

**Plymouth Congregational Church of Fort Wayne, UCC**

April 10, 2016

**“Restored and Refocused”**

*“Simon, son of John, do you love me?”*

John 21:17

**Prelude**

I'm thrilled that we have been able to recognize the work of Dan Wire this morning as our 2016 recipient of the Amistad Peace and Justice Award. In giving this award, we are expressing our most sincere appreciation and respect for all the efforts Dan has poured forth over many years on behalf of the rivers that course their way through our city.

Our community health and vitality,  
our quality of life in Fort Wayne  
and Northeast Indiana,  
is inextricably linked and tied to  
the rivers that flow through here.  
Dan is a happy navigator,  
a **“tireless champion”** for the rivers,  
and we are better off for it.  
I'm grateful we as a church can  
applaud Dan's efforts,  
and grateful for the work of  
the Peace & Justice Committee  
of Plymouth Church, who determined  
Dan a fitting recipient of the Amistad Award.

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I'm mindful -  
rivers run through our scriptures  
from beginning to end.

Rivers - the flowing waters -  
serve as rich, powerful symbols  
linked with life and human welfare.

The garden of Eden in Genesis  
is bounded and defined by rivers;

**“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; it is the one that flows  
around the whole land of Havilah, where there is gold;  
and the gold of that land is good; bdellium and onyx  
stone are there. The name of the second river Gihon;  
it is the one that flows around the whole land of Cush.  
The third river is Tigris, which flows east of Assyria.  
And the fourth river is the Euphrates” (Genesis 2:10-14).**

The author of this material has drawn  
a rather large landscape, wouldn't you say?  
It requires a huge stretch of our imagination  
to envision this vast setting.

Possibly we've seen too many framed pictures of  
a partially clad Adam and Eve covering up, huddled  
near a tree harboring a snake.

The “garden” cannot be condensed and painted  
on canvas, it can't be fully depicted on a page as  
Bible illustration. It is not some small plot,  
a raised bed in the backyard, that one can easily  
manage to work 'n weed, sow and harvest,  
prune and pick.

This portrait of a garden with its rivers  
    where humanity is placed  
        is a grand expanse.  
It isn't just trans-continental;  
it is multi-continental in scope.  
We have to pause, work hard  
to grasp the full dimensions our writer  
has drawn for us - Eden, with its  
one river that divides and  
    branches into four.

Reference to the Pishon and the Gihon  
is a reference to Blue and White Rivers  
that serve as tributaries to the River Nile.  
The Nile River is the longest river on our  
planet, measuring some 4,152 miles.  
It begins in the heart of Africa, and  
curiously there is no consensus as to its  
primary source. You can track the White Nile

to Lake Victoria (it is divided between Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania), but after that the debate begins, with some favoring a feeder river from Rwanda and others yet another river from Burundi.

The Tigris River flows through Turkey, Syria, Iraq - 1,180 miles - till it empties into the Persian Gulf; and the Euphrates is 1,740 miles in length, the largest river in southwest Asia. Mesopotamia is the **"land between"** these rivers. In my Sunday School instruction as a child, that's pretty much where I was told the Garden of Eden was located, not a cradle of civilization, but the cradle - the point of departure for our recorded history as human beings.

There is even a technical term: **"riverine civilizations"** - locating the first complex, urbanized, politically centralized civilizations in river valleys, where water was the draw. It fits a "theory," but the location is a clear miss of the biblical mark.

That's what happens when we become a small minded people - we miss the mark - the big picture - of what wonders God's hand has wrought!

The Bible mentions other rivers.  
Psalm 46 - **"there is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy habitation of the Most High"** (v. 4).

And Psalm 137 -  
**"By the rivers of Babylon - there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion. On the willows there we hung up our harps. For there our captors asked us for songs, and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying, "Sing us one of the songs of Zion"** (Psalm 137:1-3).

In Isaiah 43 we encounter a vision, when the prophet speaks Thus says the Lord:  
**“I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert.”**

That which is dry and parched, shriveled and apparently forsaken, shall blossom (Isaiah 43:19). It is not simply for humanity that the Creator is interested.

**“The wild animals will honor me, the jackals and the ostriches”** are also to be included.

Note the vintage King James Version:

**“The beast of the field shall honour me, the dragons and the owls ...”**

This too is part of **“the big picture”** of creation and redemption, that we so often miss or wish away.

In the final book of the Bible, we again encounter a river, an unnamed river, said to be **“the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God”** (Revelation 22:1).

On either side of the river the tree of life is located, with its twelve kinds of fruits; and leaves which serve for **“the healing of the nations.”**

This is the scripture verse that inspired Robert Lowery to write both verse and tune for **“Shall we Gather at the River.”** The hymn, if it isn't sung in church, also doubles as a popular robust drinking song in some countries. Who knew?

