

“Jesus Loves Me... and You”
Sermon by Rev. Dr. John Syster, Guest Preacher
Peace United Church of Christ
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Charlotte Hawkins Brown—not necessarily a household word and not necessarily a part of history that you learned in high school, but she was born a grand-daughter to slaves in 1883 in Henderson, N. C., north of Durham. If you are going on Interstate 85, you pass it just as you are going into Virginia. When she was 7, her family moved to Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Charlotte was a very bright, young woman. Her story, as she tells it, really began one day when she was babysitting in Wellesley, Massachusetts. She was pushing the baby carriage for the person for whom she was working and Ms. Palmer came by. Now, Ms. Palmer happened to be the president of Wellesley College—a very famous women’s college. Ms. Palmer overheard Charlotte read Latin. She stopped the girl and inquired what she was doing and about her education. From that moment on, Ms. Palmer, the president of Wellesley College, became a confidant and advisor to Charlotte Hawkins. She helped Charlotte to negotiate the educational system and eventually helped her get into Salem Normal School, right there in Salem, Massachusetts, probably around the corner from “the house of seven gables” and from the jail where the witches had been confined 200 years before.

After a year in Salem Normal School, Charlotte Hawkins received a letter from the American Missionary Association which, over the years, has become a part of the United Church of Christ because the Congregationalists were a very important part of the American Missionary Association which starting in the 1840s being opposed to slavery. After the Civil War, the American Missionary Association established all kinds of schools throughout the south for the former slaves. In the letter that Charlotte received, she was asked if she would like to become a teacher somewhere in the south. She agreed, and they send her to Sedalia, N. C. Does everyone know where Sedalia, N. C. is? For those of you who don’t, it’s just on the other side of Greensboro, just between Greensboro and Whitsett. I’m sure you’ve all been to Whitsett.

Charlotte came to North Carolina at the tender age 18. The school was located on the grounds of Bethel Congregational Church which had been there awhile. The school was in terrible disrepair. The students only attended school five months a year. They were agricultural people. They worked on farms. There were crops to be planted, tended and harvested, so they attended when they didn’t have to be in the fields.

After the first year, Charlotte was told from the offices of the American Missionary Association that they were closing down the school in Sedalia. It was not in good repair and, actually, they had made a decision at headquarters that, instead of having all the rural schools, they were going to consolidate, and they were going to put their money into the schools that were in the larger cities, in places like Raleigh, Salem, Charlotte, and Sedalia. She was heartbroken. She had learned over the course of the year to love these people. She had spent much of her time working in the community as well as writing letters back and forth, and now she was filled with anxiety. She didn’t know what she should do.

Carl Barth was born in 1888 in Switzerland. His father was a Professor of Church History and the New Testament in one of the seminaries in Switzerland. Carl wasn’t a particularly studious student. Carl, in fact, hated to go to school. Not only that, he was a leader in his neighborhood of a gang that fought with gangs from other areas. His parents worried that he would never go to school. When he was 18 years of age, he decided he would follow in his father’s footsteps and study Theology. He went to the University of Bern. Later he studied in Germany at three different institutions—some of the best available. He received his ordination after the appropriate amount of schooling.

He went on to be a minister at a small church in Geneva. They moved to a rural church outside of Geneva, where he married his wife and they had five children. He worked hard for his people in that small community. They were blue collar workers, and he worked hard to make conditions safer where they worked and made sure they got a living wage, but he also wrote theology and biblical studies. He wrote a book about the Book of Romans—a commentary about the Book of Romans. He didn't have any advanced degrees beyond seminary, but his book inspired so much conversation that one of the seminaries in Germany hired him without a Ph.D.—unheard of at that time, and German was the seed of the best work in theology in the world at that time, so he went to Germany. That was in 1923.

By 1934, he had moved on and went to another school. You know what events were taking place in 1934 in Germany. He started to have difficulty. He became very anxious. He did not know whether he should speak up against what was happening in Germany and against Hitler and his administration and the killings that were going on or whether he should remain in his post and declare allegiance to Hitler and what was being asked of him and keep his job and make his family safe, 5 children and a wife. He knew if he spoke out against Hitler, the job was gone and perhaps his life.

One other story I will start for you is this. Fred Craddock was a professor at Candler School of Theology at Emory University. At the end of the 20th century, for several decades, if you saw any list of the best preachers in America, he would be on it. He was very short and balding. Too bad he didn't have a mustache too! He could spellbind a congregation or an assembly. He grew up on a small farm in Tennessee, somewhere in the middle of the state and that part of the country that was not particularly good at farming.

When The Depression hit, they lost their farm, and his family had to move in with relatives into Humboldt, Tennessee. When he lived on the farm, he wrote, everyone on the farm was poor, but when they moved into the city, there was a variety of people of wealth and poverty and, though they had the same wealth they had on the farm which was basically nothing, they felt much poorer in the city because there were people who had a lot more. At his tender age, he was filled with anxiety of what was to become of him as he moved to a new place, leaving everything behind that they had known, leaving the farm with the animals with which he was familiar and loved and moving to the city.

In this passage of scripture of 2 Thessalonians, what is really taking place here is that the Thessalonians have had people come into their church who have told them “Jesus is coming again and, in fact, He has already been here and you missed it”. The people were scared to death for, on the one hand, they new that if Jesus had already come again and they weren't taken with Jesus, then they knew where else they were headed. On the other hand, he had not come again but was coming very soon. They were afraid that some of their family might not go with them.

