

Plymouth Congregational Church of Fort Wayne, UCC
October 1, 2017

World Communion Sunday
“The Grace of Faith:
Insurgent and Expanding”

*“... When he entered the temple, the chief priests and
the elders of the people came to him as he was teaching,
and said, ‘By what authority are you doing these things ...’”*
Matthew 21:23

PRELUDE

How big is your world?
That is the subject of my meditation
this morning.
How big is the world,
when we speak of the world,
as we are able to conceive of the world?

In our UCC Statement of Faith,
we find a curious affirmation of faith,
many who may not notice, if it isn't drawn
to one's attention. The Statement begins:

We believe in you, O God, Eternal Spirit,
God of our Savior Jesus Christ and our God,
and to you deeds we testify:
You call the **worlds** into being ...

Those who crafted the statement
were reluctant to speak of “world”
as a singular noun; they opted for
a plural understanding,
suggesting various worlds can be enumerated,
suggesting there are yet more worlds
we may discover;
intergalactic worlds (?), sub-atomic worlds (?),
so far, so near, called into being by the One

we purport to reverence with our worship.

How big is your world?

It was the grand dame of mysticism,
the Anglican scholar and church woman,
Evelyn Underhill (1875-1945) who once said:

**“If God were small enough to be understood,
(God) would not be big enough to be worshipped.”**

When we speak of world and worlds,
we do so as a people whose faith
is always subject to enlargement.

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I learned this week the seed for
World Communion Sunday was
first planted in 1930, and it first
occurred in 1933, at the
Shadyside Presbyterian Church,
Pittsburgh, PA.

Among Presbyterians, it is considered a
“gift ... to the larger ecumenical church.”

It took awhile for the day to gain much traction.
The Congregational-Christian Church,
as then constituted, followed the Presbyterian lead
in 1938
(see John Von Rohr, *The Shaping of American
Congregationalism*, p. 439).

A significant boost occurred in 1940, when the
Federal Council of Churches, precursor to the
National Council of Churches, took to promoting the
effort in churches throughout the world with
ecumenical sympathy.

One cleric (the Rev. Donald Kerr),
who experienced the early years
when observance was growing, reported:

**“The concept spread very slowly at the start.
People did not give it a whole lot of thought.
It was during the Second World War that the
spirit caught hold, because we were trying
to hold the world together.**

**World Wide Communion symbolized the
effort to hold things together, in a spiritual
sense. It emphasized that we are one in
the Spirit and the Gospel of Jesus Christ.”**

Trying to hold the world together,
when the world was at war;
trying to hold things together,
when the “**scourge of war**” was
bringing to ruin and grief
countless lives across the face of the earth;
this still seems to inspire and inform
our efforts today.

We are trying to hold on to a faith
suited for the one world that is our home,
a faith grounded in God’s love
for the world,
come to us by way of Jesus.

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In our scripture lesson this morning,
we see Jesus trying to hold on to a vision
of the temple as being a house of prayer
for all people (see Isaiah 56:7). Jesus had
made a scene, just prior to the reading
we heard. He took a knee in a most

public manner; he overturned the tables of the money changers and disturbed the business of selling doves suited for sacrifice. He struck the administrative nerve of temple proceedings.

Jesus has linked his life and his teaching to a vision first cast by Isaiah, who saw in the temple the grand possibility of the world being drawn into covenant with the God who calls the worlds into being.

Isaiah put out the welcome mat.

Jesus falls into Isaiah's orbit of understanding Divine largess.

But a counter prevailing spirit is lodged in the temple administration; forces seemingly have corrupted Isaiah's vision, forces not open and affirming of Jesus teaching.

The temple had become a contraction of its intended purpose; the temple had become a state-sponsored, market-driven enterprise, rather than a mercy project. Temple administrators were dedicated to making the temple great, at the expense of the temple serving for good, restoring order; they limited the temple workings to a few, at the expense of many. And they could neither see, nor think their way out of the system they served.

Take note:

Jesus didn't have a parking pass.
He didn't have a name tag.
The temple database did not
have his email, address, mobile phone.

He didn't have a key, a code, or a password
to legitimize his temple teaching.
He didn't have the credentials
the temple authorities were seeking
when they asked,
how dare you trouble
the House of God?

