**Rooted in Unity and Gospel Liberty**

**Text: 2 Timothy 1:1-14**

**Preached by Bruce D. Ervin**

**Camp Sunday**

**September 8, 2019**

It is appropriate that we are gathered at Camp on a Sunday when our theme is “Back to Our Roots” because church camp has been such an important part of our heritage – our roots – as members of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). With apologies to St. Paul, our faith is rooted and grounded in church camp. How many of you would count camp as a crucial part of your faith formation growing up? I am sure that I wouldn’t be a pastor, and I’m pretty sure that I wouldn’t even be a Christian, without church camp and the ways in which it formed me.

We Disciples are rooted and grounded in camp *and* in a camp meeting. Specifically, the Cane Ridge Camp Meeting. If we want to get back to our roots, that’s where we have to start.

It’s August, 1801. Folks from the backwoods of Bourbon County, Kentucky have gathered at the Cane Ridge Presbyterian Church for a weekend communion service. The idea was for Presbyterians, Methodists, Baptists and anyone else to gather from their isolated farms, camp in the woods for the weekend, hear some good preaching, enjoy some rare fellowship, and it would all culminate on Sunday afternoon with a massive communion service.

So they planned a communion service…and a revival broke out! It lasted for 2 weeks. Folks just kept coming and coming, and by some estimates there were 20,000 people there. The Presbyterian pastor, Barton W. Stone, took the lead, but he was assisted by his fellow pastors from the other denominations. At any given time several of them might be preaching, each one standing on a tree stump while a crowd gathered ‘round. Speaking from a tree stump: a practice which frontier politicians soon adopted; hence the phrase “stump speech.”

It was quite an event! Some of you all who once worshiped in an Assemblies of God congregation ain’t got nothin’ on the wild worship at Cane Ridge! The Holy Spirit moved over the face of that crowd in a *powerful* way! Confronted by the Word of God, some sinners were so overwrought by guilt that they fell to the ground. And they were lying there – seemingly dead – for quite some time while others prayed over them. Hence the phrase, “being slain in the Spirit.” Others were so moved that they tossed their heads back and made a barking sound. Lots of other strange behaviors were observed as well, but it was all good. Because lives were being transformed; people were being saved! Guilt became grace, despair became hope, selfishness became generosity and loneliness was replaced by community; one great *big* community!

Pastor Stone was impressed by the way in which denominational divisions melted away in the heat of revival. So were some of his colleagues. By 1804 they decided that they no longer wanted to be known as Presbyterians or Methodists or whatever, but only as Christians. Cane Ridge Presbyterian Church became Cane Ridge Christian Church, and so was born the movement that we know today as the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ).

This Christian movement spread rapidly through Kentucky, across the Ohio River and into Indiana and Ohio. And its early preachers proclaimed 2 things in particular: Gospel Liberty and Christian Unity.

Gospel Liberty because, of course, liberty was very much in the air. A little more than 10 years earlier the U.S. Constitution had been ratified, with its promise to “secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity.” Liberty was in the air and Barton W. Stone and his fellow Christians embraced that sense of civic liberty – that sense of political liberty – but when they spoke of *Gospel* Liberty they embraced something even bigger. Gospel Liberty meant 3 things in particular:

First, liberty from sin. Liberty from that human tendency to turn inward, to put one’s own interests above those of all others, to imagine one’s self to be at the center of the universe and to think, “It’s all about me!” God’s grace sets us free from such sin and opens our hearts to the wonder that is all around us, and the people that are all around us; grace liberates us from selfishness and places a spirit of generosity within us. Grace does this and Gospel Liberty proclaims this: in Christ Jesus we are set free from sin. That is the good news in which we are rooted and grounded, and we have to get back to our roots.

So Gospel Liberty meant first of all liberty from sin and secondly, liberty from doctrine: specifically, liberty from rigid, old doctrines that befuddle the mind and crush the spirit; and liberty from ecclesiastical hierarchies that impose such doctrines on believers. If Barton Stone believed anything, he believed the words of 1 John 4:8 that proclaim, “God is love.” He had a warm heart, and he believed in a warm-hearted God who loved everyone, and he had little use for any old doctrine that got in the way of sharing that love and expressing that love and could not be reconciled with that biblical notion that God is love. “Hold to the standard of sound teaching,” our scripture says (2 Timothy 1:13), but any doctrine that isn’t biblically grounded – especially grounded in 1 John 4:8 and John 3:16 – isn’t sound.

Also, along with one of our other founders, Alexander Campbell, Stone had little use for any doctrine that didn’t make sense. Disciples at their best have been rational, empirical and pragmatic. We have measured the traditional doctrines of the faith against the triple test of scripture, reason and what works in the everyday adventure of living lives infused with the love of Jesus. The Bible says that God is love and we are rooted and grounded in love. If a doctrine isn’t well-grounded biblically, if it doesn’t make sense, and if it doesn’t facilitate that life of love to which we’ve been called, then we Disciples at our best have not had a whole lot to do with it. That aspect of Gospel Liberty is very much part of our roots, and we have to get back to our roots.