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Let's transition.

In our scripture lesson this morning we found seven disciples having gone fishing. They've been drawn to the water.

The 21st chapter of John has a lot going on in its verses. It contains a “**constellation of theological concerns**” (*New Interpreter’s Bible*, Vol. IX, p. 863).

Seven disciples have returned to where they were when they first encountered Jesus, and left their nets. They’ve defaulted to the beginning. But yet again, they are sought out and encountered. Jesus walks on the shoreline, the Jesus who lived and died is with them still.

On their own, their nets keep turning up empty. Following Jesus, the haul is overwhelming. A catch of 153.

An important part of this 21st chapter is the conversation that takes place between Jesus and Peter. Peter is asked once, then twice, and yet a third time: Do you love me?

This is a restorative conversation. You recall Peter had three times denied having any knowledge or acquaintance with Jesus. Peter had proven to be such a disappointment, unable to live up the standards he set for himself.

This is material designed to restore Peter, to reboot and get him back on track.

Peter is additionally able to revision his life, to refocus upon what is important.

In the third round, one can sense Peter’s sorrow, his “hurt” at being asked yet again. The question “grieved” Peter (KJV).

**“Lord, you know everything;  
you know my thoughts,  
you know my heart,  
you know all there is to know,  
more than even myself.”  
You know I love you.**

As these questions are posed to Peter,  
I ask that we consider them ourselves.

How do we account for our lives,  
and the love that is asked of us?

Feed my lambs,  
tend my sheep,  
feed my sheep.

This passage is often thought to  
reposition Peter, to set him apart,  
to elevate and privilege him with  
special role and responsibility.  
I would soften such a read.  
Peter is not given privilege.  
He is charged and he becomes refocused.  
He is asked what all disciples are asked.

Do you love Jesus?  
Then love those who Jesus loves.  
Do you love Jesus?  
Then keep and live with  
the Jesus "torah."

Did not Jesus say:  
**"Those who have my commandments and keep them  
are those who love me; and those who love me will  
be loved by my Father, and I will love them and  
reveal myself to them"** (John 14:21).

In the gospel world of John,  
everything that goes around comes around.  
The teaching always circles  
back to the beginning.  
We love because God first loved us.  
And we are bidden to pass it on,  
each and every one of us, as only  
each and every one of us is able.

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**No. 1 - Love Beyond Your Limits; Love Large**  
Remember - God is full of surprises.  
(Desmond Tutu)

If we **“keep it all to ourselves”** we have proven ourselves fundamentally misfit for the kingdom Jesus set before us.

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No. 2 - **Love the Church,**  
and work like the dickens to keep love’s work properly focused.

One of the great challenges we face is to love the Christian so consumed with spiritual purity they make life miserable for others.

We have a role to play in Plymouth Church. To fashion a church, to build community, that is not narrowly obsessed with bedrooms and bathrooms that is so dominant in the news, showing little more than a Christian penchant for bigotry and desire to discriminate.

I was reading a recommended blog this week, and the comment was made:

**“It is a good thing Jesus rose from the dead, for if not, he surely would be turning over in his grave at what people are doing in his name.”**

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No. 3 - **Love the Earth -  
and Protect its Waters**

Be a good steward. Fear not to change habits that are toxic to earth, air, water. Be a conservationist. Hunt. Fish. Canoe the waters. Work for the day that you not be afraid to swim where you recreate. But always: be mindful of others, and be reverent and honest. Remember - our human species is the one creature with the capacity to engage in deadly sin.

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## Conclusion

Let me close with this:

It was Thomas Merton who once said:

**“God must be allowed the right  
to speak unpredictably.”**

The unpredictable word.  
The word of grace. The word of mercy.  
The question that keeps us accountable:  
Do you love me?

The unpredictable word that comes  
addressed to us even today,  
inviting us to “Follow.”

**“He comes to us as One unknown,  
without a name, as of old, by the lakeside.  
He came to those men who knew him not.  
He speaks to us the same word:  
‘Follow thou me!’  
and sets us to the tasks which  
He has to fulfill for our time.  
He commands.  
And to those who obey Him,  
whether they be wise or simple,  
He will reveal Himself in the toils,  
the conflicts, the sufferings  
which they shall pass through in His fellowship,  
and, as an ineffable mystery,  
they shall learn in their own experience Who He is”**  
(Albert Schweitzer,  
*The Quest of the Historical Jesus*).

May we all be so restored and refocused today,  
until the love’s work in us is complete, and we  
be gathered at the River of Life.  
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)*