

**Plymouth Congregational Church of Fort Wayne, UCC**  
February 12, 2017

**“Daily Devotion:  
Get in the Way”**

“Let your word be ‘Yes, Yes’ or ‘No, No;’  
anything more than this comes from the evil one.”  
Matthew 5:37

**PRELUDE**

I will get to the morning lesson.  
It will take me some time to get there.  
Please be patient.

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The church calendar affixes a theme to this Sunday: “Racial Justice” Sunday - which we haven’t always honored. To have but one Sunday that addresses racial justice would imply that you can have 51 other Sundays that do not. That is not an implication I have an interest in furthering.

Racial division;  
    racial suspicion and discord;  
racial misunderstanding;  
racial stereotyping and profiling,  
are issues that run deep in our nation’s history,  
even to the very beginning, when  
European immigrants took their first step  
in colonizing this wild and plentiful continent  
long occupied and home for a native,  
    indigenous people.

The culture clash that ensued is  
not an easy history to recollect.  
It is full of tragedy, winners and losers,  
and trails of tears.

It was in 1987, I think, that *Sojourner's Magazine*, Jim Wallis, wrote, calling racism America's original sin. **"The US was established as a white society, founded upon the genocide of another race, and the enslavement of yet another."**

There are some who say the conflict is over, a distant memory we can dodge so as not to complicate the present. There are "**color blind**" advocates, subscribers to "post-racial" optics, that would make gray

the beauty of the rainbow.

But this isn't an option for the Christian who believes God has penetrated time and invested time with saving grace and moral imperatives. Eternal truth as a biological fact, our earth-bound lives given everlasting significance - this is our Christian inheritance that we pray to come today.

What was it William Faulkner said: **"The past isn't dead. It isn't even past."** Which in my reckoning means, it's not over, the past is very much alive.

**"History will be kind to me, for I intend to write it"** (W. Churchill quote).

We prefer our history kind, full of wonder and intrigue; and heroes that have no vices. Nice to have the edited version, that avoids the cruelties, that masks the flaws, that dulls the sin.

The drama of history, of course,

is whose story gets told, and who gets to tell it. The victors' version is never quite the same as that of the vanquished.

**“By the river of Babylon –  
there we sat down and there we wept  
when we remembered Zion.  
On the willows there we hung up our harps.  
For there our captors asked us for songs,  
and our tormentors asked for mirth,  
saying, ‘Sing us one of the songs of Zion.’”**

**“O daughter Babylon,  
you devastator!  
Happy shall they be who pay you back  
what you have done to us!  
Happy shall they be who take your little  
ones and dash them against the rock!”**  
(Psalm 137:1-3, 8-9).

That is a voice from the past,  
a voice determined never to forget life  
under a Babylonian boot.

Church and society suffer what  
Walter Brueggemann called  
**“deep amnesia with little self-awareness.”**  
So remembering is important work, indeed,  
is holy work, that promises to reconcile our past  
and our present with the love of Jesus Christ.

We can trace our church's interest  
to achieving racial justice through  
various times and chapters.

Just a sample:

In Plymouth Church we have a room  
designated by the name, Amistad.

That name evokes a past in antebellum America, when our church ancestors offered time and money to support the defense fund of Africans who resisted the captors who sought to sell their bodies into chattel slavery, people possessed as property, to be bought, sold, disposed of.

We fought a great civil war over the “**peculiar institution**,” it was penance required for an economic system based upon racial exploitation; that its pain and misery, its blight upon the land might be amended. The racial underpinnings of our society was not absolved by the Civil War; they mutated into the rule of Jim Crow and social segregation, and the violence that maintained it. Along the way, the church served, sometimes silent - complicit - in the face of disfigurement, disenfranchisement, based upon race, and sometimes as siren of gospel, a hammer for justice.

When the UCC was still in its formative stages, 1963, the 4th General Synod, issued a call for the church to be “radically committed” to “**uproot intolerance, bigotry, prejudice within our own living and to replace them with goodwill and the determination to strike down immediately the barriers that divide ... on account of race.**”

In 1991 the UCC issued the “Pastoral Letter on Contemporary Racism and the Role of the Church.” I still have a copy and reference it often. It helped inspire a call in 1993 that urged the UCC to become a “**multiracial, multicultural**”

**church;**” that resolution pointedly challenged the church to “**repent and refrain**” from all acts of racial discrimination and bigotry, and to “**confront indifference, ignorance and neglect**” that serve to spur, rather than stem, what was then seen as a **resurgent tide of racism in American society.**

More recently our UCC has called for “**sacred conversations on race**” (General Synod in Grand Rapids, 2009). The call was sounded with urgent humility, knowing how insidious, how intractable, is the seed of racial animus.

There was yet another Pastoral letter on Racism – “a new awakening” in 2015.

**Let us not rush to the language of healing,  
before understanding the fullness of the injury  
and the depth of the wound ...  
let us not speak of reconciliation  
without speaking of ... how we can repair  
the breach and how we can restore the loss ...**

Fast forward – 2017 –  
still we see the resurgent tide rising,  
and sweeping across our land;  
it was reported in yesterday’s paper that a  
white supremacist group was pasting flyers on  
the office doors of faculty in Bloomington at IU.

The resurgent tide is evident whenever swastikas deface property, or the Confederate flag is brandished in belligerent displays asserting racial pride, white power, promoting and defending white privilege.

Few incidents illustrate racism’s resurgent tide more than the shooting that occurred at Mother Emanuel AME Church, Charleston, SC, June 17, 2015,

**nine** members gunned down, including Pastor Clementa Pickney, in church for a mid-week Bible Study. The shooter, a 21-year old white male (Dylan Roof), spent over an hour or more with members who were gathered, until he started shooting, was lashing out at a lie – his world was full of alternative facts.

