

Plymouth Congregational Church of Fort Wayne, UCC
November 13, 2016

**“A United Church
in a Divided Country”**

“I am about to create new heavens and a new earth;
the former things shall not be remembered.”
Isaiah 65:17

PRELUDE

For sermon time this morning I want to honor the theme of commitment and stewardship this day brings to us; I also feel a pastoral obligation to speak to the election results of this past week, and to chart my sense of what it means for us. The two concerns are not totally unrelated. So bear with me – this is not easy work. I hope not to sow seeds of confusion, for too many already litter our lives.

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

First, I give thanks to God for the life and ministry of Plymouth Church, and the opportunity I have to be part of the mix; and I’m grateful for, ever so appreciative of, church members and friends who are committed to the advancement of Plymouth, who give regularly and generously and sacrificially of time, talent, and financial resources, to ensure the ministry entrusted to our care remains strong and viable.

Second, I hereby publicly solicit your continued pledge of support for the upcoming year. We welcome whatever your gift may be if it promises to enhance our common life, if it is in keeping with our faith and mission, if it builds up the “body” for good.

I am aware this has been a year full of offering invitations and financial pleas; our cup runneth over with giving opportunities; they come weekly, and they come as ingrained within the seasons. November - Thanksgiving time; and there are special opportunities uplifted to give so as to help others. Come December - there will be more. It is within our nature, our spiritual DNA, to be charitable and benevolent. These opportunities are not intended to tax, to burden. They are occasions for everyone to exercise faith and life as a "giver" (see I Peter 4:7-11).

There is an interesting translation of a verse from I Peter that captures this thought.

"Each of you has been blessed with one of God's wonderful gifts to be used in the service of others. So use your gift well"
(Cont. Eng. Version).

Or, if you prefer the King James:

"... every (one) hath received the gift ... so minister the same ... to one another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God."

Stewards of the manifold grace of God.

Manifold - there's a word worthy pondering.

The manifold grace of God.

John Wycliffe (1331-1384) used that term in translation in 1384. Wycliffe's translation(s) spurred social upheaval. People actually started reading the Bible. The church and other authorities

were so upset with the lasting impact of social upheaval spawned by the Word of God that 44 years after his death, Wycliffe was declared a heretic, his body exhumed from consecrated ground and burned. That's called outliving your life.

Manifold - meaning many and various kinds; the manifold grace of God is always marked by diversity.

It is our style here to state as clearly as we can what needs we anticipate for the prudent funding of a faithful ministry.

We abstain from use of gimmicks, games, giveaways, gambling, guilt.

We do not threaten hell or promise heaven; we do not encourage the use of an offering pledge as an investment scheme. Do not pledge based upon a hope that God will pour a blessing upon your life tomorrow in exchange for what you give today. A pledge commitment is neither bribe nor bargain with God.

As a church, we do not engage in profitable enterprise or alternative revenue streams (although we do have endowed investments that work in significant ways to help us along the way). We do encourage planned giving (leave more than empty pew beyond the day of your death - through the church you can give from the grave! Isn't that a happy thought?!).

We rely primarily upon member generosity and responsibility to keep Plymouth Church in good physical condition,
in good financial condition;

we rely upon faith, hope, and prayer,
trusting God to provide more than we
ask, more than we can imagine.

It is that simple. To the degree that we are able
to accomplish gospel things - we thank and credit
the God most holy, wonderful and wise.

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

On Wednesday, November 9, we learned
the results of the overly long and raw
2016 election, the determination of
who would next serve as
 president and vice-president
in our United States, along with those
newly elected officials (congressman,
senator, governor), who would serve
in Washington and Indianapolis.

It was an historic election.
Stunning. Both in its coarse conduct,
 and in its unexpected results.
It was something few could see coming -
 “like a thief in the night”
to borrow a quote from scripture
(Matthew 24:43; see also I Thessalonians 5:2).

The headline of the *Wall Street Journal*
proclaimed: “A New Political Order.”

The Rev. Franklin Graham
has credited **“divine intervention.”**
The victor has brought us saving
grace, and spared us divine smite.
The Rev. Graham, from among many others,
is tragic figure, corrupting faith
for the power he prizes.

Some entrepreneurial Christians are hawking materials for the unsettled.

**“U.S. election results got you stressed?
Learn how you can live for Christ
in a confused culture in our
‘Thriving in Babylon’ devotional.”**

Questions have been asked of me:

How did we get here?
How could this have happened?
Where do we go from here?

Others have more openly expressed fear and dismay – sensing all that was vile and crude in the campaign will continue in the new administration. Later this morning, I’ve been asked to speak to the Fort Wayne Quakers who meet here. I’ve been asked: what precaution is Plymouth taking to ensure the safety of people who find sanctuary here. Here’s the fear – it is permissible to speak and act in ways that demean and disparage others. Fashionable.

There is a tradition in our nation unlike any other. We have often spoken of being an “exceptional people.” It has to do with our character; our institutions; our confidence, swagger, and generosity. This election did not meet exceptional standards.

We received an e-letter this week,
“A Pastoral Letter to a United Church
in a Divided Country.”

It reads, in part:

This week we woke up to a new reality.

“Our country and its citizens once again successfully elected a new leader. As we gather to worship this weekend, we will find among us many who are celebrating the decision that was reached – and many who are mourning. We are, by all measures, a deeply divided people.”

