

Plymouth Congregational Church of Fort Wayne, UCC

May 8, 2016

“Shock and Awe – Family Style”

“... Suddenly there was an earthquake, so violent
that the foundations of the prison were shaken ...”

Acts 16:26

Prelude

This morning I would like address a theme:
the beauty of balancing our lives in the love
and grace of Jesus Christ.

This is how I would like to proceed:

- (1) comment upon this morning’s scripture lesson;
- (2) offer some comment upon Mother’s Day,
and how its observance challenges us today;
- (3) offer some comment upon the challenge that
is ours today to nurture and cultivate a community
where we seek the beauty of a balanced life.

THE MORNING LESSON - ACTS 16

In our scripture lesson, we heard just a small portion
of an extended passage that reports on events that
transpired when Paul, in company with his traveling
companion Silas, was a resident in Philippi,
said to have been a **“leading city in the district of
Macedonia, and a Roman colony”** (Acts 16:12).

We don’t know how long Paul & Silas stayed in Philippi –
our author is content to mention **“for some days.”**
We do know those days were full of drama and
harrowing experience – what we might call gospel
“shock and awe” – that changed many lives.

It was at Philippi that Paul met a group of women
who gathered at a riverside place of prayer
(outside the city gates). What is shocking –
Paul sat down and talked to the women;
the women mattered to Paul, and Paul was
welcomed into their company. How remarkable.

It was on that river greenway that Paul met Lydia, from the city of Thyatira, who was a dealer in purple cloth – she was a high end supplier of high end fashion – Vera Bradley without the sale; upscale designs for the 1% crowd. She grasped the gospel Paul was proclaiming and she, along with all in her household, were baptized, which means, of course, that she was head of the household. Imagine that. Lydia's house, the whole house, were welcomed in a new family circle; we can see they discovered in the Christian life a balance of a peace and joy that the purveyance of purple could not provide.

Lydia and her household found themselves in a new state of grace – the beauty of holiness (Psalm 29:2; 96:9).

Another episode occurred at Philippi that had a direct bearing on our reading. Paul and company (the reading from Acts uses the pronoun “we”) encountered a slave girl who could divine the future for people with money to pay.

Was she a clairvoyant, a mind reader; a reader of the stars; able to discern the secrets encoded in the palm of your hand? Not sure really. We do know she was a valuable source of revenue for those who managed her and profited from her skill set.

For many days this young lady called out to Paul, until Paul, much annoyed, encountered her. He “**pulled the plug**” on her gift we might say, which freed her from her possession (what the text implies). It was good for the girl, but bad for the bottom line of the business. Those who were living off her labor were none to pleased.

This is gospel interference in a market-based economy that traffics and exploits children. Slave labor, corporate gain.

The entrepreneurs who held this child in bondage, seeing their enterprise was over, went after

Paul and Silas. They were seized, taken to court, charged with “**disturbing the city.**”
The court - not sympathetic to gospel agitation, could not constrain the anger of a mob venting rage over the loss of their livelihoods.

Paul and Silas were stripped naked.
They were beaten with rods.
It was, as reported, a “**severe flogging.**”
And then - they were thrown in jail.

And that’s where we found them in our reading.
Midnight. Chained. In the stocks. Wounded.
Singing. Gospel concert. Paul and Silas, recorded live, rocking the jailhouse with praise songs.

And then an earthquake.
A “**violent**” shaking of earth.

The foundations of the prison - shaken.
The security system fails.
Doors open. Chains become unfastened.
The stocks splinter.
It is institutional meltdown.
And there is nothing to keep the captives
from taking flight.

Apparently the jailer slept through all this.
Upon waking he is thrown into a panic,
alarmed that on his watch an exodus may have
occurred and he will suffer the consequences.
Just as he is about to fall on his own sword,
Paul and Silas call out - “**think twice.**”

The jailer’s world has become unraveled
by these events. He is shaken to the core of his being.
His own “**chain of command,**” the economy
in which he lives and serves, and from which his
paycheck comes, has not proven sustainable.
His world has unraveled. He asks:
“**what must I do to be saved?**”
Paul and Silas have remedy:
“**Turn and trust in Jesus.**”

Like Lydia and her household,
so the jailer and his household
get baptized. So we have
a pattern – gospel melding and
reconstituting families.

What follows is a sketch of new life:
There is a binding of wounds, and
then the baptism(s), then
a banquet shared, an early breakfast,
and great rejoicing among those
who have experienced a balance of
peace and joy the jailer’s paycheck
never promised and never delivered.

What I want us to see –
this is not something
confined to the jailer.
The turning to Jesus has an impact upon
a family system; a “household.”
Many lives are changed for good.
No longer are there strangers,
looking out with suspicion and mistrust.
No longer the divide of fear.
Life has been shaken and stirred and we
see what is beautiful –
a peace and harmony rising in a place
and people you would least expect.

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MOTHER’S DAY – THEN AND NOW ...

