

Plymouth Congregational Church of Fort Wayne, UCC
September 11, 2016

“The More We Seek”

**“... tax collectors and sinners
were coming near to listen ...”
Luke 15:1**

Prelude

It is always exciting to **“kick off”**
a new programming season
in the life of the church.
Such a festive display to mark
the fall commencement of our
educational mission:
the balloons, the children,
the gifting of Bibles,
the introduction of teachers,
all in hope -
all in hope -
that we might grow together
in our knowledge and awareness
of the God who calls and gathers
us as a church of Jesus Christ.

A little over a century ago, our
congregational forbearers
issued a statement of faith
in which they declared:

**“We are united in striving to know the
will of God as taught in the holy scriptures,
and in our purpose to walk in the ways of the Lord,
made known or to be made known.”**

**We hold it to be the mission of the church ...
to proclaim the gospel to all humanity ...**

**(to labor) for the progress of knowledge,
the promotion of justice, the reign of peace ...”**
 (“Kansas City Statement of Faith,” 1913; in the
Pilgrim Hymnal, Worship Aid No. 53).

I don't regularly revisit this statement of faith,
but when I do, it always gives me pause.
It echoes Paul writing to the Romans:
**“Do not be conformed to this world (this age),
but be transformed by the renewing of your
minds, so that you may discern what is the
will of God – what is good and acceptable and
perfect”** (Romans 12:2).

It (the KC Statement of Faith) has
a profound outlook, a progressive air,
a firm conviction that **God has spoken**
and made known ways in which
it is beneficial for us to walk;
and that **God is still speaking**,
and there are ways to be made known,
that will signal progress,
an advancement of humanity,
for goodness sake.

God has been;
God will be;
faith is our determination
to participate in this graceful,
gospel dynamic.

To be involved in such work is a tall order,
a daily challenge;
often enough we lose our way;
so no component in our life together
is of more importance than the
educational mission of the church.

So I remind:

- (a) We have a story to share, an outlook on life to impart; and it is our dreams and visions that set us apart, that protect us from conforming to a decaying world;
- (b) We have a history that is unique, that informs our witness; we don't want to be "puffed up" in exalting our history, but rather protective, to insure that we serve as a living heritage of the gospel.
- (c) Church is not a chummy club notable for high fives, hugs, and heartfelt handshakes (although these are welcome); and we just don't show up to show off and then head on out. We are here in quest for transformation of our lives; and we share life in a **force field of faith**, a "**force field**" we need, and that we desire to make accessible to our children.

This understanding of faith as a "**force field**" was invoked by James Fowler in his work, *Stages of Faith* (1981). Fowler noted a nutritional deficiency - a reduction of faith - confined in belief, which we might see as a cognitive nod, an affirmation to propositional statement(s), said to seal the deal for those being saved.

Fowler was on the cusp of dissent, revisioning faith as a complex dynamic; faith is relational, it is a vow to be kept; a covenant to be acted upon; it is a pledge of trust and loyalty, not to a book or creed, pastor or priest, but to a living God, a living, dying, rising Jesus, who bids us be alive and loving

in a “**selfie**” crazed world.

For Fowler, faith “**is a way of moving into the force field of life** ... it is where “**truth is lived**” ... and experienced in all and with all we encounter ... faith defines how we “**pattern**” our being.

Our educational mission is to nurture faith,
a “**pattern of being**” that conforms
to the love of Jesus Christ.

***** ***** *****

The scripture lesson this morning from Luke, selected verses from the 15th chapter. We find here a “**pattern of being,**” a “**force field of life,**” so characteristic of the ministry of Jesus.

Let’s briefly revisit.

The setting is simple enough.
Jesus is sharing the company of Pharisees and scribes.

Pharisees and scribes –
these are people traditionally understood to be religious professionals (the scribes), and the religiously inclined
(the Pharisees were serious about practicing faith as a pattern of their being; they didn’t simply believe; they were equally devoted to behaving).

Another group is also identified as being in company with Jesus.

