

Plymouth Congregational Church of Fort Wayne, UCC  
June 17, 2018

“Seeds of Dissent – Honestly Sown”

“With what can we compare the kingdom of God,  
Or what parable will we use for it?  
It is like a mustard seed ...”  
Mark 4:30

Prelude:

Yesterday, in conversation with Rev. Ruth,  
I posed a question – “Is it asking too much  
for some respite, for a tweet-free week that  
doesn’t unsettle the spirit or trouble the mind?”

How important – life saving – Sabbath is for us.  
Sabbath is a welcome time for rest.  
The blessings of Sabbath:  
to turn off, tune out, to call a halt to  
the maniacal assaults of media  
that bombard our lives round the clock.  
Sabbath is not an escape clause from our  
task to be responsible human beings.  
It is a provision of grace, an opportunity,  
for us to focus upon the God whose  
goodness and mercy  
keep us safe and sane and balanced,  
with faith and hope and trust.

I’ve long appreciated the insights that come  
by way of the Anglican mystic, Evelyn Underhill  
(“**God is the interesting thing about religion,**” she  
once wrote to a Bishop). Underhill once wrote:

**Faith is not a refuge from reality.  
It is a demand that we face reality ...  
The true subject matter of religion is not  
our own little souls, but the Eternal God**

**and His whole mysterious purpose,  
and our solemn responsibility to Him.**

If asked - why church is in your life, try that response:  
church is where I pray to understand my solemn  
responsibilities to God. All else is gravy.

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A good portion of the 4th chapter  
of Mark's gospel  
depicts Jesus engaged in teaching.  
The classroom is open air,  
on the seashore in Galilee.

Picture the seating chart.  
We are told that a very large crowd  
is in attendance,  
so large that certain adjustments were  
needed to facilitate a good exchange  
between the Teacher and the taught.

Somebody hailed an UBER boat  
to be brought up along the shoreline;  
Jesus got in, sat down, and offered instruction (Mark 4:1).  
Mark tells us Jesus taught many things in parables.  
The parables, at least in this section of material,  
are rather simple illustrations used to convey  
profound insights concerning  
the guiding principles  
Jesus was charged to impart.

The parables served to elucidate  
the kingdom of God,  
the foundation and basis  
for the whole of Jesus' ministry.

In Mark's gospel, the first words  
spoken by Jesus are these:

**“The time is fulfilled,  
and the Kingdom of God has come near;  
repent, and believe in the good news.”**

This concept, this government of God,  
is threaded throughout Mark’s gospel.  
We have lots of angles given to us,  
that we might understand and appreciate  
the living arrangements Jesus advocated.

Indeed, it is centered in the prayer we pray:

**“Thy kingdom come, thy will be done,  
on earth as it is in heaven.”**

It is in the prayer to ensure that we stay  
well grounded in this world, not be seduced  
into postponing life needed now  
for some life projected into a hereafter.

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The kin-dom is near, Jesus said.  
At hand. It is in our midst (Luke 17:21).  
You want to know what it is like?

It is like someone scattering seed;  
They sow, and then - after some time -  
the seeds break out of the ground  
in which they were buried; they sprout  
and blossom. It is all quite amazing,  
for while we can see results, our eye  
can’t see it actually happening in real  
time. It is really quite a mystery.

There it is, we can say,  
but we can’t help but question:  
when did it happen?

The kin-dom is near, Jesus said.  
At hand. It is in our midst.  
What is it like?

Like a mustard seed.  
 Starts so small. Quite unassuming,  
 seemingly insignificant,  
 apparently of no consequence.  
 And yet, greatness lies within that  
     mustard seed; within that  
 seed resides a towering shrub,  
 something far more than  
 the eye can see or the mind can imagine.

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The kin-dom, God's government of our lives,  
 is near. So Jesus said. It is "at hand."  
 In our midst.

It was, Walter Rauschenbusch observed  
*(A Theology of the Social Gospel)*,  
 in the beginning. Jesus talked about it all the  
 time, "**the partial and earthly realization of  
 the divine society.**" The kin-dom, God's government,  
 was the ideal lodged within the real, which was the church.  
 Yet, as church language grew and expanded,  
 the ideal receded; it lost its place.  
 Rauschenbusch noted it begs to be restored.  
 Our "solemn responsibilities" (Underhill)  
 need be re-centered, reclaimed.

