

Plymouth Congregational Church of Fort Wayne, UCC
May 13, 2018

“In Pursuit of Greater Love and Loyalty”

“As you have sent me into the world,
so I have sent them into the world.”
John 17:18

Prelude:

Last Sunday we had a marathon worship service. It left me wondering if people would dare return this week - for fear that yet again patience might be tested.

In the letter of James, we read: **“We count them happy which endure”** (James 5:11), with reference being made to the patience of Job. I’ve spent considerable time with Job over the years, and have yet to see in Job what James proclaims with such confidence. But I appreciate patience. It is gift of the Holy Spirit, a manifestation of God with us. Paul includes a grocery list, naming nine (9) fruits of the Spirit, in writing to the Galatians (see Galatians 5:22). Patience ranks high; No. 4 on the list, following love, joy, peace. There then follows patience, right before kindness and generosity.

When James speaks of patience, he uses a Greek term, *“makrothumia,”* which literally means to be **“long tempered.”** Or, as some translate, **“long suffering.”** And I am happy when church folks are filled with such spirit.

This week Rev. Ruth suggested we strive to worship within an hour - and I thought to myself - I’ll try to do my part. I’ll try to practice preaching efficiency.

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Our lesson this morning comes from a portion of John's gospel called Jesus' high priestly prayer. We heard a portion of the prayer, which takes up the whole of the 17th chapter of the 4th Gospel.

The chapter begins with Jesus praying for himself; our reading then follows - Jesus turns intercessor, praying on behalf of those who follow. He prays for **protection**; for **joy**; for **unity**.

Protection - for the world is perilous
and full of deathly deceptions.

Joy - the serious work of the Holy Spirit (C.S. Lewis),
The No. 2 fruit following love, rescuing us from
being dismal and formal, forlorn or sad.

Unity - that we might be one;
that as God and Jesus were as one,
working together in concert,
so also may we live, work, serve with
such symmetry.

This has long served as hope and inspiration
for the UCC. We have it scripted, branded
on our denominational logo -
"that they may all be one" (see John 17:21).

As we heard, Jesus acknowledges,
he is taking leave of the world;
but there are those who will remain in the world.
And so he prays for those who remain - which is us.
**"Sanctify them in the truth;
your word is truth.
As you have sent me into the world,
so I have sent them into world."**

There is a lot going on in this prayer,
wouldn't you say?
This is common in John's gospel –
the weaving of themes together,
tying them together into a larger whole.

For our purposes this morning, I'd simply like to
circle and briefly comment upon a couple of
these themes, then close with a plea that we
maintain the oneness for which Jesus prays,
which incorporates the diversity we collectively
represent.

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A challenge of the prayer offered by Jesus in John
is the appeal Jesus makes that we be one.

That we be one with God.
That we be as one with God as
Jesus was one with God.
That we be one with many,
As Jesus was one with many.
This emphasis upon being one
is clearly stated, even if it is not clearly
understood, and for the record, I'm working
hard in my life to comprehend and incorporate
the teaching – with is implied mystical connections.

The prayer and its appeal remains clear:
that we be one, as Jesus and God were one.

Many of you know I live in the downtown zip code,
in the neighborhood really, that surrounds Plymouth
Church. One of the benefits is being able to walk
to and fro. A common stroll will take me to the MLK Bridge,
where one can ponder quotes that grace the bridge.
One of the my favorites is from a lecture series Dr. King

offered in Canada (Massey Lectures), later published in a book entitled, *The Trumpet of Conscience*. It reads:

**“Our loyalties must transcend our race,
our tribe, our class, and our nation; and this
means we must develop a world perspective.”**

Loyalty that fails to reach the heights of God’s love
is tragic misrepresentation of faith, a mischaracterization
of the truth Jesus prays we be sanctified to impart to the
world.

If our loyalties are fixed to less than the world,
then we pose a threat to the world.

From the beginning of the UCC,
there was, and today there remains, a call,
a summons to grasp by faith
“a world perspective.”

From the beginning the call has sounded,
“work and pray” – as one.

Work and pray as one
for deeper awareness of the problems,
the legitimate interests, and fears,
of people other than ourselves.

Work and pray – as one
for peace, justice, and the welfare of all
nations and peoples; work and pray – as one
to overcome and transcend the divides
(the lesser loyalties of race, tribe, class, nation).

The Jesus prayer is designed to empower,
protect, and mobilize us to be in the world,
as one - with a world perspective; we are “sanctified”
for this work - which means set apart – for this purpose.

I recall from the late 1980’s, a University of Chicago
academic, Allen Bloom, published book entitled:

The Closing of the American Mind.

It was a rant against a dominant culture that Bloom took delight in blistering – a moral relativism, that worked to undermine, to sabotage critical thinking and genuine knowledge; as a result, and this was Bloom’s contention I think – students’ souls were “**impoverished.**” Indeed, the whole democratic enterprise of which we are a part was under threat, for a loyalty to ideology, rather than inquiry.

I can’t help but wonder – is there a connection between the closing of the American mind,
and the closing of America’s borders?
And has a “**closing**” virus so infected the church,
that the love and loyalty and “truth”
entrusted to it has become narrowly,
perilously defined in a way never intended by Jesus?

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We are such a divided land,
filled with mistrust,
factions aligned by race, tribe, class, flag;
we are a land in which rulers
who don’t know better
demand loyalty, and they enforce it with fear
rather than earn it with word that is
honorable and trustworthy;
we are a land with leaders propped up
by people who should know better
but who bow down, in obsequious homage,
to further their own interests at the
expense of others.

There is unity in this, but it is unity of
like-minded, not a love-minded people.

Jesus prays that we be more than like minded;
indeed that we be love minded, along with

being peaceable, patient, and kind. In the ranks of the love minded, our loyalties will transcend the lesser loves that keep the world enthralled with division and fear.

I've been thinking a lot about family lately. I guess that happens with Mother's Day. How strong, yet how fragile our families. And really, how the world can tear families apart. I learned this week, that Anna Jarvis was so upset with what had become of her vision - a Mother's Day to honor mothers, had become so commercially corrupted, that she was driven to civil disobedience. Arrested for disturbing the peace at a convention for confectioners in Philadelphia. Can you imagine? There was much love in Anna Jarvis, but her patience was stretched beyond her limits over those who diminished her dreams with the sale of chocolate bars.

The church is good, the church is real,
The church is redemptive, only when it maintains a world perspective. Lesser loyalties will not save, and they will not heal as God intends; lesser loyalties do not deliver the unity Jesus desires and the oneness for which he prays.

I've often said, we don't place our faith in the church, for the church is often cracked, imperfect, and bound to disappoint us. But church does serve as a family of faith, and full of family idiosyncrasies; and capable of discharging the fruits of the spirit, not the least of which are faith, joy, peace, and patience. And today I find myself grateful - for Mother Church, and Mother Earth, and all the mothering I have seen and experienced giving birth to love and loyalty worthy of the world.

I'm grateful for the church that challenges me to be one.
One with the world and all its complexity.

I learned that, in part, here at Plymouth Church. I found
it here, in part, when I arrived. It was voiced in what was called
the Plymouth Outreach Statement, where it was proclaimed:

**In our diversity we find strength,
and a way to understand
the inclusiveness of God**
(Outreach Statement, Feb., 1998).

That was enough to get me into the door here.
It is truth that continues to inspire and sustain.

May we be wise to defend and protect and promote it,
for the world God so loves.

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)*