

Plymouth Congregational Church of Fort Wayne, UCC
February 18, 2018

“Following Where Compassion Wanders”

“... When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it
and remember the everlasting covenant between God and
every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth.”

Genesis 9:16

Prelude:

This morning I'd like to

- (1) offer a brief word about
the season of Lent that is upon us;
- (2) speak to the lesson we heard from Genesis,
and the covenant that God established with
the creation by way of Noah; and
- (3) speak to the challenge that is ours given the
school shooting that occurred on Wednesday
(Ash Wednesday) in Parkland, Florida.

This being the first Sunday in the season of Lent,
you may have noted a change of sound and song
in our worship. As church seasons change,
so too the responses we sing.

It is a discipline we practice, an intention
that worship not become so rote, so routine,
that we fail to be engaged.

So we will sing, “**the glory of God’s presence.**”
We will (I hope) give reverence from the temple
in which God is pleased to dwell;
not a temple of mortared bricks with molded plaster
but a temple of flesh upon bone, a heart throbbing home,
with blood coursing through our veins.

“Do you not know that your bodies are a temple of the Holy Spirit that is in you?” (see I Corinthians 6:19). Paul posed that question, he included that teaching, in his writing to the Corinthians.

Your bodies:

Your straight body;

Your gay body;

Your male body;

Your female body;

Your body - your old body; your young body.

Your body - within which there may not be clarity, or mixed messaging, your trans-body.

Do you not know - our bodies -
they are temples of the Holy Spirit?

This is advancement of radical Christian thought - first century style; it is a teaching we are still trying to catch up to, to appropriate in our understanding of faith.

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We will sing also of our determination to walk with Jesus - to share his company, to stay connected - through trials, tribulations, that fill life with adventure. **“I am with you always,”** Jesus once said to his disciples (Matthew 28:20); As Jesus has vowed to be with us, as companion, we dare, with determination, to reciprocate.

And throughout the Sundays of Lent we will sing of God’s love, **“broad like beach and meadow, wide as the wind.”** The hymn is part praise, part confession, part petition. The petition: **“Take us as far as your compassion wanders among the children of the human race.”** This is a bold and striking verse - isn’t it? **“Take us as far as your compassion wanders among the children of the human race.”**

I wonder if we are up to the challenge –
to follow where God’s compassion wanders –
to the broken places, the places of torment,
desertion, where crosses are to be found,
marking where love suffers to keep hope
alive, for the sake of our humanity.

Our Lenten theme this year:
“Following Where Compassion Wanders.”
I hope we find ourselves stretched a bit;
I hope that we obtain greater awareness
that God’s love is broad ... wide as the wind.

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Our scripture lesson is taken from Genesis,
near the beginning. The chapter and verse
speaks of a conversation taking place between
Noah and God. It is a one-sided conversation,
with God imparting to Noah a lesson to be learned.

The setting is after the great flood;
mighty waters once unleashed, have receded;
God once fed up, fit to be tied,
frustrated with a rogue creation,
is pondering what to make of it now.

Pause with me. Take note.
The story of Noah’s family, the ark,
the boarded animals,
the forty days and nights of
 rain, rain – go away –
it begins with God in grief,
God seeing the creation as corrupt.
Indeed, the corruption is identified as
a human appetite for “violence”
 that God never intended.

The violence incites God
to act violently (see Genesis 6:11-13).
Indeed, so indignant is the Divine,
that God determines to wipe the slate clean,
to start over.
All is hopeless, save for good Noah,
who serves as an **alternative possibility**
for life on earth (see Brueggemann, p. 79, *Genesis*).

The ark is built, the heavens rain,
and the world is washed away.
And the God who met
violence with violence
is left with a broken heart.
The indictment and the sentence,
imposed by God,
proved to be source of grief for God,
so much so that God vows, “**never again.**”
I’ll never, ever venture down that path again.

In the first seven verses of chapter 9
we have a stunning affirmation.
I’m not sure we fully reckon with this teaching,
which is a revision of the rules to govern life.
Be fruitful and multiply, fill the earth.
You can have it all –
just as I gave you green plants,
the diet is expanded. Save one item.
Blood. Be careful when considering blood.
Blood requires what the scripture
calls “a reckoning” (NRSV; see Genesis 9:5).

There is a divine identification with blood.
The “divine image,” earlier invoked in Genesis
(1:26), is here revisited, and it is associated
with heart, and blood, and circulation, and oxygen
and health and life.

It’s a broad identification –

like beach and meadow, wide as the wind.
The blood is life for flesh on earth;
when there is a shedding of blood,
there is a shedding of God.

This is what we see:
God has inserted God's self;
God has invested God's self;
God's image has residence
in the creation; in humanity.

This is not God up, over, outside and beyond
the creation. This is – call it mystery if you like –
God deeply tied, linked, within the world (Genesis 9:1-7).
**“God deems (God’s) self violated
in the violation of ... persons”** (Calvin).

In the reading, in speaking to Noah,
God dictates terms of a covenant.
“This is what I’m going to do for you
and all your descendants – (which means
us) – this is the deal – the covenant – I’m
never again going to solve the problem
of violence with violence.

I’ll never again curse the creation.
I’ll never forget my promise.
I’ll remember.
And as a sign of Divine Resolve
to remember,
a bow will be set in the clouds,
a rainbow, to assure you of
God’s resolve to renounce violence
as a solution to violence.
The “bow,” mind you, has no arrow.
The bow – once seen as lethal weapon –
is transformed into a symbol of disarmament,
like a sword morphing into plowshare (Isaiah 2:4);
spears into pruning hooks (Micah 4:3).

