

Plymouth Congregational Church of Fort Wayne, UCC
August 20, 2017

“Resist, Agitate, Inform, Comfort”

“... (the sons of Israel) hold Jacob,
‘Joseph is still alive! He is even ruler over all the land of Egypt.’
Jacob was stunned; he could not believe them.”
Genesis 45:26

PRELUDE

The theme this morning:
As thoughtful, prayerful, progressive Christians
in this abnormal age, riddled with fakery,
our faith compels us to
“resist, agitate, inform, and comfort”
in order to fully live out lives
as intended by God.

This is a mouthful, so let me repeat.
The morning theme:
as thoughtful, prayerful, progressive Christians
our faith compels us to be involved,
to **“resist, agitate, inform, and comfort.”**
in order to be reconciled (II Corinthians 5:18),
in order to fully live life
as intended by God.

This is language that came by way of
a pastoral letter
issued this week by the Officers and
the Council of Conference Ministers of the UCC,
in response to the clashes that occurred
last weekend in Charlottesville, Virginia.
As a local congregation, we were urged to
read the pastoral letter in our morning worship
(which I’ve opted not to do). It is not a long letter
as pastoral letters go; I encourage you to find it
and read it as a “current events” assignment
(www.ucc.org/news).

To briefly summarize:

the letter strongly condemned the “alt-right” gathering of white supremacists, Neo-Nazi’s, and Klu Klux Klan members who selected Charlottesville as a staging ground for beliefs. The “unite the right” gathering was a vivid public demonstration of racial toxicity, a raw projection of white power and privilege that **“continues to pervade our nation’s spiritual ethos.”**

The letter reminded, last week was not an isolated incident, a bad weekend of negative news for Virginia; it was the rupture of a wound, an ideological virus that courses in in our minds and in our institutions. Racism, as *Sojourner’s Magazine* widely proclaimed 30 years ago (November 1987), is America’s original sin. We have not confessed its fullness, we have not amended its disorder, we have not been absolved, and we are not healed. We seek to remedy – we defy the sin – by following Jesus – by resisting what is vile and repugnant in racist thought grounded in white supremacy.

White supremacy can be simply defined by comparing T-shirts seen to be worn this past week. One t-shirt reads:

“Black lives matter.”

Another t-shirt reads:

“White Lives Matter More.”

The first t-shirt is telling a truth. The second t-shirt is telling a lie, propped by adherence to a scale of valuation:

**“black is bad, brown is better,
white is right.”** Such an

assessment of our tints and hues
is racial idolatry that we, as Christians,
are quick to renounce. It is an egregious
race-based social construct that church
culture needs subvert. And we do so when
we sing, and believe, and affirm, and teach
**“Jesus loves the little children, all the
children of the world,
black and yellow,
red and white,
they are all precious in his sight,
Jesus loves the little children
of the world.”**

Permit the reading of one paragraph
from the pastoral letter:

**“Our local UCC churches must be true solidarity
partners with those who march in the streets.
Our UCC churches are encouraged to move from
the sanctuary and walk alongside other clergy and
community leaders who seek to resist, agitate, inform,
and comfort. We must resist hatred and violence.
We must also agitate ourselves, and our neighbors, to
acknowledge any racism within or among us.
We must inform ourselves, and our neighbors, what our
sacred stories reveal to us of a just world for all.
We must lament and grieve with those who are injured
or murdered during violent demonstrations with those who
mean us harm. And we must comfort those who have been
discriminated against with the transformative love of God.”**

I hope you know, leaders of the UCC, in particular the Rev.
Traci Blackmon and others from our Justice and Witness
ministries, were in the forefront of offering the counter
demonstration in Charlottesville. It was the Rev. Blackmon
who preached on Friday evening in an interfaith

worship service, who when permitted to depart, were told to leave by the backdoor, through an alleyway, for their personal safety. It was Rev. Blackmon and Justice and Witness Ministries who live-streamed the clash that took place on Saturday. When reference is misleadingly made to the “alt-left,” that is in part labeling our church - and other faith-based traditions protesting white supremacy, as being morally equivalent to Neo-Nazism, the KKK, and white nationalists.

This is how daft and delusional and bizarre things are in our country. In the year 2017, in the USA, we had people from across the country gather to “**unite the right,**” wanting to protect Confederate statuary, marching with torches, baseball bats, and Third Reich memorabilia. Their means and their message was said to be morally comparable to those who refuse to remain silent in the face of such tyranny.

The Rev. Traci Blackmon has said,
“**Our nation is in a moral and political crisis.**”
“**We must react and respond.**”

In our UCC we are invited to
“**resist, agitate, inform, and comfort.**”
These are the things that provided outline message time this morning.

