

## **We Are Disciples: Wholeness in a Fragmented World: *Isaiah 65:17-25***

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“We are Disciples of Christ, a *movement for wholeness in a fragmented world*. As part of the one body of Christ, we welcome all to the Lord’s table, as Christ has welcomed us.”

The year was 1968, the same year that we, the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), officially organized into a denomination.

1968 was a difficult year for our country. In April, Martin Luther King was murdered. Later that June, Bobby Kennedy was killed. That summer, riots broke out in major cities across America, tearing our cities a part along the color line. 1968 was the year of the Tet Offensive in Vietnam, the year that America could no longer deny the grave cost of the war. By the end of October, the fighting came to an end, after over 900 American lives were lost and an estimate of 182,000 Vietnamese dead.

1968 was a year that could make even the most hopeful give up on hope.

It was in the midst of such world-wide fragmentation that one of the happiest songs ever written was released. That year Louis Armstrong’s album, *What a Wonderful World*, was released, containing the contagious song by the same name.

Armstrong, or *Satchmo* as he was known, was born in abject poverty in the deep segregated south. The grandson of slaves. A school dropout. His mother worked the night in New Orleans’ infamous Storyville Red Light District. Louis was a man who had every reason to give up, but he didn’t. Within him was a song, and on his face always seemed to be a big smile.

With that famous smile and a voice unlike any other, Louis sang of a Wonderful World during one of the hardest years of our national life. He imagined, instead of rioting, friends shaking hands. A world where children’s futures were full of potential, instead torn apart by war. A world where everyone spoke the language of love.

Louie sings:

*“The colors of the rainbow, so pretty in the sky,  
Are also on the faces of people going by.  
I see friends shaking hands, sayin’, ‘How do you do?’  
They’re really sayin’, ‘I love you.’”*

*“I hear babies cryin’. I watch them grow.  
They’ll learn much more than I’ll ever know.  
And I think to myself, What a wonderful world.”*

“What a Wonderful World,” now an American classic, only reached 116 on the U.S. charts in 1968. It was too idealistic. It was even controversial, as Satchmo imagined a whole

world, even in the midst of such racial violence and fragmentation. Sometimes, even hope is controversial.

Singing the song didn't change the world. But it did imagine a new world, a world that could be possible; that *should* be possible.

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In her book *Whole*, the Rev. Sharon Watkins, our General Minister and President, asks us to "Picture a globe--the kind of globe you may have seen in a classroom: a model of earth set on an axis so that it can spin. Clear, stark lines delineate national borders. Contrasting colors for neighboring countries make sure each one stands distinct. This is earth, as humans have drawn it."

"Now, picture Earth as viewed in that iconic photograph taken outside the earth's atmosphere."<sup>1</sup> The image has been named *The Blue Marble*, photographed on December 7, 1972, by the crew of the Apollo 17 spacecraft. It is one of the most pervasive photographs ever taken.

It is beautiful and peaceful. The blue so bright, the white clouds swirling around the Earth like the swirls inside a crystal marble. In the picture, there are no lines demarking national borders, for they do not exist. Though the image often gets flipped when used, in the original photo, the South Pole is on the top, for that was the angle of the spacecraft. The continent of Africa is central, not North America as we normally picture it.

This is the world as God created it. Peaceful. Whole.

The Hebrews had a word for "whole": *Shalom*. Often, in our English Bibles, the word is translated "Peace", but it's meaning is much deeper and full. *Shalom* is not simply the absence of conflict and strife. *Shalom* is the world as God intended it. Whole. Right. In order. Where all the pieces are in place. Where all creation, people, all creatures and the environment flourishes, without harm or hinderance.

The world as God created it.

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Louis Armstrong was not the first to imagine such a world. Earlier we read a much older song, the Song of Isaiah. In that text, Isaiah imagines God creating a new world. A new world where all the pain of this one was no more and not remembered.

Where there was no more weeping.

Where babies didn't die.

Where humanity flourishes, not suffers, in old age.

Where the ground is always fertile, and every home is safe, with always food to spare.

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<sup>1</sup> Watkins, Sharon. *Whole*. 2014, Chalice Press, St. Louis. Page 46.

A world where wolves and lambs sit at table together.

What a wonderful world that would be!

But is such a world merely a fairy tale, the subject of wishful songs, the stuff of dreams?

Too often it seems that all the church has to offer our fragmented world is the promise of a heavenly reward, after all this is burnt up and gone. We have taught that this is God's good news. "Hey, the world and your life is in shambles! But that's okay. One day you'll die and go to heaven, and then everything will be great!"

How is *that* good news? Endure life, waiting for death, so that, one day all will be made right? We need wholeness now. We need *shalom* in this world, this life, now.

The prayer Jesus taught his disciples--his church--to pray is that God's kingdom come, God's will be done--here--now--on earth, as it is in heaven.

Wholeness isn't something we get after we die. Wholeness is what we work for now. To make our fragmented world whole: this is the mission of the church.

Where do you see fragmentation in our community? Where are lives torn a part by violence, or poverty, or greed, or hate?

Our call is to go to these places, not just singing of wholeness, but making wholeness real, with our own two hands.

Next month, Rev. Anne Gregory will leave Iowa and journey to Thailand, returning as a missionary to the home she grew up in. You may have met Anne as she served as a minister in our region at the Elkhart Christian Church, or as a counselor at the Christian Conference Center and at ADAM Camp. Last Summer, Anne received the call to go to Thailand. Our denomination, in partnership with others, are on the ground working in Thailand to end sex trafficking in that country. Anne's job will be to pastor and support those working the front lines of this fight.

In a recent story about her new ministry, she told the Des Moines Register that she will be, "helping folks escape the slavery of the sex trade, and since many of them end up HIV positive, we have to help medically, too, not just rescuing them. We have to help them find a skill they can use to support themselves once they leave the sex trade." Anne is not just dreaming about a wonderful, whole world, she's traveling to the other side of the world to make it happen.

Our call as a church is not to simply sing and preach about the new world, calming our pain as we wait for heaven. Our call is to work to make it happen. Isaiah saw a new heaven and a new earth. Our call is to make this vision a reality.

Here, in Norwalk, through our hands, we can build a new world. As we collect over \$1,300 for warm coats for children, we build this new world. As our youth travel to Minneapolis to serve the poor, we build this new world.

As we build cabins that will shelter young people from around our region as they experience the life-changing ministry of the Christian Conference Center, we build this new world.

As we share life together, as we forgive one another, as we surround one another when we are sick, as we pray for the joys and concerns of our lives--we build this new world.

As we build a beloved community, where lines of division do not matter, where all are welcome--and all means all--we build this new world.

Someone told me the other day that what the people of Norwalk need to know is that there is a real hell, and they're going there, unless they turn their lives around. I could not disagree more.

People know there is hell. They've experienced it in the fragmentation of their lives. What they need to know is that a whole world is possible. That God is alive in the world, not throwing lives out into some made-up eternal torment, but putting lives together through the hands and feet of God's people.

The world needs to know wholeness. The world needs Disciples of Christ, a movement for wholeness in a fragmented world.

As we approach the table of God, we will sing number 600, Jesu, Jesu. It's a new song, but it's an easy song. And it's a good song. Let's sing.