

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

“Worthy to be Honored”

“... whoever serves me, the Father will honor.”
John 12:26

Prelude:

This morning I want to reflect,
in general, upon the Amistad Peace and Justice Award;
and in particular upon the significance that
this year’s recipient, Karen Francisco, holds for us.

The name, Amistad, is a vital piece of our
cultural identity and heritage.
We have an Amistad Room in Plymouth Church,
which is no small source of pride for me,
dedicated after much effort and sweat equity,
when the Louise Folsom Memorial Library
was relocated in a repurposed room that
formally served as the church’s nursery (2004).

The room is one symbol of what
we carry forward
as an inheritance from our past.

We never arrive at an outlook on life
as if we exist in a vacuum; the past is always
present - and it serves us - if we let it.
I’m mindful - it was Isaac Newton (1675)
who once said: **“If I have seen further it is
by standing on the shoulders of giants.”**
He was echoing thought traceable to
the 12th century, voiced by Bernard of Chartres
(d. 1125?), who self referenced being a dwarf
on the shoulder of giants; who pointed out
that we see more and farther than our predecessors,
not because we have keener vision or a more

favorable perch, but because we have been lifted up and borne aloft on the gigantic stature of our ancestors.

We are people who work and pray for the transformation of the world into the kin-dom of God, in part, because our faith ancestors set forth such a course.

We are a people who labor for the promotion of justice and the reign of peace, because we are wired to do so; it is in our spiritual and moral DNA.

We are people engaged in the struggle for “**justice and peace**” today, because such resolve lies in the heart of how we understand the law and prophets from long ago, as filtered and made abundantly clear by the love of Jesus.

We are people who vow to resist oppression and evil, to show love and justice, because it is consistent and commensurate with the work and word of Jesus Christ, who once was and still is in need of friends who will follow his love as needed today.

We are people whose faith seeks to colonize earth with a taste of heaven, and if we use language here that speaks of “**luxuriant life ... with increasing knowledge, widening mentality, broadening sympathies, enchanting hopes, and unselfish Christian service ...**” it is because it was first sounded by forbearers of our faith.

(I'm not a fan of bronze plaques in the church, but I'm glad for one - affixed to the wall on my right - inscribed with words credited to Arthur Folsom - who once upon a time had a voice in this church - that was liberal, generous, broad, enchanting; as once it was, so I hope we all endeavor to keep it sounding.)

Our faith - at its best -
challenges us to live in the vision
of a future cast by the past.
As currently espoused -
we believe a better world is possible,
a just world for all,
a world good and flourishing, abounding with love
of neighbor and children and creation.
I hope our children absorb that thought,
that they come to live in it as faith and hope,
with gratitude.

THE AMISTAD

The Amistad is the story of a ship -
hauling human cargo, plying the waters
off of Cuba -
making way to an auction house -
that sailed its way into the heart of our church.
It harkens back to an age when there was
an economic system in this country whose
backbone was human trafficking.
When human beings were bought, sold,
chained, lashed, bred, held captive,
in bondage from cradle to grave
a race of people,
in order to advantage themselves;
the economic system was designed such that
some suffered subjugation; some were
denied the pursuit of happiness,

that others might profit,
 being conveniently free,
 with protected privilege,
to live at the expense of others.

This economic and social and cultural system
was enforced by violence, by law, by religion.
Our ancestors saw wrong in this,
 and they sought to right it.
They affirmed the right to resist;
They invested in advocacy efforts
 and litigation;
they stood with the Amistad captives
when they were incarcerated for having
rebelled against their captors;
and they didn't give up when facing off
 against their foes who rose to defend
 the system they wanted abolished.
This is part of the past we carry
 in our present.

We carry memory of a people
who didn't give up when facing off
against entrenched and powerful
systems prone to be cruel and callous
 and contrary to the will of God.

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This year, our Amistad award is going to a journalist,
which excites me no end. How appropriate – that we
honor one who has displayed excellence in an age
when journalists are routinely excoriated, vilified,
threatened, by those in positions of power.

And who knew that our giving of the award
would be timed to coincide with
 national **Sunshine Week** –
an initiative highlighting the work of those

supportive of “**open government,**” who understand good government requires elected and appointed officials who are honest and accountable, not to their own interests, but to the constituents they speak of serving.

Respect for journalism, its public service, its powerful and strategic role informing our lives, has long been recognized in our church. **Washington Gladden**, writing over a 100 years ago, offered a meditation on newspaper ethics. He spoke with concern of “**subterranean methods by means of which large portions of the press are subsidized for the misleading of the people...the press being used by money power to poison the springs of public opinion.**”

Sound familiar?

Washington spoke of journalism
as a sacred function.

He saw the health of the commonwealth requiring a well informed citizenry, and he understood as we understand that the people are to be trusted with the truth.

The journalist is “**pledged, by all that is precious in our national life, to tell the truth; to help the people see things as they are**”

(see W. Gladden, *Recollections*, p. 236-238).

When journalists/press fail in this effort, when the people are misled, (they) become “**the worst of our public enemies.**”

So, we need be most wise and discerning.

