

My Favorite Sermons
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Invitation to the Dance

First Congregational Church – Wauwatosa, Wisconsin

Trinity Sunday – May 22, 2005

Rev. Steven A. Peay, Ph.D.

[Texts: Genesis 1:1-2:4a/Psalm 8/Matthew 28:16-20]

Patrick Dennis' "Auntie Mame" said that, "Life is a banquet!" I think so, too. But I also agree with those who see life as a dance, and that's no small thing for someone who has real trouble keeping the steps and the rhythm at the same time! The image of the dance is a powerful one and when one considers the world in which we live, we can liken so much of it to a dance. Even the jockeying of politicians in Washington or the negotiations of diplomats reflects the give-and-take, the movement that is intrinsic to dance. When someone is being evasive we say, "Ah, he's dancing around the point!" And so it is; sometimes the movements are stately and formal, like the waltz. Other times the steps are exuberant, though ordered, like a polka or a schottische. Still other times, the steps just happen, like most of the dancing you'll see at 'Summer Fest,' or at least so it appears.

As I thought about the Scriptures today and the great Christian teaching that we celebrate on this Sunday, the dance came to mind. Sometimes the liturgy is called the "dance of God," especially in the Christian East. And I think there's something to seeing creation and our experience of it as expressions like that of the dance. As I researched the sermon this week three different works, one each of music, art, and poetry came across my desk and helped to confirm my thinking. Let me share them with you and then I'll show you why I think that the Christian doctrine of the Trinity is an invitation to the dance of life and faith.

Carl Maria von Weber wrote a beautiful piece for piano, later orchestrated by Hector Berlioz, entitled 'Invitation to the Dance.' He offers a musical dialogue designed to evoke a gentleman inviting a lady to waltz. Then the dance unfolds and we hear the music, and their delight, swell. Finally, it draws to a close and there's a little coda, just a little something there, and we can almost see the gentleman bow to the lady and offer thanks for a lovely exchange.

Now to the painting; the Norwegian artist Edvard Munch, who is primarily known to us for his painting called 'The Scream,' painted a series of works which he called 'The Frieze of Life.' Munch wrote: "Through them all there winds the curving shore line, and beyond it the sea, while under the trees, life, with all its complexities of grief and joy, carries on" [this and following are quoted in Roman Jaster, "The Dance of Life," www.calarts.edu/%7Erjaster/edvard-munch/index1.htm]. Art critic Roman Jaster has said of the painting, "The three major themes of the *Frieze of Life*, love, anxiety and death are clearly expressed in *The Dance of Life*. Thus, this painting can be seen as one of the centerpieces in the series." The painting shows a man and three women on a summer's night. The women, who some interpret to be the same person, are shown from youth, to middle age, to old age indicating the cycle of life from birth to death. Munch's thought was, "life and death, day and night go hand in hand" and are thus expressed in the

painting for, ultimately, death is the birth of life. The dance of life is, in the artist's mind, that ongoing and never-ending cycle that draws us in and pulls us together, as the woman and man are pulled together in the intimacy of the dance in the prime of life.

Now we'll consider the poem, which is by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, entitled 'Reciprocal Invitation to the Dance.' It is a dialogue between 'the indifferent' and 'the tender,' let's see how it turns out, shall we?

THE INDIFFERENT.

COME to the dance with me, come with me, fair one!
Dances a feast-day like this may well crown.
If thou my sweetheart art not, thou canst be so,
But if thou wilt not, we still will dance on.
Come to the dance with me, come with me, fair one!
Dances a feast-day like this may well crown.

THE TENDER.

Loved one, without thee, what then would all feast be?
Sweet one, without thee, what then were the dance?
If thou my sweetheart wert not, I would dance not.
If thou art still so, all life is one feast.
Loved one, without thee, what then would all feasts be?
Sweet one, without thee, what then were the dance?

THE INDIFFERENT.

Let them but love, then, and leave us the dancing!
Languishing love cannot bear the glad dance.
Let us whirl round in the waltz's gay measure,
And let them steal to the dim-lighted wood.
Let them but love, then, and leave us the dancing!
Languishing love cannot bear the glad dance.

THE TENDER.

Let them whirl round, then, and leave us to wander!
Wand'ring to love is a heavenly dance.
Cupid, the near one, o'erhears their deriding,
Vengeance takes suddenly, vengeance takes soon.
Let them whirl round, then, and leave us to wander!
Wand'ring to love is a heavenly dance.

It appears that tenderness can overcome indifference in the movement of the dance!

Now, what do we see in these three works of art? In each one dance is portrayed as an interaction – there is “give-and-take” which allows the dance to begin and to proceed. We see dance as a relationship. And, we see dance as movement. In each case this speaks to the Christian understanding of God as ‘Trinity’ Because there is the drawing into relationship and the act of exchange not only in the Divine Persons, but in their relationship to us, as well.

From the patristic period forward – the time of the great teachers or ‘fathers’ of the early church -- *perichoresis* has been used to describe the interrelations of the Persons of the Trinity. The noun comes from a Greek verb (*perichorein*) that means "to contain" or "to penetrate," and describes the three Persons of the Trinity as mutually "indwelling," "permeating," or "interpenetrating" one another. Each person both wholly envelops and is wholly enveloped by the *others*. A similar Greek word, *perichoreuein*, which means "to dance around," has been used as a metaphor for the relation of the Persons. In the Western Church, using Latin, the term was translated as *circumincessio* ("moving around") or *circuminsessio* ("sitting around"). Notice, though how both words describe relationship that is dynamic, not static; that moves and grows, rather than stands still.

The term *perichoresis* has also been used historically to describe God's relationship to the world, as a way of expressing God's immanence (meaning to remain or operate within a domain of discourse, to be close) and transcendence (meaning beyond, or exceeding our ability to understand or to comprehend). It is important to understand, on the one hand, that God is contained by nothing, and is instead the One in whom we live and move and have our being — i.e., everything is contained by Him. Yet at the same time God is within all things, "omnipresent." This leads to the Christian notion of panentheism that God is in everything and that everything is in God. As one of the early teachers of the church, Hilary of Poitiers put it; the Father is both "without" and "within" all things. This mutual indwelling and containment is a created extension of the mutual indwelling and containment of the Triune Persons. And this is part of the dance, the tension within One who is at once immanent and transcendent. Augustine pointed out in his book *On the Trinity* that we reflect the same tension within ourselves because we are at once spiritual and physical beings. Thus, we have yet another sign that we are made in the “image and likeness of God,” “little less than God.”

From the beginning God has been inviting creation, and humanity in particular, to the dance of relationship. As we heard from the creation account from Genesis chapter one God utters ten words and order emerged from chaos. In the same way God would later utter ten words to the Exodus community that would bring order and civility out of the chaos of human relationships. I referenced Augustine a moment ago because when he tried to understand the Trinity he ended up looking at humanity. I think he was on to something because there are ways that we can still see the evidence of *perichoresis* in the created world and in ourselves in particular.

First, there is the realm of personal identity. We can well ask, “How can I be a distinct person, and at the same time be the product of all these influences from people who are other than me?” Don't people say this about children, "I see his father in him"? I

know in my own case that this goes beyond physical resemblance, because the older I get the more I see and hear my father! Another way of seeing this personal identity point is when we speak of someone who is a son, a husband, and a father or a daughter, a wife, and a mother. What we're talking about here is an economy of relationship. As contemporary theologian Peter Leithart has said, "We 'indwell' one another in a way that palely reflects the reality of the full indwelling of the divine persons within each other. The Father and the Son are 'mutually constitutive': there is no Father except that He has a Son, and no Son except that He has a Father. So also, our identities are constituted by relations with others, by their 'dwelling in' us and we 'dwelling in' them."

We can see reflected in Leithart both the "psychological analogies" of Augustine (the human qualities of mind, knowledge and love relating to the Divine persons) and that of later medieval theologians, like Richard of Saint Victor and Bonaventure who emphasized that the Divine Trinity is reflected in humans and their ability to relate and live in community. All analogies limp, especially when we're trying to get our mind around God who is "uncreated" and according to Anselm, "greater than that which can be thought." Yet, it's important for us to talk and explore. I find it fascinating and encouraging that there are a whole raft of new studies being done on the doctrine of the Trinity, not only because it is a great excuse to visit the bookstore, but because it shows that we're continuing to enter into the dance of life, of faith, and of understanding.

Another way we can see God's "imprint" (the Latin term used by Augustine is *vestigium*) on us and our world is the use of metaphor. When we look at it, creation contains objects that are really distinct and separate from one another. Day is not night, waters above are not waters below, water is not land, birds are not fish, I think you get the point. That said, the Scripture still indicates that one thing can stand for, represent, or symbolize other things. Things in creation indwell other things. The Psalmist can say that a "righteous man is like a tree" not because we invent similarity between two essentially unlike things. Rather, there is a real mutual relation between them. So, the Son is the express image of the Father, and yet is not the Father. This perichoretic "is/is not" (man is/is not tree) structure is inherent in God, and is the very nature of metaphor. And, ultimately, it is through metaphor that we can even try to talk about the Maker of All, the Source of All That Is, and the Ground of Being.

What's the point? The point is that we talk about how God relates to us, how God has acted toward us and we have perceived that action. We can really only talk about the Trinity as the Divine *economy*, the manner in which God works and orders God's affairs. God is inviting us into the dance of life, the dance of relationship and drawing us into the community that Creates, Redeems, and Sustains us and the world in which we live. I like what Brian McLaren writes in his book *A Generous Orthodoxy*, where he talks about the development of Trinitarian thought.

