

Plymouth Congregational Church of Fort Wayne, UCC
September 17, 2017

**“The Past We Share and
Care to Remedy”**

“... the Lord saved Israel that day from the Egyptian; and
Israel saw the Egyptians dead upon the seashore.”
Exodus 14:30

PRELUDE

As God’s people,
gospel charged,
we are called to mend,
we care to remedy,
broken systems that
are resistant to change.

That’s what I want to address in part
this morning.

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I welcome the opportunity
Heritage Sunday provides us to
reflect a bit upon the past that is ours,
the past that informs and defines,
that traces amazing grace through
many dangers, toils, and snares.

I’m so grateful my life has intersected
with teachings and traditions found
within the United Church of Christ (in general),
and within Plymouth Church (in particular).
I’m grateful for the liberal air we breathe,
the generous environment we foster
that nurtures inquiry,
that holds out hope that we can
be thoughtful Christians,
earnest in our devotion,

constant in our prayer,
steadfast in our faith.

Heritage Sunday serves to remind we are but one link, one generation, keeping current a spiritual consciousness, reaching deep into the past. This is more than maintaining traditions of liturgy, creed, or covenant; indeed, we profess to be in possession of the **“mind of Christ”** (I Corinthians 2:16), and we aspire to practice the love of Christ.

We are not shy about having such aspirations; indeed it is in our heritage that we strive for the transformation of life in **“a ... more excellent way”** (I Corinthians 12:31). So I’m additionally grateful for the challenge we sound, and the caution we urge.

The challenge - that we be a community of commitment.

“... the Church must now become radically committed at particular times and places to the struggle ...”
(1963, 4th General Synod of the UCC, issuing call for **“radical commitment”**).

**“... it is in our piety, it is in our polity,
it is in our commitment to be an agent for justice ...”**
(Yvonne Delk, Commission for Racial Justice,
in a workshop entitled, “Community or Chaos”).

The caution - it is required that we resist the allure of other life forms that appeal for our loyalty.

In our UCC Statement of Faith, there is a section that addresses God, acknowledging we are called into the church:

to accept the cost and joy of discipleship,
to be God’s servants in the service of others,
to proclaim ... gospel ... to all the world,

and resist the powers of evil ...

This commitment to resistance is also
part of our heritage -
it recognizes that faith is a work in progress,
that gospel work encounters oppositional forces,
that practicing faith includes struggling
against the forces that work to keep us
bound in a state that is less than God desires.

Our lesson this morning speaks to us of
a great defining act of deliverance,
God acting on behalf of
a people held in bondage,
**“the Lord saved Israel that
day from the Egyptians ...”** (Exodus 14:30).

It is a story full of intrigue and drama,
the culmination, the climax of a long,
extended conflict. Israel had been in Egypt
for 430 years. And a system had been developed
over that course of those years, what we
would call a domination system, an upper
class ruled and exploited a people in bondage,
for personal gain at the expense of a common good;
the system provided privilege and benefits for
some, while excluding the people who made the
privilege and benefits possible.

The system caused great suffering;
it was a cruel system; a violent system.
And Moses was sent to liberate the
people who suffered in the system.
**“I have observed the misery of my people
who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry
on account of their taskmasters. Indeed,
I know their sufferings, and I have come**

**down to deliver them from the Egyptians
and to bring them up out of that land ...”**

So God spoke to Moses from the bush
(Exodus 3:7-8).

“I know their sorrows ...” KJV

The system, though,
as unsavory as it was,
was resistant to change.

There came upon the mighty Pharaoh
and the people of Egypt
all sorts of calamities,
plagues, lots of devastation.
Through it all, the Pharaoh had a hard heart
and would not let the people go.
Only when the Pharaoh’s own heart was broken,
and the Passover angel passed through the land,
so that all the people suffered loss,
did Pharaoh relent, and give permission
for those in bondage to take leave.
Great pressure was exerted to
facilitate the change that would let
life flourish.

Pharaoh, though, couldn’t see beyond the system
that provided him the social security it denied others.

Pharaoh was so tied to the economic order,
that he couldn’t imagine life without the people
whose suffering made possible the life he administered.

Without the cheap source of labor,
the system was paralyzed.
So Pharaoh gave chase.
Called out the National Guard.
Fired up the chariots, some 600, we read (Exodus 14:6).

I don't assume it was all the king's horses and all the king's men, but just enough, a little more I suppose, to make an impressive show, and get the job done.

So off they sped. And they drew near, very near the people marching to freedom in the promised land. Moses had trouble, holding the ranks (**"Was it because there were no grave in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness ... Let us alone and let us serve the Egyptians ..."**) (Exodus 14:11-12).

And then there is a clash and lots of confusion. For the people are cornered. Trapped. Exodus - the exit - has reached a dead end.

