

Plymouth Congregational Church of Fort Wayne, UCC  
March 4, 2018

“Housing Cleaning”

“Making a whip of cords, Jesus drove all of them  
out of the temple.”  
John 2:15

Prelude:

Our theme for the season of Lent this year is:  
“Following where compassion wanders.”

Inspiration for the theme came from  
the verse we are sing in the hymn written  
by Fred Kaan:

**“Your love, O God, is broad  
like beach and meadow,  
wide as the wind,  
and our eternal home”** (v. 1).

In verse three we sing what is a prayer request:  
**“... take us as far as your compassion wanders,  
among the children of the human race.”**  
This is a bold and daring prayer.

God’s compassion – how far does it wander?  
Kaan imposes no limits, stating simply –  
we are available; we are willing; indeed,  
we are wanting to follow the God whose  
love is broad, wide. Take us,  
as far as your compassion wanders,  
among the children of the human race.

This is open-ended, not a closed loop.  
It is not confined to **“our children,”** but  
**“the children of the human race.”**

It brings to mind the children's hymn,

*Jesus loves the little children  
All the children of the world  
Black and yellow, red and white,  
They're all precious in His sight  
Jesus loves the little children of the world.*

Fred Kaan died just a few years ago (2009); he was born in the Netherlands; and grew up under the Nazi occupation, where his family was involved in resisting the occupation. Guns and fugitives were hidden in the house as part of that resistance. Occupations always take a toll on the occupied, and the Kaan family suffered as did, as do, so many. Food shortages, said to have been an induced famine, brought death to 3 of 4 grandparents.

The “war” was the pivotal experience that prompted Kaan to become religious (and “**religion**,” I remind, is simply that to which we are “attached,” or re-attached if you will; in its etymology, religion is what we choose to attach ourselves to; show your devotions, and you reveal your true religion.

Kaan's journey took him to Great Britain, where he was ordained in the Congregational Church (1955), and for a time he served Pilgrim Church in Plymouth, England, where he published his first volume of hymns, titled *Pilgrim Praise* (1968) ... fifty years ago. Kaan was “**a prodigious hymn writer**,” with his verse being translated into 15 different languages; and he was well known, much respected, much more so loved, for his passion for peace and justice.

I hope we might find ourselves working with  
the prayer that comes by way of Fred Kaan:  
**“Take us as far as compassion wanders,  
among the children of the human race.”**

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Compassion, I sense, may be more professed than  
practiced in our world. Karen Armstrong has reminded  
us, all the great religious faiths in the world **insist** -  
note that word - **insist** - that compassion is the test of  
all true spirituality. All the great religions share in  
common some variation of the Golden Rule, what we,  
as Christians, find when Jesus speaks to us in  
Matthew’s gospel: “... **whatever you want others to  
do to you, do also to them.**” This, Jesus adds  
(via Matthew) **“is the Law of the Prophets.”**

What a grand and glorious statement;  
a summation of all earnest thought and prayer,  
so profound yet simple, a rule suitable for measuring  
our religious life, our “attachments” for the entirety of life  
(see *Twelve Steps to a Compassionate Life*, p. 3-4).

And yet, how often we fail compassion’s test,  
not doing - for others - what we would want done  
for ourselves. We prove reluctant, resistant,  
to being taken to where Compassion wanders.

Compassion is not a spectator sport;  
it is not a “feeling” for others,  
as in “pity the poor soul.”  
Armstrong is very clear about  
defining compassion as participation,  
as suffering, as endurance, as a stance,  
a standing, that we share WITH some other,  
some other person, place, or thing, which  
we love, with whom we are willing to endure  
all that life might impose upon us

(see K. Armstrong, *Twelve Steps*, p. 9).

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Earlier this week I received an email from Marian Wright Edelman, Executive Director of Children's Defense Fund, a long-time advocate for children. She referenced among other items, a 2006 United Nations Study on Violence against Children. I didn't even know there was such a study, but Ms. Edelman was quoting from it, and its assessment of "**how millions of children almost everywhere have been 'left behind' (denied) their recognition as rights holders, and (denied) their protection from violence.**" There is, the study noted, a history of violence against children, and it is, quote, a "**history of silence.**"

Wright referenced another report - from the US, a 2012 Report of the Attorney General's National Task Force on Children Exposed to Violence, which was of "**epidemic proportions.**"

Can you imagine, in our United States, 2 out of 3 children, our children, suffer negative effects from exposure to violence?

Such trauma, visited upon children, impacts a sense of security, health, happiness, and the ability to grow and learn. Violence is a "**national crisis.**" This wasn't about gun violence, like the recent school shooting in Parkland, Florida. It was about what unfolds in our families, in neighborhoods, schools, playing fields, in churches, shelters, wherever children may be found.

