

Plymouth Congregational Church of Fort Wayne, UCC
August 27, 2017

“Entrusted with the Keys”

“... And I tell you, you are Peter,
and on this rock I will build my church ...
I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven.”
Matthew 16:18-19

PRELUDE

This morning I have three simple
thoughts to share.

- (1)
I assert Jesus was not a fundamentalist;
- (2)
I further assert that in the hands of
fundamentalist construct,
the Christian gospel gets twisted, distorted,
so as to eclipse the light God has given
(and continues to give through the Holy Spirit)
to serve as light of the world.
- (3)
And a third, final assertion -
the great gift of Jesus is great love;
a great, all encompassing love
that Jesus entrusts to our care.

Maybe not so simple after all.

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Peter Berger (1929-2017) died a few weeks ago.
I do not suppose many noticed, but for close
to half a century, Berger was a productive theologian
and a sociologist, fascinated by the role religion
plays in our lives.

Berger was an Austrian immigrant to this country, a Lutheran by church background, whose teaching was largely centered at Boston University, where he founded and directed the Institute of Culture, Religion, and World Affairs for close to a quarter century (1985-2009).

Berger was a prolific writer, author of “a **shelf-full of books**” (*New York Times* obit, 06-29-17). He first rose to prominence in the late ‘60s. It was in the year 1966 that *Time Magazine* published an issue with a front cover questioning, “**Is God Dead?**” There was some sentiment at the time that religion had lost much of its force as a regulator of life, as a governor of human behavior. Berger responded with a book called the *The Rumor of Angels*, in which he largely defended church tradition and teaching. Berger got some ecumenical traction out of that work; he had something to say in reaction to the critique that faith wasn’t much of a factor in halting or constraining abhorrent human behavior.

Still, he conceded, for many the Deity we often project as children was not a meaningful reality; indeed, such a God seemed largely absent, remote from everyday life in modern society, and that large numbers of people managed to soldier on quite well in the absence.

Berger is of interest to me for a couple of reasons.

He was able to acknowledge some of his mistakes. Berger at one time foresaw a diminished role of religion in modern life; and on this count he was clearly off base,

later reassessing that we live in a world that is “**furiously religious.**” He also assessed that faith manifestations were rampant, whether in the lives of the intensely secular, or the avowed spiritual. The atheist, the agnostic, the adherent all work within a certain construct or framework of faith.

(Parents whose children profess atheism need not be shocked; a good reply: “Child, you have much in common with the first generations of the Christian movement, where they were commonly charged with being atheists - for their rejection/dismissal of the cultural gods that prevailed at the time. A **thoughtful atheist** has an integrity lacking in those who may conform to creed without conviction or understanding; anyone can bend a knee begrudgingly or habitually; reverence freely offered is of another kind; it is inspired - fired from within).

In the early '80s, Berger wrote a book entitled:
The Heretical Imperative:

*Contemporary Possibilities of
Religious Affirmation.*

Intriguing title, wouldn't you say?

The imperative Berger urged:

Christian thinkers need find common ground with Hindus and Buddhists to illustrate transcendent religious values. Berger was early in seeing the benefits of keeping interfaith company, of realizing that interaction with others does not diminish or threaten faith; rather it serves as a faith enhancement; it does not confuse and threaten, rather it (can) help clarify and fortify what we hold most dear.

The main reason I've mentioned Berger is a work now sitting on my desk:
"In Praise of Doubt: How to Have Convictions without Becoming a Fanatic."

Fanatics lie on the edges of our thought patterns, and while the "edges" may appear to be on opposite sides, they in fact share in common a hostility to any perceived threat that would alter their understanding of the world and the place they have in it.

On the one fanatic edge you have relativists - who basically adhere to "truth lies in the eye of the beholder." They bristle at the notion of only one way to see the world. They revel in rejecting absolutes. They understand a lot, but defend very little. This is both the danger and weakness of being a relativist.

This is very current in our age - issues can't be argued with any meaningful end result because there is no agreement upon what facts best inform the decision.

At the other end of the spectrum where fanatics nest, you find fundamentalists. Fundamentalists are binary thinkers: right/wrong; heaven or hell; one or the other. Which reminds me of a Clarence Darrow quote, when asked about his relative lack of concern for an afterlife, and his concern about destination - to heaven or hell - on that great day, Darrow said in effect - "I'm really not concerned, I've got good friends in both places."

The fundamentalist is not so composed. Berger notes, they defend and protect binary world view with strict adherence to two principles:

- (1) “There must be no significant communication with outsiders.”
- (2) “There must be no doubt.”
Doubt is to be suppressed, not tolerated, as it is perceived to be a subversive element that endangers faith.

Berger is somewhat helpful to me in understanding what is going on in the country, for we have in office a president who is, at heart, a relativist, surrounded and supported by fundamentalists. This may seem odd. It is odd. The odd coupling though works because of the zeal that is shared to preserve one’s place in the face of perceived hostile elements.

You may be wondering – what the heck is he talking about this for.

Well, for a couple of reasons really. First, fundamentalism is well entrenched in culture; in both religious and political expressions.

For the religious fundamentalists, the testing of one’s foundations is not measured by rational thought (reason) linked with faith, and faith maintained by reasonable inquiry; faith is reduced to loyalty, which is another word for submission, which is another description of what tyrants require to rule. At the heart of fundamentalism is fear, the dread of having one’s world come toppling down.

The nightmare is the Humpty Dumpty experience,
to fall from perch, never again to rise.
To maintain one's place and perspective,
all doubts must be annihilated;
all doubters silenced.

Our last Parry Lecturer,
Philip Gulley, was writing just this past week
on the fundamentalist tenet we call infallibility.