So Gospel Liberty meant liberty from sin, liberty from antiquated doctrine, and liberty from injustice. Barton W. Stone was an abolitionist. As early as 1798 he tried to get slavery abolished in Kentucky. Like many revivalist, Barton W. Stone spoke boldly against the injustice of slavery, which makes it quite ironic that late in life he found himself to be…a slave owner! Someone in his family had died – I believe it was his wife’s parents – and they had owned a slave, which they had willed to the good Pastor Stone. Well, being an abolitionist – being a proponent of Gospel Liberty – Mr. Stone could not for one second tolerate owning another human being, so he immediately tried to free his slave. Only problem was, it was illegal in the State of Kentucky to free your own slave. By the 1840’s Kentucky and other states had embraced the extreme position the slavery was a positive good. And they’d passed laws to protect it; even to the point of infringing upon the property rights of Barton W. Stone to do as he pleased with his own property. Stone had to move to the free state of Illinois to liberate his slave.

Gospel Liberty includes liberty from injustice, including the injustice of slavery and the injustice of what has come to be called “states’ rights.” Some people claim that the Civil War wasn’t about slavery, it was about states’ rights. And there’s some truth to that. It was about one right in particular: the right of the state to make slavery legal; the right of the state to infringe upon the rights of others.

Gospel Liberty says that the state has no right to impose unjust laws upon its citizens, because the God of justice is Lord of all. Gospel Liberty is why Pardee Butler went to Kansas in the 1850’s to establish new Disciples congregations *and* to organize citizens to vote Kansas into the Union as a free state. Gospel Liberty is why James A. Garfield, the only ordained minister to be elected President of the United States and a Disciple minister at that, Gospel Liberty is why General Garfield and the Disciple men of the 42nd Ohio bravely held their ground on the killing field that was Chickamauga against a fierce Confederate assault. Gospel Liberty is why Disciples defended the rights of Black folks in the Jim Crow South and why Disciples are defending the rights of immigrants and those who protect them today. Proclaiming liberty to the captives was what Jesus was all about, and Barton W. Stone knew this and preached this and yes, we have to get back to our roots!

Barton W. Stone and his Christians of Kentucky preached Gospel Liberty, and they preached Christian Unity. “Christian unity is our polar star,” said Stone. Barton Stone in Kentucky and Thomas and Alexander Campbell in western Pennsylvania had independently come to the conclusion that the denominational divisions within Christianity were a scandal. They still are! Thomas Campbell wrote that “the church of Christ on earth is essentially, intentionally and constitutionally one.” The Campbells embraced with their minds what Stone had experienced in the heat of revival: the unity of the body of Christ. That’s why the Campbells – who were recently arrived immigrants from Ireland – likewise did not want to be known as Presbyterians. But unlike Stone, who wanted to be called simply a Christian, the Campbells wanted to be called simply Disciples. So when the Kentucky Christians and the Pennsylvania Disciples brought their two movements for Christian unity together in 1832 they created this amalgam that never could decide whether to call itself Christians or Disciples. That’s how we ended-up with the dual name Christian Church (Disciples of Christ).

They weren’t sure what to call themselves, but they *were* sure that their mission was to seek the unity of the Church, following the example of Jesus when he prayed in John 17 “that they may all be one, that the world may believe.” The mission of Christian unity is the mission of evangelism because how can Christians effectively call the world to the Gospel of love when they’re fighting among themselves? The Hindu prophet and activist Mahatma Gandhi was as good an example of the loving and peaceful ways of Jesus as was anyone. Indeed, the Sermon on the Mount was one of his favorite texts. But when this exemplar of the ways of Christ was asked why he didn’t himself become a Christian he asked, “What kind of Christian do you want me to become?” The divisions within the body of Christ had discouraged him from becoming a follower of Christ.

We Disciples seek unity so that the world might believe, and we have to get back to our roots!

It all comes down to our mission. The Disciples for much of their history have been a mission-focused people. That mission has been the dual proclamation of Gospel Liberty and Christian unity. And the goal of that mission has been a world filled with followers of Jesus; a world filled with folks who seek first the righteousness of God’s kingdom; a world filled with the good news of God’s love, where justice rolls down like waters and righteousness like an ever flowing stream. A church that is focused on its mission will make new disciples, and maybe we Disciples have been declining in numbers because in recent decades we have forgotten our mission. Few new people will join a church whose primary goal is institutional survival. Many will join a church whose mission is the liberty and the justice and the unity of God’s Kingdom.

We have to get back to our roots – we have to reclaim our mission – and the revitalization of this Camp is a big part of our mission.

Giving a camping experience to children and youth who would not otherwise be able to go to camp is part of our mission.

Bringing liberty to young lives held captive by family dysfunction and drugs and alcohol is part of our mission.

We’ll bring them to this Camp so that they can experience the love of Jesus Christ.

We’ll bring them to this Camp so that they can experience life in community and they can test their leadership skills in community.

We’ll bring them to this Camp so that they can experience the wonder of the Creator in the beauty of this space.

We are a people rooted and grounded in the good news of Gospel Liberty and Christian unity and we have to get back to our roots; we have to reclaim our mission; we have to once again answer the call to be a movement for wholeness in a fragmented world. And it starts here, on this sacred ground, where Hoosier Disciples are deeply rooted in liberty and unity and love. Amen!