

Directional Signals
Fifth Sunday of Easter
April 24, In the Year of Our LORD, 2005
Gates Presbyterian Church
The Rev. Ralph S. English, Pastor

Psalm 31:1-5, 15-16, Acts 7:55-60 and John 14:1-14

As excited as I am about my daughter Laura's wedding on June 18, there are two potential problems. The first "sticky situation" is that though Will's family is from Boston and Laura's from New York, all of us will travel to the Mississippi Delta. I will psych myself for conditions in Leland, Mississippi in the middle of June that will include sun, heat, mosquitoes and my favorite: humidity. I will do a little mantra. I will think "snow, snow, snow."

The other difficulty is that of dancing at the wedding reception without stepping on Sally, Laura or Melissa's toes! Sally and I have signed up for dance lessons. This coming Wednesday evening, we will be in the cafeteria at Greece Athena High School for the first session of classes designed for brides, grooms and parents thereof. I still think the best solution would be to let my dancing partner lead because I do not do a good job of indicating which direction I am going to turn next. All too often, my body language and signals apparently say let's go right just before I go left. So I am going to take lessons lest my dancing be willy-nilly, directionless, or confusing to my wife – and for those out-there-in-front-of-God-and-everybody-dances with my daughters.

My tendency to give off poor directional signals when dancing came to mind last Thursday on my way to work. The driver of a car that traveled most of my commute gave others not one clue as to where he was going when. He passed me on the right as Manitou Road went to four lanes, used no signal to cross in front of me to go into the first turn lane to Route 531, turned into the right lane of the approach area, used no directional signal as he cut off cars to get onto 531, almost hit a car in the right lane of 531 in order to get into the "fast" lane, made six lane changes all without turn signals to zig and zag before crossing two lanes at the very last moment to get onto 490 at which point he zoomed out of sight. This driver "made it up as he went along." He didn't use turn signals because *he* didn't know what he was doing next. He was probably having *fun*, but the rest of us didn't have the foggiest idea what he was doing.

How many of us live our lives, and in particular our *supposed* Christian lives, "making it up as we go along," giving others not the foggiest notion where we are going, what we are about, or what we believe? Like a driver who doesn't use turn signals or a dancer whose partner must constantly wonder what move will occur next, is our expression of faith, our Christianity, "willy-nilly?" More importantly, do we know *what* we believe and *why* we believe what we do?

Pope John Paul II and Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, now Pope Benedict XVI were always clear about what they believe and why. In a world filled with uncertainties and upheaval, they were seen as anchors in the midst of chaos and confusion. As leaders of the Roman Catholic Church, they earned the respect of their faithful flock and are examples of certainty, of persons who gave signals and directions without ambiguity. Would that we be as certain in our affirmations and beliefs as well!

In December of 1995, I was part of the Niagara Falls troop contingent stationed in Pisa, Italy. As Chaplain, I made arrangements for thirty-four to take a bus south to Rome for a public audience with Pope John Paul II. Two hours before the Pope made his appearance, three thousand of us from all over the world gathered in Della Casa Pontificia, the House of the Pope. It was moving to stand amongst Catholic members of my unit as they experienced one of the most significant faith-filled moments of their lives. There is a video recording of the moment for which I had made special arrangement, when Pope John Paul II, in English, asked the Chaplain, Officers and Enlisted Members of the 107th Air Refueling Wing to stand to receive his blessing. As members of my group gasped and then stood, I witnessed a moment of certainty on their part that many Christians never experience. To be sure, there was no call for martyrdom as of Stephen of whose death we read today in the Acts of the Apostles. None of us standing in the Pope's presence were asked to die for our faith, but I wondered if these friends would ever again experience the awe and wonder I saw in their faces that December day in the Vatican. In their estimation, they were in the presence of Peter's ultimate successor, Jesus' chosen disciple.

