

## It Was the Best of Times...

My favorite description of the task of ministry was actually written as part of a satiric description of journalism. Finley Peter Dunne was a well-known newspaper man in the early years of the last century. Based in Chicago, he was first a sportswriter, during which time he coined the nickname “southpaw” for left-handed pitchers based on the geography of the grounds for the Chicago White Stockings, then a political reporter, commentator, and editor. He often wrote in the persona of “Mr. Dooley,” a fictional Irish pub owner who commented on the politics and other doings of the day. It was as Dooley that Dunne wrote (and I won’t attempt the dialect), *“Th newspaper does ivrything f’r us. It runs th’ polis foorce an’ th’ banks, commands th’ milishy, controls th’ ligislachure, baptizes th’ young, marries th’ foolish, comforts th’ afflicted, afflicts th’ comfortable, buries th’ dead an’ roasts thim aftherward.”* The portion about “comfort(ing) the afflicted (and) afflict(ing) the comfortable” has been widely quoted and attributed to any number of professions, including my own. I think it bears a pretty good resemblance to the ministry of Jesus and so I wear it proudly.

We certainly find the elements of “comforting the afflicted and afflicting the comfortable” in this morning’s passage. I was delighted to find early this week this pericope from Matthew as the Gospel reading for today because I think it has great resonance with the experience Connie and I had at the ABC-USA Biennial Mission Summit last week. There were certainly some fine examples of comforting the afflicted and also of afflicting the comfortable. I must confess, however, that I also saw what some might take to be examples of comforting the comfortable and maybe even of afflicting the afflicted. To borrow a phrase from another literary giant, Charles Dickens, which was also the theme of one of the weekend’s sermons, “It was the best of times; it was the worst of times...” So this morning, rather than give you a traditional exegesis of the Gospel, I’m going to reflect on our experiences of last week with reference to this passage as well as to the famous words from Dickens.

The Biennial experience began for me on Friday morning, when I was the first person on duty at the Evergreen Association information booth in the “Hall of Ministries.” I talked to a number of fellow Evergreen members and folks who were curious as to what we were all about. Many of the latter did not even know that we are an official region of ABC-USA. Those who did know at least that wanted to know more about our structure and manner of doing business, which is still unique among ABC regions. Many also wanted to know or assumed they already knew about our relationship with the Association of Welcoming and Affirming Baptists. I repeated several times during my two hours there that while far from all Evergreen churches were “Welcoming and Affirming” that it was our common understanding that the traditional Baptist principles of “Autonomy of the Local Congregation” and the right of free association not only protected those churches which chose to make a statement on issues of human sexuality but allowed churches who took differing stands or no stand to continue in loving relationship with each other. I heard curiosity and I heard hope. I think I was able to give some comfort to some folk who were feeling afflicted. I think I also afflicted some who were feeling comfortable. That was one of the best of times.

The kick-off worship service on Friday evening featured preaching by the Rev. Sharon T. Koh. If you are not familiar with the name, Rev. Koh was named as the executive director of American Baptist International Ministries just nine months ago. She is part of the “new wave” of ABC leadership – female, Asian-American, and, when she was named to her post, not yet 40.

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Her very presence in the pulpit could be seen as an example of “comforting the afflicted and afflicting the comfortable” as she represents a gender, an ethnicity, and an age bracket that is not traditionally considered for leadership. You might also say, based on her excellent sermon, that she is a good example of those Jesus had in mind when he thanked the Father for revealing the wisdom of salvation to “infants.” It was she whose sermon featured the quote from Dickens as she looked at the “best of times” in God creating humankind in God’s image and proclaiming us “very good” as well as at the “worst of times” as first Adam and Eve and then all their children chose the way of the Fall, shattering that image of God into millions of pieces. Nevertheless, she said, God continues to work through us, especially when we value diversity. “Without all of you,” she said, “I miss part of God’s image.”