This is part of the story that is often missed. People devise grandiose schemes, they become obsessed with gopher wood and replication ark, they build theme parks to prove a misleading point about Bible fiction as fact, while missing what truth the Bible intends to teach about faith, that God vows to suffer violence to redeem life denied by violence.

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Once again we find ourselves pondering
 violence and death in school.
It is all so heart wrenching –
to consider the devastation brought upon families,
a city, state, our nation.

Broward County, Parkland, Florida, with a reputation for being **“the safest city in Florida”** (noted in an opinion piece by Jeffry Salkin, “Martini Judaism”).

In six minutes, a young man with an assault rifle brought sorrow and grief and funeral arrangements to 17 families, and fear to 14 others nursing wounds.

What we have witnessed is yet another instance of failure to protect our children, and those entrusted with the care of our children. The UCC Conference Minister in Florida, the Rev. John Vertigan, is no stranger to us, for he was formerly here in Indiana, and here in Plymouth Church on multiple occasions. Rev. Vertigan has been quoted:

“Our condolences go out to all involved, but our condolences are not enough.”

There exists a **“need of repentance at our lack of resolve to bring an end to the senseless gun violence that continues to scar the lives of so many ... people and their families who start each school day with a hug they hope will be returned later that very same day.”**

There are multiple issues at play in this wretched scenario that keeps getting repeated.

Dare we ask:

Have we become Sodom?

Have we become Gomorrah?

Have we surrendered our soul/society
to bloodshed and cruelty?

Do we not suffer the horrific consequences
that come when a people bow down to idols and lies?

Late in his life Wyatt Tee Walker spoke of a **“dilution of morality,”** that we have entered into **“The age of anything.”**

As a nation we lack the capacity to **respond in the moral arena”** (Wyatt Tee Walker).

Can you imagine - we are the only nation in the world to permit the killing of children out of reverence for gun rights.

Where once we drilled for fire and weather, it is now common to drill for “active shooter,” and routine in taking flight - hands held high so you can be seen not to be holding a weapon.

When did this become tolerable?

When did this ever become acceptable?

I understand there are multiple layers in this. There are massive gaps in our mental health system(s) that few people will pay to resolve.

Mental illness is a factor –
but please note what often confuses,
the insertion that “**evil**” is at play
when an individual perpetrates such acts.
Mental illness is simply that – a mental illness,
not a mental evil. What is evil is a system that
denies its complicity in the death
it fails to halt.

There is wide spread corruption of our political system –
So much money from unaccountable sources.
So much influence peddled and paid for by the NRA –
not the field and stream component,
but the militia minded who see and use the NRA as
a protective cover for their trigger fingered indulgences,
for the paramilitary proponents of NRA radicalism.

The NRA has made an idol of the 2nd amendment,
a tenant of sacred faith. And those who serve the idol
are not nameless and faceless.

What is so befuddling – many are local, pro-life,
Christian elected officials,
who will brazenly impose regulations
upon a developing fetus, only to have our
schools become killing fields.
This includes our former governor,
our junior senator,
our representative to the House of Representatives,
and the people we send to the Indiana Assembly.

These are among those who are quick to send
“**thoughts and prayers.**”
Yet school shootings have so multiplied,
the phrase itself has become a source of mockery.
Thoughts and prayers are not enough.
They speak of fake piety, cheap sympathy,
a false charm that does not console.

Neil DeGrasse Tyson tweeted this week:
Evidence collected over many years, obtained from many locations, indicates that the power of prayer is insufficient to stop bullets from killing school children.
Better than most preachers, DeGrasse Tyson is aware, there is a temptation to use prayer in a way that tempts God - which is dangerous and risky behavior.

There's talk already of tearing down the school that people can't imagine ever using again for the blood that was shed. They ought to seek payment from the NRA and the minions who serve in congress. Maybe there is leftover Russian money available for the rebuild.

There is one hopeful sign, and it comes not from the adults who should know better, but from youth who are fed up.

Some are saying it needs to stop now.
Some are saying it needs to stop here.
Parkland, Florida. Let that name be remembered as the place where people stood firm, and said: no more.

They don't want to be just another school on a list of infamy, a list too long to remember.

I hope the call for a student/teacher strike takes off on April 20th. I'd fling open the doors of the church in a minute as an alternative gathering spot for teach in, sing in, go and study the war on public school and public safety no more.

A temptation we face:
God will fix what is a problem of our own making.
This is an example of theology as magic,
faith in the wave of a wand to make the world go away.
It is a cross-less faith, wishful thinking
that fails to account for our faith - and the
hope and trust God places in us
and our capacity -
both to change and to be
agents of transformation.
I was asking myself this past week:
Have we suffered enough?
Is our love and prayer passionate enough
to be compassionate?

Richard Rohr, "Everything Belongs,"
**"We do not think ourselves into new ways of living.
We live ourselves into new ways of thinking."**

Follow me, Jesus speaks. Follow me, live with me.
You will discover new ways of thinking.
This is where we find ourselves this Lent.
In need of following where Jesus leads.
In need of living ourselves into
new ways of thinking.
In need of living in covenant
with the God whose love is deep and wide,
broad like beach and meadow,
wide as the wind.

May we be so wise. And if wise,
also grateful, for the Friend who
does not fail, who will not forsake.

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)*