

Plymouth Congregational Church of Fort Wayne, UCC
January 14, 2018

“Becoming the Greater Things”

“You will see greater things than these.”

John 1:50

Prelude:

This past week, I found myself half listening/half not, to Morning Edition on NPR, as Steve Inskeep interviewed Jonah Goldberg, for some news analysis. The topic of conversation was the release of the book, *Fire and Fury*, Michael Wolff's expose of life this past year in the White House. I'm not sure what was said about that, although I'm sure it was interesting. What did catch my attention was a passing remark offered by Jonah Goldberg, a senior editor of *National Review*, who said: **“Normalcy is a high bar these days.”**

Normalcy.

Normalcy was a term that gained currency when employed by that great American President from Marion, OH - Warren G. Harding, whose 1920 campaign included a pledge to return life to what it wasn't, to a “pre-war” time (WWI), when things were - supposedly - more sedate and simplified.

Harding's stump speech included these words:

***“America's present need is not heroics,
but healing; not nostrums, but normalcy;
not revolution, but restoration ...”***

Such political rhetoric - with its nostalgic appeal to a time that never existed, earned Harding the highest office in the land. He received over 60% of

the popular vote in the election of 1920. And curiously, he maintained his popularity; he died in office, you may recall (1923), and then came the disclosures of scandal that still mar his life and reputation. Makes you wonder if someone might pick up on that theme in a couple of years.

Normalcy. Don't you wonder if the election of 2020 might include a candidate who resurrects Harding's campaign theme.

Normalcy. It is a high bar these days. In August of this past year the *LA Times* ran an editorial that began with a simple statement: **"These are not normal times"** (*LA Times*, Aug. 20, 2017, "Enough is Enough").

I submit in part this morning that our "times" have rarely been normal. Some possibly more so than others. But normal as a description of our existence is exceedingly hard to pin down. Even so, the abnormalities that rage in the world, that stir concern and stoke anxiety among us, are real enough, and should not be dismissed.

I have on a bookshelf in my home Robert Lifton's book entitled *Witness to an Extreme Century*. Lifton was a psychiatrist who dealt with death camps and brainwashing episodes, and survivors of nuclear blasts. The book is there to simply remind me that every age, every generation, has its extremes; every generation gets to confront what is grotesque and abhorrent, the incidents and transgressions that serve to assault the life we are charged to manifest as children of God.

In our scripture reading, John 1:43-51, we have a lesson in which Jesus issues the summons, “Follow me,” to a small but growing band of disciples. The lesson is a gospel reflection borne in an extreme age, with its own absence of “normalcy.”

John’s gospel begins with its profound prologue, a beautiful, elegant expression of “**Word**” theology, a reflection upon creation, and the re-creational properties of the Divine: **“in the beginning, the Word was with God, and the word was God ... and the Word became flesh and lived among us ... the Word dwelt with humanity, God “tabernacled” in flesh.**

The prologue ends with verse 18, and immediately we are thrust into drama; the heightened tension of an inquisition.

We are literally peppered in this chapter with a barrage of questions. A delegation from Jerusalem, a task force consisting of temple priests and Levites, interrogate John (the Baptist). In the beginning there was interrogation.

“Who are you?”

John was not normal.

John the Baptist is quite peculiar; a rather bizarre character, who didn’t fit into any of the prescribed categories of the day. He defines himself, at least initially, via negative, by who he is not.

He is not Messiah.
He is not Elijah.
He is not **“the prophet”** (Deuteronomy 18:15).
He concedes this: **“the voice of one crying out
in the wilderness ...”**, which aligns with
vision captured and first articulated by Isaiah
the prophet.

John connects with Jesus
and gives some of his disciples a clue:
Jesus is special, Lamb of God in an age
when the only normalcy you could
count on was cruelty.

So two disciples following John
leave and take up with Jesus.
It is to these two disciples, one of whom
is Andrew, that Jesus first speaks,
and he does so with a question:
“What are you looking for?” (John 1: 38).

The question is never formally answered;
it simply hangs in the air, inviting us to
think about our own answers.
The author of this gospel uses Jesus
to spur self-examination, that we might
come to know ourselves, that we might
attain understanding of who we are,
as we engage and seek to understand
the Messiah, God’s anointed.

I wrestle with the question, especially given
the transition looming in our lives.
It is very personal; it is institutional.
What are you looking for?

I can’t answer for anyone other than myself.
I realize, if answers come, they aren’t necessarily
what I was seeking at some other period in my life.

What are you looking for?

Peace? Contentment? Engagement?
 Beauty? Honesty (something other than
 a “bubble” of self-deception)?
 A place to belong and believe in that
 is both respectful and respectable?

Would such a place, such a people,
 look normal?

