

Plymouth Congregational Church of Fort Wayne, UCC
October 16, 2016

“Antidote for the Intractable”

**“Jesus told them a parable about their need to
pray always and not to lose heart.”**

Luke 18:1

PRELUDE

I've resisted offering much commentary
on the headline news that so dominates
our lives during an election year.

The process of determining who will serve
in the highest office in the land;
and who will be seated in the
chambers of congress;
and who will judge cases brought
before the supreme court,
is of such tremendous importance.

The great challenges we face today
impact not only our lives,
but the lives of our children.

So it has been incredibly disappointing,
dispiriting may I say, to digest the debasing
of what is essentially the defining of our
lives in this land.

We are not well served when
gutter thought and moral rot,
character smears and attack ads,
neither inform nor elevate
required political discourse.

Our political system is an experiment,
isn't it, to see if government **“of the people,
by the people, for the people”** shall endure
(Lincoln, *Gettysburg Address*, 1863).

The system does not appear to be working well;
and this year's election, when over in a few weeks,

will not restore life to any measureable degree
of normal. We will continue to be challenged
to see if we can work together,
to build a better world,
to pray the kingdom come.

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How long will this take?

One answer comes from the most recent
Nobel Prize for Literature recipient,
singer/songwriter Bob Dylan.

It was in his youth that Bob Dylan asked:

**... how many times must the cannon balls fly
 Before they're forever banned?
... how many years can some people exist
 Before they're allowed to be free?
... how many times can a man turn his head
 And pretend that he just doesn't see?
... how many times must a man look up
 Before he can see the sky?
... how many ears must one man have
 Before he can hear people cry?
... how many deaths will it take 'til he knows
 That too many people have died?**

And he concluded:

**The answer, my friend,
 is blowin' in the wind
The answer is blowin' in the wind.**

It is a rather vague answer –
“blowin’ in the wind.” For the Christian,
though, it’s rather potent language.
The wind is spirit, the spirit is the

power of God, the wisdom of God,
the breathe of God which fills us with life.
And whether bidden or unbidden,
whether we are awake or not,
it is the Spirit that animates our lives,
enabling us to encounter grace/gospel.
It is the spirit that keeps us going,
and doing likewise.

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Our morning lesson,
a parable from Jesus as narrated by Luke,
told for disciples who may well have been
asking: how long? Told to impress upon
followers of Jesus about their need to
pray always and not to lose heart.

Two characters are featured:
a woman - single - widowed.
The woman lacks peace,
for an opponent (unidentified)
is denying her the justice
that is her right.
Her human right.

She pleads her case before a judge,
who has no outstanding merit whatsoever.
This judge would never get a vote to
sit on the supreme court, for he would
never get nominated. He has no religious
faith to speak of, and confesses little more than
contempt for his fellow human beings.
He is, by definition, an unjust judge.

He does act, though, ruling in the
woman's favor, because she is in irritant
disturbing his peace, which is one thing
he does seem to value.

The parable encourages those who have experienced a delay of good they expect from the God whose good has been promised.

The parable encourages those who have been denied what Jesus lived and died to deliver.

The delay and the denial are
disappointing;
the delay and the denial are
depressing;
the delay and the denial are
disheartening;
the delay and the denial are
discouraging.

Jesus counsels us to pray,
not to avoid such experiences,
but to defend ourselves,
to protect ourselves,
to keep ourselves centered
and focused;
to ensure that we are going,
and doing likewise,
in keeping with our calling.

Some Plymouth people will remember in the days leading up the invasion of Iraq, there was a UCC effort, 100,000 Voices - to Join Protest to Prayer. We still have a T-shirt of two around the house. Few may recall that effort. Maybe we were too timid, in both protest and prayer,

knowing the devastation and destruction that has come from that folly. Jesus is certainly clear in the parable, we don't need a just judge with whom to plead. We simply need the temerity and resolve to keep on going where we trust Jesus is leading. And to not forsake our advance when others may resist.

John Thomas, former President of the UCC, once said: **“A church enduring conflict because it stands for something is better than a united church that stand for nothing.”** We pray not to avoid conflict, which is cowardly, but to endure, which is the courageous capacity to struggle.

In our Wednesday evening Bible study, it was pointed out that the woman in this parable was a suffragette (Rev. Bill Deans). She had no standing, as a woman, in the court. Apparently that didn't matter to her. She had standing, a life, in her own estimate, and she was not to be denied her dignity, her due, her rights. She serves to inspire us to **go and do likewise.**

The church as an institution needs to be a praying community - so as not to lose heart - so as not to subvert the gospel entrusted to its care.

So many years ago I heard Charles Cobb, Ex. Director of the UCC Commission for Racial Justice, remind a group of clergy:

“The UCC has the proclivity to do right when pushed.” Our prayer life should be working to help us respond to people who know too much delay, too much denial of their dignity and due.

Which reminds me what Victoria Woodhall, the suffragette who ran for president in 1872, when nominated by the **“Equal Rights”** party (maybe that will resurrect after this election); Woodhall’s life, according to the Ohio State Historical Society, was a **“continuous campaign”** to fight for women’s suffrage, civil rights, and child labor reform laws.” Ms. Woodhull once said:

“While others prayed for the good time coming, I worked for it.”

This is the kind of resolve and determination that would serve us well in being “likewise” people for Jesus.

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I’d like to close with this thought.
The question, how long, how many years, kept recurring in my mind this week. How long this election? How long the plight of the suffering, suffering denied, the oppressed seen as responsible for their oppression, the occupied seen as being responsible for their occupation. And Nelson Mandela came to mind. He spent 27 years in prison, locked away by a brutal apartheid regime in South Africa. How is one sustained day after day in such a despairing condition, sentenced to life?

“As I walked out the door toward the gate that would lead to my freedom, I knew if I didn't leave my bitterness and hatred behind, I'd still be in prison” (Nelson Mandela, 1918-2013; in prison from 1962-1990).

The quote I want to share is this;

“Do not judge me by my successes, judge me by how many times I fell down and got back up again.”

This, in part, is who we are as a Christian people. We aspire to pray always, so as not to lose heart. We trust God will not delay long in helping those who cry night and day. If we listening to the Blowing in the Wind, we may the answer to somebody's prayer.

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)*