

1 Corinthians 15:1-11  
Pass It On  
Heritage Sunday May 21<sup>st</sup>, 2017

We live in a very unsettled time of religion and politics. It is a time like the Church and people of faith have gone through many times in the past, and not only survived, but thrived. Today I want to encourage you in this unsettled time to hold onto the Word of God and the core of the Gospel as it has been passed on to you.

Isaiah 40:8 indeed states, “The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand forever.”

Politics have always been in the background of our faith. Politics have always tried to stymie the plans of God going all the way back to the Pharaoh in Egypt.

Politics and taxes drove the Holy Family to Bethlehem; so that Jesus could be born there “in accordance to the scriptures.” For Caesar Augustus was the Roman Emperor and ‘declared that all the world be registered in order to collect taxes.’

King Herod drove the Holy Family to Egypt so that again “in accordance with scriptures” the Messiah would come out of Egypt for the Prophet Isaiah wrote, “Out of Egypt I have called my son.”

Jesus was crucified by the political authorities having been accused of being an insurrectionist and pretender to the Jewish throne.



The persecutions of Christians starting with St. Stephen propelled Christians out into the known world and wherever they went they made converts and the Church grew and grew and grew. The more the Roman political figures tried to suppress it, the more it grew; so that by the reign of Emperor Nero 37-68AD there were enough Christians to be

crucified for their faith that he lit up one of his evening parties with the burning bodies of 1000 crucified Christians.

“The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand forever.”

And what is that word, that powerful word that neither politics, nor power, nor the forces of death and even evil itself cannot defeat?

“For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures,

that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures,..”

Folks, that single sentence, it is the heart of the Gospel! That is the Good News. That is the reason for the hope that we have within us that we defend to whoever would ask. Wherever that hope is shared with whomever that hope is shared, we will bring life. They will have life. We will pass on the Word that lives forever that brings life forever.

All people in their heart of hearts wonder about the great beyond. All wonder is there life after death? We have the answer. We have the Word that gives life.

This scripture has two main parts: **First, Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures.”**

**Second, “he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures.”**

His death for our sins grants us eternal life. His resurrection and appearance too many witnesses validates his life, his teachings and our claim to the salvation of our souls!

My intent today is to give you assurance that the gospel will thrive and survive despite all that politics and government can throw at it. And often times as you read the Scriptures you can see that God indeed

uses the frailties and even the evil of politics and government to do his work and will.

The Roman Government did all it could for 300 years to crush the Christian faith and lost. Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire in 325AD. Rome lost not in a ferocious battle, but to a love within the members of the Church for each other and for God that could not be overcome!

The Church has always thrived, though, crushed in numbers under persecution. The church was vibrant in the former Soviet countries when the Iron Curtain fell. The Church continues today in North Korea and in the Mideast despite mass killings and decades of torture and persecution.

I have often thought recently, of the words of Joseph after he revealed himself to his brothers who had kidnapped him and sold him into slavery, “You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives.”

Today is Heritage Sunday where we look at the heritage of our Christian faith and our denomination in particular with the background of very unsettling politics for many in our country and within our denomination.

It was a political argument that gave birth to John Wesley and to our denomination.

You see in 1701, the year before the death of King William III of England, Samuel Wesley, the father of John Wesley was leading his family in worship. When he prayed for William III, which had been his daily habit for the 13 years he had been married to his wife Susan, Wesley finally noticed she did not say “amen” to his prayer for that King.

There ensued an argument whereby he discovered that in the 13 years of her marriage she had never said amen to his prayer for William III for she never thought he was the rightful monarch and would never

recognize him as king. This was after 13 years of marriage and 14 children.

Well, this fight led to Samuel Wesley leaving home for a year and he only returned home after the death of King William III and the ascension of the new King who both recognized as being the legitimate king.

And here's where I introduce the 3<sup>rd</sup> forbidden topic in polite company having already talked about religion and politics: sex.

About 9 months after Samuel returned John Wesley was born, the son of their reconciliation! Think of it, God even used a family argument over politics during a family prayer time to bring John Wesley on the scene probably the greatest evangelist since St. Paul.