Our shared and individual experiences on Saturday were very much a mix between the best and worst of times. We began after breakfast with a Bible study. We had several options and Connie and I chose to attend a study drawn from the first verses of Philippians. Sadly, rather than an interactive study, we found a lecture, complete with four densely spaced pages of notes from the lecturer. The presentation was academic, dry, and unresponsive. While I’ve nothing against academia, I was saddened that the presenter felt the need to deliver a lecture on a rather obscure point of interpretation to a room full of pastors and lay leaders when we could have had a vibrant discussion based on a more relevant topic within that passage. Not much comfort there, just the affliction of those who were already afflicted by the early hour.

Also on Saturday morning were the opening Mission Summit Conversations. There were a total of seven topics, each of which had three sessions throughout the weekend. I chose to attend the opening conversation on “Innovative Models of Pastoral Ministry.” To begin with, several of those sitting around the table where I was were taken aback by both the tone set by the “Case Statement” which was distributed and by some of the models which were presented as innovative. Among those, for example, were coffee shop ministries, yoked parishes, part-time ministry positions, and bivocational pastorates. All of these models have been flourishing in the Pacific Northwest and many other parts of the country for decades. Use of these models was called out in the case statement as “accelerating at an alarming rate over the past decade.” Is anybody here “alarmed” by those models of ministry, most of which have been a part of Good Shepherd’s history? I didn’t think so. The Case Statement also remarked, twice, that use of these models of ministry “were not signs of” and “should not communicate failure.” I don’t know about y’all but I don’t consider my twelve-plus years as your part-time, bivocational pastor to be a failure. Not when we’ve built 40 units of affordable housing, renovated our entire building, given a home to several start-up congregations, and a safe place to countless individuals in the recovery community and among those experiencing homelessness. Does anybody here think that looks like failure? So, I confess I found the leadership of that session to be apologetic and timid. My compatriots around the table, offended as I was, resolved to do a better job of telling their stories of success – not perhaps in the way the wise count success but the success of our gracious Father and of the Father’s Beloved Community.

I won’t try to detail Connie’s experiences in this regard. She attended sessions in the “Women in Ministry” track, hoping to find some sisterhood among pastors’ wives. In fact, only women pastors were in attendance. I will say, based on her reporting to me, that those women seem “stuck” – stuck in their fear that no one is taking them seriously, stuck in their feeling of being

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unappreciated – rather than boldly claiming their place in the community of ABC and leading us all as they are gifted to do. I would say that between both of those conversation groups, we heard a lot of “We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not mourn.” We both came away feeling as if there is a great deal of fear among Baptists right now – fear of the world as it is, fear of the future. It makes me all the more proud of this congregation as you have proven yourselves willing again and again to take risks and try new things. I have hardly ever heard from any of you those deadly words: “But, we’ve never done it that way before.”

Lest you think the Mission Conversations were a complete washout, let me give you a report on another session that I only heard of second hand, although I watched the opening later on Facebook, as you can. Session one for “The Gospel in a Rapidly Changing Society” was moderated by Rev. Dr. Marcia Patton, the executive minister of our Evergreen Association, with a panel that included four Evergreen pastors and a missionary to Latin America and the Caribbean. The panel encouraged the attendees to tell the Good News through a variety of means of communication, including the arts, which missionary Mylinda Bates reminded them had been “the people’s resource for centuries.” Rev. Mindi Welton-Mitchell, previously pastor at Burien Community Church and now at Queen Anne Baptist Church, advocated use of social media. As you may know, she also serves as Evergreen’s Ministry Associate for Social Media, making sure all of our Evergreen events are promoted and reported on through Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, the website, and other avenues. As Mindi asked the group on Saturday, “Where are we if we are not where the people are?” You can watch the panel’s remarks on Facebook on the link on your calendar insert.

Another moment of hope for the future was provided in the brief business session on Saturday afternoon. There, the delegates unanimously approved as President of ABC-USA for 2018-2019, Dr. Josue Gómez-Menéndez, a Puerto Rican lawyer and administrative director of the Puerto Nuevo Baptist Academy, a college prep school in the San Juan area with 1000 students. Dr. Gómez-Menéndez is the first person to be nominated as an ABC-USA officer from Puerto Rico, a youthful family man, and eloquent in English and Spanish. I look forward to his leadership in our denomination.