It was the Russian,
 Fyodor Dostoevsky,
 who said:

“The world will be saved by beauty.”

I wonder if he had in mind the
 teaching of Isaiah,

“How beautiful upon the mountains
 are the feet that ring peace ...”

I wonder if he had Paul in mind,

Who roughly quotes Isaiah,

“How beautiful are the feet that
 bring good news!”

(Isaiah 52:7; Romans 10:15).

Are we looking for such things?

And if so, do we have the capacity to say,

“How beautiful!”

In this first chapter, Jesus is a seeker,
 and those who he finds, he invites to “follow.”
 And those who follow find and invite others.
 As we heard in our lesson: Philip was found
 by Jesus, he followed; and in turn, Philip found
 Nathaniel and shared with him the news:
**“We have found him about whom Moses
 in the law and also the prophets wrote ...”** (John 1:45).

Nathaniel is such an interesting character; he is skeptical, cautious. But Nathaniel is also good. Nathaniel is a living embodiment of a beatitude: pure in heart. Jesus states it this way: Nathaniel is the real thing, **“an Israelite in whom there is no guile, no deceit.”**

Nathaniel, though, is not perfect. He has limitations as to what he can see and understand. When informed that Jesus is from Nazareth, Nathaniel raises a dubious question - **Can anything good come out of Nazareth?**

Apparently Nazareth had a “no good” reputation. He couldn’t conceive, couldn’t see, couldn’t imagine, Messiah coming from such a place.

It is not an uncommon problem.
It is a question we need to be asking
today as it pertains to our world.

Can anything good come out of those
places reputed to be “no good?”

Can anything good come out of Haiti?
El Salvador? The Dominican Republic?
Can anything good come out of Africa?

It takes a certain skill to offend
a whole continent with outhouse insult.
We should not be surprised, for
such pronouncements are consistent
with past behavior. We should be concerned
for the sharp limitation it imposes upon
God at work with us, not as a nation,
but with us as world.

To speak of others with such derision is quite unbecoming. It is to despise where and with whom God would dwell; it is miss the rainbow that follows a storm.

It bears mentioning this morning a verse of Paul written to the Corinthians:

“God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, so that no one might boast in the presence of God.”(I Corinthians 1:28).

In other words, God sent a Savior by way of Nazareth, a town with its own outhouse reputation, to save the Norwegians of the world.

***** ***** ***** *****

A final thought.

The call of Jesus to “follow” in this passage comes with promise. It is to Nathaniel that Jesus speaks: **“You will see greater things ...”** than what you have seen.

This promise returns to the initial word Jesus spoke in this chapter: What are you looking for? One can see only what one is looking for.

The Christian faith comes in so many different shapes and sizes, with cultural diversity and racial beauty. Our prayer should be for more and more, more wisdom, more sight, more heart, more love, more understanding, so as to not confine where or restrict with whom

God works for good.

This part of Dr. King's hope and dream was it not, that the great divides of the world, between rich and poor, north and south, black and white, Jew and Christian and Muslim, might live in the harmonies of justice, and mercy, and peace. And that the church might live up to its commission, to treat all people with a measure of dignity, value, and worth.

A closing word. In his book, *Streams of Living Water*, Richard Foster explores and examines six different dimensions of faith that define (in his estimate) the richness of Christian tradition.

The six "streams" are

- (1) contemplative (the prayer-filled life);
- (2) the Holiness tradition (the virtuous life);
- (3) charismatic (Spirit filled);
- (4) Evangelical tradition (Word centered);
- (5) incarnational tradition (sacramental).

Some of these traditions overlap, at least in my life, and what I'm looking for in church.

It is a sixth stream that I want to underscore.

The social justice tradition, a tradition that includes Roger Williams and John Woolman, William Wilberforce; Sojourner Truth; Susan B. Anthony, Florence Nightingale and Harriet Tubman; Catherine and William Booth, Dorothy Day, Albert Schweitzer, and Martin Luther King.

It is a rich tradition. And it is at the heart of our life here in Plymouth Church. According to Foster:

Question: What is the Social Justice tradition?

Answer: A life committed to compassion and justice
For all peoples.

Question: Why should we explore it?

Answer: Because through it God develops in us the compassion to love our neighbor freely and develops in our world a place where justice and righteousness prevail.

If we are faithful, if we are willing,
if we are following as Jesus has need of us to follow,
we will see it. The world will be a better place.
And it will be glorious and beautiful to behold.

We pray to become such a people in such a place,
for the glory of God.

Amen.

*(Sermons are typically composed in haste,
for the demands of the day are many;
so be charitable as you read; and remember:
the contents of this sermon have not been edited
and may or may not have been a part of its public presentation)*