

“Interpretation of the Word: Fear, Faithfulness and Being Called” by Kevin L. Ogle

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given at First Christian
Church (Disciples of Christ),
Keokuk, Iowa: Interpretation
of the Word: Fear,
Faithfulness and Being Called**

[Gospel Reading: Luke 19:1-10]

Hebrew Scripture: Habukkuk 1:1-4, 2:1-5a

**Interpretation of the Word:
Fear, Faithfulness and Being
Called**

It is a privilege to be here on this All Saints Sunday as part of your Month of the Ministry observance. It was good to be with you in mid-August when I was in Keokuk for the 25th anniversary of my High School graduation at KHS. The arrival of that event at such a seemingly young age in my life reminded me that I have not fully expressed my gratitude to this congregation for what you have meant to me in my life and ministry journey.

I am honored to be on the "Timothy" roster of those ordained from within this congregation to be ministers of the Gospel in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). Moreover, I am delighted that this tradition continues with three Keokuk Disciples candidates for ordination currently under the care of the Upper Midwest Region's ministry commission.

My own path to ordination here in 1987 was far from direct, and my ministry path since then has certainly evolved differently than I had originally foreseen. When I first responded to an emerging sense of calling to a non-traditional ministry path, I was a student at Vanderbilt Divinity School, enrolled in a unique joint-program in Law and Divinity that was my original backdoor entry to seminary and formal theological education. As it turned out, the issues of seeking vocational meaning and purpose in my life that had led me to pursue law school were much better engaged, for me, by the education for ministry that the Divinity School offered – so much so that I felt led to let go of the idea of becoming an attorney. I soon began to understand that I had chosen Grace over Law, to borrow the apostle Paul's language, as I began to see a ministry vocation as a way to serve others in a deeper and more satisfying way than the practice of law seemed to allow – at least for me. Pastoral care classes and field experiences were the ways that really began to help me

understand this, even as I also sought to integrate the societal mandate of Christian faith and my year of legal education, through courses and student internships in justice advocacy.

After my seminary coursework was completed at the time of my ordination here in the Sunday worship service (on April 26, 1987), those present affirmed our call “to a shared ministry of care, servanthood, and proclamation for all persons and God’s creation on behalf of the Gospel.” This was a re-affirmation of the ministry that we all share as baptized Christians. As Rev. Mitchell put it so well in his sermon four weeks ago, we are each – out of love and gratitude for God – called to feed Christ’s sheep. We are each part of the priesthood of all believers called to be in ministry to God’s broken, hurting world. In addition, some of us are further called to specific pastoral and prophetic roles in support of this larger ministry that all share.

Following ordination, I sought to discern my path, trying on several different ministry roles – including advocacy work for the mainline religious community, and pastorally serving several local congregations. Eventually, I embraced a ministry path as a pastoral psychotherapist by enrolling in a three year training and residency program in pastoral counseling near our Northern Virginia home, one year after I married Carol Ann Siciliano. Some of you know that she is an attorney with the Environmental Protection Agency, and that she and I acknowledge – only half-joking – that it has been important for our marriage that we are not both lawyers. We are blessed with two sons, (Nathaniel and Jeremiah), now in 2nd and 5th grades.

Therefore, my ministry vocation today is one that consists of providing counseling or psychotherapy to individuals, couples and families in an ecumenical, interdisciplinary pastoral counseling community, (the Center for Pastoral Counseling of Virginia). I find it rewarding and fulfilling work that suits my personality and gifts.

What I want you to know today is how important this congregation was, at the formative and sometimes quite difficult adolescent years in my life, in grounding me in an experience of Christian community and love – and also in an understanding of Christian faith that encouraged me both to ask the difficult questions that occur to thinking young people, and to embrace a relationship with God that makes a decisive difference in my life.