At 53, I hesitate to call the Rev. Dr. Jeffrey Haggray “youthful,” although I know he would seem that way to many in ABC-USA. He was named executive director of American Baptist Home Mission Societies two years ago, another of the “new wave.” His preaching and the singing of the Evergreen Association “Mass Choir” were the highlights for me of the Saturday night worship service. Again, you can hear both through the Facebook link given in the bulletin. Sounding a common theme in the conference, Dr. Haggray reminded us that “our primary mission field is the emerging generations” and that we must “go beyond form and religiosity to worship God in spirit and in truth.” He said, “We must unleash Jesus’ gospel from the social mores and trappings of a cultural Christianity, bound by forms of practice and worship that are more beholden to Western and American preferences than to the Great Commandment.” He called on all American Baptists to “remain connected to the Incarnate Jesus, remain connected to one another, and maintain concern for our world.” “Let us see our differences,” he said, “as opportunities to make new partnerships.” I cannot do his sermon justice in this brief synopsis, so

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I encourage you to listen to it yourselves. It was both comforting and afflicting, as it should have been, truly gracious wisdom from one of “the infants” in terms of denominational leadership.

Many of us also heard from Dr. Haggray’s predecessor at the helm of Home Missions. After the worship service, a reception was held in the concourse outside the ballroom where worship was held, sponsored by the New Baptist Covenant. Some of you may remember that I have been quite involved with that organization and I was eager to hear from its current leaders. To my great distress, the speakers who mounted the podium at the side of the reception were roundly ignored by those eating the food they had provided. First, the current President of ABC, Rev. Judith Fackenthal attempted to get the attention of the party-goers with very little success. Then two leaders from the Indian churches of Oklahoma told the story of their work with the New Baptist Covenant to almost complete disregard. Hannah McMahon, executive director of the New Baptist Covenant, showed a brief video and struggled to tell about it while conversations continued unabated. Finally, Rev. Dr. Aidsand Wright-Riggins III, former executive director of Home Missions took his place at the podium. He started low and slow. “In this country, when a White woman or a Native American man or a Black man try to speak and are ignored, it reinforces our experience that we are unheard and invisible.” Then, he repeated it, with slightly more volume and slightly more passion: “In this country, when a White woman or a Native American man or a Black man try to speak and are ignored, it reinforces our experience that we are unheard and invisible.” Then, he said it again: “In this country, when a White woman or a Native American man or a Black man try to speak and are ignored, it reinforces our experience that we are unheard and invisible.” I think he said it four or five times until everyone had stopped talking and was looking at and listening to him. He then gave a brief promotion of NBC, thanked them for sponsoring the reception, and left the podium. He had made his point. I was simultaneously proud of him and deeply ashamed of the crowd that had so abused the previous speakers. My sisters and brothers, we have a long way to go. It is the best of times; it is the worst of times.

We began Sunday morning on another positive note. About 100 or so attended the Baptist Peace Fellowship breakfast, Connie and I included. You may not know that it is thanks to a series of dedicated gifts from Rev. Charlotte Keyes that Good Shepherd is a partner congregation of the Baptist Peace Fellowship, which is why we receive their quarterly magazine, usually to be found in the Narthex, and annually receive vouchers for deep discounts or free registration for first-time attendees to the summer Peace Camp. Check with me if you are interested in attending. The breakfast included music from Leslie Lee and Steve Gretz, whose song “Children of God” we’ve sung here from time to time, and preaching from Rev. Dr. Cheryl Dudley, executive minister of ABC of Metro New York.

