shared fellowship time with me, all you who have shared your passions with me in one-on-one sessions, and all of you who have engaged with me in board and committee meetings, might give me an AMEN when I say, "I am a passionate person!" AMEN?

Tonight's sermon/testimony is based on a sermon/testimony I was asked to give earlier this month at Mayflower Church in South Minneapolis where I have my church membership. Mayflower Church also supports me in a three-way covenant that allows me to be engaged in Interim Ministry. This summer, they have asked some of the authorized ministers who are members there, to preach during the summer months and answer three basis questions. They are: *Why, in this day and age when so many are leaving the Jesus path, are you still on it? How did you find the path or it found you? Why do you stay?*

Before I begin, I will share a quick funny story. When I texted my husband that I was feeling inspired about writing my testimony for why I am on the Jesus path, he responded with "Swiss or Colby?" I was confused, so he told me to look back at the text I had sent. My voice texting tool had changed "Jesus Path" to "Cheeses Path". So, I will try and spread some different flavors and aromas as I share with you tonight.

My simplest answer to why I have stayed on the Jesus path is that it is on this path that I have been able to live out my passions. It is being on the Jesus path that has allowed me to be more fully myself than anywhere else in my life. It is on the Jesus path that my gifts for ministry and for leadership were fostered.

What are my passions? First and foremost, I am passionate about love: love of God; love of Jesus; love of social justice, love of the Jesus path; love of my husband and of our families; love of friends; love of the church; love of all God's children; love of the created world; love of life.

As to how I found the Jesus path, I was placed on the Jesus path by my parents and by their taking me from birth to the First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) of Washington, PA. I was nurtured by this beloved faith community from the time of my dedication as a baby; through my baptism by immersion and formally joining the church at age 11; through my deep involvement in youth group activities and church summer camp; through the church embracing me as a "Timothy" in my junior year of high school; through my college years, seminary years and then through my ordination as a minister of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) on July 1, 1972, at 25 years of age.

This Jesus path of my childhood and youth was not always a smooth and easy path. The verse printed in the bulletin speaks powerfully to my experience. It is from the poem “Outwitted” written by Edwin Markham. It reads:

He drew a circle that shut me out-
Heretic, rebel, a thing to flout.
But love and I had the wit to win:
We drew a circle and took him In!

I do not remember when I first heard it, but it speaks to my appreciation for those others who have drawn a circle to include me when I have felt excluded. It also speaks of my concern for inclusivity where I have had opportunities to draw a circle for someone who has felt excluded – the poor, those facing mental challenges, the oppressed, and the ill and dying.

I share, now a story from my early faith development.

My paternal grandmother was important in shaping who I am. Grandma Bell lived in our home. I loved her deeply. I was possibly even closer to her than I was to my mother or father. Grandma Bell taught me right from wrong. She was a ten-commandment woman. She taught me that God kept a ledger book in heaven. She said that each person received a red mark when they did something good and a black mark every time they did something bad. Then, she informed me that on the judgment day God would count up my marks and I would go to heaven or hell depending on whether I did more good deeds than bad deeds. I accepted all of her teachings as fundamentally true.

I was, almost without fail, Grandma’s helper around the house. On one particular day in 1956 just before my ninth birthday, Grandma called me in from outside to help her clean. On this day I refused, preferring to play baseball with my friends. That evening my grandmother was extremely tired. I was scolded by my father for not helping Grandma that day and “for making Grandma tired”. Later that evening my grandmother died in our home of a heart attack. I felt somewhat responsible for her death and I believed that I had a black mark in God’s ledger that might take a lifetime to overcome with good deeds.

Fortunately, the people of my church taught me about God’s unconditional love and demonstrated that love to me. I believe my experience with my Grandmother could have led me off the Jesus path, but rather, it drew me even deeper into the church, deeper into my commitment to be a minister, and deeper onto the Jesus path. If God could transform my feelings of guilt and grief in such a traumatic experience, I came to trust God to transform all of the challenges of my life.