. . . the experience of God in Jesus was so powerful it forever transformed what followers of Jesus meant when they said the word *God*. What was God like? What was God about? When they thought about what they had learned, seen, and experienced in Jesus, their understanding was revolutionized. Eventually, after a

few centuries of reflecting on God as revealed and experienced through Jesus (in the context of some major controversies with varied forms of Greek philosophy) the church began to describe God as Father-Son-Spirit in Tri-unity or the Trinity. For them, God could no longer be conceived as “God A,” a single, solitary, dominant Power, Mind, or Will, but as “God B,” a unified, eternal, mysterious, relational, community/family/society/entity of saving Love.

Think of the kind of universe you would expect if God A created it: a universe of dominance, control, limitation, submission, uniformity, coercion. Think of the kind of universe you would expect if God B created it: a universe of interdependence, relationship, possibility, responsibility, becoming, novelty, mutuality, freedom. I’m not sure which comes first – the kind of universe you see or the kind of God you believe in, but as a Christian who believes in Jesus as the Son of God, I find myself in universe B, getting to know God B. [p. 76]

I agree with McLaren. The world in which I want to live, the world I want to help to create is the one where we find interdependence, relationship, possibility, responsibility, becoming, novelty, mutuality, freedom, and I would add intentionality. I believe that this is the kind of world God created. I believe that this is the kind of world God wanted to heal and restore by becoming one of us in Jesus the Christ. I believe that is the kind of world God wants to continue by sending the Holy Spirit among us to be our companion, our advocate, and our teacher.

The doctrine of the Trinity is not some out-dated construct born of musty and abstruse philosophy and theology. The Trinity is about the dance of life, the dance of relationship, and the experience that each of us can have with the living God. It is an invitation to the dance, an invitation to move beyond ourselves and our narrow view of our world and our day-to-day experience and see the possibility, the hope, and the difference than can be made when we start to dance with God.

Pray with me, please: “Holy God, who created all things through the Son, with the cooperation of the Holy Spirit; Holy Mighty, through whom we knew the Father and the Holy Spirit dwelt in the world; Holy Immortal, the Spirit Comforter, who proceeds from the Father abides in the Son, Holy Trinity, glory to You!” Amen. [Pentecost Hymn attributed to Emperor Leo VI (886-912) in John Meyendorff, *Byzantine Theology*, p. 184.]

A Gifted People

First Congregational Church – Wauwatosa, Wisconsin

17th Sunday after Pentecost – September 11, 2005

Rev. Steven A. Peay, Ph.D.

[Texts: Romans 14:1-12/Matthew 18:21-35]

We use the term ‘gifted’ to refer to people, and especially to people who have demonstrated some remarkable abilities or traits. We talk about gifted scholars, students, performers, artists, athletes, and even caregivers. What we’re saying is that these folks have been endowed with some extraordinary talents or abilities, which enabled them to excel. However, I am also reminded of Thomas Edison’s definition of genius, “One per cent inspiration and ninety-nine per cent perspiration!” There are few who would say that Edison wasn’t among the gifted, but he realized an essential point – the gift is only good if it’s used. A gift left in a box, still in its wrappings, only has the potential to be one thing, a “re-gift.” Unless it is used as it was intended, it’s really wasted.

Now, what has that got to do with being church? Plenty. There is a danger, you see, to sitting around recovering. You have time to think, to read, and even to watch. The last two weeks following my surgery I’ve gone from the sublime, reading Marilynne Robinson’s wonderful novel *Gilead*, to the ridiculous, watching the whole series of *The Vicar of Dibley* and even Monty Python’s ‘*The Meaning of Life*.’ In all of them I found things that pertain to what it means to be a gifted people, to be the church.

In the pages of *Gilead* I was reminded of Calvin’s point that the world is a stage, we’re the actors, and God is the audience. Our lives, our actions are observed by God and make a difference. Our lives are a gift from God and what we do with them is our ‘thank you’ for the gift. Reading the reflections of the Reverend John Ames in the novel I saw the truth of that and how we make a difference in each other’s lives – even in the smallest things.

Now, believe it or not, I also found the sublime in the midst of the ridiculous. I am not going to say that my approach to pastoral practice is going to change thanks to *The Vicar of Dibley*, but I did find something interesting in *The Meaning of Life*. There’s a scene in the middle of the film that opens with a group of businessmen seated around a large conference table. This is how it unfolds:

[Large corporate boardroom filled with suited executives]

Exec #1: Item six on the agenda: "The Meaning of Life" Now uh, Harry, you've had some thoughts on this.

Exec #2: Yeah, I've had a team working on this over the past few weeks, and what we've come up with can be reduced to two fundamental concepts. One: People aren't wearing enough hats. Two: Matter is energy. In the universe there are many energy fields, which we cannot normally perceive. Some energies have a spiritual source, which act upon a person's soul. However, this "soul" does not exist ab initio as orthodox Christianity teaches; it has to be brought into existence by a process of guided self-observation.

However, this is rarely achieved owing to man's unique ability to be distracted from spiritual matters by everyday trivia.

Exec #3: What was that about hats again?

Exec #2: Oh, Uh... people aren't wearing enough.

Exec #1: Is this true?

Exec #4: Certainly. Hat sales have increased but not *pari passu*, as our research...

Exec #3: [Interrupting] "Not wearing enough"? enough for what purpose?

Exec #5: Can I just ask, with reference to your second point, when you say souls don't develop because people become distracted...

[looking out window]

Exec #5: Has anyone noticed that building there before?

And there's the point – not enough hats. No, the point is we are gifted with a spirit, an energy, and we tend not to develop it because we get “distracted by everyday trivia.”

I believe that we Congregationalists are a gifted people, but tend, like other gifted folks, to neglect our gifts because we get distracted. The gift is God's will to relationship expressed in the person, the teaching, the life, death, resurrection and abiding presence of Jesus Christ. I know that I've used this reference from John Shea before, but it fits. In his book *An Experience Named Spirit* Shea writes:

Jesus Christ is not only the past founder of our relationship to God but also its present mediator. He not only overcame the law of time by not being forgotten, he overcame the law of death by not being lost. He lives among us! And our rhetoric for his presence ranges from the lyrical Hopkins' verse “Christ plays in ten thousand places” to the sudden, shocking revelation of Zooney Glass, “And don't you know – listen to me now – don't you know who that fat lady really is? . . . Ah, buddy. Ah, buddy. It's Christ himself. Christ himself, buddy.” [p.17]

The encounter, the gift, holds that even though I may never have seen the Christ there were those who did and they have passed their experience to me and in their experience, through their agency, I am brought into that living relationship. For the church to continue as a gifted people, to be what it is called to be, means to bring people into an encounter and relationship with the living God. For that to happen requires those of us who have identified ourselves as “Christ followers” to take our own encounter, our own faith and relationship seriously and recognize that we're the means of encounter and relationship for others. In short, we could be Zooney's fat lady!

So we are a gifted people because God desires to know us and gives us the means to know God and to know one another. One way we can express this giftedness is by talking about the “three fs” that we see on publications and nametags around here: Faith, Freedom, and Fellowship. These three concepts are at the root of our being a gifted people.

Faith can be used in a number of ways, as I pointed out in a sermon back in January. We can talk about faith as believing or assenting to a certain set of doctrines or

teachings. We can also talk about the radical notion of faith that we see in Jesus' invitation to his disciples. I like what contemporary theologian Hans Kung notes, "Jesus nowhere said, 'Say after me,' but rather 'Follow me.' That means that Jesus did not first require a confession of faith from his disciples, women or men, but rather called them to utterly practical discipleship." [Kung, *Christianity: Essence, History and Future*, p. 50] What Kung is saying is that it's more about the life we live than the words we say; because we can 'know' something and never have it make a bit of difference in our lives. My own thought is that faith is our response to that invitation to follow and the means by which we come to understand what we're about.

Now, that being said, let me address a point of misinformation about Congregationalism and faith. This is NOT the church where you get to believe anything you like and the reason we have a weather vane and not a cross on the top of the steeple is NOT so people can figure out which way our theology is going today. I have no idea where that notion got started, but after ten years of fairly consistent research I have yet to find one Congregational scholar who says faith for us is a free-for-all. You see, there's a reason that we have a book in the library called *The Creeds and Platforms of Congregationalism* and why over the years statements of faith, like the 1913 Kansas City Statement of Faith (you can find it on page 512 in the back of your hymnal), were written. We believe something – we stand in the historic Reformed tradition. We simply choose not to use these statements as tests, but rather as testimonies.

When Pastor Robinson sent the Pilgrims off from Leyden he told them, "The Lord hath yet more light and truth to break forth out of his holy Word." So, we stand on the truth of Scripture and that these words penned long ago still have meaning and effect because of the living Spirit in the living body of Christ – which is the church, a gifted people, the Lord's free and gathered people.

We have a faith and while we see creeds not as tests, but as testimonies, we are not acreedal. Our freedom comes as a result of this faith-perspective. The early Congregationalists didn't want to be constrained by external statements or liturgies so that they could be absolutely free to give themselves to loving God and one another. I've said it before and will continue to say it: our freedom is not a freedom from, but a freedom to. We are not freed from believing, but freed to believe and to follow Jesus with all our hearts, minds, souls, and our everyday lives reflecting it.

That faith and freedom come because we are gifted with forgiveness. That's the point Jesus makes in Matthew's Gospel. Peter is looking for the minimum, the "how-long-before-I-get-to-retaliate?" point. Jesus tells him, and in no uncertain terms, that there isn't one. Seventy seven times, overcoming Lamech's vengeance in Genesis 4, and multiplying the perfect number seven, Jesus says. That's forgiveness, compassion at a level beyond comprehension, but that's what God practices and we're to do the same. People who come among us are to be welcomed, embraced, forgiven, and cared for – just as we have been. All of us, all of us, are debtors and all of us have had a "zillion" dollar debt (which, by the way is what that number is in the Gospel – an astronomical sum) pushed aside by a God who says, "I love you – now get on with the business of loving

others.” And every time we say the Lord’s Prayer we are reminded of that forgiveness and of our action in response, “Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.”