Looking back especially on the years following my parent's separation and divorce when I was 12, I see how important it was to me to be a part of the vital youth group ministry program that this congregation provided. I know that some of you will recall that I was often an unruly participant for our adult sponsors and difficult with at least some of my peers during several of those years. Nevertheless, the ethos in that group – which was embodied in the larger congregation – allowed me to experience a supportive, inclusive community that let me know what God's love has really meant. I would be called to account when I put others down, in what I now am wise enough to know were dysfunctional attempts to deal with my own feelings of insecurity or self-doubt and shame.

Somehow, it was clear that being held to account when I acted out was because everyone else was also a beloved child of God; so, sins were to be acknowledged and confessed, but with

repentance, they were forgiven – and God’s love for me or any other child in this congregation was never in doubt.

So as I have read Matt Hunt’s columns in The Courier describing the thriving youth ministry and outreach to the community that this congregation now offers through the Common Grounds Coffeehouse mission, I have much appreciated the way in which you are ecumenically extending a ministry of hospitality to youth in this community, regardless of their denominational or religious affiliation. Like Paul, Timothy, and Silvanus in their 2nd letter to the Thessalonians (one of today’s lection texts), I give thanks for you when I receive the Courier, since it provides me with a regular reminder of your faith and steadfast love not only for each other, but for the community and world beyond that God also loves.

When I to began to prepare for this sermon I was intrigued to find that a little known or celebrated prophet from the Hebrew Bible was making his once-every three-year appearance in the common lectionary cycle on this particular Sunday. The prophet Habukkuk, you may recall, was a contemporary of Jeremiah. Unlike Jeremiah, however, we do not know much about the person of Habukkuk; we have only his short three-chapter book.

Both prophets lived in troubling and difficult times in the history of Ancient Israel.[1]

Habukkuk’s initial prophecy is thought to have taken place under Jehoikim’s oppressive kingship, near the end of Ancient Israel’s experiment with monarchy. Jehoikim had been the son of the youthful Deuteronomic Reformer, Josiah, who had

inherited Judah's throne as a boy shortly after the long reign of the iron-fisted and unjust King Menassah. Nevertheless, the religious nationalism that Josiah had come to embrace would reach its high-water mark with his death in battle against Pharaoh Necho's army at Migiddo in 609 BC. Moreover, it turned out that the pragmatic alliance Josiah had forged with the Babylonians would not endure long after Babylon's conquest of Egypt in 605. So that now, as Jehoikim's corrupt reign of injustice was nearing its end at the turn of the century, the Babylonians under Nebuchadnezzar loomed on the horizon. The days of the Davidic dynasty were numbered, and the injustice of life within the nation is the cause of the prophet's initial, anguished cry to God. (Hab. 1:1-4)

"O LORD, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not listen?

Or cry to you "Violence!" and you will not save?

Why do you make me see wrongdoing and look at trouble?

Destruction and violence are before me, strife and contention arise.

So the law becomes slack, and justice never prevails.

The wicked surround the righteous – therefore judgment comes forth perverted."

God's response to Habukkuk, as to Jeremiah, is not comforting – the terrifying Babylonian super-power is to be the instrument of God's judgment upon God's chosen people and the end of the nation's idolatrous, insular and increasingly unjust leadership.

Hearing this disturbing pronouncement, Habukkuk complains to God about the fairness of an empire as violent as the Babylonians being allowed to victimize and conquer Judah, which though flawed, could hardly be said to be more violent or unjust than Babylonia. Stating this grievance to God,

Habakkuk reminds God of God's goodness, and retires to his watchtower. In today's lection verses from Habakkuk Chapter 2, the prophet reports:

"I will keep watch to see what [God] will say to me, and what he will answer to my complaint. (2) Then the LORD answered me and said: Write the vision; make it plain on tablets, so that a runner may read it. (3) For there is still a vision for the appointed time...If it seems to tarry, wait for it; it will surely come; it will not delay. (4) Look at the proud! Their spirit is not right in them, but the righteous will live by their faith. (5) Moreover, wealth is treacherous, the arrogant do not endure."