I wish I could say that the Worship Service which followed the breakfast was another high point. Sadly, the opposite was true. If you read the weekly newsletter I send out for Good Shepherd, you’ll be aware that ABC-USA has another new leader, a new General Secretary who represents ABC to the wider world. There has been some concern about the Rev. Dr. Lee B. Spitzer expressed by several leaders in Evergreen and others. Nevertheless, I arrived in Portland hoping to hear from him in a way that would be inspiring, hoping that he would afflict me where I am too comfortable and comfort me where I feel afflicted. Dr. Spitzer’s sermon was not terribly inspiring but mundane up until the point when, talking about making a difference in the world

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around us he exclaimed, “Facebook is the competition! Who needs Facebook?” This was despite the denomination’s use of social media to promote the Biennial, despite all of the reminders in the program to use Twitter and Facebook to post responses, despite the organization of Facebook groups to continue the Mission Discussions after the event, despite the repeated reminders that Gen Xers, Millennials, and generations to come are the future of ABC, the Baptist movement, and the Church in general. In one fell swoop, the new General Secretary of ABC-USA proclaimed, according to the younger people I spoke with afterwards, “Millennials need not apply.”

In our Scripture this morning, Matthew tells us: “Then (Jesus) began to reproach the cities in which most of his deeds of power had been done, because they did not repent. ‘Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the deeds of power done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. But I tell you, on the day of judgment it will be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon than for you. And you, Capernaum, will you be exalted to heaven? No, you will be brought down to Hades. For if the deeds of power done in you had been done in Sodom, it would have remained until this day. But I tell you that on the day of judgment it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom than for you.’” It perhaps bears reminding us that Tyre and Sidon were best known for being cities of both incredible wealth and incredible poverty, much like our nation today. They, like Sodom, were accused by the prophets and by Jesus of the sin of inhospitality.

When the leader of our denomination says to the young people of our country, “Your preferred mode of communication is not welcome here,” I accuse him of the sin of inhospitality. When the cry goes up, “We’ve never done it that way before,” I wonder who is piping and expecting others to dance, wailing and expecting others to mourn. Jesus told the crowds that his yoke, his way of being in fellowship with God, was easy. Do we present an easy yoke to others when we insist that they adapt to us and our way of doing things before they are “part of the club?” Some of you may recognize the image I chose for the front of this morning’s bulletin as the silhouette of Ian Anderson, famed as the flutist and lead vocalist for the rock group, Jethro Tull. I chose that image in part because Dr. Spitzer’s lack of sensitivity to our younger generations reminded me of the Southern Baptist evangelists of my youth (never my pastors, thank God) who told me I was going to hell if I didn’t stop listening to rock & roll music, just as, incidentally, they had told my parents’ generation. Or the ones in the generation before that who warned against jazz. And before that, the telephone. And before that, the scandalously close dancing of the waltz. You get the idea. But slowly, almost always too slowly, the Church has adopted the arts and sciences of the world – but at what cost to the generations out in front of the culture? My sisters and brothers, we must pray for Lee Spitzer that he and others like him would remember the easy yoke of Jesus and the sin of inhospitality before they help to drive even more of our young people away from the grace of God taught in the Church.

Let me end on a more positive note. Connie and I on Sunday afternoon attended the showing of a brief section of a new movie entitled “Since I Been Down.” It is co-produced by our friend Lydia Flora Barlow, wife of Ricky Barlow and herself the ABC Home Missionary to the Prisoners. It shows the work of education she and many partners are doing in the prisons of our state. It is shattering and it is hopeful. Lives can be changed. Lives will be changed. And then I attended a session on “Being the Hands and Feet of Christ to Our Muslim Neighbors.” There is

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a hunger in our ABC family to be good neighbors to those who follow Islam. Some are aimed at conversion; some, just at loving relationship. In either case, let us remember to always greet our Muslim neighbors in peace. Do you know the traditional greeting? Salaam aleikum; aleikum as-salaam. Peace be with you; and with you, also, peace.

And so, we came home, praying as does the hymnist: "O Savior, from the mountainside, make haste to heal these hearts of pain... Till all shall learn compassion's might, following where your feet have trod..." I have taken extra time today. I hope you will forgive me but I thought it was important to share with you the best of times and the worst of times in our denomination. I hope you will join me and pray for me and for each other as each of us, part of the Body of Christ, takes up the mantle of Jesus, seeking to comfort the afflicted and maybe afflicting the comfortable just a bit, too. May we be led to walk in humility, in hospitality, and in justice. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, One God and Mother of us all. Amen.