Faith and Freedom, then, lead to Fellowship, to community. This isn’t an exercise in individuation – though this is Congregationalism’s thorn in the flesh. The point is that we are a gifted people, not just gifted persons. God’s love, God’s grace, God’s action takes individuals and draws them into community. God’s takes persons and makes a people. It is as a people, a church, that we are to reach to others with the message of God’s love and healing presence. Christians have been having difficulty at this almost from the beginning. Notice Paul’s words to the church at Rome we read today. Still, that doesn’t mean that we give up or that we lightly excuse ourselves from the effort of forming and maintaining community. We have been given a gift and now we’re expected to use it.

As I’ve prayed, read, and thought about what we’re undertaking in the next few weeks as we seek to “rekindle the gift,” I realized that we’re taking a big step. As a church we’re stepping back and giving serious thought to who we are and what we’re about. I believe that God is going to use this time and use all of us, if we accept our giftedness and exercise it.

Part of my musing has been on what I envision for this church and I’d like to share it with you. First, I see this as a welcoming, a safe, and loving place. A place where people seeking refuge and healing can come knowing that they’ll be accepted and welcomed. Second, I see it is a place where we practice “a generous orthodoxy.” This is a term that I discovered in a book, of the same name, by Brian McLaren. It originates with respected theologians Hans Frei and Stanley Grenz. Grenz talks about it as having elements of both the liberal and the evangelical. I like what McLaren says in the introduction to his book:

Scandalously, the generous orthodoxy you will explore (if you proceed) goes too far, many will say, in the direction of identifying orthodoxy with a consistent practice of humility, charity, courage, and diligence: humility that allows us to admit that our past and current formulations may have been limited or distorted. Charity to ward those of other traditions who may understand some things better than our group – even though we are more conscious of what we think we understand better. Courage to be faithful to the true path of our faith, as we understand it even when it is unpopular, dangerous, and difficult to do so. Diligence to seek again and again the truth path of our faith whenever we feel we have lost our way, which seems to be pretty often. [A Generous Orthodoxy, p. 30]

As Congregationalists we don’t check our heads at the door, they come in along with our hearts and here we struggle, we learn, and we grow – together. Ours is a reasoned, pilgrim faith seeking solid grounding and authenticity. Like Paul to the Romans, we don’t judge people as weak or strong in faith or judge where they are in the journey of faith. Rather, we open our doors and our hearts to people wherever they are on their journey to

God, knowing that all together, “we are the Lord’s.” The operative word in all of this is “generous” – we stand on classical Christian faith, but know how little we know and how much we need to learn. The best verse of our closing hymn today, “We Limit Not the Truth of God” isn’t in our hymnal. It goes like this: “Who dares to bind to his dull sense the oracles of heaven, for all the nations, tongues and climes, and all the ages given? That universe! how much unknown, that ocean! unexplored: the Lord hath yet more light and truth to break forth from his word.” That Lord has yet more – and we’re to be open.

Third, I envision this to be a place where we take our gifts seriously and use them. The message of Jesus in Matthew and of Paul to the Romans is clear: we are accountable for what we have been given. Part of being gifted is accounting for the gift – we have been given much and now we are to use it for the good of others. There has been a strong core of folks who make sure this place runs – they’ve been around for years and some new folks come along and join it, but that’s not the way the church, especially a Congregational Church, is supposed to run. It’s all of us that make it go. We are all called upon to be intentional in living our faith and we do it in the context of mutual care and concern – the old 80-20 rule doesn’t work here. It’s all of us because we’ve all been given the gift. Remember our businessmen in *The Meaning of Life*? We’re to get around the distractions, move beyond the everyday trivia and be about living the gift.

We are a gifted people and I see a place of welcome and safety; a place where a generous orthodoxy is practiced, and where we take our gifts seriously and use them well. Faith, Freedom, and Fellowship are gifts given to us so that others might know what we know and be loved and as we are loved. It’s that simple, and it’s that difficult. We are gifted and now we have to use the gift so that others might be blessed – as we are blessed. We are a gifted people.

"A Covenant People"

First Congregational Church – Wauwatosa, Wisconsin

18th Sunday after Pentecost – September 18, 2005

Rev. Steven A. Peay, Ph.D.

[Texts: Exodus 16:2-15/Matthew 20:1-16]

“...then you shall know that I am the Lord your God.”

“As followers of Jesus Christ we commit ourselves. . .”

When I was taking Psychology back in college there was a study we discussed that disturbed me greatly and has stayed with me all these years. It seems that back in the 1940s two groups of infants were given identical food and care, save in one area. One group was treated as we would normally treat babies. They were cuddled, talked to, touched and paid attention to in every way. The other group was touched only long enough to feed, or wash, or care for bodily needs. They weren't mistreated, but they weren't shown what we would consider normal human contact. The study showed that the first group developed as one would expect and were healthy, normal children. The second

group was sickly, showed signs of developmental problems, and some even died. Why do I remember it? Because it brought home to me very powerfully that human beings were made for relationship. We were made to belong to someone, to a community and when we are alienated from that we are less than what we were destined to be.

When the people followed Moses into the wilderness they had not yet become a true 'people,' a nation. The whole of the Old Testament – the word 'testament' means 'covenant' – is the record of God's establishing the covenant relationship with humanity in general, and Israel in particular. In the Jewish mind God had approached their nation when he called Abraham and had renewed this formally with Moses when he said to them, "I will take you to me for a people, and I will be to you a God" (Exodus 6: 7). The Exodus event continued the process and the Sinai Covenant, what we call the Ten Commandments, brought it into being. This covenant relationship put them in a place of privilege, but also in a place of responsibility. God calls the people into relationship and calls them out to follow a way of life and an approach to the every day that is different from those around them.

When Jesus says that "the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner" and tells the parable of the workman and the wage he's doing the same thing, personalizing and extending the call to relationship. What we see in Matthew's Gospel is what we saw in Exodus, the invitation to relationship and the reminder that that relationship, like the life that animates our bodies, is an entitlement – it's a gift.

God offers a gift, relationship, and in the lives we lead and the attitudes we form we demonstrate our response. So the church may, indeed, be a voluntary organization, but 'voluntary' only in the root meaning of that word – voluntas, will. God calls upon us to turn our wills to respond to relationship, communicating the Divine will to us in the person and work of Jesus Christ. We are now called to be a people of the new covenant, called at different times of day and in varying stages of life, to be God's people, followers of Jesus Christ, to be the Body of Christ.

What, then, is a covenant? A covenant is a solemn promise made binding by an oath. The oath may be either verbal or symbolic. The oath demonstrated the actor's obligation in making good the promise. The covenant-concept was quite prevalent in the ancient near East, but there are profound differences between those and the Hebrew idea of covenant. Typically a covenant is a bi-lateral arrangement; this is not the case with that entered into by God and Israel. The covenant is seen as a gift God makes to the people, which takes the covenant-relationship beyond the level of a contract into that of a bond of communion. The Dutch Old Testament scholar, Theodore Vriezen, has said, "the Covenant between God and the people did not bring these two 'partners' into a contract-relation, but into a communion, originating with God, in which Israel was bound to him completely and made dependent upon him."

While God sacrifices none of God's holiness, God extends participation in that holiness to God's people. The people may violate the covenant, may depart from the covenant, but they are forever marked by its effect. The implications of this communion

are made even more profound when considered in the light of the Old Testament understanding of humanity made in the "image and likeness of God" (Genesis 1:26ff). Or, in the words of the Psalmist: "what is man that thou art mindful of him? . . . Yet thou hast made him little less than God, and dost crown him with glory and honor" (Psalm 8:4-5). The covenant brings a dignity to humans called into this relationship that is far more than any mere contractual arrangement could ever bring.

In the person, the life, and the work of Jesus Christ the covenant-concept is raised to a new level, as is the divine-human relationship. The law of love becomes the definitive standard for the Christian community, since it was by demonstrating this law in his act of absolute self-giving on the cross that the Christ brought salvation. This is Paul's point when he talks about Christ being "our peace" and telling us that he has broken down the walls of hostility and alienation that he "might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby bringing the hostility to an end" (Ephesians 2:16).

When the early Congregationalists looked at the scriptures they saw the covenant as its great theme, God's desire for relationship is why "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son." Christians, Christ-followers, were called from the old "covenant of works" into the new "covenant of grace." The effect of the covenant of grace was to bring about a restored relationship between God and humanity. In the mind of the Federal Theologians (the word 'federal' comes from the Latin word for covenant: foedus), God had always dealt with humanity by means of the covenant. If humanity responds to the gracious invitation to come into covenant relationship with God by faith, they will enjoy all the benefits of a restored relationship. The Federal Theologians understood, like Paul told the church at Ephesus, that we were now a people in relationship with God and with each other. Thus, the 17th century Congregational theologian Richard Sibbes could define the covenant of grace in a manner common to all the writers:

It has pleased the great God to enter into a treaty and covenant of agreement with us his poor creature, the articles of which agreement are here comprised. God, for his part, undertakes to convey all that concerns our happiness, upon our receiving of them, by believing on him. Every one in particular that recites these articles from a spirit of faith makes good this condition.