In October of this year just past (2016), some of us participated in a walk that included Polly Shepherd and Felicia Sanders, survivors of that massacre – they came with a story to tell – a story of forgiveness and a refusal to harbor hate for hate.

Felicia Sanders – protected her 5-year old granddaughter, saying, “Play dead.” She couldn’t protect her daughter. Polly Shepherd was spared, being told, **“I’m going to let you live so you can tell the story.”**

In response to this horrific incident, an editorial appeared on **the Breitbart.com** website, lashing out at **“liberal control freaks”** who were engaged with promoting an agenda of cultural genocide. Dismay was expressed that the Confederate flag was being taken down from the various public perches, which prompted this: **There is only one response (to those attempting to obliterate the Southern identity) defiance. Every tree, every rooftop, every picket fence, every telegraph pole in the South should be festooned with the Confederate battle flag. Hoist it high and fly it with pride, it proclaims a glorious heritage.**

This wouldn’t merit much attention if it resided in fraternal drinking clubs, where cards are played, smoking rules do not apply, and bingo supports local charities. Such extremist views will always spin in the minds of malcontents. Yet this editorial

was on the website, whose editor, Steve Bannon, has ascended to the heights of power in our country, and is helping craft policy and strategy on our nation's National Security Council.

Misinformation, deceits operating at high levels of our life, is a national security threat, and it is a church security threat. It reaches into our lives, and the lives of our children. It is a threat to our wellbeing, and the common good for which we pray.

This is not a problem unique to the current administration, although it surely is magnified with the current administration.

Ten years ago, the *New York Times* asserted, **“Unless there is a grass roots movement to awaken the nation from a permanent state of complacency ... lying, as a useful political instrument, will continue.”**

Noted deception ranging from

- (1) barely true;
- (2) categorically false;
- (3) liar, liar “pants on fire”  
(Michael Cohen, Sept. 2008).

In college, I had a professor who made deep impressions on me, Rex Reader - who introduced me to the work of Dan Wise, his book, *The Politics of Lying*. Don't remember much about that book other than a section devoted to consumer products, and what labels were required to disclose. How much peanut content should be in peanut butter to call it the real deal? There was a lot of lard being added to some products, almost as much lard as peanut. Is it peanut butter? This was prior to the natural food craze, but that's the conversation that was being had.

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All this brings us to the lesson –  
the snippet we heard from the  
Sermon on the Mount.

Jesus addressing the subject of oaths,  
and truth telling. To extract truth,  
an oath is taken, a guarantee, a promise  
of punishment (implied) to be applied  
if a false statement is made.

Jesus intensifies our call to be a people  
of impeccable integrity. No oath should be  
required – no hint of suspicion – no doubt  
of one’s veracity; no notion of deceit; no  
impression of treachery or sham.

Be as good as your word – don’t complicate it  
with recourse to so valuable charm deception will  
discredit.

Tell the truth with yes or no, in such  
a way that you do no harm – to yourself or to  
some other.

Tell the truth of your faith in a way  
that will heal and reveal God’s mercies.  
Tell the truth as way to promote faith, hope, and trust.

Tell the truth to yourself about yourself, for the great  
deception that confuses others and the world is when  
we deceive ourselves. “To thine own self be true,”  
is what father Polonius counseled Laertes (Hamlet),  
for failing that, we live as less than God intends.

In the Heidelberg Catechism, the commandment No 9 –  
a prohibition that addresses “bearing false witness,”  
speaks:

“in judgment and all other dealings,  
love the truth, speak it uprightly ...  
defend and promote as much as (you are)  
able the honor and good character of  
(your) neighbor.”

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So many years ago while ministering in Michigan,  
I was running in circles that gave racial justice a  
high profile in practicing a life of faith. I remember  
when first told that black folks,  
    and brown folks,  
    and tawny folks,  
    the coffee-colored,  
    the tanned and passable colored,  
can't resolve the racial attitudes and emotions  
held by prejudiced whites who profess superior rank  
    based upon race.

Our work to advance racial justice and harmony  
must be shared work, it not be delegated. In part.  
Meaningful advance is furthered when whites join hands  
crossing racial divides, when whites become more assertive in  
discrediting the lie of their superiority, and dismantling  
the system that maintains it.

Walter Rauschenbusch wrote in  
*A Theology for the Social Gospel*,  
**“Social suffering serves social healing.”**  
This is a profound and vital insight for us.  
When we band ourselves together for good,  
    healing mercies abound.  
We, as community, help remedy/reform  
the sin of predatory forces always  
    at work in society.

We can learn from others.

**“You must find a way to get in the way**

**and make our country a better place.”**  
John Lewis

This is part of our calling.

So I encourage:

Get in the way of injustice.  
Get in the way of hate, ignorance,  
misunderstanding, and strife.  
Get in the way of falsehood,  
whether intended or not.  
Fact check your sources.  
Be impeccable, as impeccable as God’s grace  
permits. Do no harm, be not malicious  
with the truth you impart.

Find a way to get in the way  
to make our church a better place.  
Find a way to get in the way  
to make our world a better place.

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A final word – let it be that of Harriet Tubman,  
whose image is slated for the \$20 bill (if ever  
released).

**“Every great dream begins  
with a dreamer.  
Always remember,  
you have within you the strength,  
the patience, and the passion to  
reach for the stars to change the world.”**

**“If you hear the dogs,  
keep going.  
If you see the torches in the woods,  
keep going.**

**If there is shouting after you,  
keep going.  
Don't ever stop.  
If you want a taste of freedom,  
keep going."**

This is the truth, and it is truth  
that is unleashed in us as the power of God  
that we might advance human dignity,  
for any people tired and weary,  
for any and all with ears to  
hear, and hearts to soar  
in the life God desires.

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)*