

Plymouth Congregational Church of Fort Wayne, UCC  
June 26, 2016

**“Who Will Follow?”**

“... The spirit of Elijah rests on Elisha.”  
I Kings 2:15

**Prelude**

We have two lessons in our worship  
this morning, and I want to comment  
upon both, to distill, if you will,  
what they might offer us today.

They each address a concern  
over leadership,  
and the question -  
who will follow the leader?

I have some recollection of  
a children’s game  
that once I played:  
Follow the Leader.  
It is a faint recollection.

The game used elimination  
to determine a victor.  
You either followed the leader’s action,  
or you were out. And if you were good,  
if adept enough to outlast your  
fellow competitors,  
then in a next round, you were designated  
the leader others were challenged to follow.

Follow the leader.  
A challenging game for young children;  
and for adults who aren’t always sure  
leaders merit following.

There is a question looming in the background, that I haven't been able to free from my mind since first it was posed. In the aftermath of the Orlando massacre two weeks ago today, President Obama was quoted as saying:

**“We have to decide if (this) is the kind of country we want to be. To actively do nothing is a decision as well.”**

This statement pertained to the issue of gun control, and if the Orlando massacre would spur any kind of action that might reasonably serve to curb the easy acquisition of guns in our country - in particular the assault grade weapons that permit largely unregulated magazine capacities.

This week *Time Magazine* reported there are 270 million guns owned in the U.S. (that's 88.8 guns per every 100 people). This number comes from a dated survey (2007), which may not reflect the actual count. A Congressional Research Service in 2009 concluded there was 310 million guns available to U.S. citizens, which indicates we have more guns in this country than people. Whether you assume the low or high number, we have more guns here than in the next 23 countries combined which were included in the Time comparison of guns and nations.

We have to decide -  
is this the kind of country we want to be?  
We have to decide.

To date - **“we the people”** -  
have actively done nothing.  
Our political leaders are on a moral vacation  
that doesn't look to end when they

return to work following their recess.

I don't bring this up to grandstand on gun control - and let me be clear - this isn't about prohibiting a perch during deer season or denying "ducks unlimited" their field time; but to acknowledge what is very real - a "**skittishness**" that has seeped into many of our spirits.

I was in a Kroger parking lot the other day,  
and somebody set off a firework -  
and I was skittish -  
I cowered and ducked before I turned  
to look and see what fool was having fun.

Not all have been actively doing nothing.  
Marian Wright Edelman has observed:  
**"America is running out of safe spaces."**  
She is unquestionably right.  
It is left more to chance than choice,  
where hate, and bigotry, and terrorism,  
and mental illness (all contributing factors)  
will converge with unfettered access  
to weapons of war.

The Indiana resident arrested in California  
with intent to wreak havoc upon LA Pride,  
was in possession of a virtual arsenal.  
Although he was in the criminal justice  
system - on probation for "intimidation" -  
with a restraining order preventing  
possession of firearms, he had a treasure  
chest of munitions and explosives  
when apprehended.

So we - in church - are engaged in doing  
what every other institution in this country

is doing - every school K-12, every college and university, every hospital, every public office or institution, every facility director of stadium or arena - we are wonder about and seeking to be prepared for a **“hostile intruder, active shooter”**; we are working, praying about how best we can maintain the decorum required of a sanctuary, where safety and peace will prevail in our house of worship.

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Skittish.

I use this term to convey that sensation of being a little nervous. Restive. Edgy. For the record, I'm not supposed to be skittish. It is not in the job description. But it can seep into our lives.

This in part is an underlying condition that is evident in both of our scripture lessons.

In II Kings, chapter 2, we again meet up with the prophet Elijah.

Elijah, having led such a momentous life,  
is now in his waning years.  
The great battles, Elijah's game of thrones,  
the confrontations with the dynastic elites,  
with whom he faced off in the prime of life,  
have all been archived.  
Elijah's great encounters, heroic exploits,  
are past tense;  
no enemies now threaten;  
there are no giants to fell.  
We find ourselves at the end of an age,  
a point of transition.

Elijah, the great defender  
and protector of faith,  
has aged out of his role.