The core of God's message to Habakkuk, (vs. 4b), "but the righteous shall live by their faith" is formed by just three root words in Hebrew; in English those are perhaps best translated righteous, faithfulness, and live. The tsaddik, or righteous, are the opposite of self-righteous – they are those who humbly fulfill the social obligations of the Torah. They will, it is promised, have life – lives of full vitality. Faithfulness or trust, emunah in Hebrew, is used in the Hebrew Bible in varying ways: sometimes it means to be steadfast, at others it has to do with truth or fidelity in speech and testimony, as in marriage or in relation to public offices.

Paul later cited and understood this verse to undergird the central affirmation of his theology after his radical conversion to the Christian community he had been persecuted. Paul now realized no one is made righteous by God's law – since all fall short of its rigorous requirements. Rather, it is through faith and trust in God that we are made right with God; it is through trusting or loving God that it becomes

possible to live fully and faithfully, to become righteous in God's eyes – and thus to fulfill the true vision of human life under God's law. For Paul, this meant finding peace and salvation living in the shadow of the corrupt, violent Roman Empire.

Habukkuk and Jeremiah also lived in troubled, violent and fear-inspiring times. Both prophets feared for and pleaded with God about the fate of the homeland they loved, even as they challenged its leaders and people to repent, humbly turn to God and restore shalom – God's vision of justice and fairness in the land. Both received disconcerting responses from God, naming the terrifying Babylonian (Chaldean) superpower as the instrument of God's judgment on Israel's disregard of God's will for her society. Jeremiah would be ridiculed and later imprisoned for his prophecy – though he would be vindicated and freed by the conquering Babylonians. And of course at this dark hour he would raise up a vision of God's new covenant with God's people, which would be written in their hearts, and rooted in God's forgiveness of their sin (Jer. 31:31-34).

We Americans, three years after 9-11, have become increasingly aware that we live in troubled, dangerous times. Many of us have learned to live in fear. In this polarized time, and in this polarized presidential election, we are encouraged by politicians on both sides to vote based on our fears. Both major party presidential candidates openly profess their Christian faith. Moreover, both claim to be best suited to lead the global war on terror that one declared shortly after 9/11 – – promising to hunt down and kill/capture the terrorists wherever they live. The candidates and their parties are arguing stridently about whether the War in Iraq – the former land of Babylon – has been a costly distraction

from or a necessary step in the War on Terror. Both agree that winning the peace in Iraq is now crucial.

What are we Christians to do? We live in a democracy with the healthy separation of church and state, rather than in a religiously monolithic monarchy. Most of us are clear that part of our calling as Christians in the world is to citizenship and exercising our responsibility to vote. Moreover, we realize that in today's world we are the clear Superpower – more like the ancient Babylonians in our military capacity than say, ancient Israel. We realize, perhaps more than ever these past three years, that our country's actions have a huge impact on God's world beyond our borders.

Yet I imagine that we are as divided among ourselves as the fearful, polarized nation in which we live. Many of us, I imagine, have made up our minds and given up on dialogue with the other side. In the Disciples church, where diversity and openness to difference are part of our self-understanding, the temptation is to fall silent to avoid the strong feelings that disagreement will bring, rather than to seriously and respectfully explore the sources of disagreement with each other. Perhaps after the election that will be easier...I certainly hope so.

For now, let us acknowledge, like the Christian Sojourners movement, whose newspaper ads you may have seen by now, that God is not a Republican or a Democrat and that Christians and other people of faith can vote for President Bush or Senator Kerry, for reasons deeply rooted in their faith and faith-based values.

From my own personal experience, I will confess that what gets in the way for me of having more tolerance with those who disagree with me is my fear of what it may mean for the world my children will inherit if their side prevails. Living near and sometimes working in the nation's capitol, I imagine that the war on terror, continued as it is, will lead to suicide bombers in a mall near me. Yet clearly, those who disagree with me often are fearful of what will happen if the war on terror does not continue much as it has – they claim that is the way to prevent more terrorist attacks on U.S. soil.

Fear does not seem to get us very far. When I am motivated primarily by fear, I am not trusting God, and while I may feel self-righteous, if I am truly honest with myself and open to the feedback of others, I usually don't feel fully right with God. God's message to Habakkuk suggests a better way.

