

Plymouth Congregational Church of Fort Wayne, UCC
November 20, 2016

**“An Opportune Time –
Make the Church Great Again”**

“I rejoice in the Lord greatly that now at last
you have revived your concern for me;
indeed, you were concerned for me,
but had no opportunity to show it.”
Philippians 4:10

PRELUDE

Our worship service this morning is overflowing
with song and prayer and sacrament –
 manifold expressions of grace
 designed for our good.

For my part, I'd like to build upon
the theme of thanksgiving, and hopefully
enlarge its framework in our lives.

A question looms in the back of my mind:
what are we thinking about these days?
What is on our minds?

Are we fatigued in spirit,
“cast down ... disquieted within?”
**“Why are you cast down, O my soul,
and why are you disquieted within?”**
(Psalm 43:5).

When the scripture speaks,
**“Rejoice in the Lord always;
again I will say, Rejoice!”**
do we fend it off with a
“not me, not here, not now?”

Are we thinking of goodness and mercy;
are we thinking of a deficit or surplus of blessings?

Johnson Oatman, Jr. was a prolific hymn writer,
said to have composed verse for over 5,000 songs.
One came to mind this week:

**When upon life's billows you are tempest tossed,
When you are discouraged, thinking all is lost,
Count your many blessings, name them one by one,
And it will surprise you what the Lord hath done.**

Keeping count with God is well nigh impossible.
The psalm of old made some attempt:

**"How weighty to me are your thoughts,
O God! How vast is the sum of them!
I try to count them - they are
more than the sand ..." (Psalm 139:18).**

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GIVING THANKS: THE CHURCH IS IN GOOD REPAIR

To count the blessings of life -
seemingly an impossible task.
This morning though, I have a
partial list of thanks that is on my mind,
that I'd like to share with you.
There are three things (or so) on my mind.

First, I'm giving thanks that the church,
Plymouth Church, is in reasonably good repair.
My goodness, we have been through
a year quite unlike any other. A capital campaign,
trying to raise a huge sum of money,
to embark upon the installation
of a new, needed, HVAC system. We've been through
many dangers, toils, and snares in this episode of

facility improvement. It has been hard, and dirty,
and labor intensive, workers crawling around
in cramped attics and dark air shafts,
where most people are neither
encouraged nor inclined to go.

Today we have mechanicals that will serve
for a generation or more, a system for heating
and cooling suited for at least the first half of
the 21st century. For all the trouble and all the cost –
we have taken a huge step into being good stewards
of space; and we anticipate lowering both our
costs and consumption of energy.

I'm grateful to have been here –
to bear witness to what we have accomplished;
and grateful for the support and office staff
who may have muttered a few things along the way,
but who stayed the course with some degree of good humor.

I'm grateful for the **lay leadership** that
continues to drive the project to completion,
and to make sure we are paying our bills
in a timely and responsible manner.

I'm grateful for the skilled engineers,
the project manager, and the various contractors,
who were exemplary in every way
in doing their work.

It speaks to the character and quality of people
when you are somewhat sad to see them go –
even though you want them gone –
which we are (sad),
and which we do (want them gone).

I'm grateful for what we have accomplished;
I'm grateful for the support, the patience and
understanding and encouragement that has

has pushed this project along. We do not have one horror story, not one disaster story, not one instance of calamity. Praise the Lord!

**GIVING THANKS FOR THE WORK OF THE
HOLY SPIRIT THAT REVIVES OUR CONCERN
THAT WAKES US UP TO OUR CALLING**

A second thought on my mind.
Plymouth Church - relatively speaking,
is in good repair.
but the church - the one, wider,
catholic church, interdenominational
in shape and form - it is not in good repute.
It is seen to be a contributor to polarization
in our country, rather than a reconciler;
it is seen to be a source of division,
rather than of unity.

I came across a statement issued this past week from Fuller Theological Seminary, a formidable school of Protestant evangelical orthodoxy. The current president and former president authored the letter, as a lament and as a confession of what has become of the term **evangelical**, and its close tie and association with partisan politics.

They noted, among other things, that evangelicals **“were increasingly and inextricably bound to and complicit with scandalizing words and actions that degrade people and contradict the gospel of Jesus Christ.”**

The letter placed some blame on media; but they were also quite pointed: such degraded behavior was **“clearly and repeatedly captured through evangelicals’ own witness.”**

So the presidents spoke:

“we lament and reject the disgrace that hateful words and actions ... have heaped upon people of color, immigrants, women, Muslims, and LGBT persons in our nation, as we uphold the dignity of all persons made in the image of God.”

