

Plymouth Congregational Church of Fort Wayne, UCC

January 22, 2017
Annual Meeting Sunday

“Ministry in Outrageous Times”

“Jesus heard that John had been arrested ...”
Matthew 4:12

PRELUDE

The past few days have been quite eventful,
packed with significance for the life
we share as citizens of heaven (Philippians 3:20),
who live in a great and wonderful land.

On Friday, January 20, 2017,
a peaceful transition of power occurred
in our nation’s capital as the 45th president
of the United States was sworn in as
the new head of the executive branch
of our government.

The highest office in our land now has
a new occupant,
who placed hand upon Lincoln’s Bible,
solemnly swearing to
“preserve, protect, and defend”
the Constitution of the United States “to the best
of” his ability (Art. VI, Clause 3, US Constitution).

The inauguration of a new president is
powerful political liturgy,
transferring power in accordance to the
to the desires of the electorate.
It signals for us - great change has come
upon the land and its people.

Yesterday, Saturday, a march took place in
the same city of Washington, women and men

gathered from across the nation, lifting voice,
advocating for women's rights, civil rights,
human rights. Crowd estimates vary (as usual),
but some estimate that 600,000 or more were involved
in the march.

The President's inauguration with its parade,
and the Women's March (with its parallels
in various other cities)
represent the deep polarities in our land,
the different encampments of value,
variously poised to orchestrate
change in our lives.

The divide is deep. And wide.
As expressed by one commentator,
it is a divide of Grand Canyon proportion.
It is not simply a political divide;
it is a religious divide,
which is why we cannot avoid
the subject.
For the contrasting visions and
values are inevitably
on a collision course.
Some assess that our nation
has not been so intensely polarized
since the Civil War.

The divide is a crisis that threatens our peace.
And it isn't going away with our wishful thinking.

But take note -
I appeal for you to listen closely here -
the crisis is not so acute - so threatening,
that a negotiation stage is meaningfully near,
such the binary sides see, and agree,
and acknowledge the need, and the possibility
for compromising action.

Martin Luther King, Jr. – who was an advocate for nonviolent confrontation to foster social change, spelled out the purpose of direct action demonstrations in his “Letter from the Birmingham Jail.”

“The purpose of our direct-action program is to create a situation so crisis-packed that it will inevitably open the door to negotiation.”

The purpose of engaging entrenched powers with direct action – was not aggravate, instigate, exacerbate, conflagrate the existing divides. The goal was negotiation that would effect change altering the landscape that produced the division in the first place.

So – our age is a crisis-riddled age.
But we are not yet so “crisis packed”
that any side in the divide is
willing to negotiate or reconcile.
Making haste to reconcile is not feasible.
Realistically, few are interested.
Indeed, some of the divide is irreconcilable.

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And today,
as we gather, I’m wondering – how do we envision ministry, given the great division(s); how do we plot a course for gospel through the tweets, the taunts, the slings and arrows? It is not a question we will be able to fully answer today, but simply a question I invite us to prayerfully engage as we work through the coming year.

I was reminded this week of an interview that took place on NPR a few years ago with Neal Conan and Karen Armstrong, founders of the Charter of Compassion. Early in the interview, Neal had a moment of insight, and he said to Ms. Armstrong, what you are suggesting is really hard and challenging. She agreed, saying, **“It requires a constant effort of imagination.”**

Today, of course, is our Annual Meeting day in the life of Plymouth Church, and while we do not agree on all things great and small - I think it safe to say we do have consensus affirming the Socratic dictum:

“The unexamined life is not worth living.”

We are lovers of wisdom in the Socratic sense, and lovers of God, followers of Jesus in the Christian sense. In this current divided age, how dare we advance the gospel entrusted to us? This I find to be an urgent and compelling question.

What is interesting to me - the first century when Jesus showed up, when the Christian movement first emerged, was also a time of crisis, of outrage.

The Russians weren't influencing the election and promoting their interests - the situation was far more severe. The Romans were in the land, the Romans ruled in their interest, making life miserable for all who were bound to their subjugation: their military rule, their economic exploitation, and the imposition of Roman imperial religion.

This was true in the age of Jesus, and in the age to follow, when the church was young, Jesus was Lord, and Christ was risen and present with his followers; when Jerusalem had been devastated,

basically destroyed,
and those who survived did so by taking flight,
leaving the land of promise, in search for
some other land that might provide peace.