We are told at the beginning of chapter  
what is to unfold. The Lord was to take  
Elijah up to heaven in a whirlwind.  
This is something other than a **“spoiler alert.”**

The text suggests there is  
an anxiety in the air -  
a skittishness, a nervousness  
about what leader will emerge  
when Elijah whirlwinds  
up, up and away.  
Who will replace the Elijah who has  
served with such honor and distinction  
that his life is decorated with legend  
magnified with miracle?

Elijah doesn't seem to know.  
He has a student, Elisha,  
but there is no strong bond;  
Elijah is content to proceed  
on his own.  
He says to Elisha, “Stay here, for the Lord has  
sent me as far as Gilgal.”  
Elisha is resistant - **“I will not leave you.”**

They journey together,  
from Gilgal to Bethel (II Kings 2:2).  
And a second time, Elijah seeks for Elisha  
to take leave. **“Stay here,”** Elijah orders.  
Yet again, Elisha resists.  
**“I will not leave you”** (I Kings 2:4).  
So the journey continues -  
from Bethel to Jericho. And there,  
then again, a third time, Elijah speaks

**“stay here”** to Elisha.  
And a third time, Elisha retorts:  
**“I will not leave you.”**  
So the journey continues, from Jericho,  
to the Jordon River.

The reading didn't permit some of the nuance  
that is lodged in this lesson. Twice mention is made  
of **“the company of prophets.”** Other students,  
other followers, having a word with Elisha.  
**“Do you know that today the Lord  
will take your master away ...”**  
(II Kings 2:3 [Bethel]; 2:5 [Jericho]).

At the river Elijah parts the Jordon,  
like Moses before had parted the sea.  
The journey continues into the east.  
And then the question - Elijah to Elisha,  
the one soon to whirlwind out,  
to the one who follows. What do you want?  
Elish: Let me inherit a double portion  
of your spirit.

This is indicative, not of what Elisha got,  
but of what he wanted. His desire was great,  
very great indeed, to gain double what he so  
cherished and prized in his Master and Teacher.

Elijah's response?  
**“You have asked a hard thing.”**  
Not a vote of confidence.  
Elijah is non-committal.  
Maybe; maybe not.  
Be alert to what you see.

Well - Elisha does see.  
Does he rise, so as to exceed Elijah -  
a doubt dose? Not really.  
But he carries on.

He becomes the leader others follow.  
The "Spirit" that animated Elijah  
is not extinguished; it carries  
on in the lives of those who  
are determined to faithfully follow.

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In our gospel lesson,  
Jesus clearly is eager for followers.  
Yet all who express interest are  
not wholly determined.

Follow me, Jesus speaks,  
but some pause with an excuse:  
I've got funeral duty.

Follow me, Jesus speaks,  
yet another postpones -  
let me first bid farewell  
to those at home.

Note: according to Luke,  
Jesus is not promoting  
a personality cult of his own making.  
He is promoting kin-dom reality.  
He is enlisting community activists.  
Go, proclaim the kin-dom of God,  
as you are, wherever you are,  
don't withhold and  
don't look back.

He is urging for a decision to be made.  
We have to decide  
what kind of country we want to be;  
we have to decide  
what kind of church we want to be,  
we have decide  
what kind of Christian we want to be.

To actively do nothing is a decision.

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Two quotes and conclusion - - -

(1)

**“Great works are performed,”**  
so Samuel Johnson once observed,  
**“not by strength but by perseverance.”**

(2)

**“I am only one, but I am one.**  
**I cannot do everything, but**  
**I can do something.**  
**And because I cannot do everything,**  
**I will not refuse to do the something**  
**that I can do.”**

Edward Everett Hale  
(1822-1909; often noted to have been a  
Unitarian, he served as the pastor of  
South Congregational Church, Boston )

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## **Conclusion**

Our faith is exposed,  
not by what creed we recite,  
    although creeds are important  
        touchstones and expressions  
        for the journey of life;  
not by covenants,  
    although our covenants define and  
        express what we hold most dear,  
        and they serve to keep us accountable



to God and to ourselves;  
not be what we believe, although belief is a  
critical component of faith;  
belief is assent to what we hold in  
our hearts.

Christian faith is seen, and felt,  
and conducive to good,  
only in its determination to  
follow the Leader;  
only with our resolve to carry it forward  
wherever the love and light of  
Jesus Christ is needed.

The choice is ours,  
each and every day of our lives.  
May our choices be wise,  
and consistent,  
in keeping with  
the love that is our peace,  
now and forever.

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)*