**“Tax collectors and sinners
were coming near to listen.”**

In the words of one translation the
tax collectors and sinners were
“all crowding around”
(Cont. Eng. Version; Luke 15:1).

J.B Phillips, the English translator of
scripture, suggests a different reading:
he wrote of **“tax collectors and ‘outsiders,’”**
as crowding around.

So we have an unlikely mix –
insiders and outsiders;
saints and sinners;
members and non-members;
religious types who look and act the part,
along with those who don't.

Jesus was not stressed by this;
but some were, particularly
the insiders who were put off –
not by the outsiders
coming near to listen,
but by Jesus' rather benign
acceptance of their presence
in the pattern of his being.

So – they grumbled, wondering
why Jesus would be accepting of such
folk in the force field of life.

Jesus is aware of the tension in the air,
and so he proceeds to tell three parables,
two of which we heard in our lesson;
he doesn't want to miss out on this
teachable moment.

He speaks about a herd of 100 sheep,
but one becomes lost; and the owner goes off,
and will not give up, until the one is found.

And a second parable, a woman in possession
of 10 coins, loses one, and she will search and
search and search until the one is found.

What do we see and understand
in these parables?

I suggest they are radical assertions
designed to enlarge our understanding
of what should be normative in our
pattern of being.

The one who is lost is worth seeking.
Indeed, the Seeker engaged in the search
will not halt, will not suspend, will not cease
seeking until lost has been found.
The Seeker has an obsession,
not with some, but with all –
even one who has wandered off,
who faces danger and peril alone.

In pondering these parables, I've often
confined my thought to what was lost–
the sheep and a coin, and
neglected somewhat who was seeking.

Take the second parable –
the women with coins.
We should note:

Luke has a not-so-subtle interest in women that far exceeds our other gospels. It is in Luke that we read of mothers, Marys, Marthas, all playing significant roles. And so this parable, featuring a woman with coinage (Luke's interest in women - see *The Bible and the Common Reader*, by Mary Ellen Chase, p. 272; 1944).

Don't you wonder:

How did she come to have this
household money?

Was it a household of one? Any children
to feed and clothe?

Was she consumed with finding the lost coin
because she was charged with keeping the
household accounts, she knew what bills were
due and when they needed be paid
and why the one coin was so needed?

When the coin was found,
did she call for her wife -
along with friends and neighbors -
to share the joy?

That the woman is the Seeker
of what is lost enlarges the framework
of how we might typically
conceive grace at work in the world,
in the pattern of our being.

Yet there it is in this parable:

the self-sufficient woman who has
no need of man
to party hardy
in finding the prize
that was lost.

Even so, happy though she may be,
"there is joy in the presence

of the angels of God over one sinner repents.”

***** ***** *****

A final thought - or two.
In the force field of life where Jesus reigns,
much has been made known to us,
but there is always more to be made known
in the ways of God's love and grace.
There always exists **the hope**,
the possibility of amendment,
in the merciful love that leads to
 peace and joy.

The accent here is on hope.
When youth, who are prone to indiscretions,
get lost, we hold out hope for them to
turn around, come to their senses.

When we advance in age, and we
get lost in various stages of mental or
physical diminishment,
we hold our hope, we are being sought
by the One whose love never rests
until our transformation is complete, and
we rest together in the never ending life.

CONCLUSION

I want to close with a quote from E. O. Wilson,
the brilliant Harvard entomologist, noted for his
inquiry, his seeking to understand the earth and
the fullness thereof; it was Wilson who
gave voice to the term “biodiversity” (1985),
who has mused: so much (diversity) from
so little (physical matter). Wilson has written;

**“Our sense of wonder grows exponentially:
the greater the knowledge, the deeper the**

**mystery, and the more we seek
knowledge to create new mystery”**

(E.O Wilson, quoted in the D. Boorstin, *The Seekers*,
Pt. VII, “Sanctuaries of Doubt”).

The more we seek,
the more mystery.
The more we seek,
the more understanding.
The more we seek,
the more we gain,
and the more we can give away.

Let us not waver in this grand adventure,
with the gospel of love and grace
entrusted to our care.

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)*