

Plymouth Congregational Church of Fort Wayne, UCC
November 6, 2016

**“Worthy of a Place
in the Age of Peace”**

“God is God, not of the dead, but of the living,
for to God all of them are alive.”
Luke 20:38

PRELUDE

Over the years I have grown to appreciate more and more the ritual we observe on the first Sunday in November – naming of church members and loved ones who have died within the past 12 months. It is good faith practice, providing opportunity for the Holy Spirit to work with our sorrow, to comfort us in our acquaintance with loss.

Samuel Johnson (1709-1784),
the brilliant wit and man of letters,
once said when death is at the fore of life,
it **“concentrates the mind wonderfully.”**
That’s not quite what he said; the exact quote –
**“When a man knows he is to be hanged in a
fortnight, it concentrates his mind wonderfully.”**

Concentration does not come easy as the mind is prone to wander; concentration – maintaining mental clarity and spiritual focus for more than a moment – does not come easy in a commercialized, crazed age, when we are deluged with inane sound bites, blitzed with entertainments and soul-numbing distractions.

Odd that brushes with death,
experiences with loss,
are often necessary to waken in us
a sense that life is
precious and wonderful and brief.
Strange that such a sting (I Corinthians 15:56)
is needed that we might concentrate
and focus our minds,
our thoughts and prayers,
on things that truly matter.

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For a moment this morning
I want us to concentrate, for we have
some rather serious matters to ponder.

Let me outline what I hope to address.

First, a couple of reflections on maintaining
“**a fair and balanced**” faith this election year,
which has been a circus of scandal,
both real and imagined.

Second, I want to share some thoughts on
our need for **well-seasoned saints**
to practice a fair and balanced faith
in keeping with the traditions of this church.

By invoking “the traditions of this church,”
I mean Plymouth Church,
a mainline, liberal Protestant Church,
a committed community,
ecumenical in outlook and ironic in spirit,
seeking to broaden sympathy,
to inspire hope and kindness,
in a more just and caring world,
that we might be worthy of a place
in the age of peace,

and that our children might live in
the reality (future) that is our hope,
for which we pray
(That was a very long sentence, I know,
but necessary!).

I recognize there are other churches,
other traditions, who are not like minded
in their concentrations of faith.
We may speak a similar language,
and read from the same book,
yet a dissimilar spirit prevails.
We are responsible to discern
our own saintly pursuits,
which I hope to encourage.

Third, I will close with a plea that
we work and pray for good in this age,
that we, in conjunction with Jesus,
might evolve as a people,
that we might be considered worthy
of a place in the age of peace.

So - the election. In my lifetime I can't recall
a comparable election year to what we have
experience in 2016. It has been long, grueling,
and wearisome. And worrisome.

I will defer to my elders who have greater
perspective if there is any comparable campaign
in our past. I simply have seen and heard in
in both religious and secular arenas, deep concern
over the direction this election cycle has turned.
Some have called it a "nightmare" election -
others view it in apocalyptic terms, that a
new chapter is being scripted, which will bring
our national life to an end as we know it.

Twenty years ago (1996), Paul Fussell spoke of American culture as **“more than ever bellicose, ignorant, selfish, and greedy, shot through with quasi-religious fraud and hypocrisy”** (Fussell, *Doing Battle*, p. 229). I’m not sure much has changed; but much is magnified.

I’ve received stirring appeals from different partisan quarters, urging me as a pastor/preacher, to sound an alarm.

An email letter from the Commonwealth of Kentucky, a state representative (Tom Riner):

“I’m asking you in the name of Jesus to make Request ... ask your flock to consider fasting and praying for virtuous leadership during the 12 hours of voting on Election day ... Can our country survive as a free nation in a culture that celebrates sin and defies God? ... Religious liberty, the sanctity of human life and marriage are at stake if we Christians continue to ignore our duty to vote ... The stakes are titanic ...”

This is an example of religion run amuck,
that stirs anxiety and fear,
that stokes anger and conflict,
that concocts and purveys “real depression”
in the lives of many.

The anxiety is enhanced with the unwelcome
and irresponsible allusions questioning the
integrity of the election process,
and whether the election results will be accepted.
Allegations of fraud and rigging
have people wondering whether we will have
a peaceful transition of power.
Already there is talk of

impeachment, imprisonment, obstruction
to prevent government from working.

What is clear is that party passion,
and single issues, are having a corrosive,
caustic impact upon any reasonable effort
to advance a common good.

I have no clue what the election will bring other
than a day after. I do encourage all people to
participate in the experiment that is uniquely ours
in the United States. Whatever comes,
we cannot afford to drop out and give up.
We need carry on - facing the obstacles
we cannot avoid; we need stay focused,
concentrating our thoughts and prayers upon
the blessings and promises of God
we are wise to prize.

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To keep ourselves on point and unstained,
we need **well-seasoned saints**,
who know something about being
baptized, saved, and sanctified
as Christian in a manner consistent
with our tradition.
The key word here: sanctified.

Oscar Wilde, who knew a thing or two
about being a sinner, said:
**“The only difference between
the saint and sinner is that
every saint has a past
and every sinner has a future.”**

We need such mental acumen in the DNA of our faith,
because we need saints alive, active, at work in
the world. We need people who have experienced

turning points in their lives, such that they are aware of living and advancing life and common good within the design and purpose of God.

As Protestants we have a bit of a different take on saints as that of our Anglican, RC, Orthodox brother and sisters. In the RC church, there is a rather complicated process, the church scrutinizing and adjudicating whether evidence suggests sanctification worthy of sainthood.