God is there - in the lead - a cloud by day, pillar of Fire by night.

And Moses in there - stretching out his hand over the water that was preventing their advance.

And a strong wind is there, so strong that water is rising and falling, receding and returning, as determined by the wind. The Israelites see a way where before no way was seen. And when the wind withdraws, the water returns, crushing the Egyptian advance.

It is a richly textured story. A violent end to a violent system that caused great suffering to a subjugated people denied the freedom and opportunity God desired to provide.

"The Lord saved Israel that day from the Egyptians; and Israel saw the Egyptians dead on the seashore."

Does it have to be this way - death and suffering to end systems

that bring death and suffering to the world?

I wish I had some clarity on this issue,
but I confess, I do not. I do sense our humanity
has a rather remarkable capacity to create systems,
and then to defend those systems, even when the
systems are failing us, if not killing us.

How do we account for this?

In yesterday's *Journal Gazette*, Pope Francis was quoted.
When asked why some people have trouble
accepting the reality of a human contribution
to climate change, the Pope said:

**“(Hu)Man is a stupid and hard-headed
being who doesn't see.”**

That gave recall to instruction I received
from Mr. Keith Sellers, a 7th/8th grade teacher
who admonished me with the plea:

**“Mr. Gardner, in assessing your classmate's comment,
would you consider using some other term than stupid.”**

Stupidity is not the determining factor
contributing to the plight of our bondage.

Our love is the determining fact.
Our love too often is deficient,
misplaced, misspent.

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Fast forward.

Washington Gladden, said by some to be the **“father
of the social gospel”** is a part of our heritage
that I want to invoke this morning, particularly
his interest in race relations, contesting the
great racial divide enforced by law and order
and custom. In 1903, Gladden was sounding an alarm -
we gotta' lot of work to do to repair and remedy

the brokenness our humanity caused by false and malicious valuations based upon race.

If we don't do this work,
we will suffer for our neglect.

Gladden was an early supporter of Booker T. Washington; and he urged a sympathetic reading and appreciation of W.E.B. Dubois, *The Soul of Black Folk*. In essence, Washington pleaded: systems of injustice that exist so glaringly cannot endure. They should, and they will, fall.

I invoke Gladden - to illustrate the intensity of resistance to change within the racial system then prevailing. Gladden was an optimist; he foresaw a future based upon **"liberty and opportunity."** He thought help was on the way from an **"awaken moral sentiment of the Christian people in the south.** It is impossible, Gladden assessed, that these millions of white Christians should shut out of their minds and hearts the great ideas of human brotherhood (and sisterhood) ... impossible that they (white Christians) should resist the altruistic understanding of this faith" (*The Social Gospel*, by R.C. White, Jr., p. 107).

In retrospect, I suppose, Gladden was incredibly naïve about how deeply seeded and deadly our prejudices lie.

Fast forward. 1961. The work and witness of James Baldwin, black, gay, proud, defiant.

"The real question which faces the Republic is just how long, how violent, and how expensive the funeral is going to be."

Fast forward.
Still the festering wound persists.

We are in need of an Exodus –
that our land might no longer be stained
and disfigured by the toxic sin of racial supremacy,
white superiority.

What can we do?

We can help pay the funeral expense.

If we don't, we will continue to suffer
the sin and suffer for our neglect.

And we can play a part when we commit ourselves
to building a just world for all.

In our UCC, this includes:

- **Resist** hegemony and patriarchy as a model for building holistic communities;
- **Eradicate** constructed race categories within the Christian Church and society;
- **Restore** God's human family—the equality of humankind.

It further includes the intention
to disrupt and dismantle racism,
whenever, wherever we find it.
Speak loudly, clearly, that
God desires all people be treated
with dignity and respect.

Fast forward. 2016. The quarterback of the San Francisco 49er's, Colin Kaepernick, bi-racial, raised in a largely white family, makes headlines for kneeling, rather than standing for the national anthem, expressing solidarity for the Black Lives Matter. **So many don't understand** his stance, and they are critical of his protest, which could well be costing him a job. As for himself, Kaepernick has stated: **"I don't want to kneel forever. But I think there are some ... changes that we can make ..."**
(*USA Today*, Sept. 14, 2016).

Sometimes we need to be coaxed along.
At times we need to be **“goaded”**
along the way, to have our eyes opened.

Recall how hymn writer James Manley
describes the God, our help in ages past:

**“You swept through the dessert,
you stung with the sand,
and you goaded your people
with a law and a land;
when they were confounded
by idols and lies,
then you spoke through your prophets
to open their eyes”**

(NCH, No. 286, v. 2).

This is our hope - that God will open our eyes,
that God will goad us along - the more excellent
way, to be the people no longer bound, but free,
celebrating the life and love that God has provided
for our good.

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)*