Plymouth Congregational Church of Fort Wayne, UCC
January 25, 2015

“Danger – and Opportunity – Lie Ahead”

“… after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the gospel of God.”
Mark 1:14

Prelude

Our service this morning has been rather full – with commissioning of covenant class and mentors; with installation of officers; and recitation of the church covenant. And a luncheon is set to follow, in conjunction with our Annual Business Meeting.

I was reminded of a Mark Twain quip the other day, Twain stating the “secret to a good sermon is to have a good beginning, and a good ending, and to have the two as close together as possible.” Twain also once said: “No sinner is ever saved after the first twenty minutes of a sermon.” Twain was of help to me in setting the boundaries for sermon time this morning.

This morning I want to speak on the subject of church; I invite you to think with me about this enterprise of which we are part; and what we are doing together.

Let us ponder ...
the church protecting a heritage too little known, and too little practiced;
the church and the dangers we face;
the church and its always changing face.

First, though, a reading from our church bylaws, Article V (Polity), Section 2,

“there shall be an Annual Meeting in January to adopt an annual budget and to received reports from all Officers and Boards of the Church.”

This may not seem to be the most stirring of subjects. I would point out, though, the considerable work that is preparatory for this day.
Budget preparations for a new fiscal year begin early in the fall, involving all church boards and committees; expenditures and revenues are closely monitored throughout the year, seeking to ensure that we not overextend, that we steward with faith and prudence what resources are available.

A proposed budget projects expenses judged to fall within range of anticipated revenues, and in so doing, it serves as a faith document, as a blueprint of ministry, for mission endeavors we hope to sustain, for church programs we hope to build.

I mention this for it is all so much more than ink upon paper we will recycle. The budget plots a challenging course that has been met, that will only continue to be met, if the church is the beneficiary of people who are personally invested with their time, talent, and treasure.

I just need to thank God for those who give of themselves and their good, and those who financially sacrifice to support the church, emphasis not upon financially, but upon sacrifice.

I just need to thank God for those who have paved the way, and for those who give what they can to keep us accountable to our commitments.

I just need to thank God for all who care and all who contribute, whether member or friend; for all who are generous to the church, and the nature and purpose of its ministry.

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So the church – and our purpose. How do we understand “we the people” in this place, not so much as an institution governed by people who adopt a budget,
but church as a people
who acknowledge government
by God, for gospel;
as a people committed to
“the patient rule of Jesus Christ,”
as a people who are open to
“the guidance of the Holy Spirit”
(Plymouth Church Covenant).

THE CHURCH – PROTECTING A HERITAGE,
TOO LITTLE KNOWN, TOO LITTLE PRACTICED

I first impress as a reminder that we have
a heritage, a history, a “spirit”
worth protecting and promoting.
It is the impulse that stimulates the conviction:
the church of Jesus Christ is vastly more
than a system of doctrine.
It resides in the teaching of our Reformed heritage,
that the church “must be a Godward orientation
of the soul…that culminates in the transformation of
human activities according to the designs of God.”

The spirit we prize is “irenic.”
Irenic speaks to the task of
“promoting peace,
of being conciliatory”
in thought, deed, and temper.
This is why here we speak of
forging a “broader expression” of Christianity,
a generous expression.
We are emphatically NOT engaged in something new,
with innovation/novelty;
but part of a spiritual stream that becomes visible
when there is a Godward orientation of the soul,
when our human activities are transformed,
righted according to the designs of God.

It was H. Richard Niebuhr who famously
defined the purpose of the church as
“the increase of the love of God and neighbor.”
Confusions and conflicts arise, Niebuhr suggested,
“due to failure to keep this goal in view …”
This summary was both
“law” and “gospel,”
God’s requirement and God’s gift.

He proceeded to clarify - we may “poorly apprehend yet sufficiently discern” what God has demonstrated in Jesus Christ, such that we dedicate ourselves to reciprocate God’s love.

He continued to clarify: our purpose is “not simply that we should believe in the love of God; it is that we should love God and neighbor” (The Purpose of the Church and Its Ministry, p. 27, 32).