What is more, in the covenant of grace God pursued fallen humanity and brought it back to its original situation. Another Congregational theologian, Thomas Shepard, wrote:

Oh the depths of Gods grace herin . . . that when he deserves nothing else but separation from God, and to be driven up and downe the World, as a Vagabond, or as dryed leaves, fallen from our God, that yet the Almighty God cannot be content with it, but must make himself to us, and us to himself more sure and neer than ever before! The Lord can never get neer enough to his people, and thinks he can never get them neer enough unto himselfe, and therefore unites and binds and fastens them close to himself, and himselfe unto them by the bonds of a Covenant.

Here the individual believer is given a new dignity, like the dignity given to all of Israel. The relationship entered into by God and a "particular man" in the covenant of grace implied a relationship between all those who had entered into the covenant. That gathering of those "called out," which is the church, also takes on a new importance as the place where that covenant relationship is lived out.

When the people gathered at Salem in 1629 they agreed: "We covenant with the Lord and with one another, and do bind ourselves in the presence of God to walk together in all his ways, according as he is pleased to reveal himself unto us in his blessed Word of Truth." What they declared as they gathered themselves into a church was what had been taught by the learned doctor William Ames in his book *The Marrow of Theology* six years previously. Ames said that a church could only be a church when it is made up of individuals bound by a particular covenant. What the folks at Salem, Ames, we hear at First Church, and Congregationalists everywhere understood doesn't preclude fellowship with other believers. However, it more accurately expresses the reality of the New Testament concept of a local or a particular church.

We Congregationalists are people of the new covenant. The Cambridge Platform, an important document of American Congregationalism written in 1648, expresses this very clearly. It defines a Congregational Church in this way:

A Congregational-church, is by the institution of Christ a part of the Militant-visible-church, consisting of a company of Saints by calling, united into one body, by a holy covenant, for the publick worship of God, and the mutuall edification one of another, in the Fellowship of the Lord Jesus.

What calls us together is faith, but what sets us apart as a church is the covenant into which we enter. So the church is a particular assembly made-up of those who have come into communion, first with Christ and then with one another. The covenant, then, takes on almost a sacramental character, as do the gathered people, since both serve as a visible reminder of the presence of Christ.

For Congregationalists, as people of the new covenant, the church is primarily a communal and relational reality. Our theology of the church does not place emphasis upon the church as institution, hierarchy, or society. Rather, it is the relationship of the believers to Christ and to one another that make the church what it is. When the body of believers is engaged in the living-out of the covenant, that is through acts of worship ("the Word preached and the sacraments rightly administered") or service, then Christ is present in and to the church. To believe in the "communion of the saints" as a Congregationalist implies a this-worldly faith in the presence of Christ in one's brothers and sisters within reach and not just in the abstract of universal presence or the hereafter. I think how we have described the church is what Paul meant when he told the Ephesians:

So then you are no longer strangers and sojourners, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and the prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in

whom the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you are also built into it for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit. (Ephesians 2:19-22)

When a Congregationalist talks about 'the church' he or she is talking about the "living stones," the "fellow citizens" that make it up. As people of the new covenant we are people committed to relationship. The goal for us is not how big a meetinghouse we can build, or how many people we can stuff into it, but how well we can make Christ present to each other. Our chief desire, as people of the new covenant, should be to make a loving community of faith where people can come without worrying about what someone will think or whether their ideas, dreams, or beliefs will be belittled. Our unique position of emphasizing the covenant, rather than a uniform creed, provides a wonderful foundation for building that kind of community. Back in 1939 J. S. Griffith wrote something in *The Congregational Quarterly* that I believe still holds true of Congregational churches to this day:

The glory of our Congregationalism is that we refuse to make the Church of our Lord a theological sect. Our position, which has grown gradually clear through the centuries, has been that the basis of our fellowship is common experience of Christ and not identity of thought about Him . . . That exclusion of fellow-Christians would be schism . . . This is the trust that has come down to us, and a stewardship for which in our day we have responsibility; the stewardship of the Church Universal, to save the Church from becoming a sect . . .

Back in 1842 a group of believers entered into covenant relationship to 'gather' the First Congregational Church of Wauwatosa. That little group, less than a dozen, met in the Gilbert family cabin, not too far from where Mayfair Mall now stands, and that being the days of the Plan of Union with the Presbyterians, they gathered using the covenant of the Frankfort, Illinois Presbyterian Church. In one hundred and sixty-three years there have been ups and downs here, as in any family. I am pretty sure that there have been times when there has been conflict and life has not been pretty. On the other hand, I am equally sure that there have been many more times when the love expressed here has been beyond words. Whether up or down, this has been a place of relationship, of belonging. That belonging is what makes the covenant forever relevant and fresh. People need to know that they belong, regardless of their situation. Belonging, welcoming, generosity, fairness to all is what it means to be people of the new covenant.

Every year at Easter I am moved by John Chrysostom's homily and something he says in it so fits that I want to share it with you. Chrysostom, his name means, "golden mouthed," said: "If any have labored from the first hour, let them receive today their rightful due. If any have come at the third hour, let them feast with thankfulness. If any have arrived at the sixth hour, let them in no wise be in doubt, for in no wise shall they suffer loss, If any be delayed even until the ninth hour, let them draw near, doubting nothing, fearing nothing, If any have tarried even until the eleventh hour, let them not be fearful on account of his lateness: for the master, who is jealous of his honor, receives the last even as the first. He gives rest to him who comes at the eleventh, as well as to the one

who has labored from the first hour; and to the last he is merciful, and the first he pleases; to the one he gives, and to the other he bestows; and he receives the works, and welcomes the intention; and the deed he honors, and the offering he praises. Wherefore, then, enter all of us in the joy of your Lord; both the first and the second, receive your reward.” God’s offer of covenant relationship stands and we are welcomed, no matter when we come, but we must come. We have to answer the invitation and declare that we are “followers of Jesus Christ.”

Over one hundred and sixty years have passed since this church was first gathered and people knew that in this community of faith that the Lord is indeed their God and they were “strangers and sojourners no longer.” What they experienced here was the basic and timeless truth that we were made for relationship. It’s no less true today, and we don’t need to do an elaborate experiment to prove it, we are still made for God and for each other and we only thrive in relationship. I invite you to claim your covenant relationship in a renewed and fresh way and to offer to Wauwatosa and all the surrounding communities the witness of people in loving relationship, people of the new covenant, followers of Jesus Christ.

A Worshipping People

First Congregational Church – Wauwatosa, Wisconsin

19th Sunday after Pentecost – September 25, 2005

Rev. Steven A. Peay, Ph.D.

[Texts: Isaiah 6:1-5/John 4:7-26]

“You know, Reverend, I really don’t need to go to church to worship God. I can worship God better over a cup of coffee and my paper on a Sunday morning. I need my quiet-time.” I hear that and similar arguments from a lot of folks and have heard it and its variations for years. Obviously many feel that way or this church, which numbers a membership of over eight hundred, would have both services packed and, sad to say, we don’t. So, why do we worship? Why do we keep this up if, indeed, we could just as effectively praise God while kneeling weeding in our gardens or appreciating the wonder of nature on an immaculately manicured green with a putter in our hands?

Well, first let me offer a little story I found from the Jewish writer Elie Wiesel. He tells the story of one of the great Hasidic rabbis, when the great man was but a young boy studying in the local yeshiva. The teacher noticed that the lad was occasionally absent from the classroom where he was studying Torah. Finally, one day, he followed the boy into the surrounding woods where he discovered the rabbi-to-be praying. “What are you doing?” he asked. The boy replied, “Praying.” “But why do you come all the way out here to pray,” the teacher pressed. “Don’t you know that everywhere God is the same?” “Oh, yes,” the lad replied, “God is everywhere the same . . . but I am not.” Sometimes we need an opportunity to focus and respond to God, in a place and among a people where we are different. Why? Because we were made for worship, let me explain.

Human beings are rational animals or, as Kenneth Burke the great rhetorical critic and theorist of the last century said, we are the symbol-using animal. We have the ability to think, to reason, to consider and, even more, we have the ability to be reflective. That ability to reflect, to be self-aware, is one of the great signs that we are, as the Bible says, “made in the image and likeness of God.” We also possess a longing for more, a deep-seated sense that there is more to us than what we see. Thus, we begin to look outside ourselves for the transcendent, that which is beyond the limits of our experience or even of our comprehension.

Back at the turn of the last century Rudolf Otto wrote a fascinating, and still standard work, called *The Idea of the Holy*. Otto says that the holy is a nonrational and ineffable part of the human experience. He describes the encounter with the Holy as *mysterium tremendum et fascinans* – a mystery at once tremendous/overwhelming and yet fascinating. ‘Mystery’ is something that lies beyond our power to comprehend or to conceptualize rationally. It is something extraordinary and unfamiliar. When we come in contact with it we are immediately put off-guard because it is outside of our ordinary experience and then to find ourselves in such a presence frightens us because we are forced to acknowledge that we are less than that in whose presence we stand.

“In the year King Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and his train filled the temple.” Isaiah’s vision is one the classic examples of the experience of the ‘holy.’ Isaiah comes into the temple and through the clouds of incense and the smoke of the burning sacrifices he has an encounter with the transcendent. In this vision of God Isaiah is made to realize just how small and how different, ‘unclean,’ he is in the face of God’s ‘otherness’ or ‘holiness.’ Still, he is fascinated by what he sees, so much so that after he cries “Woe is me!” he offers himself in service to God saying, “Here am I! Send me!” What we see in that story is, or at least should be, why we’re here this morning, why we come to church at all. Because we may be awestruck, overwhelmed in the presence of that which is wholly other than ourselves, but still we’re compelled to stand outside ourselves because we’ve been touched, we’ve seen the Lord. Part of being human is responding to the Other, because while it is so different we see a glimpse of ourselves there, too. As Augustine said, so beautifully, “You have made us for yourselves and our hearts are restless, until they rest in You, O Lord.”