Albert Schweitzer, a hundred or so years ago,  
 was working along the same lines: "**To be a  
 Christian means to be possessed and dominated  
 by a hope for the Kingdom of God.**"

Georgia Harkness reminds us (*Understanding  
 the Kingdom of God*, p. 40): though sin and  
 evil exist in human society, "**at no point does  
 God surrender sovereignty ... Despite the  
 world's misery ... God's providential care is**

**over all, and God's design impels us to service in love."** Such service, to again quote Harkness, involves acceptance of God's rule, assuming "solemn responsibility" for advancing the increase of love and justice upon earth.

All this is but a simple echo of what Paul wrote to the Romans: **"Do not let good be spoken of as evil. The kingdom of God is not food and drink, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit ... let us then pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding"** (Romans 14:17, 19).

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The kin-dom, God's government of our lives.  
Is it near? At hand? In our midst?  
Given the times into which we have fallen,  
this would seem to be a hard faith to maintain.  
Where can we see it? Where can it be found?

Our city experienced a rare event this past week. In a rather hastily arranged visit - so it seemed - the Attorney General of the United States, Jeff Sessions, came to Fort Wayne, and offered explanation for policies (Zero Tolerance) being enforced on our nation's border with Mexico, in dealing with people, with families, that have come seeking asylum.

As you know, adults are being detained, they face prosecution, and if accompanied by children, the children are being separated from their caretakers. Parents are going to jail, the children are going into some other system.

The separation has given rise to additional concerns, of whether the children are properly cared for, and for what length of time.

The detention and separation is being justified, in part, as a deterrent strategy. The children, as some note, are being **“weaponized,”** leveraged, to dissuade migrants from seeking refuge in our country.

Mr. Sessions, in explaining the policy, reinforced it with an appeal to scripture. In fact, he quoted from Paul’s writing in the letter to the church of Rome.

**“Dear and wise counsel,”** according to the Attorney General.

**“Obey the laws of the government because God has ordained them for the purpose of order.”**

I profess no expertise on immigration law, and I have no wisdom as to how best we administer the challenges that exist on our border. But I do have a certain vocational interest in scripture and its use, and a pastoral interest that we maintain integrity as a people of faith and not forsake our solemn responsibilities in as citizens in the commonwealth of God.

The Attorney General should not lecture the church, misquoting scripture, with blanket appeals to **“follow what we order.”**

In Plymouth Church, we are not sheep who follow only to stain the soul and wound the conscience we have by God’s grace.

Self-serving interpretations of the scripture in question (Romans 13:1) are dangerous.

They have justified the waging of countless wars, the abuse and subjugation of women, the enslavement of Africans to profit Europeans, the genocide of native Americans and Jews, the denial of dignity and decency to dignified and decent people who,

by design of God,  
are LGBTQ.

The Attorney General was, I sense, sincere in wanting to uphold and enforce the law. That I have no doubt. The Attorney General presumed God was on a side - and that the church needed be on a side of government. This is where things get dicey. I personally have too much Martin Luther King in my head and heart to stomach what the Attorney General dished out.

As Christians we have the utmost respect for the law. But we are not exempt from God's law, and we pray to be wise to know the difference between a just and unjust law. Or, in this instance, a just or unjust policy. King dealt at length on this, noting just laws, but unjust applications; laws made by majority people for minority people, without a mutual binding obligation. That's not just. It is just only when equality prevails. To build beloved and just community, you may recall, King advised: "one has a moral responsibility to disobey an unjust law."

For spiritual health and welfare - I advise the Attorney General to get back into Sunday School. Lecture the church when you know the difference between Roman 13 and Revelation, where the emperor is the Beast, and the Beast is anti-Christ.

I am not alone in expressing concern - some Plymouth people, I know, were present, showing disfavor, expressing dissent. And others as well. What is curious - I do not recall any instance in which an array of Roman Catholic, Mainline Protestant, Evangelical, and Fundamentalists have ever spoken with such unity - that the "zero tolerance" policy being enforced on our borders is misleading and disgraceful (Disgraceful is the term used by the Rev. Franklin Graham).