Washington was a journalist (4 years), and he gained a degree of fame for reporting on corruption in government. He was a “sunshine reporter.” Late in life, after, he wrote:

“continents subside and mountains explode and crumble, but no moment can ever come when truth will not be better than falsehood, and fidelity than treachery, and trust than suspicion. How much better? Infinitely better. No measurements can express the difference”
(*Recollections*, p. 417, the chapter entitled: “October Sunshine”).

In this dishonorable age, with powers eroding trust in public institutions, we need hold fast to such ideals – and not concede to those seeking to profit at the expense of common good.

In late January of this year, Pope Francis denounced the popular chant of “**fake news**” that regularly sounds, calling it evil; Francis urge journalists to make it their mission to search for and report the truth (JG, Jan. 25, 2018).

Some of you know that when I last served in Wales, I was given an assignment to compile a Calendar of Saints for use in the Gladstone Library. Saints can be a rather narrow class depending upon one’s faith stance – so I took to working on an Uncommon Calendar of Sages, Saints, and Friends of God. A lot of writers and poets and playwrights were included. But I made it a point to include a sampling of journalists.

Ida B. Wells – born a slave, rose to become a journalist, a writer, newspaper editor, who documented and reported on lynchings in the south; one of the founders of the NAACP. She didn’t give up; she was engaged in sunshine work, casting light into Jim Crow darkness. She never gave up.

Ida Tarbell – the mother of investigative journalism, she was writing in a way never before imagined; wrote the “History the Standard Oil Company” (1904), which contributed to the breakup of Rockefeller’s monopoly,

in an age when people actually cared about the concentration and accumulation of unimaginable wealth, in the hands of so few, when so many are impoverished. She never gave up.

Robert Hunter (d. 2005) journalist, writer, “How to Change the World” documentary on his life, 2015; environmentalist, co-founder of Greenpeace. He never gave up, he engaged and fought for a better world, sought to save the whale, not simply from being overharvested, but from being harvested in the first place.

Daniel Pearl – Wall Street Journal writer, kidnapped, executed by terrorists in Pakistan (2002)

Anna Politkovskaya – human rights activist, a journalist, reporter on Russian politics; intimidated in Russia for years, she survived a poisoning (2004), only later to be assassinated (2006).

Do you know?

There is a “Remembrance Day for Journalists Killed in the Line of Duty,” December 15.

Do you know, in Russia, it is estimated between 10-20 journalists die every year under “suspicious” Circumstances? Check out the website cpj.org (Committee to Protect Journalists) for more information.

I share this – for we need good journalists.
 We need hard working, fact checking, committed
 and courageous journalist in our lives.
 They are public servants,
 they are defenders of good government,
 sparing us the shenanigans of the corrupt.
 Messengers we know, are often blamed for
 bringing to light things people don’t want to address.
 Journalists need to deal with critics, trolls,
 those cowardly voices, often spiteful,

who have a rather perverse aptitude for abusing the truth, when facts do not square with heartfelt convictions they harbor.

So I'm happy we can honor Karen's work. I'm happy we have opportunity to publicly thank her this morning for her public service, especially her work that casts light upon what is happening to public education in the state of Indiana.

We all need be concerned about what has been unfolding with the funding of education in the state, and the impact of vouchers, an instrument to give parents educational choice for their children, has had upon our public school system. That tax dollars can be ciphoned away from public schools to private, parochial schools, without accounting of expenditure, should scandalize all people who care about the health and welfare of all our children.

Karen - you have gone above and beyond the call of duty to sound the alarm. Plymouth Church is pleased to honor your work.

There is a verse from the scripture lesson this morning I want to highlight to underscore this. Jesus is a little edgy in his speech, or so it seems. He speaks of things needing to die, that they might live. It is paradoxical language, cryptic, and challenging to understand. You have to give up some things to gain; In keeping things, you can actually lose them.

Indeed, there is a sense that his death is drawing near, and that from his death, an abundance of more will come upon the world. Take note, he is speaking to (some) Greeks, to Jews (Philip and Andrew); and to us, the readers/listeners/students of gospel material.

**Whoever serves me must follow me,
and where I am, there will be my servant also.
Whoever serves me, God will honor.**

We don't ever want to lose sight of this teaching, This appeal, this promise. To follow - is to be a servant. What service we render, God will honor.

It has been said the social justice tradition of Christian faith is about "discovering the compassionate life" (Richard Foster, chapter 5, *Streams of Living Water*). The social justice tradition that is our inheritance, is not about being politically correct; or socially popular; it is about being spiritually/religiously compassionate; it is about our following of Jesus, and the connections that are made, when we serve where Jesus love is needed, typically in places with people who are denied the love and understanding they need to attain a fullness of life desired by God.

When our lives intersect with others who may or may not be like us, gospel is revealed, God is exalted, goodness and mercy endure.

This is our charge, to follow and serve
with devotion and delight.

We can bank on the promise, if we feel that we need such reward, God will honor our efforts.

May we be so wise, and discerning, and godly,
that we are better off for it; may we find ourselves
eager to follow, that we may be actively
engaged and involved with the mending
work that is so urgently needed.

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)*