So, we worship because it is a part of who we are as human beings. We also worship because God reaches to us, offering relationship to us. The essence of the covenant relationship, remember, is when God says, “I will be with you.” What we see in Scripture again and again is God taking individuals and little groups and drawing them into relationship, first with God’s self and then with one another. God takes us where we are and forms community. Worship is response to God. Thus, God’s continued assurance of presence is made visible through the lives of those who have responded to God’s gracious self-disclosure and, in the process, have become “visible saints.” Recall that the definition of a Congregational church is “a company of saints by calling” or “visible saints.”

One may become a “saint” through profession of belief, but this profession implies more than an intellectual assent to a series of theological propositions. William Ellery Channing revealed the Congregational roots of his Unitarian faith when he delivered his discourse on “The Church” in 1841. He told the people of the First Congregational Unitarian Church in Philadelphia:

God heeds not what we say, but what we are, and what we do. The subjection of our wills to the divine, the mortification of sensual and selfish propensities, the cultivation of supreme love to God and of universal justice and charity toward our neighbor – this, this is the very essence of religion . . .

What Channing identifies is the essence of spirituality. Our spirituality is genuine when it brings our faith into lived experience, providing the means for visible sainthood if you will. The end is, as William Ames described the practice of theology, “living toward God,” which implies living toward others in the process. Thus, Channing also describes the practical nature and purpose of the church, in other words that it is to put into practice that which it preaches.

So sainthood in its Congregationally understood way is ultimately communal and is to be the practical fruit of the church’s preaching. Marva Dawn, who is doing wonderful work in the area of worship, points out that one of the grave problems facing churches now is the loss of a sense of community. In fact, she identifies the lack of genuine community as the root problem of the churches. The gift of Congregational churches to the church universal, I believe, should be the emphasis upon the life “in common” that rests at the heart of the Congregational ideal and made possible through our emphasis upon the response to relationship expressed in the church covenant which identifies our chief purpose as the “publick worship of God.” The community comes as the result of individuals responding to God’s call to relationship. This community gathered in response to God’s call then becomes the means of communication of the Divine presence. The heart of God speaks to the human heart and those in dialogue constantly seek new partners; intentional and mutual acts of communication and commitment. We worship because it is why the church exists.

We worship because it is how we serve God and reminds us of how we are to serve others. We can say that the service of worship leads to worship through service. Our gathering for worship allows the individual to serve others through the exercise of the gifts that God has given to each of us. All of us have gifts, as Paul reminds us in First Corinthians, and while they will vary, the end result is the same: the community is drawn together and individual hearts join to commune with the loving heart of God. This understanding of “church being,” to use a term coined by Marva Dawn, stands over against how many would solve the problems confronting the churches today. Dawn speaks to this point when she writes:

Churches think they’re a “community” because that is what the word church suggests, without realizing how much the technological milieu hinders us from really caring for each other with gutsy, sacrificial love of genuine community.

Moreover, when we find out how much effort it takes truly to be the kind of community the Bible describes, we are often not willing to involve ourselves in that much struggle and suffering. In our overly entertained and blatantly consumerism-oriented culture, with little concern for serving the common good, many “churches” have become, in George Hansberger’s masterful phrases, “vendors of religious services and goods,” instead of “a body of people sent on a mission.”

The essence of the church as the place of the heart-to-heart exchange stands in sharp contrast to worship as consumption. Worship is service to God and to the community gathered in response to God gracious invitation to relationship. Church is not where I come to have my needs met, but where I come to offer myself to God and to others and in the process I find myself and am made whole.

Worship is when the church is most truly itself and expresses its nature as the people, the body, and building made up of living stones. This is made so clear in Channing’s description of the church as it meets for worship and testifies to the idea of the relationship or communion of human hearts with the heart of God in Christ revealed in “warm hearts . . . beating on every side.”

We come together in our places of worship that heart may act on heart; that in the midst of the devout a more fervent flame of piety may be kindled in our own breasts; that we may hear God’s word more eagerly knowing that it is drunk in by thirsty spirits around us I see the signs of Christian affection in those around me, in which warm hearts are beating on every side, in which a deep stillness speaks of the absorbed soul, in which I recognize fellow-beings who in common life have impressed me with their piety.

What we hear in Channing’s words is what we heard in the Cambridge Platform’s description of a Congregational church gathered “for the publick worship of God and the mutual edification one of another, in the fellowship of the Lord Jesus.” We are called to live out the covenant of grace, not in some abstract way, but in our service to God through those “warm hearts” on every side. We gather to worship because out of that experience we go forth to serve.

The church as “a company of saints by calling” in Congregational thought is then a place, a community of the heart. The church is a worshipping people, a community where love lives and expresses itself in a concrete manner through the actions of those gathered, chief of which is the service offered to God in worship and continued through a welcoming spirit and loving service to those in need. This is what the Samaritan woman at the well hears from Jesus, “God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.” True worship isn’t going through the motions or just saying the right things at the right time. True worship comes from deep within and transforms the worshipper and leads from the worship act to a different attitude toward life and relationships. Like the woman at the well we come to understand that we can come with all of our ragged edges, our triumphs and our failures, our sorrows and our joys, our

doubts and our certainties, and our questions and our answers. When we come to worship we express the Congregational theology of the church, based on the concept of the called, and thus visible, relationship of the believer to Christ and the gathering of these believers in loving relationship and service by means of a covenant. The church, then, is where heart speaks to heart, where we worship in spirit and in truth.

The early Congregationalists read Jesus' words in John's Gospel, searched the Scripture, and sought to express this worship in "spirit and truth." First and foremost they sought simplicity. They understood that the whole world was holy and that, indeed, one met God everywhere. So they built what was first called "God's barn," the meetinghouse, which was set in "the convenientest place for us all." When the church was gathered there then that meeting house became sacred space because a holy people was there.

They were determined not to have anything in worship that they couldn't find in the Bible, which, by the way, doesn't tell us a great deal about how the early church worshipped. So their service was based on what they could find, prayer, the singing of the Psalms and canticles from Scripture, the sermon and the sacraments. It tended to be a bit sparse and a tad long. It was not uncommon for a pastoral prayer to last as long as the sermon, about an hour each, and for worship to take three hours altogether.

Because they wanted to have pure worship, with all of what they called "papistical fripperies" removed, there was no cross, no candles, no "dumb readings" (that is, each reading was explained line-by-line and often word-by-word), nor were there any "dumb prayers" (the Lord's Prayer was seen only as a model for prayer and no prayers were repeated or read together). Neither was the "devil's box of whistles," the organ, anywhere to be seen. They had nothing against musical instruments, but in worship only that which God made, the voice, should be used, though choirs or anthems were not permitted.

Over time attitudes changed, especially as they, and we, have learned more and more about the worship not only of the early church, but also of the Reformation. The four-fold order of worship (1. the church gathers; 2. the church hears the Word; 3. the church offers prayer and thanksgiving; 4. the church is sent forth to love and serve) is not only reflected in the early church's worship, but in that of the Reformation. Gradually elements of worship once discarded in the first fervor have come back and many of them we use today – amply witnessed by the presence of cross, candles, organ and choir, to name a few.

We are a worshipping people. Worship is the most important thing, indeed the most human thing, we do. Worship binds us as a community and empowers us for service so that those who come to the well of life, thirsty to know God and to experience the more of their lives, will be welcomed and challenged. Worship is where we come to meet God and God is here – waiting to meet us. We do this Sunday-after-Sunday because it makes us who we are.

Annie Dillard, who has called herself a “lapsed Congregationalist,” takes all Christians to task in *Teaching a Stone to Talk*. Her point is that we’re “not sufficiently sensible of the power we so blithely invoke” and suspects that we don’t believe what we do when we invite God into our midst. I think she’s on-target. You see, God has called us to be worshipping people and when we call, God comes. God is here. The Lord of time and creation is here and like Isaiah and the Samaritan woman we should just fall down in wonder, awe and amazement. Worship is our acknowledging God’s presence and showing our gratitude for it – it’s not about our being entertained, but about the response we make to God. We need to be sensible of the power we invoke and be a worshipping people with all that it implies for living everyday. Oh, and my response to those folks I mentioned at the outset? I tell them that it’s simply not the same. And it isn’t, is it?

A Learning People

First Congregational Church – Wauwatosa, Wisconsin

20th Sunday after Pentecost – October 2, 2005

Rev. Steven A. Peay, Ph.D.

[Texts: Philippians 3:4b-14/Psalm 19 / Matthew 21:33-46]

Sometimes we use humor to “poke fun” at others and sometimes we “poke fun” at ourselves. This week I heard a variation on this joke. “What do you get when you cross a Jehovah’s Witness with a Unitarian? Someone who knocks on your door for no apparent reason.” Here’s the variation: “What do you get when you cross a Jehovah’s Witness with a Congregationalist? Someone who knocks on your door, shoves a Bible into your hand and says, ‘Figure it out for yourself!’” It’s cute, but not entirely accurate and I think you’ll see why as we explore what it means to be a learning people.

I want to begin our consideration of what it means to “grow in the knowledge and expression of our faith” by addressing a common misunderstanding of our Congregational heritage. The Pilgrims and the Puritans were not really separate groups of people, but two ‘wings’ of a movement. Since the turn of the last century and the work of people like Champlain Burrage and Perry Miller we have understood that there were Puritans who wanted to separate from the Church of the England and those who did not wish to separate from it. The Pilgrims were Separatist Puritans. The settlers of the Massachusetts Bay Colony were Non-separating Puritans.

