

Plymouth Congregational Church of Fort Wayne, UCC
May 22, 2016

“A Good Read”

“... the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.”
II Corinthians 3:6

Prelude

Our worship this morning provides time for an affirmation of ministry of one of our own, the licensed ministry of Allen Haynes.

Allen is the third member of Plymouth Church to attain such standing. He joins Eric Black and David Grim, who are likewise certified to serve.

Permit a word on the process involved in our coming to this; and also on what is required and what is expected of Licensed Ministers.

It was a year or so ago that I approached Allen and asked him to discern his interest in seeking authorization to serve as a Licensed Minister. He paused ... and paused ... and then paused some more. Eventually, he indicated that yes, he would enter the process.

The process we mapped included the writing of a paper, a portion of which was devoted to Allen's faith journey, the distilling of a lifetime of years into a few pages; the paper also served as a formal request of support from Plymouth.

This paper was presented to the Executive Council (EC) of Plymouth Church. EC then interrogated Allen. They questioned and engaged Allen. They also were asked to discern - did they see in Allen the spirit and character, the ability and maturity, to be “licensed” for ministry in our mix.

To clarify:
in the Body of Christ, we are all ministers,
with the capacity and charge
to serve as each is able, and as each is gifted.

We all have the capacity to show and
share the love of God in Christ.
But some are authorized for specific tasks,
often pertaining to teaching, or pastoral care,
or the leading of worship in the church community.

EC deliberated and said yes.
But they do not confer certification
for Licensed Ministry.
A local church requests certification
of the association of which we are part.
So Allen, with EC support and encouragement,
trotted off and appeared before
the Committee on Ministry of the
Northeast Indiana Association of the UCC.

Betty Barry of Plymouth Church sits on
that committee - if you want good church
gossip, knowledge of who is running
fair and foul of church circles,
Betty is a source - if you can pry it.
She can't disclose anything really,
but she is on the front line where
such conversations take place.

The Association's Committee on Ministry

reviewed Allen's paper; and they interrogated;
they deliberated (behind closed doors).
And they said - yes.

Licensed ministers in the UCC
do not freelance;
According to the faith and order of our church,
their ministry is grounded here, in our midst.
Their license is annually reviewed,
annually renewed by the association.
They serve - as assigned, as able,
among us, that we might live out
our calling to be a people of God's
love and grace.

This coming summer,
Allen, Eric Black, and David Grim
will be preaching and helping lead
worship during vacation schedules.
And other occasions, I'm sure, will
be arranged.

One of the resources the
Committee on Ministry uses
in its work is a document titled:
"The Marks of Faithful and Effective
Authorized Ministers in the UCC."
Four pages, five sections,
listing what marks and skills and abilities
are required and expected.

- **section on spiritual foundation**
(faith, commitment, sense of being called; open to continuing
discernment and growth)
- **section on UCC history, identity,**
knowledge of UCC commitments to
ecumenism, justice, radical hospitality;
understanding of covenant, willingness to

live in the covenants of mutual accountability

- **Personal and Professional formation:**
demonstrated moral maturity, integrity in personal and public life, responsibility to self, family, church, community;
- **General knowledge and skills** (Section 4)
to understand and appreciate a variety of perspectives; to understand the profound differences that physical, psychological, gender identity, sexual orientation, age, class, cultural, religious, racial and ethnic factors make in the ways human being experience the world; to understand and interpret people; to communicate clearly and effectively;
- **Knowledge and Skills Specific to Ministry**
thorough knowledge of the Bible;
skill with methods of interpretation;
15 different abilities,
 - to articulate ... and practice ministry;
 - to analyze ... to engage ... to appreciate...
 - to celebrate ... to preach ... to organize ...
 - to implement ... to lead and encourage ministries of evangelism, service, stewardship, and social transformation.

No. 15 “to preach the good news, lead worship ... in a manner faithful to the broader Christian heritage and appropriate to the characteristics of a specific culture and setting.”

This means one is expected to know and appreciate what goes on down the street; but also know how we order and practice our worship here.

What I simply want to convey here –
we do not authorize or license ministry lightly,
but with some measure of thought and prayer;
we may not be as rigorous as some,

but we are not as lax as others, who may
“sell the office;” who expect little
more than a check that won’t bounce
to issue a card
indicating you can go and
pretty much do as you will.