“Because this election sharply separated us over matters of race, gender, human sexuality, faith, economic inequality, and political persuasions, we all bear a heavy burden moving forward. It is our call, our shared mission, to heed the call of God’s Spirit and to work to repair damages in our deeply wounded and fiercely broken body.”

As a nation we are a deeply wounded and
fiercely broken body.

And the pain, the anger, the apprehension
and uncertainty – the racial, religious, and
cultural resentments –
existing prior to the election,
remain pretty much intact.
And not talking about it is a false tonic.

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

Anger/Resentments

Permit a word or two about anger, for lots of
anger abounds. Economic anger. Racial anger.
Anger at the alien. Anger and grief over values
some see slipping away. Anger at being overlooked,
unheard, dismissed.

**“Anger as soon as fed is dead –
‘Tis starving makes it fat” (Emily Dickinson).**

Lot of anger has grown fat in our culture,
starved for attention. Few are looking in
a mirror to realize they are in need of diet.

It was in July of 2015 I heard Robert Putnam
speak at Lakeside, Ohio. He was a book tour,
just having published: *Our Kids - the American
Dream in Crisis*. And he was sounding an alarm
on the devastating perils of income inequality.
Unlike his own youth in Ottawa County, Ohio, the
current generation is rived with disparity, the haves
and have-nots living in “two separate universes,”
and the cause was an economy that was functioning
in any way to be supportive of family life. So families
today are in tatters compared to what once was the
norm when Putnam was growing up. Lots of people
there in Ohio, in the rustbelt states, in small towns
and villages, overweighed with anger, and they voted
for the person they believed heard them.

Honor your anger. Channel your anger.
Pray that you not starve and make it fat.

**WE HAVE OUR WORK CUT OUT FOR US;
WE STAY THE COURSE AND STICK WITH
THE MISSION!**

There are a lot of unknowns about what will unfold
in the “new political order.” Our responsibility is
to stay the course and stick with the mission of the
church. And this is where things get interesting.
As one acquaintance expressed to me this week:
“I find it all rather invigorating.”

What is clear is that foundational elements of

our faith collide with core values as expressed by the administration elect, in particular, with the faith expressions of our former governor.

As governor, Mike Pence – always quick to assert first his Christian identity, was not a friend of Plymouth Church. He consistently acted contrary to core values we hold most dear. He paid little heed and offered no welcome to the values we espouse.

He was friends with the **NRA**, welcoming no provision for any reasonable curbing of guns, guns, more guns.

He was friends the **American Family Association**, which the Southern Poverty Law Center has declared a “hate group” for its obsession and fear of gay men and lesbian women.

As a **Christian Zionist**, he was friends with Israel, with neither mind nor heart for the plight of the occupied in Gaza or the West Bank of Palestine.

As a friend of the **coal industry**, he was neither earthwise nor sensitive to the environmental impact of burning fossil fuels which is killing our planet; melting the glaciers. In this, he was/is not only at odds with the UCC teaching on the environment, he was at odds with Pope Francis (Laudate Si).

As a friend of **Right to Life**, he sought to impose cruel, unnecessary restrictions upon any woman facing a pregnancy with unintended consequences; he signed a bill that led the nation, intruding where governor is not helpful or needed, into the privacy of a doctor-patient relationship, restricting a women’s right to choose.

As a friend of **closed borders**, he sought to prevent churches from settling Syrian refugees, sensing they posed a terrorist threat to Indiana.

As a **friend of school vouchers**, his pushed policy has made life so hard for public schools and public school teachers.

So ... we have our work cut out for us.
And let us be clear. Our work is not for us.
It is gospel work for our children, and the planet that will be their home. We work and pray and witness for their future, as much as for ours.

My commitment to you?
We will do our best to do our duty to God and to our country, to defend and advance the best that we are as a Christian people, to pray our way forward, into a glorious liberty of goodness and peace.

If we people are designed with an inner calibration to give and sacrifice for good greater than self, in some noble and redemptive purpose, which I believe we are - we are going to have any number of opportunities to practice and witness to our Christian faith. So we will encourage:

... pray for neighbors, friends, and enemies;
... to seek out those hurting, aimless, unaided and alone;
... to raise up a generation who will go and do likewise
in keeping with the manifold grace of God,
and the love of Jesus.

I want to return to the pastoral letter,
“A United Church in a Divided Country:”

“Dear United Church of Christ,

**We were built to heal bodies broken and divided.
This is our calling. Our core values of love,
hospitality, and justice for all must be fully embraced
in the days to come. It could well be that we were
called into being for just such a time as this.”**

It could be that Plymouth Church was called into
being for just such a time as this.

If so, it will take courage and commitment on
the part of many. We need to be careful - and
avoid the pride that turns angels into devils.
We need to pray for hope and trust in the vision
we heard from Isaiah the prophet - who sets before
us the great transformation God has in store for
creations. New heavens, a new earth, sustainable,
peaceful, glorious and wonderful. With no more
fear. No more war. No more having life cut short,
and children being denied their future.

Presidents come and they go.
So too nations, and states.
And churches. And pastors.
And people. But we are here for now.
And we have much work ahead of us.
Fear not. We do not face our perils alone.

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)*