The Separatists wanted to “come out” from what they saw as a church beyond reformation and went so far as to leave the country to do it. The Non-separatists wanted to give a witness to their “dear mother,” as John Winthrop referred to the Anglican Church, what a purified church could look like. Which is why they came on the “errand into the wilderness” or the “great migration” in 1629. Both groups shared a common understanding of theology and approach to the Christian life and at the Cambridge Synod of 1648 these strains would come together to develop the American form of Congregationalism. So when I talk about the Puritans, I know that they were also behind the Presbyterians, the Baptists and even the Quakers, but I’m talking about us.

Now, why did I do this? To demonstrate our heritage and so that we can see the Puritans were a learning people. They valued education highly and saw it as one of God's gifts to us so that we could understand the two "books" he had given us: the book of nature and the Holy Scriptures. No other group of colonists were so quick, or so driven, to establish schools as were the Puritans. Boston Latin School, America's first public school, was founded in 1635 and Harvard College in 1636. We read in the 1643 document *New England's First Fruits*, "After God had carried us safe to New England, and we had builded our houses, provided necessaries for our livelihood, reared convenient places for God's worship, and settled the civil government, one of the next things we longed for and looked after was to advance learning and perpetuate it to posterity.' [in Ryken *Worldly Saints*, p. 158] This desire, often described as a learned ministry to a literate laity, would lead to hundreds of schools and colleges across what would become the United States – including Beloit College, Ripon College and Northland College here in Wisconsin.

Schools were founded because they understood that reason was a gift from God and as good Augustinians/Calvinists saw it as a sign that humans are made in the image and likeness of God. This gift was to be used, as Richard Baxter said, "We must use our best reason . . . to know which are the true Canonical Scriptures . . . to expound the text, to translate it truly . . . to gather just and certain inferences from Scripture assertions; to apply general rules to particular cases, in matters of doctrine, worship, discipline, and ordinary practice." [in Ryken *Worldly Saints*, p. 160] So they would not have advocated or used a literalist approach to Scripture. As Perry Miller and Thomas Johnson point out in *The Puritans*, "What we know as 'fundamentalism' would have been completely antipathetic to them, for they never for one moment dreamed that the truth of scripture was to be maintained in spite of our against the evidences of reason, science, and learning.' [Miller and Johnson *The Puritans* vol. 1, p. 4] The Puritan curriculum had the Bible at the center and a firm grounding in the liberal arts all around it. That approach shows they were not only the heirs of all that was the best of the Reformation, but also of the Renaissance and of the Medieval Church and they employed this Christian humanist heritage to the glory of God.

Congregationalists, if they are true to their heritage, are people who are constantly seeking to know and to grow. So "to grow in the knowledge and expression of our faith" means realizing we have a faith to begin with. The Puritans stood in the classical Christian tradition; their quarrel with the Church of England wasn't doctrinal, but political and liturgical. They looked at the book of nature and saw the evidence, the fingerprints and footprints if you will, of a God who has created a wondrous world and echoed the Psalmist, "The heavens are telling the glory of God. . . Day to day pours forth speech, and night to night declares knowledge." They looked at the Bible and saw there the record of God's self-disclosure gradually unfolding through the covenants until it was made complete in the person and work of Jesus the Christ. And with Paul they said, "I want to know Christ." This quest for knowledge of God and then to live out the relationship it established was, at root, the Puritan project. I believe it continues to be our project as well.

When Paul tells the Philippians, “I want to know Christ” it is important to understand that this is not knowledge as fact or as mere intellect. The word Paul uses “to know” is used in the language of human intimacy. To know in this way is immediate, personal, and born of experience. What he is saying is, “I don’t want to know about Jesus – I want to know Jesus.” Paul, then, is talking about coming into a deep and personal relationship. This relationship is made possible because in Jesus, God has come to know what it means to be human from the inside out. All of the good and the bad of what it means to be human, even to our very deaths, God take on and transforms through Jesus. God does this so we can experience new life – not just in the hereafter, but in the ‘herenow;’ one of those already-but-not-yet situations that are so much a part of Christian life. Paul says “I don’t have it all yet,” but we can still know a sufficient amount to continue to grow until we attain the fullness, “the high call of God in Christ Jesus.”

The Puritans would not, and we don’t, tell people to “figure it out for yourself.” No, we do this together, as a community gathered in response to God’s self-disclosure to us in the Word made flesh, in the Word of the Scripture, and in the book of nature. If you look in the back of your hymnal on page 512, number 53, you’ll see the Kansas City Statement of Faith of 1913. When it was written it was presented as being held generally among Congregational Christians. A later document came along in 1945 that expanded a bit on this statement and said something I think is quite important. “Every good form in the Church must therefore (a) witness to God and (b) conform to the apperceptions of those who would understand and profit by it. Congregational Christians have never gone to the extreme of denying the place of forms, but they have resolutely resisted the use of any particular one as sacrosanct. They have striven constantly toward the universal, which includes all particular forms. The form of their government, their theology, and their liturgical practice is hospitable to all forms by which Christians, whatever their denomination, point toward God. It is this quality which makes them the interdenominational denomination. Their fellowship is not exclusive, but inclusive. The two great sacraments mean, for them, induction into and nourishing communion in the universal fellowship of all who love and serve the Lord. Jesus.”[in Walter Marshall Horton *Our Christian Faith*, p. 132]

We stand, therefore, in the great tradition of Vincent of Lerins whose canon said that authentic faith was that “believed by all, in every place, and at all times” and that did not change into something else, but grew into full maturity. Vincent used the analogy of the human person and it’s apt. Hard as it is to believe, I once weighed eight pounds nine ounces. That was a long time ago, but while I weigh a great deal more I am still the same person, though grown into maturity. All of me that was there at birth is still here now, but fully developed. So it is with Christian doctrine. It doesn’t change into something else, it grows more fully into what it is. As Christians we don’t grow that way by ourselves, we need to be guided by the Holy Spirit and accompanied on the journey by those who seek the fullness of truth with us.

As a learning people, then, we don’t shut the doors and say that we have the exclusive hold on knowledge. Jesus told his parable of the vineyard to make the point that knowledge of God is not the exclusive property of religious leaders. He tells this parable,

with its foreshadowing of his own passion, to remind his hearers that God seeks to embrace and include, not exclude. The knowledge that we gain is to be shared, rather than controlled, so that others may enter the vineyard. Let me put it this way, our faith should lead us to fellowship and that fellowship is expressed in freedom. It may be wonderfully alliterative to say “faith, freedom, fellowship,” but theologically the other way is more accurate.

“To grow in the knowledge and expression of our faith” means that we’re on a journey together and it’s not “do it yourself,” nor is it “solo.” I think the joke might be a bit more accurate if it went like this: “What do you get when you cross a Jehovah’s Witness with a Congregationalist? Someone who knocks on your door, hands you a Bible and says, ‘Come join us. Bring your questions, your doubts, and your baggage with you, but join us. We’re a learning people and we’ll figure it out together under the Spirit’s guidance.’” Oh, I know it doesn’t make for a snappy punch line, but it is the truth. We are here to learn – together.

A Compassionate People

First Congregational Church – Wauwatosa, Wisconsin

21st Sunday after Pentecost – October 9, 2005

Rev. Steven A. Peay, Ph.D.

[texts: Philippians 4:1-9/Matthew 22:1-14]

I fear that I am falling prey to the old preacher’s device of using a definition as a starting point. However, I think that it would not hurt for us to consider where the word ‘compassion’ comes from and what it means as we discuss being a compassionate people. The word ‘compassion’ comes from the Latin word ‘patior,’ which means to allow or to suffer and is the root for ‘patient.’ To have compassion then is to suffer or feel with another and to be compassionate is to demonstrate this willingness to suffer with, to feel pity for another. Even more important than its etymological origins is to discover from where does this quality of compassion come? I believe it comes from humanity being made in the image and likeness of God.

If it comes from the spiritual side of us, then it stands to reason our cultivation of our spiritual lives, our spirituality, will be what nurtures and stimulates compassion to grow within us. Spirituality is a hot topic right now, as this as this September 5th copy of Newsweek demonstrates. The cover and the feature articles are devoted to the quest for spirituality in contemporary America. I don’t find this odd at all given the nature of our nation and its founding. Some years ago the great scholar of American religious history, Sidney Mead, said that we are “a nation with the soul of a church.” The current quest for spirituality is, to a large extent, an attempt to recover that soul, which has been more than a bit battered by both modernity and, now, post modernity. The article states, “Today, then, the real spiritual quest is not to put another conservative on the Supreme Court, or to get creation science into the schools. If you experience God directly, your faith is not going to hinge on whether natural selection could have produced the flagellum of a bacterium. If you feel God within you, then the important question is settled; the rest is

details.” [p. 50] The flourishing of spirituality today and the search for large numbers of people is for the immediacy of a relationship, a communion with the Divine.

To be honest with you, I think that this has been the human quest – in one form or another – from the very beginning. This is that search to fill what Pascal called “the God shaped void” and Augustine poured out his soul about in his Confessions.

It’s something we’ve talked about here in this meetinghouse again and again. It’s about relationship. What fascinates me, however, is how diverse the quest has become and how advances in technology and information science have added new twists to the process. There is a Web site called ‘Beliefnet’ that sends out more than eight million daily emails on spiritual topics to more than five million subscribers. Here’s a list of what is sent, “Generic ‘inspiration’ is most popular (2.4 million), followed by the Bible (1.6 million), but there are 460,000 subscribers to the Buddhist thought of the day, 313,000 Torah devotees, 268,00 subscribers to Daily Muslim Wisdom (and 236,000 who get the Spiritual Weight Loss message). Even nature-worshipping Pagans are divided into a mind-boggling panoply of sects, including Wicca, Druidism, Pantheism, Animism, Teutonic Paganism, the God of Spirituality Folk and, in case you can’t find one to suit you on that list, Eclectic Paganism.” [p. 52] All of it is an attempt to fill that void, to experience the immediacy and assurance of relationship.

