

Temples of Pan Caesarea Philippi – Artist Rendition 1st Century

Greetings!

Please read [Matthew 16: 13-20](#)

Tuesday, I attended the funeral service of Rev. Herbert E. Palmer along with other members of the West Ohio Annual Conference Extended Cabinet. Rev. Palmer, 96, was the father of our presiding Bishop, Gregory Vaughn Palmer. The service was held at Mother African Zoar United Methodist Church in Philadelphia, PA, led by the senior pastor, Rev. William Brawner. The preacher of the day was a friend of Rev. Palmer's, Rev. Alfred Maloney, a pastor in the Eastern Pennsylvania Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church. The title of the sermon was "Love in Action" taken from the texts [Isaiah 40: 28-31](#), [Romans 12: 1-2, 9-13](#) and [Matthew 6: 25-34](#).

Rev. Maloney used these texts to describe his friend's life and ministry, but then he inserted a sermon in the sermon. He talked about the call on the lives of all clergy and laity to build the church. Instead of citing a text on the Christian life or on faith practice, he asked us to imagine a three-framed cartoon like we might see in the newspaper:

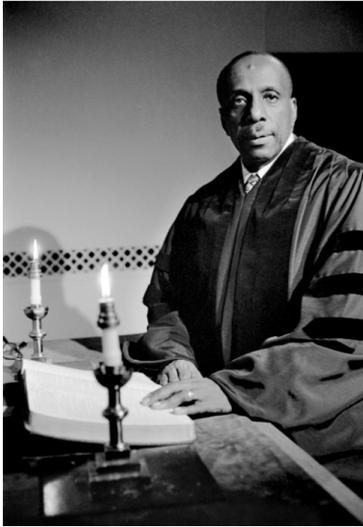
- Frame One: An image of a church building behind the wheel of a car.
- Frame Two: An image of a church building behind the wheel, now with the familiar image of Jesus in Western culture in the passenger seat.
- Frame Three: A bubble text coming from Jesus's mouth speaking these words, "I used to drive."

The idea of the cartoon and the imagination of the preacher set me back. The institutional church has been driving the vehicle of faith for a while. As I drove back to Cincinnati I thought about the bumper sticker, "Jesus is My Co-Pilot" and wondered how indeed the bumper sticker and the cartoon became in conflict with each other?

Further reflection hit me about the time I reached Blue Mountain on the PA Turnpike. There are centuries of conflict between the aspirational church and the one we have

on our hands. The human condition seems to be inescapable. It has a long history, one that began well before the advent of the automobile, newspapers, or cartoons.

Albert Schweitzer, in some sense, was trying to address that which is inescapable in his 1906 masterpiece, *The Quest for the Historical Jesus*. As a theologian, he was trying to work out the aspirational sense and the human condition and how both impact faith, practice, and belief.



Howard Thurman, 1899 -1981

In more recent times, the great theologian and pastor, Howard Thurman, addressed his readers by proposing that the conduct of your life is like the metaphor of waters – swamp, canal, or reservoir. Thurman was cited in the sermon and adds a dimension to the conversation.

Likewise, The Rev. Dr. Douglas Powe, Jr. from Wesley Seminary, wrote a book recently titled the *Adept Church*. You may remember that Dr. Powe was our guest in the Ohio River Valley District and the West Ohio Conference earlier this year. He used these images from Thurman to talk about our churches and our personal spiritual life.

All four of these pieces - the fictional cartoon, the work of Schweitzer, Thurman and Powe - call us to think about our primary relationship - the acceptance of Jesus as our Lord and Savior. At that moment, we found Him at the wheel giving us work that only we can do – to make disciples and create beloved communities of love and justice.

The text of the conversation between Jesus and Peter is telling. It is set in the rural fortress city of Caesarea Philippi. It is known as *Peter's Declaration*, for Peter is announcing the greatness of Jesus. Then Christ Jesus himself makes a declaration in Matthew 16, verse 18: *And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it.* Jesus is at the wheel!

Jesus is still the leader of the ministry, but chose temporal leadership to care for the body – the church. Sometimes we honor our ministry leader and sometimes we fail. I could not help but notice that just a block or so from my hotel was the Liberty Bell and the original Pennsylvania State House, now known as Independence Hall. July 4 is this coming Sunday, the day the Declaration of Independence was ratified by the Continental Congress. I love July 4. 1776 was a great musical and movie. Books about the subject from all eras written by major historians are informative and fun to read.



Independence Hall

But while the Declaration was seeking independence from the tyranny of a king an ocean away, not everyone was free. Not everyone had a voice at the table. Some

signers owned people and used them exclusively for slave labor. Some slaveowners used people for nefarious purposes and sexual gratification, including the writer of the Declaration of Independence. The unequal relationship between Sally Hemmings and Thomas Jefferson was believed to be a forgotten story. Some years ago with scholarship and DNA tracing, a light was shined on her and Thomas Jefferson. A discovery of a whole family of heirs of the patriot, writer, scientist, architect, agronomist, Cabinet Secretary, landowner, President and slaveholder came to light. This family of heirs wishes to be counted in the story of our nation and of one of its founders. The family is a family of color. They ask all of us in dominate culture to see them. Thomas Jefferson is many things to many people. His aspirational language has eluded us as a diverse people throughout our history. We continue to work into what it means to be the people to form a more perfect union.

No matter the era, our histories are filled with success and failure to be our best. The sermon "Love in Action" reminded me of this for my own life. Whether we are talking about the Christian Church, the "Christian Nation" or the Christian – the prophetic words of Rev. Maloney's cartoon penetrate my soul with the words of Jesus: "I used to drive."

Peace,



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