**“It was this search for a new direction
in a time of crisis that the Gospel of Matthew
was primarily intended to serve”** (Ulrich Luz,
The Theology of the Gospel of Matthew, p. 19).
A literature emerged to help navigate the crisis.

The church has always existed in the
face of crisis, which requires self-examination,
trying to sort how to live loyally,
faithful, to the summons of Jesus,
when daily faced with external threat.

A quick summary of the morning lesson.
Jesus is in obscurity.
Mathew then clearly states: oh, oh - problem.

An outrage.
John has been arrested.
The leading light, the voice crying in the wilderness,
the one hope holding out against all others.
John has been silenced. Imprisoned.

Oh - the angst! What will come of it?

Jesus withdrew ... introspection; self-examination.
Jesus emerged; stepped out; marched.
Jesus began to proclaim ...
Jesus enlisted followers ...
Jesus went round and about
teaching gospel,
curing the people of their afflictions and maladies.
Jesus is in the headlines - great crowds,
a coalition with a broad tent,
transcending class and clan,

incorporating a people of many ages, tongues and races.
This is what Matthew conveys:
Jesus from obscurity to inclusive community;
from nothing to a new creation,
a galvanized people -
a rainbow people from the beginning,
healing the sickness that has befallen the land,
restoring hope for all people
from the “**Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem,
Judea, and from beyond the Jordan**” (Matthew 4:25).
And to add some icing to the gospel cake,
all this in a passage said to be part of
Matthew’s gospel prologue.

What did Jesus do when faced with crisis?
Matthew is clear. He got busy.
He started small. He stayed focused
upon the gospel work with which he was charged.

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Looking into what lies ahead ...
what is not going away?

The church – always butting heads with world.

Beware the raw, bully nationalism proclaimed
in Friday’s inaugural address – America first,
America foremost in the world. A bully America,
sounding as if isolated from the world, is a
dangerous America. It rubs wrong against a
biblical teaching and principle: nations that so
self-assert – with or without godly implorations –
are doomed to fall, usually after bringing
untold misery upon the world.

So - pray and advocate for new administration;
pray and advocate for the United Nation.
Pray and advocate for peace in Jerusalem,
with Jerusalem being secure as an international city,
respecting the religions that honor her
sacred walls and sacred history.

More locally, spread the word about our liberal outlook,
extravagant welcome we proclaim; spread the word
that we do not champion a pro-life ethic,
but a whole-life ethic.

Spread the word - we are committed to healing
the land, restoring hope, and keeping it alive.
Spread the word to young and old, but especially
the next generation.

Conclusion:

Living in the gray.
The flight home from Los Angeles.
Soaring at thirty-thousand feet.
The sun - bright. Visibility clear. Clouds below.
White puffy, looking like cotton.
Then the descent. Into the clouds. And shades of gray.
A momentary break, an interim suspension between cloud
layers. But then more descent. More clouds.
A long period of no visibility. No horizon.
We stayed in that state for a few minutes
that seemed to me an eternity. Vida commented:
The pilot needs to fly, not by eye, but by instrument.

We made a safe landing. But it was wet and drippy. Overcast,
gray upon gray. And no sign of sun. Looking for light
“required a constant effort of imagination.”

I was introduced to the work of Warsan Shire just a few months ago by Peter Francis, Warden of the Gladstone Library in Wales, who sent me a piece of her writing, a poem titled, "Home."

**"You only leave home when home
won't let you stay."**

**"No one leaves home unless home
chases you ..."**

Warsan Shire, born in Kenya to Somali parents, who emigrated to the UK (London) when still a child, raised to become a poet, writer, now living in Los Angeles, who has a heart for the refuge, the outcast, the marginalized.

She is one of us.

She offers us wise counsel as we pause to refresh ourselves in worship.

**The sun is perfect and you woke this morning.
You have enough language in your mouth to be understood.
You have a name, and someone wants to call it.
Five fingers on your hand and someone wants to hold it.
If we just start there, every beautiful thing
that has and will ever exist is possible.
If we start there, everything, for a moment,
is right in the world.**

My friends, it is a great day
to be grateful for Plymouth Church.
It is a great day to thank God
for another day to have a name
and someone to call it.

A great day to replenish in the beauty and
wonder of community.

A great day to stay focused
and true to our holy calling,
requiring only the constant effort
of imagination that we be as
compassionate as the
God whose mercy
redeems us.

Let us be open to the calling of Jesus,
still speaking, gentle but fierce,
for the healing of the sickness
fallen upon the land.

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)*