

Plymouth Congregational Church of Fort Wayne, UCC
October 23, 2017

“A Pledge of Resistance”

*“Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s,
and to God the things that are God’s.”*
(Matthew 22:21)

PRELUDE

We are in the thick of our fall stewardship season, our time to consider what offerings and contributions will serve to sustain, indeed, to propel the ministry of Plymouth Church.

We have had excellent witnessing stewards, up to and through this Sunday - have we not? Ahnee Conner, January Simpson, Steve and Pam Etheridge have each borne inspired testimony about the impact this community has registered upon their lives.

We are using Psalm 46 as the grounding scripture for our appeal. **“There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy habitation of the Most High. God is in the midst of the city ... God will help it when the morning dawns.”**

Psalm 46 - is a very rich and inspiring psalm, speaking of the God who brings order out of chaos; who speaks as a “sovereign” of all nations; the God “with us;” who is both known and exalted.

In some circles, it is known as Luther’s psalm. Luther used Psalm 46 as inspiration for the hymn “A Mighty Fortress is our God,” which one scholar (James Moffat) described

as the **“greatest hymn of the greatest man in the greatest period in German history”**

(see *Guide to the Pilgrim Hymnal*).

Luther’s hymn has been called the **“Battle Hymn of the (Protestant) Reformation.”**

It was (seemingly) composed in the year 1529, when the Diet of Speyer was held, and certain church(men) voiced dissent over church rulings intended to curb reform movements. Those in dissent of restrictions placed upon reform offered **“protest”** to measures they saw as contrary to the Word of God (scripture) and to their conscience. It was this act of objection to restraints placed upon reform that gave rise to the term **“Protestantism.”**

There was yet another contextual concern on every mind at the time. The Ottoman Empire was making an incursion into Europe, under the leadership of Suleiman the Magnificent, the reigning Sultan (r. 1520-1566).

The threat had a chilling effect upon Europe, especially as the Ottoman Turks advanced to the door of Vienna and laid siege. Weather played a significant role in halting the advance, which some interpreted as a divine act of saving grace; and some surmise M. Luther was enthused over this good news, and inspired to write both words and tune for **“A Mighty Fortress is our God,”** again basing his work upon Psalm 46.

Luther and music. **“Next to theology, there is no art which is the equal of music ... music alone, after theology ... can quiet and cheer the soul.”**

Luther and his love of music.
“As long as we live there is never enough singing.”

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A curious thought – there is no river of significance in Jerusalem, the city of peace for which we pray (see Psalm 122:6). The river metaphor comes from other sources, possibly the mythology of Paradise we find in Genesis, 2:10-14.

Do you recall?

“A river flows out of Eden to water the garden, and from there it divides and becomes four branches. The name of the first is Pishon ... the second is Gihon ... the third is Tigris ... the fourth is Euphrates.”

Mention is made of a river in the beginning, with four wonderful branches marking paradise, the garden of God. And river is mentioned in the Revelation, **“the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God ... through the middle of the street of the city.”** And on the banks of the river, it is said, is the tree of life (Revelation 22:1-2).

These are wonderful, intriguing images that reside in the heart of our faith. The river and its streams serve to amplify the abundance God has invested in creation, the vast resources and wealth of the world, the powerful blessings of goodness and mercy that flow from the Presence of the Divine, to/through/from the God who is our Provider,
our Peace,
a present help in troubled times.

So the question, simply put:
how can we “**make glad**” the city where
we are placed? What offerings,
what contributions, dare we pledge?

I’m off for Wales early this next week,
so I won’t be around to sound off on this
after this morning. I have opportunity
to serve as resident Chaplain at the
Gladstone Library in the village of
Hawarden, Wales, located in
Flintshire, the north east of Wales,
not so far from the English city of Chester.
It is a rare and unique opportunity for me
and I’m grateful that you give me leave
to serve there for what will be assigned.
So - today is the one remaining day
I have to encourage and solicit your
support for the church.

2018 will be a challenging year - in more
ways than one. It will be a transitional
year as the church begins its search for
new senior leadership. And our operating
budget will be challenging.

We are blessed with institutional resources,
relying upon the planned giving and
generosity of ancestors whose gifts
are still at work for the church. We also
rely upon member pledges of time,
talent, and treasure. Every gift - the large,
the small, the check, the cash, the coin,
the gift in kind, every gift - makes a difference.

Leadership in the church is committed to being
prudent, transparent, and responsible. There is
much work expended to earn your trust

that your offering will serve as you intend it.
The lay leaders of the church, working in
conjunction with staff, hold themselves
to high standards, and for that we can all
be grateful.

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What can you pledge - promise - to make
glad the city? I encourage you to make your
own list. But I have list of three things I
want to mention.

I pledge devotion.

Church is not one commitment among others,
church is first and foremost among others.

I pledge to give at a depth, to a degree,
that my giving makes a difference in my
personal life ... my tithe indicates the church
has priority in my giving.

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I pledge to be disciplined and generous

in offering my time, talent, and treasure.

This requires that I sometimes have to say “no,”
in order to say “yes” to keep my pledge current.

It is hard for some of us to say “no.”

Arthur Ashe quote:
**“Start where you are.
Use what you have.
Do what you can.”**

I want to echo Ashe’s advice.
And encourage - start ... then

stick with the program.
Be consistent, faithful, and diligent.

There is second Ashe quote I value.
**“True heroism is remarkably sober,
very un-dramatic.
It is not the urge to surpass all others
at whatever cost,
but rather the urge to serve others
at whatever cost.”**

This, I suggest, is a good measuring stick
for both our devotion and our discipline -
does our giving satisfy and fulfill
“the urge to serve others”
whatever the cost.

Our giving to Plymouth Church -
I hope we don't frame it as duty, obligation,
an imposition that chafes the soul and burdens
the spirit.
I hope we don't frame it as a gambit
for great gain.
I hope our giving is genuine, an urge to
make a positive contribution to a community
that is saving grace with Jesus love.

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A final thought.

**I pledge my thoughts,
my prayers,
my pocketbook,
to resistance.**

I pledge to resist
any dilution of my devotion.

I pledge to resist
any diversion of my discipline.

I pledge to resist
any violation, any desecration of faith
that I have admitted.

I pledge to resist any power that
separates me from
principle,
prayer,
the faith that keeps me connected
to the saving love and grace of Jesus Christ.

Our scripture lesson this morning –
we see Jesus deftly maneuvering so as to
avoid a sting operation. A trap has been
set. The cameras are rolling. The press
is present, wanting photos and quotes.
Will Jesus get caught in a question designed
to discredit his mission and purpose?

We see him setting himself apart from
other parties, and resisting their appeals.

Is it lawful to pay taxes?
Is it permissible to participate
in the system that rules our lives
by feeding the system with
the financial support
it needs to function?

If Jesus says yes, then he discredits himself
by siding with a system content to abuse
the very people Jesus has a heart to redeem.

If Jesus says no, then he aligns himself with forces
fueled by hate, anger, and a desire to
avenge all the pain and suffering caused
by the administration in power.

What to do?

Be clear.
Pray to think clearly.
Pray to give generously.
Pray for wisdom,
 to rightly discern
 what lines mark
 integrity, honor, fidelity.
If or when asked to cross the lines that define you
 as child of God, friend of Jesus,
 then resist.

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This is nature and purpose of the church simply
stated: to keep us loving ... to keep us loving in a
way that reflects God's love for the world.

May our offering keep the doors open,
the ministry strong,
the music sweet,
the community equipped.

May our offerings reflect
 our resistance to anything less,
 our loyalty to making glad
 the city wherein God is pleased to dwell.

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)*