

Plymouth Congregational Church of Fort Wayne, UCC
January 28, 2018

“The New Thing on the Threshold”

“What is this? A new teaching –
with authority” He commands even the
unclean spirits, and they obey him.”

Mark 27

Prelude:

The annual meeting scheduled for today is one
of two meetings specified in the church’s bylaws,
which dictates that we gather in October
for an election of officers,
and that we gather in January
to conduct business,
**“to adopt a budget and receive reports
from all Officers and Boards of the Church”**
that are charged and vested with duty
(Plymouth Church Bylaws, Article V –
Polity, Section 2).

I hope our meeting time is efficient.

And informative. And conversational.

I hope it provides ample time for us
to reflect upon the enterprise we share,
and to consider the ministry of Plymouth
Church, and the covenant we share,
and the purpose we serve.

This annual meeting is somewhat different
from those of recent years. We are on the verge
of something new. Change is coming, this
we know. But there is so much that we don’t

know, which is always a bit unsettling.

Let me assure you, we will manage.
But let me also challenge, that we pray
to manage well.

And by that I mean that we maintain,
that we continue and carry on, as we have,
exploring faith, restoring hope, discovering
new dimension in the fullness of God's love.

I speak of these not in a trivial way,
but in a profound sense of what such
terms mean.

Faith is the antithesis of fear,
hope is antidote for despair,
for doom & gloom;
and **love** is the key to a larger life,
a voluminous life,
full of grace and mercy.

I mention this for
uncertain times
are always filled with peril;
with danger that is real
and formidable.

This last fall I encountered an early writing from
Biblical scholar Amos Wilder, in a book entitled:
New Testament Faith Today, written over sixty
years ago (1954). Wilder said:

**“We are in an interim period between an old
and new formulation of the Christian religion...
A re-conception of our religion (is) demanded
by the conditions of a new age ... Such epochs are
periods of exploration, uncertainty, schism,
and heresy”** (see *New Testament Faith Today*, p. 14).

Interim periods – when you know you are between an old and a new chapter – when a re-conceptualization of things is demanded, are full of opportunities, some to be embraced, some denied, some that may advance, some that may stall what is entrusted to our care.

The challenge is to stay true and consistent and not to falter along the way.

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In our gospel lesson this morning, we find Jesus at the intersection where change is located, where old collides with new, where tradition that is fixed is chafing with tradition that is flexing.

Our writer places significant emphasis upon Jesus as Teacher. On the Sabbath, in the synagogue, Jesus taught; he offered instruction.

The teaching astonished those in attendance.

Jesus taught as one having authority, which means (to me) that he taught with such depth and clarity that a response was required.

Curious, isn't it, that we are given no taste of what content was being dished out.

We are given the picture of Jesus
being in charge. He was not teaching
to entertain, he was teaching to elevate,
to alter one's state of mind,
to change life.

This is gospel, good news, working.
it was stirring; and provocative.
The provocation is illustrated
for us by the man with an unclean spirit,
who apparently is the one person
who has figured out that something
momentous was happening.
The question is posed and answered:

**“Have you come to destroy us?
I know who you are, the Holy One of God!”**

Have you come to destroy,
to end life as we know it?
Have you come to change us,
to invite a re-conceptualization
of life?

The answer;
yes, indeed
Jesus does so come.
And lest we shrug and glibly nod,
the author makes clear what Jesus
prompts isn't easy; it is accompanied
with convulsions and a crying out.
Which means it was hard,
full of turmoil and anguish.

Well, apparently it was quite a spectacle.
Something actually happened at church!
A life was changed, restored, embraced.
How wonderful - to see such change
in the one said to be unclean, possessed

and in need of release of bondage.

Mark's gospel spells it this way:

**“A new teaching – with authority –
with power.”**

**A new teaching with
capacity to redeem life – for good.**

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With our annual meeting as a backdrop,
What might this mean for us?

A couple of things.

I hope we, as church,
as not so conditioned to routine,
so entrenched in what we do
 and why we do it,
that we have lost the capacity
to imagine or conceive of change
that would be both healthy and wise.

I happen to maintain high expectations
for what can happen in our church setting(s)
because I believe in the God who is a dynamic
change agent, who is making all things news.
Nothing stays the same. All is evolving.
Unfolding. If not, then death is perched
on the doorstep.