Fifty years before, in 1945, the Commander of Allied Forces was informed that Pope Pius XII wanted to personally thank the US Army for sparing the city of Rome from ruin at the end of conflict on the Italian peninsula. Two officers were to meet the Pope. The requirement that they speak Italian, French and German narrowed the choice to two, a Captain Balasz from Ohio and a Second Lieutenant English from New York. Captain Balasz, a devout Catholic, convinced my father to load his pockets with rosaries and crucifixes available at kiosks outside the Vatican to take back to Catholics in New York. The two of them sat with Pius XII for a private audience. When asked about their families, my father didn't hesitate to announce he was the son of a Protestant minister. Even though "when in Rome, do as the Romans do" is a secular phrase, that is what occurred to my father when Pius XII offered his ring to be kissed. Indeed, despite a very clear reformed faith stance that precludes emphasis on blessings by priests (or a Pope), my father took those items back to Stanfordville for my grandfather to give to Catholics in that community. Fifty years later, I did the same as he. I offered Catholics in Warsaw and Niagara Falls rosaries blessed by John Paul II, accompanied by copies of the invitation from the Prefettura Della Casa Pontificia.

I still have a few of those rosaries in my possession, but let us be clear: as Reformed Protestants, we affirm faith can be experienced to its fullest without going to Rome and seeing the Pope. But of what *are* we certain and what faith experiences move us in similar fashion to others who feel the transcendent power of God in the various traditions of their faith? What do we consider non-debatable issues of faith? What directions and signals does our system of beliefs give to our lives? In turn, what signals, messages, directions and affirmation do we demonstrate to others, to people we meet out in the world about our God, Christ, the Holy Spirit?

Our Gospel Lesson is one that is often read at Memorial Services, as it will tomorrow evening when the Willits and Brown families gather here to celebrate the life of Carol Brown's father, Stanley Willits. The first verse of the fourteenth chapter of John tells of Jesus' promise that there is a place for us in God's Kingdom. My favorite part of the section comes after Jesus tells His disciples that "they know the place to where [He] is going." Thomas – thank God for Thomas' questions – isn't sure and so he asks: "We do not know where You are going, how can we know the way?" If Thomas had kept quiet, we would not be privy to Jesus' poignant response:

"I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."

While it is assuring to hear the first words in the fourteenth chapter, the assurance of a place in heaven prepared for each of us, how wonderful it is that Jesus also gives us directions if not directional signals about *how* to get there!

First called “People of the Way,” Christians are, in every sense of the word, called followers of Christ. We might get picky about some specifics of what it means to follow Jesus, about how old a person should be at baptism, the frequency of celebrating the Sacrament of Communion – and just think how easy it is to point out differences among churches, across and within denominations! The one Church of Jesus Christ needs to again affirm essentials on which we agree instead of where views diverge. While my views differ from that of the Roman Catholic Church on married clergy and the ordination of women, there are issues of greater theological significance with which I disagree with persons of some other Protestant traditions, particularly those churches where there is little accountability on the part of clergy to *anyone* and where there is little emphasis on formal education. While there is much to be said for a sense of calling by the Holy Spirit, there is also much value in the strict requirements of undergraduate and graduate studies and the process that allows the church as a whole to discern that the Trina Wards, Kirk Bakers, Bob Kaisers, Carol Anne Strawbridges and Ralph Englishes of the world are worthy candidates for the office of Minister of Word and Sacrament. When we gather in this Sanctuary on June 12 for Trina’s ordination, it will be the culmination of much that she learned in this place with this group of faithful people, of hard work, a great deal of study, and much preparation on Trina’s part and on the part of the peoples of at least two Presbyteries. Churches that ordain someone from their midst on the spot because a person claims they are called of God is running some risk in today’s world of charlatans and people of questionable motives.

Like those who have gone before her, Trina has been asked to define her faith, tell of the signals and directions that have led her to this point in her life. Few lay people ever experience that degree of accountability – but in our heart of hearts perhaps we need to examine what it is we believe. Like our congregation’s potential confirmands who this last Friday evening were asked to write their faith statements, it might be good to take stock of what we believe and to what degree we would fight for the essentials of our faith. To repeat, few of us will ever have to confront the choice of Stephen whose profession of faith cost him his life.

Every week, participants in the Wednesday evening Bible Study examine passages of Scripture to be shared during worship the next Sunday. Those passages are often taken from the Common Lectionary, reading of the Bible over a three year cycle that are read simultaneously at services of Roman Catholic, Episcopal, Lutheran, United Church of Christ and Presbyterian Churches. This past Wednesday, we looked at what each of the passages for today said about our faith – about that which people of all times have been certain – that which we as Christians affirm.