They help us understand:
God is an equal opportunity employer;
we can all be participants in witness to our faith,
we can all be aligned with God’s desire
 that this world,
God’s world,
 be a just world for all.

WE MUST RESIST HATRED AND VIOLENCE

It takes incredible strength.
Passivity is complicity. We must resist.
It is not enough to live and let live,
to keep to our own camps.
The life God intends is based upon
interaction, not separation.
It is based upon mutual respect
and good will, not suspicion,
anger, fear, which fuel hate.
We conform, not to dress code or creed
in order to pass some test of acceptance,
rather we conform to a spirit, generous,
good, just, and affirming.

Maya Angelo:
“Hate always destroys the host.”

**“I have decided to stick with love.
Hate – is too great a burden to bear”**
(Martin Luther King, Jr., 1967).

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WE MUST AGITATE OURSELVES, AND OUR NEIGHBORS, TO ACKNOWLEDGE ANY RACISM WITHIN US OR AMONG US

The legacy is so great.
It is burden we cannot avoid,
labor we cannot excuse.

It was in 2008 when another Pastoral letter
on race was release in our UCC – calling for
Sacred Conversations; and as delegate to the
next General Synod (Grand Rapids, 2009),
such conversations were had. Yet so often

there is a resistance, a reluctance let me say,
along with a lack of urgency to see the
conversations through. So - agitation is
necessary. Not as an end - but as a means to change.

It was said at the time (2008)

**“Our conversations will be sacred if we trust
in the Spirit of the living God to do a new thing
in our midst.”**

As Christians, we believe new ages are possible.
We believe Jesus inaugurated a new age;
we believe new life is possible,
not as an effort to rewrite our history, but
as grace to live in more than our history,
to create new scripts that exceed our past.
We all have a past - some good, bad, ugly.
But we are not defined by our past -
we are defined by our hope for
what good God has in store.

**WE MUST INFORM OURSELVES, AND OUR NEIGHBORS,
WHAT OUR SACRED STORIES REVEAL TO US OF A JUST
WORLD FOR ALL**

It is in our sacred story (biblical),
it is in our church's history,
it is in God's claim upon our lives today,
that we champion a just world for all.
In the core of our faith is conviction that
God is working with our doubts and
concerns and disappointments,
for our good and the good of the world,
that we overcome what shame and grief
and anger we bear.

Shame, grief, anger.

Do we bring such things
into this sanctuary?

Shame -
grief -
anger.

Such things we are not spared.
But God is working that we overcome
that emotional bondage that denies
us the peace, wholeness.

Jacob, when informed that Joseph was yet still alive,
was stunned (NSRV). The King James translates:
“Jacob’s heart fainted.”

Walter Brueggemann paraphrased this as:
Jacob’s life threatened - by a heart attack!
(see Brueggemann, *Genesis*, p. 350).

Stunning turn of events -
a family becomes reconciled ... **canceled:**
grief (the father) ...
shame/guilt (brothers) ...
revenge (no need!);

God made a way for good to come of evil ...

**“the power to create newness does not
come from detachment, but from risky,
self-disclosing engagement”**
(W. Brueggemann, p. 345).

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WE MUST COMFORT THOSE WHO
HAVE BEEN DISCRIMINATED AGAINST WITH
THE TRANSFORMATIONAL LOVE OF GOD

We are called to comfort.
We are called to comfort
in the name of the God who speaks:

“Comfort, comfort my people,”
(Isaiah 40:1), speak tenderly,
for the spell is over, the suffering
comes to an end,
the dawn of a new day is upon us.

We are called to comfort with gospel,
good news:
God is working - through us -
to right the world of its bigotry and bias,
to restore the world and all that
have been maligned as less than
that of a child of God,
that all may fully live out their days
as God has created them to be.

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CONCLUSION:

A closing word,
one of encouragement.
We can be aligned, rightly so, with God’s love and will
for our lives so as to be at peace in the world.
The pieces of our jig-sawed lives can be put together
in such a way as to be stunningly
beautiful and wonderful to behold.

We live on one planet,
with one moon,
circling one sun,
in one galaxy (the Milky Way)
of an incredibly vast, seemingly
expanding universe, a universe
filled with billions and billions
of galaxies.

If God has called the **“billions and billions”**
into being, if God be great and incredibly
creative, then not one are quite the same.

And there are moments when we can see
the stars (sun, moon, planet) aligned –
all in place – as designed. What a wonder.
O, how glorious and full of splendor!

The world is too large to have a small heart.
God has called us into the church,
a people of many ages, tongues, and races,
a rainbow people.
There is enough here.
In the heart of God – in the love of Jesus –
there is enough, enough to build
a just world for all.

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)*