They went on to say, racism and fear, rejection and hatred, do not in any way **reflect the fruit of God’s Spirit and instead evoke the sorrow of God’s heart and our own.”**

I’m grateful when voices are lifted up from unexpected quarters, working to repair the disrepute into which the church has fallen.

I’m grateful when voices are lifted up, seeking to salvage the Christian witness that is saving grace for the world. So much has been twisted and tarnished, corrupted, in mean-spirited, small-minded ways, by popular and powerful forces.

You may have read in yesterday’s paper the report of the lawsuit filed by the Indiana Family Institute and American Family Association, challenging the revision of the Religious Freedom Restoration Act, as well as local civil rights ordinances (Carmel, Bloomington, Columbus, Indy) that protect LGBT Hoosiers from discrimination. These are Christians feeling obligated to engage in simple human decency, who want legal protection to discriminate - in the market place - in the name of religious freedom.

People look to the church for sanctuary;
people look to the church for credibility.

people look to the church for hope,
for understanding, for sympathy,
for kindness, for peace.

These are the things that enable gospel
ministry to endure without losing the love we are
charged both to keep and to give away.

Jonathan Haidt, Professor of Ethical Leadership
at NYU, has employed an image to describe
community, that of the drawbridge. Is
the drawbridge up (bunkered, isolated), or
is the drawbridge down (open and welcoming).
When Jesus called and summoned us -
that we might be welcomed and working
in the place, it was because somebody made
sure the drawbridge was open and accessible
to whosoever might find their way here.
Those that stay for a time should always
work to ensure the same for others.

GIVING THANKS FOR THE HERITAGE WE ARE CHARGED TO PASS ALONG

A third thought, I'm giving thanks for the heritage
that is uniquely ours. Everybody can and should
celebrate Thanksgiving, but we have a unique angle
on this day. It may not be in our bloodline,
traceable by DNA to the good ship Mayflower.
But it is our church line of history and tradition.

Our ancestors walked out of cathedrals and country
in search of hope of being free; they were resistant
to forces that required conformity;
they were willing to board boat and sail treacherous
waters into unknown land, to worship and serve in
accordance with conscience.

They braved a way at a time
where few others dared to go.

Thanksgiving gives us opportunity to recall
the harrowing adventure of those immigrants;
and to remember the counsel offered by
John Robinson, their pastor, who
**“challenged his followers to
believe in the future, in the community
that they would build with God’s guidance,
a free church in a free commonwealth.”**

This is a word suited for today.
Believe in the future ...
believe in what we are building
with the grace of God and love of Jesus.

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CONCLUSION: AN OPPORTUNE TIME TO MAKE THE CHURCH GREAT AGAIN

Let me close with this - really a return to the beginning.
What is on your mind?

Paul, in writing to the Philippians, was bold to
make an extraordinary appeal: **“Let the same mind
be in you that was in Christ Jesus”** (Philippians 2:5).

Paul consider this the proper outcome of a
living faith. A people, a church, a community,
being of the same mind as the mind of Jesus.

As we heard in our lesson:
**“... the peace of God, which surpasses understanding,
will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.”**

This combination of heart and mind and spirit,

is quite wonderful and amazing. We feel and think
our way into the love of Jesus with the help of the
Holy Spirit. And with the help of the Spirit,
we can think about the things that really matter,
the things that true ... and honorable ...
and pure ... and pleasing ...
and commendable ... and excellent ...
and worthy of praise.

When we think about these things,
when we do things, then we are being
revived; and in our reviving we have
an opportunity to make the church great again.
The church has been and will be great,
when it stays true to its calling,
to share the love of Jesus,
to impart the peace that is
peace with God.

The final word - Betty Deans shared a benediction
being used where a daughter attends - an adaptation
of a William Sloane Coffin prayer:

**“May the Holy one bless you and keep you;
may God’s face shine upon and be gracious to you.
May God give you the grace never to sell yourself short;
grace to risk something big for something good;
grace to remember that the world is now
too small for anything but truth and
too dangerous for anything but love.
So may God take your minds and think through them;
God take your lips and speak through them;
God take your hearts and set them on fire.”**

This Thanksgiving, let’s think about these things,
and all the grace that abounds in our lives.

Amen.