Psalms 31, which we just sang, reminds us of the supremacy and sovereignty of God and that the Almighty is the One in Whom we put all our trust. There is a significant message in that which we echo in The LORD’s Prayer, most importantly that we *don’t* put that same degree of trust or allegiance with ourselves or anything devised by humans!

In today’s reading, we are reminded how Stephen was dragged out of the city and stoned to death. While holding fast to one’s faith to the point of death is a message in and of itself, the most important part comes in the last words Stephen spoke before he died. Echoing Jesus’ “Father forgive them for they know not what they do,” Stephen reminds us of our call to forgive one another when he cried out in a loud voice, “LORD, do not hold this sin against them.”

Then we have our Gospel Lesson! We are reminded of the “place” in heaven prepared for each of us, and *how* it is that we might get there. We are then reminded that as followers of Christ, we would mirror His faith in God and continue Christ’s work in His stead. In that reminder comes an assurance that should fill us with awe and wonder, an assurance that God touches our hearts and souls each and every day in a manner that is just as special as something touched or blessed by a Pope.

To mirror Christ’s faith means we have to take a hard look at what we believe. To name just a few issues: What does it mean to us that Jesus is the Son of God, that He was born of Mary, called disciples, ministered through word, miracle, and His presence for three years, was crucified, died, was buried but was raised from the dead? Does a reading, like the one from the fourteenth chapter of the Gospel of John mean anything for us in the way we live our lives – or prepare for our mortal deaths? Does it instill love, faith, hope, optimism? Does it make us more forgiving of others, of self? Are we people of grace and thanksgiving?

What does it mean Jesus is the Prince of Peace? What does that ask of us as peacemakers or as workers for justice? How are we called to act peaceably in the home, community and world? Is praying for peace enough? How do we work for peace and justice? Do we confront injustice when we see it next door, in our country, across the globe? Are we to do something, *really* do something, about genocide in the Sudan, upheaval in the Middle East or the rush to war every time we feel threatened? Or is peace just a matter of our inner being, being at peace with our own soul, our own inner-essence, our own relationships? In this there is a challenge. What signals do we give when we do nothing, stand by, and let “peace” just be a word and not a call to action and a call to challenge everything that embraces strife and war and combat?

Finally, how do we go about our lives – not just giving signals to others that we are persons of faith, but knowing what directions God would have us take in our lives, in our journeys of faith, in how we challenge the way things are that they might become all the more the way things God want them to be? Do we offer signals that mirror David’s trust in the Almighty? Do we live lives of grace that instead of tromping on others – stepping on their toes - demonstrates that we forgive those who hurt us? In so doing mirror we would the message of forgiveness that comes from Christ and persons like Stephen. Do we live in such a way that we know where we are going, that a place has been established for us where we might join loved ones who have gone before and finally meet our LORD face to face? Do we live in such a way that we are anything but willy-nilly, anything but directionless, and are instead persons of a firm and assured faith in the God Who loves us, calls us, creates us, redeems us, and gives us the very means to be sisters and brothers of our LORD Jesus Christ in Whose name we gather, in Whose name we worship, in Whose name we live and breath and are special creatures of God?

Amen.

Prayers of the People

God of all time, God of David the Psalmist, the disciples, Stephen the martyr, and all who call upon Your name – we call You, and You only, Holy! You create, redeem, and empower us! Remind us to put all of our trust in You and to turn to You with words of joy and words of sorrow, words of praise and words of wonder!

O God, we know what we believe! Help our unbelief! We know the words of our faith. May they become directions and signals for how we live our lives! We know that you hold each of us in Your Holy Hands. May that assurance touch the lives of those who hurt, who are hospitalized, who question the purpose for their lives, who struggle in places of hatred, war, strife, pain, hunger and thirst! We know Your promises. May those words touch our souls, hearts and minds, that we might be people of faith – and mirror Your love – that others may be brought to this gift of grace as well!

O gracious and loving God, as persons of faith, we know we are to turn to You in all of the circumstances of our lives. Help us to do so – and help us to live in ways that mirror the words of that prayer Jesus taught His disciples and teaches us to say:

Our Father, Who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For Thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen.