

04/28/2019 ~ Second Sunday of Easter ~ *Acts 5:27-32; Psalm 118:14-29 or Psalm 150; Revelation 1:4-8; John 20:19-31 ~ *During Eastertide a reading from Acts is often substituted for the lesson from the Hebrew Bible ~ Blessing of the Quilts Ceremony.

Alpha and Omega

“‘I am the Alpha and the Omega,’ says our God ‘Who is and Who was and Who is to come, the Sovereign.’” — Revelation 1:8.

I know a United Church of Christ pastor, a friend, who is brilliant. This is what I mean by brilliant: when he reads Scripture privately, for himself, he reads it in the original languages. He also reads ancient religious literature—the so called church mothers and fathers—in the original languages.

Interestingly, he was raised in a family of fundamentalists. He was, himself, attending a fundamentalist seminary before being bitten by the liberal bug. Having been infected by liberality, he then got yet another degree at Harvard.

But back when he was in that fundamentalism seminary, being a fellow of brilliance, he began looking at the history of biblical manuscripts and also looked at ancient manuscripts in the original languages. Among the things he realized is there are often hundreds of manuscripts which contain the same passage.

Further, you can look at these passages, compare one manuscript to the next to the next. And none of these manuscripts—not one—exactly match the other in what’s written. Not one is exactly, word for word, the same.

Hence, it occurred to him that seeking a literal interpretation of Scripture seemed a pretty far fetched concept. After all, which manuscript should be taken as the one from which that aforementioned literal reading could be gleaned? And so, while at that fundamentalist seminary, he went to a professor and because of this obvious fact, asked *how could* Scripture be given a literal interpretation.

The professor had an interesting but unsatisfying answer. The professor said the original manuscript and only the original manuscript is what should be granted the ability of being taken in a literal way.

When my friend suggested to the professor no definitive original manuscripts could be identified. Then the professor nodded and said, “yes?” That was his only response. As I

indicated, that was not a satisfying answer. (Slight pause.)

If you get an account on Facebook when you fill out your profile information it gives you an opportunity to claim some kind of religious belief. This is what I entered on my profile. I am a Trinitarian Monotheist or a Monotheistic Trinitarian.

Given that entry, I don't know if the joke I am about to offer will be funny only if you went to seminary but I have always found it hysterically funny. The joke runs like this: there is one question and only one question on the final exam in a Christian Theology class. Define God; give three examples.

I, of course, find that funny since, as a final exam in a Christian Theology class it is an invitation to address the basic Christian belief we label as the Trinity. And I heard laughs so you get it. Trinity— define God; give three examples— all right.

Needless to say, the basis of Christianity is the Trinity. It is what separates Christians from many other traditions. But can we, mere humans, actually define God? (Slight pause.)

So, here's another challenge similar to the 'define God, give three examples challenge.' Define Scripture. (Slight pause.)

Here is my definition: Scripture is an example of the inadequacy of our language. Scripture is an example of our inability to define God, to explain God.

Let me put that another way: words are not reality. Words are only an inadequate reflection of reality. (Slight pause.)

We hear this, these words, in the work known as Revelation: "I am the Alpha and the Omega," says our God 'Who is and Who was and Who is to come, the Sovereign.'" (Slight pause.)

Throughout this reading the author describes God, Jesus and the Spirit. These descriptions have parallels in a variety of Jewish and non-Jewish sources and, therefore, would have sounded familiar tones, familiar notes in New Testament times.

Needless to say, this passage is being read today in the season of Eastertide, the celebration of the resurrection. We read this now in part because what emerges with particular clarity in the words is a richness of an understanding of the role of Jesus.

Christ is described in terms of the work of the ministry preformed. Christ is described in terms of the role as a witness of and for God. Christ is described in terms of the present and even future accomplishments of the resurrection. Hence, we also have a description of and for the presence among us of the Spirit.

But it is the closing— that Alpha and Omega, that wording— which catches my attention and perhaps our attention. These words are attributed to God and place the whole reading in context.

This is God who breathes the first word, the action by which creation came into being. This is God who has and will have the last word, the action by which a new creation will come into being. That ultimate action illuminates and is illuminated by the promise of Easter, by the resurrection.

This description catches our attention because, while these are mere words, merely a description of God, they speak about action— action taken by God— the action of creation and the action of new creation. What I take away from that is simple.

While words themselves are static, mere descriptions, action is not static. Indeed, what I take away from this is, if God is the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end, then these words are merely an attempt at describing a God of action, a God Who calls us not through words or with words but calls us to action, the reality of action. Put another way, this uses inadequate language in an attempt to describe the reality of action— the reality of action by God whose very being is illuminated by and through action. (Slight pause.)

In a couple minutes we shall dedicate, bless the quilts made by the Chenango Piecemakers quilt group. As was said earlier the quilts will be given away. As was said earlier, this is a ministry of love.

I want to suggest what the Piecemakers do is not simply about making quilts. This is about taking action, the reality of action. And the very action being taken *is* an action because the action expresses love.

Indeed, we often describe love as a feeling. I think that is, at best, a poor description. When love is real, love is not only or simply a feeling. Love is action. And since real love is action, love always defies our ability to fully describe it.

All that brings us back to God who is Alpha and Omega, beginning and end. How can we describe God? We cannot describe God. Mere language is not up to the task of

describing God.

But we can, I think, engage God, interact with God. How? We engage God, interact with God when our own actions can be described as loving, when we act in love, when we act with love.

That's what our friends, the Piecemakers do. They take action to express love. That love displays its reality in the action of making quilts. So let us do something similar. Let us express our love not in mere words but in the reality of action. Amen.

United Church of Christ, First Congregational, Norwich, New York
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ENDPIECE: It is the practice of the Pastor to speak after the Closing Hymn, but before the Choral Response and Benediction. This is an précis of what was said: "Two things: at Christmastide this church displays a giant Alpha and Omega in this worship space, a recognition that the incarnation and the resurrection are irrevocably tied actions. Second, let me leave you with a quote from Thomas Merton. 'In a world so torn apart by rivalry and anger we have the privileged vocation of being living signs of a love that can bridge all divisions and heal all wounds.' I would suggest that healing is possible but never through inaction. Healing is possible only through action."

BENEDICTION: Go out in the compassion and love God provides. Praise the deeds of God by the way you live. And may the steadfast love of God and the peace of Christ, which surpasses understanding, keep our minds and hearts in the companionship and will of the Holy Spirit, this day and forever more. Amen.