The church is always in need of ministers
to do well the work the church expects and
needs to be done. The church is always in
need of ministers dedicated and devoted to
advancing its mission. And I’m grateful that
some have said “yes” when they experienced
being nudged along.

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THE LESSON FROM CORINTHIANS

Our lesson this morning, taken from Paul’s letter to
the church at Corinth, is an early Christian endeavor
to discern “the marks” of faithful and effective ministry.

Paul is in part addressing what “marks” truly matter
in ministry. He presses the thought -
as Christians we are “a letter of Christ.”
People will not read our bulletin material
to sense and determine who we are,
and what we believe;
some may show up to visit having
checked out our website or FaceBook,
but it will not compute if they don’t
read experientially in us
what we write elsewhere.

Paul was equally aware, if the mind is
bound to the strict letter of law we will
all trip and continually stumble; we will
all fall flat.

Paul was an advocate for understanding that
it is the Spirit of God that gives life,
and that Spirit is conveyed as grace,
working for good, forgiving, amending,
transforming our lives, such that we grow
and regenerate in God's love.

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So - this morning, I pose the question:
What is to be seen in us,
that we will be **a good read**
for people to encounter and
comprehend gospel?

What is to be seen in us,
what dare we
prize and value and cherish,
to inspire life pleasing and
acceptable to God?
What is to be seen in us that
we will be **a good read**,
imparting faith, hope, love
into the world?

(1) IF WE ARE TO BE A GOOD READ,
PEOPLE NEED TO SEE THAT WE ARE
COMMITTED TO PERSONAL AND SOCIAL
TRANSFORMATION

I happened to revisit the work of Richard Foster
this week, and his book, *Streams of Living Water -
celebrating the Great Traditions of Christian Faith*.

He has chapters devoted to Imitation;
Contemplation (Prayer);
Holiness (Virtue);
Charismatic (Spirit-empowered life);

Social Justice (Compassionate life)
Evangelical (Word-centered life)
and Incarnational (sacramental).

When Paul writes to the Corinthians that
“you are a letter of Christ” – he is, I believe,
urging us to be an incarnational people.

The Spirit of the Living God
falls fresh upon us, and God’s love
gets written upon our hearts.

According to Foster, the incarnational stream
of Christian faith is based upon
**“making present and visible the realm of the
invisible spirit ... (it) addresses the crying need
to experience God as truly manifest and
notoriously active in daily life.”**

Notoriously active in daily life – for life.
Notoriously active in daily life – now.
Notoriously active in daily – for our good,
our health, our wholeness.

Illustrating the incarnational life – for Foster –
was Susanna Wesley (1669—1742) because of her
**“complete immersion for finding God in the
details of daily life.”**

**“Help me, Lord, to remember that religion
is not to be confined to the church, or closet,
nor exercised only in prayer and meditation,
but that everywhere I am in Thy presence.
So may my every word and action have a
moral content ... May all the happenings in
my life prove useful and beneficial to me.
May all things instruct me and afford me
an opportunity of ... daily learning and
growing toward Thy likeness ... Amen.**

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(2) WE ARE A GOOD READ WHEN WE ARE A BELIEVING
PEOPLE, BELEIVING DEFINED AS BELOVING ...

When he turned 70, Marcus Borg (1942-2015) wrote a book,
Convictions - How I Learned What Matters.

In an opening section he graphed out
what he saw as the landscape for Christians in America.

- **Conservative Christians**
- **Conventional Christians**
- **Uncertain Christians**
- **Former Christians**
The “form of Christianity they learned growing
up ceased to be persuasive and compelling.”
They are still curious, still seeking, still hoping
there may be a vision of Christianity they can embrace
- **Progressive Christians**
Believing matters...but believing is best defined as
“beloving” - “What we believe shapes our lives
and has great transformational power”
(Borg, *Convictions*, p. 15).

Are we a begrudging or believing people?
Are we straight-jacketed by our faith,
pillars of fear, or freed to explore and discover more,
more, more, what it means to be
forgiven, accepted, growing in grace?

Our challenge - day by day, week by week:
be a good read. May people see in you
the grace and mercy they need to
grasp God’s good intent - the love

that comes for us to attain the
abundant life as promised, as delivered,
by Jesus Christ.

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)*