

“Gilead”
Rev. Joyce Kirk-Moore

Memorial Sunday Sermon, May 30, 2010
San Dimas Community Church UCC

My sister-in-law, Jenny, gave me a book for Christmas titled *Gilead*. She knew my mother was dying and a friend of hers had found this novel helpful in her time of loss. It's taken me some months to read because the emotions of the book were too close to my own wounds as I grieved my mother and even now journey with my father through his life's last days on earth. Last week I finished the book, and the book, as well as the time with my dad, were that healing balm for which the Biblical place called Gilead is remembered.

I went to Nashville in response to an email SOS from my sister thinking that I'd see my dad AND help my sister with the huge task of cleaning out my parent's house. We began this task in January, but because my dad hoped to return to live there, we stopped. My parents were children of the depression. Perhaps this is why they never threw anything away. I tell Tom that this overwhelming task of dismantling their home is why I've become a little obsessive compulsive about getting rid of our own clutter. But I didn't know that the real reason, the God reason I went to Tennessee, was not to clear the clutter and not even primarily to help care for dad, but rather to receive the balm of Gilead, the blessing of healing, a grace filled experience of affirmation.

When mom died in January, my dad kind of went crazy. I didn't know to what extent grief could express itself through manic behavior. We children were hurt and bewildered as dad hired an attorney to revoke any power we had to help him. But now four months later, he has, as he put it, “returned to his senses” and in a way I've never seen before, asked us to forgive him. He is vulnerable in a good way, allowing for a relationship beyond anything we've had before now. His hearing is still sharp, his intellect and memory superb, his sense of humor returned, but the great wall of separation is no more. His authentic self is revealed sincerely and beautifully. Dad lives in a lovely assisted living facility with caring staff; yet he is physically extremely weak. He eats in a small dining room with one other man, and one day last week my sister and I joined them.

Now this assisted living facility is exclusively for members of the Church of Christ (by now you know, I hope, that is *not* the United Church of Christ). The gentleman who eats with dad wrote a book about the **true** Churches of Christ in Rutherford County, Tennessee. So you know we were in the presence of a 92-year-old hard-core Church-of-Christ-er. Much to my amazement, dad asked Brother Arnardt if he would be offended if I, a woman, said grace; and he said “not at all.” After I prayed, Brother Arnardt said, “well, you learn something new every day.” Somehow the conversation turned to music, and my sister and I told Brother Arnardt that Dad (in addition to being a preacher) was a church musician; he had led over 4000 in congregational singing

without piano or organ accompaniment. He was extraordinarily gifted at conducting. Before we knew it, we had a hootenanny of old hymns going through the dining hall. Even the staff joined while serving and clearing dishes...*When the Roll is Called Up Yonder, What a Friend We Have in Jesus, There's a Fountain Free, In the Sweet By and By...*

Back in dad's room he took my sister's and my hands and he said he wanted to give us his fatherly blessing. He said he didn't know why or when all the doctrinal issues had gotten in the way; he said he knew that all four of us children had followed the light as faithfully as we knew how, and he said he loved us. It seems to me that when death comes near, all that would divide us seems to melt away. It no longer matters who wins the argument, who holds sway over the other: what is left on the eve of death is simply the relationship of two people who love each other. These were holy moments; surprised by the grace of God in human experience, my sister and I could hardly believe what was happening but we soaked it in like a thirsty sponge--every drop of life and love. On the way home that day, we agreed that one lesson among many we had learned from the visit was not to wait to offer these holy moments to those we love and cherish. We were reminded to strip away all that separates us from each other, to breathe into every moment the life that IS because NOW is the moment of grace.

Each moment is an opportunity for decision about what is important and what we choose to do. On this Memorial Day Sunday we remember those who've gone before us faithfully choosing to breathe life into this church community. We will mention some of them by name during our prayer time. In just two years, on May 20, 2012, this church will be 100 years old. Soon we will begin planning how to celebrate its first 100 years and to anticipate how we may be called to be faithful in the next hundred.

In just the first half of this year we've seen a 20% growth in church members. But even more than numbers, we have tried our best to be faithful in the particular ways and through the unique gifts of individuals. We are like a giant puzzle, no two pieces identical, that fit together to make a whole. Recently I have been strongly encouraged by some of our church leadership to offer a reality check for the future. But I want to be clear that what I'm about to say is not for young families living paycheck-to-paycheck; it's not for people who've spent their last dime to save a child; it's not for families facing job loss or foreclosure, or anyone else living on the edge. These words are for people like Tom and me whose kids are grown and who have all they need materially. These words are especially for those of us who can write a four, five, or six-figure check and not notice a difference in lifestyle. Yet anyone's gift, no matter the size, adds up and is welcomed.

Though I don't like to preach on money, I am compelled out of a sense of duty to present my version of the "straight talk express." Five or ten years from now when I

retire (or you kick me out) this church will need to offer a salary increase of more than \$25-30 thousand to be able to call a new pastor. Let me be perfectly clear, I don't need more money; we have Tom to thank for that: he's the most generous person I know. But I feel that I would be failing you if I didn't prepare you for the future. Maybe you think pastors are overpaid. I was told last week that REV stands for "rest, eat, and visit." But whatever the pastor makes, we have a mission to fulfill in this place, to be faithful to those who've gone before us by sharing God's love and holding an aging building together, not make it pretty but just keep it standing, so that the church can gather to serve. All we do as church must be subordinate to our mission, our reason for being. I hope that during the next two years that culminate with our 100th anniversary as church, we will spend time in prayer discerning just what IS the genius of our church and how we can be more of it.

In the meantime, let's not wait for death's door to give a legacy gift to the church above and beyond our yearly pledge -- if you can. Your children will not love this church like you do, nor will they remember it through your estate unless you designate it so. My parents have 4 children and they have designated in their will that their estate be divided 5 ways with the church receiving the 5th share. I have waited until now (my sixth year as pastor), until I felt the church was at a good place, to preach this sermon. Yet, I've suggested legacy gifts to a couple of longtime members who have since died and who loved this church, but they were too worried about whether they'd have enough money to live out their retirements. After one of their memorial services, a son bragged to me about the hundreds of thousands their mom had left them (with no mention of the church where she spend many days of her life). In contrast, Walker Downs, who I never met, remembered the church through a small annuity which helps us make our budget each year. This is why I encourage us to either give to the church's endowment fund or to "This Old Church" building fund in addition to what we pledge each year; to give while we live in memory of the pioneers of this church, in honor of our children, and for the love of the world. I won't ask you to do something I won't do myself, so here's a check to get us started. We have been given so much! In gratitude, may we freely offer all that we are, all that we will be, and all that we can give to make this church a place of God's grace today and in all the years to come.