You and I know, because we can look back for more than 2000 years, that in every era there are people who claim that the end times are coming, that Jesus is here. Sometimes when a president is elected, some people proclaim “See, this is the worst president that is ever going to be and, therefore, it means that God has placed a burden upon us and if you will read the Bible carefully, it says that this particular president came, the world is going to end”. Other people find that, in battles with this country or that country that it is always being proclaimed. In 2 Thessalonians, the author of the letter says to the people to stop worrying so much. There are always people who proclaim the end is coming but it isn't yet, and this God who loves you will take you into the sky. Do not be afraid. Do not worry. Face your anxiety. Open the closet door and let that monster come out and welcome it into your bed because this God loves you.

In the Psalm that Dale read for us this morning, it is a hymn of praise from the Hebrew people. It is a rather majestic pretense in which they point out the abundance of God, and they tell us that this God who loves us pours out upon us a gift of life and a love that will not end and, yet, most of us are afraid “It wasn't meant for this time in my life” or in this period of history we forget that this God loves us.

Think about this. Charlotte Hawkins married later and became Charlotte Hawkins Brown. She made a decision. In the midst of her anxiety, she decided she would return to Sedalia. She came back and founded a school. She asked the pastor of Bethel Congregational Church if there was any land nearby. He told her there was across the road. She bought it. It had a blacksmith's shop on it. There was also a nearby house where some of the students could stay. She began her school at that house.

Eventually she owned 340 acres plus. She started out as an agricultural and technical school, as that was all the whites of the community would allow her to do. They had no idea that the students were advanced in science or math or anything like that, but in the 1930s and 1940s, at the peak of this school's existence, The Palmar Institute, for every 25 spaces they had available in their high school, there were 1000 students who applied. The president of Haiti sent his children there. From Durham and Black Wall Street, those who had the most money in the negro community sent their children there. They came from everywhere. It was arguably the best high school in the south for African-Americans. It was great!

She began moving, over time, away from the farming and technical style and began teaching pre-college courses and many, if not most, of her students toward the end would go onto college at some of the most prestigious colleges in the land. Charlotte Hawkins Brown was the best teacher and administrator that those children could possibly have. She prayed every morning before she started work. She prayed during the day because she knew that this God who had led her to this place would always be with her and guide her in what she did. She is arguably the best principal that the African-American race had in the first half of the 20th century. It is a landmark of what is possible in the midst of very trying times. She knew that God loved her and that God loved each one of the children in her school.

What about Carl Barth? Well, Carl Barth made a decision in 1934 that he would have to speak out against what was happening in Nazi, Germany. He was the principle author of what was called the Barmen Declaration, which was a theological statement that said that those who were Christians could not follow the dictates of the Nazi government. He was supposed to make a statement that he was loyal to the Nazi party, and he refused. He, of course, lost his job, and he quickly left Germany and took a teaching position back in Switzerland. At one point in 1938, he wrote a letter to a colleague stating that "I believe that any person who fights against the Nazi regime is a true Christian". Carl Barth has been called, by those who know him, the greatest Protestant theologian of the 20th century—head and shoulders above anyone else.

Remember that idea about predestination—that the moment you are born you are destined to go either to heaven or to hell? It was a part of the Puritan heritage that came to New England following after the pilgrims, but Barth transformed that. He said that, it may be that God has predestined, but God's greatest gift is given to us in Jesus Christ, and that is a gift of love and forgiveness, and certainly God would not hold to a predestination heritage after he has given us this gift of forgiveness. Everyone has the opportunity of forgiveness and can be with God through eternity.

Carl Barth never came to this country until he was 75 years old. That was in the early 1960s. He had written millions of words about theology. One reporter said "Dr. Barth, out of all the words you have written, out of all the books you have written, what is the essence of this Christian faith?" Carl Barth said "Jesus loves me this I know, for the Bible tells me so", and he turned and left. He was quite serious.

Oh, and regarding Fred Craddock, Fred got into Humboldt, Tennessee. His family took him to the Christian church there on one of the corners in Humboldt, Tennessee, and he was welcomed into a family. He was in the primary division of Sunday School at that time, and they took him to his Sunday School class, and there were bright red, blue and yellow chairs, and the teachers there, Ms. Lucille and Ms. Mary Ann, welcomed him, hugged him and they treated him with great respect and love. He wrote

later in his life “a greater welcome was never had by anyone”. The superintendent of the Sunday School, Ms. Jane, every Sunday morning after Sunday School, would pass out papers to him as he went into the church service that had connect the dots and all those drawings you would do, and he said it was probably not until he was in the junior department, probably in junior high, before he ever listened to one word of the minister’s sermon because he was too busy drawing pictures of the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem and The Arc of the Covenant all during the church service. He said those teachers taught him the songs of Christianity, the simple songs of “Jesus loves me this I know, for the Bible tells me so”. They also taught him the song “Jesus loves the little children of the world”...”red and yellow, black and white, they are precious in his sight”. It talks about how each child is sacred to God. He didn’t learn until years later what a revolutionary idea that was in Humboldt, Tennessee at that time but it was.

One last note, for those of you who are football fans, Ms. Jane Craddock married a gentleman, and they had a child. They named that child Archie. His last name was Manning. Jane had some grandchildren—Eli and Peyton and Cooper. It is surprising what happens when love rules a household and a congregation.

What I want to say to you is quite simple. The story in 2 Thessalonians and the Psalmists, the story of Carl Barth and the story of Charlotte Hawkins Brown is simply this: Jesus loves me...and loves you—each one of you. Thanks be to God for that gift. Amen.