Now the age in which John Wesley was born in was also very unsettled. The Protestant/Catholic controversies had been "settled" by ongoing wars and civil wars. Religion by many was held in great disrespect and disrepute. This was both within and without the Church. A common derision for pastors who weren't doing their job was to call them "fox-hunting parsons" or "tithe-pig parsons".

London and English society was in cultural ruins. Every 6<sup>th</sup> business in England was a gin shop. They advertised "drunk for a ½ penny, dead drunk for a penny." At Oxford University where the Wesley brothers attended you could get an education if you wanted, but if you simply paid the fees, didn't show up for any classes and tests you could graduate with a degree.

The Wesley Brothers and their "Holy Club" stood out in this atmosphere. They strove for holy, disciplined lives following the disregarded rules of the University and their Anglican faith. They sought to serve when and where they could including: riding with condemned prisoners to their execution, teaching children, paying off small debts of those in debtor's prison and more. They were next to poverty themselves but looked to the needs of others.

Among the names they were called in derision were “Bible moths”, “Bible eaters” and “Methodists”. Thank God it was the last one that stuck.

John Wesley addressed the social ills of his day from alcohol abuse to slavery. And slavery is again an issue in today’s world. The evils of each and every age are the same though we think we have evolved.

Now the Methodist Church in America was the result of the Revolutionary war, again Politics driving religion, and being used by God. You see after the Revolutionary war the Methodist Movement stayed a part of the Church of England in England for a much longer time. But in America the Methodists parted ways with the Church of England as soon as they could.

The Methodists didn’t want to be associated with a church that was still headed by the King of England. To do so in many people’s minds in America was to be a traitor. Budding nationalism in America drove the separation. So in 1784 the Methodists in America had their first Annual Conference and the ordination of Coke and Asbury as bishops.

Many denominations came out of the Wesleyan movement. Some of it was because of language like the Brethren and Evangelical churches that spoke German. For some it was racial prejudice which is where the African Methodist Episcopal Church and AMC Zion Church came from. Through the years many others came into being. We are related to the Salvation Army, Nazarene Church, Assemblies of God, Wesleyan Church, Free Methodist Church.

We broke apart over slavery in 1844 and came back together again in 1939. Through the years we have had breaks and schisms and reunifications and grown and shrank in different parts of the world. In 1968 the EUB church joined the Methodist Episcopal Church and we became the United Methodist Church. The 2 flames on our cross and flame symbol represent those two denominations uniting as one.

In 2004 African Methodist Churches united with the United Methodist Church and we grew by about 2 million members that year. In the US we have about 7 million members and outside the US about 5.7 million.

Again through the years the Wesleyan movement started by John and Charles Wesley has experienced many splits, branch offs, re-uniteings and startups. Today there are about 84 million Christians in about 80 denominations who trace their roots to the Wesleyan Methodist movement.

And when and where the Gospel is preached and taught and lived the Church keeps growing, not because we make new members, but because we make disciples, who at their foundation believe, **“that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures,”**

Today politically and within the church there is division and upset. The UMC today faces division over the issue of homosexuality and hermeneutics. In other words the issues we fight over are driven by how we interpret the Scriptures to guide us in our beliefs and practice. In February 2019 there will be a special called General Conference to address these issues.

But this age is like all the ages before us unsettled in terms of religion and politics, but God is going to use them all to work his good will. Today, despite it all, we have such great opportunity to spread the Gospel.

This live streaming we are starting to use gives us the opportunity to actually preach to the entire world. Anyone with a computer and internet connection can join us right here right now. It gives us the opportunity to be in people’s homes that can’t be here with us now. It is how some local churches have 5 or more locations for worship that are miles apart.

John Wesley thought outdoor preaching at first was vile, scandalous and unholy. He changed his mind when he saw the effectiveness of that type of ministry outside the consecrated sanctuary walls. Today our computers and cameras give us opportunities that I believe none here, including me, quite yet grasp.

Yes, the world may be a mess, the Church in places in upheaval, but God is in charge. God can and will use it all to make sure in the end his will is done. His Word the Gospel will be proclaimed.

We here in the meantime must simply continue to love each other, love God and serve those in the world. We must hold on to the core the center of our faith which is the belief that **Jesus died for our sin and on the 3<sup>rd</sup> day was raised from the dead.**

So take heart, be at peace, as Jesus said, **“I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace.**

**In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.”**



In Jesus' name, Amen!