

Plymouth Congregational Church of Fort Wayne, UCC
March 11, 2018

“Believe ... to be Believable”

“... those who do what is true come to the light,
so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds
have been done in God.”

John 3:21

Prelude:

During this Lenten season we are working with the theme: following where compassion wanders. We are seeking to cultivate and develop our capacity for compassion.

Meister Eckhart (1260-1328), one of the great medieval mystics, once said: **“You may call God love, you may call God goodness, but the best name for God is compassion.”**

Karen Armstrong, who has been such a cheerleader for compassion, indeed the brains and brawn behind the Charter for Compassion (2009), reminds us we have as natural a capacity for compassion as we do for cruelty (see *Twelve Steps to a Compassionate Life*, p. 22). If there be a cure for our perilously divided world, it lies in **restoring compassion** to the center of our morality and religion.

If you have read through the Charter of Compassion, you know that it presents quite a challenge:

“We urgently need to make compassion a clear, luminous and dynamic force in our polarized world.

Rooted in a principled determination to transcend selfishness, compassion can break down political, dogmatic, ideological and religious boundaries. Born of our deep interdependence, compassion is essential to human relationships and to a fulfilled humanity. It is the path to enlightenment, and indispensable to the creation of a just economy and a peaceful global community.”

I hope and wish we could all be on board such project.

So this Lent – this is our endeavor. To follow where compassion wanders. To elevate hope for humanity in keeping with God’s love. To practice our faith, such that we be “clearly seen” (this is important!) (John 3:21), that we be seen clearly to be children of God, friends of Jesus, which is always our hope and prayer.

On Wednesday evenings during this season of Lent, I’m part of a study group working with a book by the Franciscan priest, Richard Rohr, entitled, *The Naked Now - Leaning to See as the Mystics See*. Father Rohr works hard to impress upon his readers the need to acquire what he calls a “**third eye**.” Our vision, our capacity to see and understand is really quite limited, so we benefit, we are blessed, our world is enlarged when we can “**see**” with additional angle(s) that a third eye provides.

A third eye is really quite necessary for a religious people. It provides a corrective lens, breaking the bondage of what Rohr calls bi-nary thinking.

Bi-nary thinking can only see the world
in two ways – there is right or wrong,
you are either with it or without;
there is black or white; or red or blue,
conservative or liberal.

In looking at the world that's the way it is,
you are expected to take it or leave it;
in a religious framework,
you are either saved –
 and so destined for heaven,
or not saved, and so headed for hell.
In a group setting you either one of us, or not,
which means you are either friend or foe.
If a box has to be checked,
 there are two options: yes or no.

A third eye frees us from this
either/or way of seeing the world,
with all its deadly implications.

**“All or nothing thinking is
a cancer at the heart
of our preached message”** (p. 80, *The Naked Now*).

So we are in need for “**scales**” to fall
from our eyes (see Acts 9:18-19), that we
might see as we are seen,
that we might love as we are loved,
that others might clearly see us as a
community of compassion that brings
hope and healing into the world.

This is one reason why we come to church.
We come to participate – to bless and be blessed –
in a force field that is working for good,
bringing hope and healing into the world.

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A week or so ago I was invited to Canterbury School to be a participant in what was billed as a day devoted to “Courageous Conversations.” Two assembly periods were scheduled – one for Junior High and one for Senior High youth – which featured interfaith panels, various representatives speaking from their different faith perspectives. I was one of two Christians – along with representatives from the Baha’i, Jewish, Muslim, and Buddhist religious traditions.

Everyone was quite nice and cordial. I noticed, though, what was an example of bi-nary thinking from my Christian counterpart. In both assemblies, John 3:16 was quoted as a summary of faith.

“For God so loved the world that He gave his only Son, that whosoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life.”

This is grand summary, what Luther called the “**gospel in miniature.**” But did I hear correctly? Was it implied – if you do not believe Jesus as “only Son” – however such belief be construed – then one forfeits the reward that is set out – the everlasting life. Was it implied – if you do not get this verse right, you do not pass go, and you do not collect \$200?

The moment was a reminder of how important the third eye is, that we not come to this biblical material with mind that says, you either get it right or wrong. The third eye is focused upon generosity,

and wonder and grace and mercy. The third eye sees what is amazing and is transfixed by the gift and the Giver.

The third chapter in John is really quite complicated. It has two separate parts, the first of which has 21 verses. We often don't get to the end; it is easy to get sidetracked, To pick and stick with one verse.