Saints get nominated, they have postulators, promoters, who argue in the affirmative; provision is also made for a “Devil’s advocate” to ensure saints worthy of the office have been thoroughly vetted. Just a couple of months ago, Pope Francis formally canonized Mother Teresa, an “ideal” for the church, a model of mercy who lived on behalf and in service with the poorest of the poor, those suffering materially, spiritually.

Mother Teresa died in 1997 – so her canonization took 19 years to deliberate. I don’t know if that is a fast track or not.

What’s curious among other things about Mother Teresa – after her death you may recall it was revealed that she lived for almost 50 years in what some call “**dark night of the soul,**” a virtual absence of God, with no feeling, no touch, no word, no thunder, no still small voice, no inner validation of what gospel she was sharing and projecting to the world. Quite remarkable that she endured and was not dissuaded. She maintained her concentration we might say, which proved sufficient for sainthood.

In our tradition, saints are not elevated to an elite status, which is possible, but largely improbable for most of us. We opt for an alternative tack: a challenge that we all concentrate.

Concentrate on the little things in life
that make a difference:
be kind, considerate, generous.
Be consistent. Live within your means.
Defend the environment. Protect children –
whatever their class, color or creed.
Work to ensure everybody has access to
health care in a system where the average
person won't delay, won't fear going
bankrupt with catastrophic illness.

Little things, “**insipid details,**” matter.

**“To be really great in little things,
to be truly noble and heroic in the
insipid details of everyday life,
is a virtue so rare as to be worthy
of canonization”** (Harriet Beecher Stowe).

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VONNEGUT ON “SAINTS”

Don't rule yourself out,
don't delete yourself,
from being a saint.
Don't think sanctification too hard,
or difficult.
Don't rely upon your own self-estimate,
which is rarely reliable any way.

I'm partial to the Kurt Vonnegut's
definition of saint, which I've been
waiting to share for a year or more.

**“I believe in original sin.
I also believe in original virtue.”**

**“You meet saints everywhere.
They can be anywhere.
They are people behaving decently
in an indecent society”**

(quoted at the Ohio Union, OSU, Columbus, 03/06/06).

You can be a saint and
not even know it,
which is probably true for
most saints.

The standard to which we all can aspire:
“to behave decently in an indecent world.”

Nobody gets left out in this definition.

Again, quoting Vonnegut:

**“Scum of the Earth as some may be
in their daily lives,
they can all be saints
in emergencies.”**

If we don't know, we better reckon,
we are in an emergency situation in
our state, nation, and world.
It is an environmental crisis,
a war and peace crisis, a poverty crisis,
all of which is a compassion crisis/a spiritual crisis,
which is a religion crisis.

One further comment with regard to
concentration and sanctification.
The concentration of saints is such that
they experience the wonder and pleasure
of being **“dazzled”** by life in this world.
Saints, I say, are enthralled,
dazzled every day with

being here, now,
even in this moment.

**“It must be a great disappointment to God
if we are not dazzled at least ten times a day”**
(Mary Oliver, *Blue Horses: Poems*).

I'm guessing saints don't
concentrate on keeping count.
They simply are good at being
receptors, conductors, of God's
dazzling love, dazzling wonder, dazzling grace.

Now to clarify - Vonnegut and Mary Oliver,
I want you to know that I know that they
are spiritual but not religious. It is important
that we remember: saints are NOT confined to
church. They can surprise us anywhere, anytime.

Yet I hold out hope that church
can be a fertile ground for spawning saints.
Consider, then, this quote from Emil Brunner:

**“... watchfulness in prayer is
the true criterion of the saint.”**

Brunner was quick to point
the existence of a double nature
that exists within the Christian,
**“confidence in outcome;
consciousness of weakness.”**

This double nature is what enables us
to say: **“I will, with the help of God”**
(see Brunner, Emil, *The Christian Doctrine
of the Church*, p. 305).

To quote from Brunner again:

“What makes us true saints is not our action ...

**True humanity ... is never solitariness,
but always a being-with.
To be a true human being to humanity”
(see pg. 304).**

Well, we did have a scripture lesson this morning. Jesus - in the temple.
And Jesus is given a jeopardy question by Sadducees - a question of resurrection and eternal life, and relationship in this world, and how they get transported into the next, and do we carry our ties from now into forever.

The Sadducees didn't believe in any now and forever. They believed in now, and they did so with fierce urgency. They concentrated on now like there was no tomorrow - which make them a faction concerned only about the preservation of their own power and privilege.

Jesus concentrated on other things. Jesus saw life as a continuum, with life, now, life forever, but the life now was distinct from life forever. Death is at work in this life. But death was not an inevitable trump thwarting the life God wills.

In Luke's lesson, Jesus gives clear instruction, those who are considered worthy of a place in the age of peace have all their ties transformed and made new.

So we concentrate. We align now to live forever.

This makes us “**visible saints**,”
which is much in keeping with
our religious tradition.

Not disguised, not incognito, not pretend,
not maybe, not “dormant” (William James),
but visible. Real, live, fleshy, frail,
well-seasoned people
being true human beings
to humanity. Saints we say,
a people having fallen in love with the love of God.

May we be so visible,
with grace and mercy and generosity,
behaving decently in an indecent world.
May we concentrate enough,
not to dazzle, but to be dazzled
enough that we never lose hope of
being counted worthy of a place
in the age of peace.

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)*