My decision to attend Bethany College proved to be extremely critical to my staying on the Jesus path and deepening that path as an adult. Freshman year I was introduced to the concept of “grace” in a class on the writings of Paul. Paul’s writings helped to free me from my judgmental understanding of God as a keeper of a ledger. Because this Pauline influence, it was a special joy of my life to travel to Ephesus and walk the path that Paul

walked. The photo on the cover of today's bulletin is a picture I took during that visit. I am forever indebted to Professor Hiram Lester for his unique way of introducing the concept of grace to us by telling us our class would be ungraded since God's grace would provide each class member with an "A" grade – earned or unearned!

At Bethany, I was given the opportunity to serve in ministry as the Student Pastor of a small rural church. I preached every Sunday from my sophomore year through my senior year, did two weddings, seven funerals and thirteen baptisms, but who was counting. This small, struggling rural church which could not afford even a part-time "real" pastor demonstrated God's love for all and how a faith community – no matter its size or capacity – can enrich the lives of all who worship there. They certainly enriched my life and deepened my continuing commitment to the Jesus path through professional ministry.

I had my eyes opened to justice issues at Bethany through visits by the Black Panthers, the Weathermen, as well as other presenters. I was basically a white do-gooder who thought highly of the life, ministry, teachings and inspiration of Dr. Martin Luther King. A Black Panther speaker shook the foundations of my understanding of racial reconciliation as a justice issue when he said to me: "Whitey, go clean up your own house first." I continue to this day, to seek to better understand institutional racism, my personal racism, and how to work effectively to eliminate racism. This memory was powerfully reinforced recently at the Annual Meeting of the Minnesota Conference UCC by the presentations of keynoter Jennifer Harvey. I know that the Jesus path will involve continuing in this struggle in ways I cannot yet see.

A further challenge to my staying on the Jesus path occurred in the summer between my junior and senior year. I lived in an impoverished area of Pittsburgh, PA. serving as an Associate minister at a church led by Rev. Leigh Jarvis. Leigh walked the Jesus path of social justice like no other person I had known before. During that summer I experienced a police-induced race riot. Leigh came forth with a charge of police brutality. The police lied to cover-up their roles. The press reports were racially biased and did not tell the full truth. My eyes were opened to Paul's words in today text, to "be not conformed to this world". Leigh and I struggled to not become embittered, but to continue to confront injustices and to build bridges within the community we were serving.

My passion for social justice continued when I attended Yale Divinity School (YDS), I was privileged to listen to the prophetic sermons of the Rev. William Sloane Coffin on a weekly Sunday morning basis. Rev. Coffin influenced me to be willing to do civil disobedience in regard to the social justice issues of my YDS years - an unjust war in Vietnam; racism-based injustice during the Black Panther trial in New Haven in 1970; the National Guard murders of students at Kent State; and general socio-economic injustices, particularly in large urban areas. I briefly flirted with switching my career to law or politics pondering whether these avenues might be more efficient than the Jesus path. My time as an intern at the New Haven Legal Assistance program taught me the value of legal solutions to address justice issues as well as the limitations of the legal system in solving justice issues. I decided to stay on the Jesus path seeking ordination.

My perspectives on life and ministry had changed so drastically from my years in Washington, PA., that I approached Rev. Coffin to inquire as to whether or not he might consider ordaining me at Battell Chapel. He declined because he suggested to me that there would be greater benefit to me and my future ministry if I could embrace my roots as well as the ways I had begun to branch out from them. He then offered to travel to my hometown and participate in my ordination at First Christian Church by preaching my ordination sermon. What an indescribably powerful example for me of a person I so admired walking the Jesus path.

I have been blessed professionally to be able to live out my passions on the Jesus path even though much of my career ended up outside the auspices of the church and outside of pastoral ministry. Due to the limitations of time, this morning, I cannot share in detail the riches of my professional career on the Jesus path.

I leave you with this thought about my staying on the Jesus path for the future. "I feel as though I can do no other." Amen.