What hit me as I read the article, and has been mirrored in my own experience, is that many pursuing those diverse paths used to be Christians. The article told the story of an African-American woman who had been raised in a Baptist Church in the south who early on saw Christianity as “the religion of white oppressors.” Her spiritual journey led her to Tibetan Buddhism, which she embraced and now teaches. She recognizes that compassion is a trait common to both faiths, but something she said struck me, “The Bible says ‘love your neighbor,’ but it doesn’t tell you how.” She believes Buddhism taught her the way of compassion and tolerance to the point that she is now “an African-American Baptist Buddhist.” And while I applaud her search and her integrity, I believe that somewhere she missed the point that the Bible and Christian faith are really all about the “how” of loving your neighbor, of becoming and living as compassionate people. I won’t deny that sometimes it gets obscured, but that’s not the faith’s fault, it’s the fault of those who practice or, in too many cases, don’t practice it!

When Paul writes to the Philippians he is telling them precisely how to go about the love of the neighbor. He says, “whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. Keep on doing the things you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.” [Phil. 4:8-9] Paul is simply commending a balanced and positive way of life to those he loved and taught. He reminds them to stay focused on the things that matter – the positive things – and to look beyond the negatives and the flaws, especially the flaws in others. How different would our daily lives be if we lived what Paul commended? How different would this church, would every church, be if we lived our lives centered on that which is true, just, good, pure and beautiful? I believe that he is

describing God who is the source of all these virtuous actions and is the one toward whom we live as we seek to live day-to-day.

The essence of Christian spirituality is a life lived in response to God's gracious invitation to relationship on a deep, intimate, and personal level. The parable Matthew relates makes that point powerfully. The wedding feast is the metaphor for the kingdom of God, which is coming and bringing a new consciousness of God's presence and action in our world. We're not just invited to the party; we're invited to get married. Everyone is invited to come to the party; there is no ethnic, gender, age, or health requirement. All of the barriers that have stood between human beings and God and human beings among themselves are broken down, leveled. The great 'kicker' here, as John Shea points out, is that the wedding guests are the bride. "They were not invited to witness a wedding; they were invited to be married to the son. They were not invited to observe; they were invited to participate. The requirement is a wedding garment, an eagerness to be united to the son." [The Spiritual Wisdom of the Gospel Matthew Year A, p. 208] The garment is our willingness to respond and to make Jesus' teachings part of our lives. We all 'marry' and then bear the children of the union, which are the acts of justice, compassion, and love that we do in the world.

I know it may sound odd. However, the Puritans understood this "mystical marriage" which went beyond gender or anything we think marriage to be. Like the great teachers and mystics of the church through the ages, they understood the implications of what it meant to be "joined" to Christ as the "head of the body" and to be brought into corporate relationship not only Christ, but with other believers. They understood, as is pointed out in Matthew's Gospel, that marriage is not a theoretical, but practical relationship. So they gave themselves to study, prayer, meditation, and contemplation to enter into that union and then turned to produce the fruit of it in the commonwealth, in the society they formed. John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* is one of the classic works of Puritan spirituality. In it Christian observed, "The soul of religion is the practical part. . . ." When judgment day comes, he points out, one will not be asked, "Did you believe?" but "Were you doers, or talkers only?"

There is another Puritan manual on spirituality that speaks to the practical deeds of loving one's neighbor. It's called *The Plaine Mans Pathway to Heaven* and was written by Arthur Dent. Dent listed, "honest, just, and conscionable dealing in all our actions among men" as signs of whether or not one was in proper relationship with God, or among the elect. Here he echoes both Richard Baxter and the learned doctor, William Ames. Baxter said, "True morality, or the Christian ethics is the love of God and man, stirred up by the Spirit of Christ, through faith; and exercised in works of piety, justice, charity, and temperance." Elsewhere he wrote, "Take heed that you lose not that common love which you owe to mankind." Ames, who defined theology as "the art of living toward God" demonstrated that there is another side as well when he wrote, "To profit or benefit others is a duty belonging to all men. . . . Love towards God cannot consist without this charity towards our neighbor . . . neither can any true religion." [both in Ryken, *Worldly Saints*, p. 179-180]

Our Puritan forebears showed time and again that love of God and faith in Christ showed itself best in the love of neighbor. For all of the later descriptions of them as sour and unforgiving, their writings, the institutions of public good they founded, and the works they did tell us otherwise. So, too, do the good works done by their descendants, including the movement to abolish slavery, the Underground Railroad (in which our church participated), the founding of Howard University for African Americans and Gallaudet University for the hearing impaired, and countless social projects. The emphasis was on a spirituality that wasn't theoretical, but practical.

Their whole project, the rekindling of the fires of faith that they saw going out around them, was summed up in their love toward God and neighbor. Their spirituality was nothing fancy or exotic, but was just the basic practice, which has marked Christian faith when it is at its best. Lewis Bayly's *The Practice of Piety* describes it: "to joyne together, in watching, fasting, praying, reading the Scriptures, keeping his Sabbath, hearing Sermons, receiving the holy Communion, relieving the Poore, exercising in all humilitie the works of Pietie to God, and walking conscionably in the duties of our call towards men." [in *Senn Protestant Spiritual Traditions*, p. 165]

The contemporary English spiritual writer, Kenneth Leech, wrote a little book that I recommend to folks beginning their exploration of Christian spirituality. It's called *True Prayer: An Invitation to Christian Spirituality*. While written some years ago, Leech makes a comment that speaks to right now, "Today meditation and 'spirituality' are being offered as commodities, as products of the social order, but as leisure-time activities which have no effect upon society. Spirituality has become 'privatised', banished to the private sector of life. Yet the future of our society is inextricably bound up with the future of the human spirit. . . True spirituality is not a leisure-time activity, a diversion from life. It is essentially subversive, and the test of its genuineness is practical. Discipleship involves a real transformation of character." [p. 79] That's what we are called to as people of compassion, to the transformation of character which empowers us to live toward God and toward others reaching out to those in need, because God has first reached out to us in our need – God has felt with us, suffered with us. Now we reach to others.

We can come up with a long list of reasons, I am sure, why being a compassionate person is best left to someone else. We might denigrate or belittle our own spiritual life and think we're not worthy. Ultimately, there is no excuse and all we have to do is look to how God worked transformation in and through the lives of the most unlikely people. I came across this list and it makes such sense that I'm just going to leave with it today. "What's our excuse? Abraham was too old. Moses stuttered. Miriam was a gossip. Jacob was a liar. Elijah was burned out. Solomon was too rich. Isaiah had unclean lips. Jeremiah was too young. Jonah didn't like his job. Naomi was a widow. Peter was afraid of death. Paul was a murderer. Lazarus was dead. Martha was a worry-wart." God can take us, transform us and use us for good – but we have to respond to the invitation to become a people of compassion.

"A Generous People"

First Congregational Church – Wauwatosa, Wisconsin

23rd Sunday after Pentecost -- 23 October 2005

Rev. Steven A. Peay, Ph.D.

[Texts: 1 Thessalonians 2:1 8/Matthew 22:34 46]

Expectations....all of us have them, great or not. Expectations bring a sense of comfort and familiarity to the constantly changing world around us. For example, when we go into a McDonald's we have a certain set of expectations of what the food, the service and the price will be like. We have a different set of expectations if we're heading into say one of the finer dining establishments, like Bartolotta's or Eddie Martini's for dinner, don't we? Because of those expectations a hamburger, fries and a coke taste fine at a Mickey D's, but if we'd get that meal at a "good restaurant," we'd be disappointed to say the least. In fact, we're less disappointed when we have a bad experience at McDonald's than at a very fine restaurant. Why? Because we expect more. As Shakespeare says in *All's Well that Ends Well*, "oft expectation fails, and most oft there where it promises most."

Expectations, then, provide parameters based upon our experiences and the shared experience of our culture. We want things to meet expectations, I'd go so far to say that we expect them to, but we're pleased and surprised when things exceed expectations. For example, when Julie and I were traveling in Australia several years ago, we decided that we had to eat lunch in a McDonald's, just to compare. Know what? The food was almost identical but the tomatoes and lettuce were outstanding! When I was in school in Germany ages ago, I did the same thing. Know what? They serve beer in McDonald's! Talk about civilized! Those fast food meals exceeded my expectations and I still remember them as a consequence.

The Pharisees have a certain set of expectations of what the Messiah is supposed to look like and, quite frankly, Jesus doesn't fit them. So, as we've seen in the Gospel readings over the last several weeks, they carry on a campaign to trip up or discredit Jesus in the eyes of the common people. Today they come with yet another question, of all the commandments, which is the greatest?

You and I know the answer to that question. It's been a part of us since we were very little. However, did you know that Jesus isn't providing a new teaching when he tells them what the greatest commandment is? What Jesus does here is to summarize the Torah's 613 commandments – 248 positive (thou shalt) and 365 negative (thou shalt not) – into two very positive statements. Appropriately enough, he quotes Scripture to make the answer.

First, he quotes Deuteronomy 6:5, which forms part of the Shema one of the prayers Jews pray daily. It goes like this: "Hear (Shema) O Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might." So Jesus takes the essence of this prayer, love God completely. Interestingly enough, the word for 'might,' in the Greek *dynamis* (from which

we get our words 'dynamite,' 'dynamic,' and dynamo') is exchanged for dianoia, 'mind.' I think that's an important distinction, it reminds us – I believe – that God expects us to use the rational capabilities we have in our service. This, too, has been a hallmark of our Congregational Way. As the old saying goes, the doors of meeting houses were built tall so folks would know they didn't have to leave their heads outside!