I work to resist those impulses that reside within
that keep me sedated, intransigent, stuck. I work
to resist being part of a faith crowd that harbors
a low threshold for what change is needed now,
indeed that is possible now, if we could simply
muster the will.

I worry – as a culture – that we’ve lost our capacity to be shocked by egregious transgressions of misbehavior.

I’m not talking about personal faults/failures, rather institutional practices that fail to keep people accountable.

I’m mindful of what has been taking place up in East Lansing the past couple of weeks, at Michigan State University, and the trial of Dr. Larry Nasser, where scores of young women testified to the abuse they suffered. It is a small slice of the large picture: **#metoo**.

It is terribly tragic – but what is most damning is the institutional cover up that enabled a predator to prey for decades.

The big story, the big picture, is not that Nasser goes to jail for the rest of his life. According to the *Lansing State Journal*, what is most profound is the

- (1) the depth of callous disregard for victims;**
- (2) and the depth of the organized institutional effort to deceive, deny, and hide the truth, which enabled Nasser to practice his perversions as a professional.**

Mitch Album, *Detroit Free Press* –

“Harsh light” is being cast on the university. “They will either change or be gone.” But harsh light is “not the norm. Secrecy is ...”

Maintaining the appearances, protecting reputations in the athletic department, was more important than protecting the victims of abuse and assault.

A re-conceptualization is needed up there in East Lansing, and in all other places where values are twisted and deception hides the truth.

There is so much that is unclean, and that remains so, for fear that change will destroy us.

Less than a week ago – Tuesday this past week, There was a school shooting in Benton, Kentucky. Two 15-year old students dead, 18 injured. It was the 11th school shooting of 2018. Research over the past four years indicates there are school shootings at about one of week.

What do we do?

We elect people to the Indiana Assembly who spent this week trying to weaken the weak gun legislation we have on the books. The message, twisted as it is, is clear: We love our guns more than we love our children.

It doesn't have to be this way. We need to remember Jesus didn't bid us carry anything other than a cross when following. We can do much better.

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I want to invoke the name of Richard Rohr as we prepare for Annual Meeting, and his understanding that we are capable of being more than “**small minded.**” In fact, that we are capable of possessing what Rohr refers to as a great mind.

In Rohr's estimate, we often settle in what he calls a bi-nary way of looking at life. This is an “**either-or**” way of seeing things, that creates a sense of control.

This is a “good guy – bad guy,” friend or foe way of looking at the world. It is, in Rohr's estimate, the workings of a small mind. “**The small mind works by comparison and judgment.**” Love it or leave it.

There is an alternative. A way of compassion and generosity and struggle. **“The great mind,”** so says Rohr, **“works by synthesizing and suffering with alternative truths.”**

Karl Marlantes, former marine, now a writer, has said, **“... if we didn’t always think we were the good guys, we might actually get in less wars”** (*Christian Century*, p. 22, Jan. 17, 2018). That’s a great mind at work, trying to resolve the dangers of binary thinking, the quick and reckless wit that gives no pause in saying: **“I have a much bigger button”** than my adversary (D. Trump referring to Kim Jong Un, Jan. 2. 2018).

I hope we aspire to be of a great mind here in Plymouth Church, a great mind not measured by IQ, but a JMCQ, a justice and mercy and compassion quotient, that looks upon the world as did Jesus, with love and generosity. And it is Jesus, his love, his teaching, his command and authority that puts us on the threshold of an exciting new day, full of gospel adventure.

Let me close with this thought from Oscar Romero (1917-1980), the martyred Archbishop from El Salvador. (Romero is on the threshold for being canonized as a saint in the Roman Catholic Church; he is already honored worldwide in other denominations, who recognize and are inspired by his passionate promotion of human rights, human dignity, and opposition to violence). On the Great West Door of Westminster Abbey, Romero is included as one of eight 20th century martyrs, who suffered for trying to clean up an unclean, small-minded world.

Romero was martyred in a hospital chapel,
presiding over a mass, taking and breaking bread
to be shared with people hungering for good news.
His assassins knew who he was, a man of God
come to destroy the ways of life filled with death.

**“Let us not forget:
we are a pilgrim church,
subject to misunderstanding,
to persecution,
but a church that walks serene,
because it bears
the force of love.”**

This is how we are,
how we should be,
how we will be judged
as a church:
our capacity to bear, to display, to discharge
the force of God’s love.

May we do so faithfully, hopefully,
generously with what time we share.

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)*