Let’s face forward.
What has a lesson such as this to do with
Mother’s Day? Quite a bit, I believe.

Mother’s day is traceable to about
a hundred years ago,
when Anna Jarvis crusaded for a national day
to recognize all mothers as she desired
to recognize her mother.
It all started in one West Virginia church (1907).
It started small, but quickly grew –
from county to county,

state to state -
until President Wilson issued the first
presidential proclamation in 1914.

Anna, though, was building in part
upon the work of
Julia Ward Howe (1819-1910),
who had a vision that women might
rally for peace, that they and their allies might rise
and oppose war in all its forms.
That was Julia's vision - not a Mother's Day for Mothers,
but a Mother's Day for Peace
(Wilson domesticated and reduced
Howe's radical vision; he played the man card).

Julia Ward Howe was aware of how devastating war
and a war based economy was upon the economic
life of families. And her vision wasn't limited
to the women of New England,
nor the women and families of the north,
nor the women and families of the south,
still suffering the effects of civil war in United States.

She was looking for women of the world
to rise and unite and foment change
for the children of earth.

I have nothing against Harriet Tubman being
portrayed on one side of the twenty dollar bill.
I'm all for it.
But I'm of a mind we have enough bills in circulation
to picture more than one woman,
and Julia Ward Howe gets my vote -
for the \$2, the \$10, or the \$50.

She was brilliant and broad in her thinking
(she was fluent in seven languages);
she was unbending and resolute in desiring to curb
the maniacal tendencies of her male counterparts;
she endured in a faith that worked for a better day
she herself didn't live to see.
She endured a "stultifying" marriage,
along with the depression brought about by
a spouse (Samuel Gridley Howe)
who was not altogether supportive;

when he died, the first line in her journal was: **“Start my new life today.”** She lived another three-and-a-half decades, as poet, teacher, reformer; she gained such esteem that some called her: **“Queen of America.”** At her death, her children wrote a Pulitzer Prize winning biography. And lest we forget, when we sing, **“The Battle Hymn of the Republic,”** we are singing the verse by Julia Ward Howe.

What is important for us to see—so much had violently shaken the foundations of her world — how tempting to withdraw from the “shock and awe;” yet she refused to wilt; to be a recluse; she herself was a “shaker,” an advocate for a reformed life — she pushed for a society more just and peaceful and equitable, not only for her own sake, but for all God’s children. We see in her the beauty of a balanced life: though turmoil without, there was deep peace within.

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Yet another fast forward. Today — our challenges are different, yet no less daunting than those of previous generations. Our lives are peppered with shock and awe experiences that prove to stretch, if not break, the faith we profess.

The shock can be very personal; or it can be shared by many, when we each sense the foundations that hold us together may have been so shaken as to fundamentally alter the life we share, and we fear for our future, and shudder to think our lives may never be the same.

I’ve detected a considerable amount of election anxiety in recent days. Conversations begin one way, end up with questions or commentary about the recent election.

And how shocking — how quickly things have changed in little less than a week. Before the

primary election on Tuesday - Indiana was center stage for the nation. We had all sorts of folks visiting Fort Wayne. I'm surprised they found us. Yet folks showed up. And then they were gone, and so was a lot of hope.

David Brooks wrote an essay/editorial this past week, that captured the turmoil of our times, much exposed in an election year. We are so oppositional, so polarized, that many are cynical and filled with disgust at the dysfunction. He said, in part:

“We’re now at a point in which normal political conversation is has broken down. People feel unheard, which makes them shout ... which further destroys conversation.”

It is not a pretty picture Brooks painted. He mentioned printing out a Twitter list of insults hurled by Donald Trump at his opponents - the print out took up 33 pages, bashing, name-calling, discrediting others seen as standing in his way.

As a nation, we are in many ways at war with our ourselves, struggling to determine how best can we begin to meet the great and many challenges we face.

Aren't we all asking and wondering, who best will lead us into tomorrow, less polarized, less broken than we are today?

There is another way. Brooks reminded that **“Politics is a way of ruling divided societies without undue violence.”** While often muddled and messy, there is a beauty therein.

“It involves endless conversation in which we learn about other people and see things from their vantage point and try to balance their needs against our own” (“The Governing Cancer of our Time,” Feb., 2016, NYT).

Such conversation includes giving **“consent to disagree.”**

You don't have to see the world my way in order for me

to see you as a friend; our relationship, our ties, are stronger than lesser things over which we may disagree.

What binds us is not my way, or your way,
or the UCC way, or the Plymouth way.
What binds us is greater than any one way –
what binds us is an acknowledgement of need
for balance in the beauty of holiness; and
our need to follow Jesus,
trusting in his grace, his mercy,
and the love that endures forever.

Long ago a Philippi jailer, having had his world
turned upside down and fearing his future, asked:
What must I do to be saved? Paul gave an option:
Believe and trust in Jesus, and all will be well.
As once it was, so may it for us today.

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)*