Jesus doesn't give a clear answer.
But if we read between the lines,
we can formulate an answer.
For he is saying, in part,

I'm holding on
to the most ancient of ways,

I'm holding on to the God,
Maker of heaven and earth;

I'm holding on to the God
this temple was build to expand upon,
not reduce and belittle;

I'm holding on to a tradition of radical,
insurgent inclusion,
and the hope of
personal and social transformation.

I'm holding on to the God whose
grace is expansive,
not the contraction of current practice
that needs to be remedied.

To illustrate, Jesus offers a parable.
Who is on the right path -
those who say they will,
 but don't;
those who say nay,
 but reconsider with yea,
to the will of God?

Jesus doesn't rule out of order
anybody's reconsideration of
living in the grace and wonder
 of being a child of God.
Not even those who live in the world as
 tax collectors and prostitutes.

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How big the world in
 which we work and pray?

I'm often tempted to live in a small world,
 narrow in my outlook and concerns.
Maybe it was my small town background -
born in a Michigan village few other than
God and gerrymandering politicians
would know or care about.

Today I live a ten minute walk
 from this church, not even 6 blocks;
going north, beyond Dupont,
southeast beyond I-69,
I can feel out of my element.
I have tendencies within to burrow,
to accommodate a small-minded world view.

Yet worlds break into and complicate
 my cocoon.

The other day as I was getting myself up

and dressed, I conducted a rather hasty inventory of my wardrobe closet.

The shirt I wear today was made in Vietnam; the suit was made in India.

My favorite golf shirts:

made in Taiwan (Nike),
Madagascar,
Bangladesh,
the Northern Mariana Islands.

My sport jackets:

the Navy blue blazer: Canada;
my one corduroy jacket: Vietnam;
the tan, taupe jacket: Indonesia.

My Jockey brand shorts: Honduras.

My Arizona Jeans: made in Mexico.

My New Balance shoes were made in China.

The iPhone in my breast pocket has component parts that came from Japan, Korea, and four different regions of China.

I was portioned a small cubby hole that serves as my home office in our apartment.

There is wall space for two pictures from Wales, the small village of Laugharne, home to Dylan Thomas's writing shed, overlooking the estuary of the River Taf.

And on a shelf also, an army-issued communion chalice, passed on to me, by way of my father, who served as an assistant chaplain when the world was at war in the 1940's, when a few churches were doing what they could to hold the world together via their faith in the love of God incarnate in Jesus Christ.

I do not know much about the chalice,
other than what little I know of the
chaplain who used it in ministry.

I assume it was put to use:

in Ireland, in north Africa,
in Sicily, and Italy.

I wonder also if it wasn't in worship
within the shadows of Mount Cassino,
and its famous Benedictine monastery
that dates from the year 530 CE,
bombed into ruin,
when the battle for Rome was waged (1944).

I can't exit my house, can't get out the door,
without being aware of vast worlds God
has called into being, worlds that touch my life.

How big the world we seek to hold together?
It is grand, awesome, wonderful,
bewildering in its inexhaustible expanse.
And we bring inexcusable harm,
to ourselves and to others,
when we reduce our concern
to making great only ourselves,
only one nation under God.

It was the poet, Mary Karr, in speaking of
her faith journey, who once said:
**"My mind didn't take in reality
before I began to practice some
regular devotions"**
(see M. Karr, Sinners Welcome, p. 82).

The communion table is a central
part of our Christian devotion.
This is where we take in reality.
This is Table of grace, symbol of faith,
insurgent and expanding.
Here we encounter the reality of
God with us,
when we taste and see the blessings
God has in store for us,
when we incorporate Jesus into
our hearts, into our worlds.

“Insurgent Christianity.”

This is a term coined by Herbert Butterfield,
which he surmised was a requirement for
20th century Christianity (see *Writings on
Christianity & History*, p. 254).

Insurgent Christianity, not to be understood
to mean a **“noisy or cheap agitation and the pursuit
of novelty,”** it was not merely a cherishing of
tradition and idealizing it, but as constantly
ready to return to first principles, for a “fresh
dip into the Gospel and New Testament revelation,”
to affirm, to hold on to the simplicities of faith
and the love that is essential for life to flourish
when we face crisis that threatens life. And this
is what is essential – we are holding on to
the love of God that was in Christ Jesus;
and that we have Christ
as our companion in all the worlds
in which we are permitted to journey.

So may we live, and so may God be glorified.
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)*