“The advocates of infallibility claim it protects the church from error, as if modern people are incapable of discerning truth, so must rely on the wisdom of ancient people who believed the world was flat and seizures were caused by demons. They have no confidence that thoughtful men and women can decide matters for themselves. This is why infallibility, at its heart, is not the defense of truth, but the protection of ignorance”

(Philip Gulley, *Grace Talks Blog*, Aug. 25, 2017).

Gulley proceeds to describe infallibility as this
“poison of certainty ... a disease of the heart and mind” that denies fresh thought and freedom ...
as a crime.

“This is the real crime of infallibility— it not only prohibits our thinking a new thought, and becoming a new people, it prohibits God from offering it. Thus, infallibility might be the gravest sin of all— the world telling God to be silent, that we have nothing more to learn and God has nothing more to say”

(Philip Gulley, *Grace Talks Blog*, Aug. 25, 2017).

The gravest sin of all?
To submit to a system
that proclaims its infallibility?

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We come now to the morning lesson
from Matthew's gospel.
Jesus is fresh from having been interrogated
by fundamentalists -
different camps, but the same spirit,
ensconced in their own sure and certain
way of seeing the world -
the world according to the Pharisees,
the world according to the Sadducees.
Jesus - tired of all this head-butting,
takes the disciples on retreat.
They head north,
to the far side of the Golan Heights,
(way beyond Lake James and George),
where they camp on the outskirts of
Caesarea Philippi - said
to be an ancient city "**of great sanctity.**"

There were old gods associated with CP -
Baals and other deities of the once
indigenous people.

The Greeks came along and brought the Hellenic
gods; CP became a shrine for **Pan** -
god of the wild, nature;
Pan - companion/consort of the nymphs;
Pan - skilled with rustic song, such that
a flute was affixed with Pan's name.

In the Roman age, in the Advent,
the name Caesarea Philippi registered
on Google maps,
to honor Caesar Augustus,
Augustus = the magnificent
Caesar = emperor; followed by
Divi Filius - "**son of the Divine.**"

And Phillip II (the Tetrarch),
the local ruler, whose City Hall
was located at Caesarea Philippi.

Close your eyes, imagine if you can,
the city's forum, well defined,
suited for strolling and sightseeing,
full of towering marble columns,
impressive monuments,
honoring the elites whose
power and might preserved a peace
based upon submission and obedience,
knowing your place and staying there.

Then imagine Jesus speaking to disciples,
enthralled with the spectacle of
imperial splendor before them,
and asking:

What are people saying about me?

The disciples speak and identify a
range of possibilities:
a contemporary - John the Baptist;
the legendary Elijah - from so long ago;
the renowned Jeremiah - who suffered the
people and their waywardness,
who warned the people of the
plight of their ways.

Jesus continues the inquiry
and makes it personal.
But you, who do you say that I am?

I imagine a long pause.
It is a shame that we don't have pause
punctuation in our text.
To prevent the making of haste.
To prohibit easy/habitual answer.

I heard it expressed long ago:
in school I got my questions answered;
it was after graduation that
 my answers got questioned.
And I learned along the way,
 Jesus is the question for my
 every answer.

Who is this prophet, teacher, healer,
this charismatic so magnetic?

Simon speaks:
I think you are the Anointed (Messiah),
 for whom we long have waited;
I think Jesus - you are so connected to Life
 that you channel the best of the past,
 that you signal the dawn we need,
 that you make real and compelling
 and urgent my life in time.

Jesus, I suggest, also pauses.
This is no Alex Trebek moment
 on Jeopardy.
This moment determines whether
we live bound by the past, or in hope
of the future. This moment
determines whether our following
is to be static and submissive,
or creative and evolving.

Jesus:
You've got possibility, Simon.
How 'bout a new name: Peter!
Upon you and your confession,
 let community (church) arise,
and may that community endure
 against every threat to
 its dynamic power

to save and redeem and
and enliven a people
eager for justice and mercy,
eager for peace,
eager and willing to
impart God's love.

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Please note:

Jesus was not a fundamentalist.
Jesus was not a proclaimer of infallibility.
Jesus does not insert himself as
an object requiring worship;
rather we are invited to see him
as the Anointed of God who imparts wisdom,
who fosters and imparts confidence
that we are capable of sharing
wherever he bids us serve;
we are invited to hear him speaking still,
entrusting all who will listen
to carry on with an honest
keeping and sharing of his Word.

Jesus entrusts us with keys that will either
open or close the doors of heaven on earth.
That's us, folks. That's us being the
church of Jesus Christ, charged with his love.

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I want to close with this thought.

I came across a Leonard Bernstein
quote this past week.

**The key to the mystery of a great artist
is that for reasons unknown, he will
give away his energies and his life**

**just to make sure that one note follows another ...
and leaves us with the feeling that
something is right in the world.**

That got me to thinking, curious I guess,
about church, and faith, and love.
The key to the kin-dom can never be **fear**.

Nor **isolation** - as if we can sequester ourselves
away from the world, washing our hands of its
pain and turmoil. Nor can we hide and deny
the inquiring minds God has given us to use -
that we pray to use for good.

The key to the mystery of faith is a grace-full
capacity to give, to give away,
who and what we are;
to be decent and charitable,
to work hard in quest
for a harmonization of love and mercy,
that our lives might be synchronized
with Jesus-like love -
that a little bit of heaven might here be found;
that peace and justice and understanding
might flourish among us;
and that we - as a collective -
by God as a church -
might help right a world that is often
fanatically wrong.

Jesus says:
You have within you the capacity to do this.

As an entrusted people, this is our agenda:
to love ... to forgive ... to teach ... to serve ...
to contend, as did Jesus,
with fundamentalists and relativists,
with ruling powers and principalities.

Life and death for many

hangs in the balance.
May we choose wisely, for our good,
and always for God's glory.

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)*