Trusting in God and persisting in faithfulness to God's vision for human life – a vision of shalom, or health, healing, and right relationships – holds more promise. It is all God really seems to ask of us as we confront the evident fear and evil at loose in the world; when we fail to truly trust in God then fear and evil are given life in ourselves as we succumb to the human temptation to forget that the other whom we fear or even despise as evil is also a beloved child of God – dangerous and scary though that adult child might be.

So, what, instead of fear-based motivation, would Christian, biblical, or love-based motivation look like as we seek to evaluate the political choices before us today? The good people at Sojourners suggest a list of concerns that I commend to you; I will make their ad available today or you can check their website (www.sojo.net) if you like. Michael Kinnamon

devotes his monthly column in the Oct. issue of Disciples World to a list of ten convictions to take to the polls developed by religious leaders in the St. Louis area. I would also commend that. Moreover, I will be happy to follow-up with personal conversation or e-mail correspondence with anyone interested in dialogue on these matters.

In closing, I simply want to suggest three issues that might be guideposts for making faithful political choices in this election. These concerns flow from the theological understanding that each person is created in God's image and each is of infinite worth. They seek to fulfill the central Christian ethical call to love God and neighbor as well as self, and to care for God's creation.

First, domestically, since all deserve the opportunity for fullness of life, it is time for this predominantly Christian country to finally join the rest of the industrialized world and make the commitment to provide health care coverage to all its citizens, rather than continue the costly and callous rationing of health care according to family financial status.

Second, since God calls us to be advocates for those who are most vulnerable in society, and to care for the earth (on which physical human life depends), we are called to support political leaders committed to work for economic justice to reduce the growing disparity between rich and poor, both domestically and around the world. As a practical matter, economic justice is difficult to move toward without a healthy economic system, so the economic and tax policies of the candidates we choose ought to be practical, environmentally sustainable and just, as well.

Finally, since all of God's children all around the world deserve opportunity for fullness of life, and since God's blessing is pronounced on peacemakers, political leaders who seek non-violent solutions to conflict – and truly treat war as a last resort – are to be favored. Leaving aside the Christian pacifist tradition, there are truly practical reasons for the presumption in Christian just war theory that war must always be the last option. As a counselor, I am very aware of the profoundly traumatizing effects of war, both on soldier combatants and civilian victims. Modern warfare is also devastating to the immediate ecology and environment of the earth. Post-traumatic stress syndrome takes its toll on soldiers, their families and entire cultures. [2]

Not delivered in sermon: [When one is traumatized, his internal system remains aroused; she is always on edge, unable to relax or tone down. One is constantly aware of a pervading sense of danger, suspicious of everything and everyone. The suspicion creates a fear and reactivity that escalates. Propelled by a tremendous terror and rage lurking just beneath the surface, one is unconsciously driven into re-enactments of trauma and violence to help regulate the ongoing escalation of arousal.]

Left untreated or without outside professional or neutral intervention, the cycle of violence and trauma continues, and can consume families and entire cultures and generations. As one example of this, I think of the escalating violence between the Israelis and Palestinians in recent years.

It is no accident that in the violent Roman Empire under which

Christianity took root, Grace and Peace were the standard Christian salutation. The early Christians were very aware of the need to rely on God and God's love to sustain a different way of life in a fear-based and traumatizing culture.

May God bless us all as we seek to respond to God's call in our lives daily, and as we vote Tuesday. May we be united in praying that our country collectively will choose fullness of life, and faithfulness to an ethic of love, rather than trauma and fear.

Amen.

[For, as the earlier prophet Micah (6: 8) so well said to the people of Ancient Israel, "What does the LORD require of [us, but to do justice, love kindness, and to walk humbly with [our] God?"]

[1] Much of the historical information which follows comes from Bernhard Anderson's Understanding the Old Testament, (3rd Ed., Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1975) Chapters 11 and 12.

[2] See the description of trauma's effect by Peter Levine, Ph.D., writing in the summer 2004 issue of Cutting Edge, a publication of the Meadows (www.themeadows.org).