One of the major hurdles - this toxic conversation on immigration - is the judgment being rendered on those seeking new life and opportunity. That parents are irresponsible, placing their children at risk. That the parents

are to blame for receiving the rude welcome  
they are getting. Blaming victims is a moral wrong.

So a poem. From one who knows.

Warsan Shire, HOME

no one leaves home unless  
home is the mouth of a shark  
you only run for the border  
when you see the whole city running as well

your neighbors running faster than you  
breath bloody in their throats  
the boy you went to school with  
who kissed you dizzy behind the old tin factory  
is holding a gun bigger than his body  
you only leave home  
when home won't let you stay.

no one leaves home unless home chases you  
fire under feet  
hot blood in your belly  
it's not something you ever thought of doing  
until the blade burnt threats into  
your neck  
and even then you carried the anthem under  
your breath  
only tearing up your passport in an airport toilet  
sobbing as each mouthful of paper  
made it clear that you wouldn't be going back.

you have to understand,  
that no one puts their children in a boat  
unless the water is safer than the land  
no one burns their palms  
under trains  
beneath carriages  
no one spends days and nights in the stomach of a truck  
feeding on newspaper unless the miles travelled  
means something more than journey.  
no one crawls under fences  
no one wants to be beaten  
pitied

no one chooses refugee camps  
or strip searches where your  
body is left aching  
or prison,  
because prison is safer  
than a city of fire  
and one prison guard  
in the night  
is better than a truckload  
of men who look like your father  
no one could take it  
no one could stomach it  
no one skin would be tough enough

the  
go home blacks  
refugees  
dirty immigrants  
asylum seekers  
sucking our country dry  
niggers with their hands out  
they smell strange  
savage  
messed up their country and now they want  
to mess ours up  
how do the words  
the dirty looks  
roll off your backs  
maybe because the blow is softer  
than a limb torn off

or the words are more tender  
than fourteen men between  
your legs  
or the insults are easier  
to swallow  
than rubble  
than bone  
than your child body  
in pieces.  
i want to go home,  
but home is the mouth of a shark  
home is the barrel of the gun  
and no one would leave home  
unless home chased you to the shore

unless home told you  
 to quicken your legs  
 leave your clothes behind  
 crawl through the desert  
 wade through the oceans  
 drown  
 save  
 be hunger  
 beg  
 forget pride  
 your survival is more important

no one leaves home until home is a sweaty voice in your ear  
 saying-  
 leave,  
 run away from me now  
 i don't know what i've become  
 but i know that anywhere  
 is safer than here

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The kin-dom is near, Jesus said.  
 At hand. It is in our midst (Luke 17:21).  
 At times, it is hard to believe.  
 It starts small, seed small,  
 buried in the ground, out of sight,  
 but never out of hope.  
 Our solemn Responsibility:  
 Pray such hope to life,  
 For come it will, as the will of God,  
 As blessing, as good, as healing.  
 As righteousness, as peace, as joy.  
 Our solemn responsibility:  
 Advance whenever possible,  
 resist whenever necessary, show mercy,  
 practice compassion, protest any law and policy  
 that makes a mockery of family values.

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“The Kingdom,” by RS Thomas:

**It’s a long way off but inside it  
There are quite different things going on:  
Festivals at which the poor man  
Is king and the consumptive is  
Healed; mirrors in which the blind look  
At themselves and love looks at them  
Back; and industry is for mending  
The bent bones and the minds fractured  
By life. It’s a long way off, but to get  
There takes no time and admission  
Is free, if you purge yourself  
Of desire, and present yourself with  
Your need only and the simple offering  
Of your faith, green as a leaf**

A prayer:

If seed we be, let us down,  
deep in faith, green as leaf;  
if we are to be sown, let us be sown  
in dissent of the world the way it is;  
with honesty of thought, purity of heart,  
and in the solemn responsibility of worship,  
may we rise and flourish, rejoicing  
in the love that lands us all safe in the  
everlasting life.

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)*