This is the passage where Nicodemus comes under cover of night to speak with Jesus. Nicodemus, a Pharisee and leader of the people. **“Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God.”**

Nicodemus and Jesus have engaging conversation, with Jesus emphasizing you/we need be born again, born from above, born of the spirit, and Nicodemus missing the point and being puzzled. Nicodemus is a bi-nary thinker. Jesus has a third eye. Nicodemus needs to change the way he sees the world

And then we have the strange verse, about Moses, lifting up upon a pole a serpent in the wilderness, and our writer in John referencing this and drawing a parallel to Jesus, who also will be lifted up.

This mention of Moses harkens to an episode we find in the book of Numbers, 21:9. While wandering in the wilderness, fiery serpents afflicted the people, they were getting snake bit; and some were dying. And Moses was given instruction – by God – make a snake, affix to pole, let the people see, and let them be healed. So Moses did. And apparently, the problem was solved.

As the people looked and saw and were healed
in the ancient time, so those who look upon
Jesus lifted up in real time will be gifted with life.
Look and live we might say; but let us be careful.

Look and live upon the Jesus lifted up – on cross.
Look to the crucified, to the compassionate,
and there find what love will suffer
for life to rise and flourish in the world.

What is curious about this image of snake on pole,
it is not only mentioned in Numbers,
we encounter it again in II Kings during the reign
of King Hezekiah (II Kings 18:4).

The snake on a pole was handed down for centuries;
It survived Moses and Joshua, through the judges,
from wilderness to promised land;
from God portable in tent, to God posted in temple,
through Samuel and Saul, David and Solomon.
Down to the reign of Hezekiah, who saw the pole
had become a hindrance, a block, impeding worship.
The king “**broke in pieces the bronze serpent
that Moses had made.**” The pole even has a name
affixed to it: **Nehushtan.**

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This morning – consider – where is your eye fixed?
What is it you “see?” Do and dare you
see as God sees – with compassion,
and understanding, and mercy beyond
all compare?

R. Rohr reminds that most folks walk around
in a mass hypnotic trance.

**“We’re sleepwalkers.
All religious teachers have**

**recognized that we human beings
do not naturally see.
We have to be taught how to see.”**

This is one reason Jesus sounded the note,
echoed by Paul:

“Watch and pray ...”

Which is another way of saying
Stay wide awake to act as required.

It is underscored in the teaching of Jesus:

**“If your eye is healthy,
Your whole body is full of light”** (Luke 11:34).

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If your eye(s) be healthy,
what do we see?

I hope we see the wisdom of Jesus at work,
that we understand - we believe - not to be
saved, but to be believable.

In a roundabout way, this is where the concluding
verses of this morning’s lesson take us.

We see Jesus lifted up ... we believe ... and we
partake. We become reflections of this goodness
and mercy. We channel his light. We share in
his love. We **“do”** what is true, in the words
of this gospel, that it may be **“clearly seen”**
that what we do is done in God.

So - we believe ... to be believable.
We believe that the world might see in us
what we have come to see in Jesus.
The Jesus lifted up, who stayed
true to his calling up his death.

This is Jesus the brave, Jesus the beautiful,

Jesus of the greater love, who inspires
our quest to be as he was and is.

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If our eyes be healthy, what do we see?
Not salvation as an exit strategy, what
Brian McLaren has called an **“evacuation plan.”**
No, belief is not an insurance policy – a gamble –
for the everlasting life. If our eyes be healthy
we can look upon the world with generosity
and wonder, and feel no need to
judge others with deficits because they are
not like us. If our eyes be healthy, it is easy
to see what we share in common with others,
rather than what divides us.

We believe, not to be saved;
We believe to be believable.
Belief is not an end point.
It is a beginning – a faith, hope,
a prayer, that our
deeds may be **“clearly seen.”**

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Two final words.
Albert Schweitzer once said something to
the effect: **“Until we extend the circle of
compassion to all living things, we will not
find peace.”**

Isn't this the great goal and hope of our quest?
To attain the gift of God's peace, to be content
with life as provided by God. It comes, when
it comes, when we see beyond ourselves, when
we see Jesus, and we come to embrace God's love
that Jesus carried throughout his life, into his
death, and into his rising. It was never intended
just for me; from the beginning it was seen

as saving grace for us. For the world.

W. Rauschenbusch, *Prayers for a Social Awakening*,
“For This World,”

**“Grant us, we pray thee, a heart wide open to all
this joy and beauty, and save our souls from
being so steeped in care or so darkened by passion
that we pass heedless and unseeing when even
the thornbush by the wayside is aflame with
the glory of God”** (see W. Rauschenbusch,
Selected Writings, p. 223).

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)*