What is significant about these studies? The findings. Which speak: all violence against children is non-justifiable, preventable, and everybody has a part to play in being responsible to prevent and

eradicate what is a plague in our land.  
 All sectors of society have a part to play in  
 building a world that is whole and healthy,  
 where compassion is the rule, not the exception.

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In the fall of last year, the *Atlantic Monthly* published an article entitled, “How America Lost its Mind.” The author took a long look over the past half century, trying to account for what was termed: a “**promiscuous devotion to the untrue**” (*Atlantic Monthly*, Sept., 2017, p. 78). In assessing the world and what is unfolding before our eyes, facts no longer matter; what matters is what you feel to be true. The world is pretty much what you want it to be, the facts be damned. Wyatt Tee Walker called our time: “**the age of anything.**” Anything goes for want of a moral consensus about what is most near and dear and worthy to defend and protect.

When societies disintegrate, it is often due to the lack of a shared vision, a lack of consensus about what will serve the common good. Societies fray from a compassion deficit, from factions and camps that can’t see beyond their borders. This is an old problem plaguing our humanity. It shows in the book of Judges where the verdict is rendered: “**In those days there was no king in Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes**” (Judges 21:25).

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When Jesus took to house cleaning in the Jerusalem temple, I wonder if – at least in part – he wasn’t indignant at living in a time of “**promiscuous devotion to the untrue**” (see John 2:13-22).

I wonder if he wasn’t put off by the religious life, the institutional attachment to propping up a commercial enterprise, benefitting so few at the

expense of so many, the temple failing to cultivate a culture of compassion to serve a common good.

I wonder if he wasn't deeply offended by adults going about business as usual while children lurking in the shadows suffered the violence and cruelties that come by way of poverty.

I wonder if he simply had had enough of a system that put profits ahead of people, and leaders who put their position ahead of principle, corrupting the system that was intended to serve and save the people.

It is a rare picture we see of Jesus this morning, one we won't or can't always incorporate into our understanding of gospel.

In the words of one rather dated commentary, the house cleaning Jesus administered in the Jerusalem temple "... **was a wild scene, with cowering figures clutching desperately to their tables, as (tables) were flung here and there; (with some) running after spilled coins** clinking the temple pavement, being scattered about.

It is a scene of violence, and I don't think it can be described in any other way. It may not fit with the image of Jesus being meek and mild, but it is squarely fitted in the gospel narrative.

I do not want to justify this action- as if Jesus can do no wrong, so he lives in his own "anything goes" universe. And I don't want to suggest it is not as bad as it appears.

My Bible has a footnote that reads: Jesus' action was **“not an outburst of temper, but the energy of righteousness against religious leaders ...”**

If it look like an outburst of temper,  
if it sounds like an outburst of temper,

I'm thinking it is an outburst of temper.

This is the kind of protest that got Jesus killed,  
which is why we need to reckon it.

What I do want is to understand it.

All four gospels speak of this attack  
upon the temple. On that score they harmonize.  
But only on that. Otherwise, the timing  
of the event cannot be reconciled; nor  
is there consistency of interpretation.

In Mark's version, Jesus charges the authorities  
with corruption, with making the temple a hideout,  
a sanctuary for thugs and thieves; indeed, for  
making the temple an exclusive club, suited only  
for one nation under God, not “a house of prayer  
for all nations” (see Isaiah 56:7; Jeremiah 7:11).

In John's version, it is the commercial activity  
that caused Jesus to act with zeal. (see Psalm 69:9).

The temple had lost its capacity to be a compassionate  
institution; and Jesus, for his part, seems to have  
wanted it to rediscover its purpose, to reattach itself  
to the work God most desired. So this is what we  
see: Jesus, engaged in a house cleaning...  
we see his compassion to cleanse and restore  
at an institution that had lost its bearing,  
its *raison d'être*.

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Lesson No. One – Jesus didn't walk out and wash his hands; seeking comfort in some other system. He waded into the temple as an act of faith, hope, and love; he was compassionate, suffering what was wrong to help restore what was right.

This is where we are uniquely challenged today, in our nation that has lost its mind. It was said last fall (Steve Bannon), "Darkness is good." Quite a remarkable thing to say from one positioned in a president's inner circle. Darkness is good.

Which leads to lesson No. Two -  
a swamp can't drain a swamp.  
Darkness cannot drive out darkness (MLK),  
only light can do that.  
And hate cannot drive out hate;  
    only love can do that.  
And temple cannot save our lives,  
    When it is only serving itself;  
only when the temple is living and  
    breathing and imparting God's love,  
only when we insist upon compassion,  
    only when we suffer for the future  
        of our children,  
only then will we find life worth living.

May we be faithful enough, daring enough,  
trusting enough, to grasp the fullness of this gospel,  
that comes to us by way of Jesus.

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)*