So behavior conditions belief. We serve our purpose, we project and protect gospel, to the degree that we reciprocate God’s love.

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THE CHURCH AND THE DANGERS WE FACE

Reciprocating God’s love. This is our calling. Yet how hard it seemingly is.

Reinhold Niebuhr once wrote that ideally, “the church is...a community of contrite believers.” That’s an odd compound, wouldn’t you say?

Contrite believers. It is cautionary – for Niebuhr saw the church being faced with danger of “becoming a community of the saved who have brought the meaning of life to premature conclusion.”

And danger also of becoming a community of the righteous, a pretentious bulwark of bullies, where faith and hope recede, and certainty and conviction and conceit rise against the unrighteous and ungodly.

Faith and hope do not serve to make us certain, dismissing as devilish all doubt or differences that do not fit our institutional schematics. The “faith and hope by which the church lives sharpen rather than annul (the church's) responsibility for seeking to do the will of God amid all the tragic moral ambiguities of history” (see Faith and History, p. 238).
I'm suggesting this morning that we not rule out being a community of contrite believers.
I hope we dare not lose our courage –
courage to ask the question:
are we doing enough?
Of if not this, then, “what more can we be doing?”

What more can we be doing to shine our light
as an ONA congregation;
what more can we be doing to promote
just peace;
what more can we be doing as environmental stewards;
as a people invested in local and global mission?
Where is God calling that we need follow?

This is where there is good connection with
the morning lesson.
  John has been arrested.
  John has been silenced.
  Blessed John, in whose ministry there came
    a convergence of belief and behavior;
  Blessed John, who suffered for his actions.
  John’s been unplugged; his voice stilled.
So there is a void. Who will step forward
  and fill his steps?

Mark states is all so simply –
after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee;
he did so proclaiming the gospel of God.
And he invited friends to join.
And the friends followed.
We may poorly comprehend their motives,
but we can sufficiently discern that
they followed the One who promised
  more love, new life, a new understanding
  of what their role was in the world.

Where dare we follow? Time and prayer will help tell.
But consider this. We received this past week a pastoral letter from the UCC, a pastoral letter on racism. I hope that we might thoroughly read this in coming weeks, but for this morning just a snippet:

“we are aware of our profound need for a new
awakening of understanding about race and racism ... Our paths might need to be on roads less travelled so that we are able to arrive at a truly new place when it comes to gaining insight into the depth of systemic racism.”

New awakenings are always needed in our lives. The world is too broken not to believe, not to behave, otherwise. New awakenings come when we follow.

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THE CHURCH AND ITS ALWAYS CHANGING FACE

Final thought:
the church and its always changing face,
for people are always coming and going.

The news was received this past week that Marcus Borg died, one of the first and finest of voices for progressive Christianity, an irenic spirit, who inspired so many with his scholarship. He understood so well what we poorly apprehend, and what we sufficiently discern.

He certainly has impacted the faith and life of many in the UCC.
I mention this to both honor and applaud his witness.
I have been profoundly influenced by his works:
— *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*,
— *The Heart of Christianity – Rediscovering a Life of Faith (How we Can be Passionate Believers Today)*

and his co-writing projects with John Dominic Crossan.
His work carved a needed niche in church, creating space that others would leave closed, locked and without interest in finding a key.

In his book, *The Heart of Christianity*;
Borg posed the question:
So why be a Christian?

He answered, in part, by talking about community.
Let me share in part what he said:

“the first (reason) is the importance of being part of a religious community and tradition of practice....
We need a path. We are lost without one. Community and tradition articulate, embody, and nurture a path ... Religious community and tradition put us in touch with the wisdom and beauty of the past. They are communities of memory ... (that) can deliver us from the provinciality of the present ...

And, though all the traditions have their monsters and have at times been distorted in brutal directions, they also have incubated lives remarkably filled with compassion, courage, and joy.

There is it. There lies my hope for the church – incubating lives remarkably filled with compassion, courage, and joy.

The year 2015, number 145 in the life of Plymouth Church, lies before us. Pray for great and shared adventure. As contrite believers, in need of new awakenings, may we follow where the love of Jesus is need today.

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)