We also have to understand that Jesus is not calling us to a dreary set of obligations here. As one author has said, "But all together, they can neither limit nor even foresee all concrete applications. To love – with all one's heart, with all one's soul, and all one's mind – has nothing to do with discharging a series of predetermined obligations. Love is constant attention to the other; it is inventive and does not let us ever consider ourselves free of its demands. With all one's heart, with all one's soul, and with all one's mind means that particular obligations jotted down on a calendar – for instance, the dates of birthdays, anniversaries, etc. – are mere reminders, not the bill of expenses to be paid so as to be released from all debts. God is not like a faraway person who keeps rigorous accounts of our actions and omissions." Thank God for that mercy!

Second, Jesus quotes Leviticus 19:18, "you shall love your neighbor as yourself." I'm not sure that many of us really ever understand this one. To love someone as we love ourselves is an incredible thing. When we look around our world, our town, our church, I sometimes think we have a lot of folk who are engaged in self-hatred. Why? Because we see the way they treat other people.

This command of Jesus, to love our neighbor as ourselves, means that we do to others only those things we would want done to us; I believe that Jesus said that somewhere too, didn't he? And in that, too, he quoted another great rabbi, Hillel. The story goes that a gentile seeking to convert came to another great rabbi and said, "Give me a summary of the whole law that I can say while standing on one foot." The rabbi scoffed at him as a mocker and had his disciples throw him out. The man then went to Rabbi Hillel and asked the same question. Hillel smiled, told him to stand on one foot and said, "Do not do to others those things which you do not wish to have done to yourself." Then he accepted him as a convert and told him, "Now go; study and pray!"

Jesus exceeds expectations here because he shows that there is more than mere obligation to the observance of the law. What is more, he shows us that we come to love God in loving our neighbor. That's why when he then turns to ask the question on who they think the Christ is he again exceeds their expectations. They think the Messiah is only the Son of David, and thus can only be an earthly king. Jesus – pardon the expression – blows their minds when he shows them, again by quoting Scripture, that the Messiah, the Christ is not just son of David, but Son of God.

What Jesus teaches them, and us, is really a revelation about the Holy Trinity. No one has ever seen the Father. The Son has become our brother, one of us, through his taking of flesh in the incarnation and, what is more, we continue to find him present in our neighbor, which is the action of the Holy Spirit. Three of my favorite spiritual writers said it like this:

To love our neighbor in charity is to love God in man. (Francis de Sales) He alone loves the Creator perfectly who manifests a pure love for his neighbor.
(Bede the Venerable)

Though we do not have our Lord with us in bodily presence, we have our neighbor, who, for the ends of love and loving service, is as good as our Lord himself. (Teresa of Avila)

And, St. Augustine sums it up fairly well when he writes:

The love of God is the first in the order of precepts; the love of neighbor is the first in the order of practice. For he who prescribed this love in two precepts has not recommended neighbor first and God second, but God first and neighbor second.

As for you, because you do not see God yet, you merit to see God by loving your neighbor. By loving your neighbor, you purify your gaze to see God. This is what St. John says very clearly, "For whoever does not love a brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen."

Here is what is said to you, "Love God." If you tell me, "Show me whom I must love," what shall I answer but what John says, "No one has ever seen God." But do not imagine that you are absolutely excluded from God's life. John tells us, "God is love, and whoever remains in love remains in God and God in him." Therefore, love your neighbor; look within yourself whence this love of neighbor comes; there you will see God in the measure in which this will be possible for you.

The Holy Spirit is found in the depths of our hearts and directs us toward our neighbor. As G. K. Chesterton once wrote: "We make our friends, we make our enemies; but God makes our neighbors." It is impossible, then, to find the Father in prayer and the Spirit in the secret of our hearts if we do not recognize and serve the Son in the sisters and the brothers with whom he identifies himself. Now, we see what God expects of us.

Moses was the bringer of the Law, but he couldn't keep it. He couldn't meet, much less exceed, what God expected, even though he was the greatest of the prophets. That's why he ended his life gazing at the Promised Land on tiptoe, as it were, from the top of mount Nebo. Jesus came to give us the grace, the means to fulfill what God expects. In that he exceeded the expectations of the one for whom they had waited so long. He continues to exceed our expectations, because even when we fail, when we fall short or wander off from the way of loving concern, he brings us back.

One of the means he leaves for that is his body, the church – the place where we can find acceptance, love, kindness, trust, and forgiveness. When Paul came to the Thessalonians he didn't come among them with "beguiling speech," as did the competing philosophers of the time. Rather, he came preaching this message of great expectation in

the love of God and neighbor through Jesus Christ, the message that exceeds all expectations when we allow it to take root in our lives. The message Paul preached at Thessalonica is the same today for us in our communities, it gives the same answer that Jesus did to that long ago question, and it exceeds all our expectations.

Now what does this have to do with our being a generous people? Everything, because generosity exceeds expectations, it touches us and should move us to respond in the same manner. John Calvin talked about loving God and neighbor in his monumental Institutes of the Christian Religion, which helped to form Congregational theology. He said, "Unless you give up all thought of self and, so to speak, get out of yourself, you will accomplish nothing here. For how can you perform those works, which Paul teaches to be the works of love, unless you renounce yourself, and give yourself wholly to others? "Love," he says, "is patient and kind, not jealous or boastful, is not envious or puffed up, does not seek its own, is not irritable," etc. [1 Corinthians 13:4-5] If this is the one thing required—that we seek not what is our own—still we shall do no little violence to nature, which so inclines us to love of ourselves alone that it does not easily allow us to neglect ourselves and our possessions in order to look after another's good, nay, to yield willingly what is ours by right and resign it to another. But Scripture, to lead us by the hand to this, warns that whatever benefits we obtain from the Lord have been entrusted to us on this condition: that they be applied to the common good of the church. And therefore the lawful use of all benefits consists in a liberal and kindly sharing of them with others. No surer rule and no more valid exhortation to keep it could be devised than when we are taught that all the gifts we possess have been bestowed by God and entrusted to us on condition that they be distributed for our neighbors' benefit [cf. 1 Peter 4:10]." What we have, even what and that we are, is a gift from God and God expects us to be as generous with these gifts as God has been in giving them.

Let's go back to McDonald's to look at what it means to be a generous people. We talk about being stewards of God's gifts. Well, a steward is like a manager of a local McDonald's Restaurant who carries out the aims of the owners, maximizes profits, while handling all the problems. The world around us is our store to manage and God asks that we simply return a portion of that entrusted to us so that God's work can continue and the 'franchise' can grow.

Staying at the restaurant, but with a different angle, let me tell you a story I heard called "Who Owns Your French Fries?" It is the story of a man who buys his little boy some French fries. Then the father does what all fathers do, he reaches over and takes one French fry to taste it. The little boy slaps his father's hand and says, "Don't touch my French fries." The father thinks that his son is selfish. The father knows that he bought the French fries and they belong to him. The father knows that his son belongs to him. The father could get angry and never buy his son another French fry again to teach his son a lesson, or the father could "bury" his son in French fries. The father thinks, "Why is my son selfish, I have given him a whole package of French fries; I just want one French fry."

God has given us money, when God asks for a portion; people figuratively slap God's hand and say, "Keep Your hands off my money." They may think that they are just telling those people at the church to "take a hike," but our being a generous people is ultimately about how we respond to who God is and what God has given us. You see, God owns everything we have. God wants us: 1. to manage what we have for God's glory. God expects us to manage our time, talent and treasures. 2. To give back a portion of what God has given us. We have agreed to this as part of our covenant relationship, but there are those who give nothing and expect to receive everything. No one is ever turned away from here, there is no fee for service or cash register, but it would be good if we could exceed expectations of always doing the minimum, of "what can I get by with this year," and give as we have been given.

So, what's the expectation? First, love God, with all our heart, all our soul, and all our mind. Second, love our neighbor as ourselves. If we do that, every day, every action, every thought, will be marked: "exceeds expectations," and so will our lives. Then we will be a generous people. God has shown us how to be generous and now calls us to express it through our service to our neighbor, beginning here with the household of faith. In my heart of hearts I know that we are capable of exceeding expectations and being a generous people and for that I say, "Thank God!" I also say, "Thank you!"

"A Person of Integrity"

First Congregational Church – Wauwatosa, Wisconsin
Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost – September 24, 2006

Rev. Steven A. Peay, Ph.D.

[texts: James 3:13 4:3,7 8a/ Psalm 1/Mark 9:30 37]

It's an election year, so I suppose I won't be too far off-track if I ask this question, "What do we mean by integrity?" Webster's dictionary defines it as "an unimpaired condition: soundness; firm adherence to a code of especially moral or artistic values: incorruptibility; the quality or state of being complete or undivided: completeness." When we say a person has integrity we're judging them sound, whole, and authentic. A person of integrity is one who is what they say they are – nothing less, nothing more. Dwight L. Moody, the great Congregational lay preacher of the nineteenth century, said, "Integrity is what you are in the dark."

I can imagine the disciples' surprise when Jesus inquired about their conversation on the road to Capernaum. He had been teaching them the meaning of his Messiahship and telling them of his upcoming passion, death and resurrection. But, like schoolchildren caught with a comic behind the textbook, they had had their thoughts elsewhere. Now Jesus wanted to know what it was that had occupied them so much as they walked.

Naturally they didn't want to tell him the matter of their dispute. After all, what they were talking about really had nothing to do with his version of what the Messiah was supposed to be about. They had grander ideas and were contesting to see who would be the greatest when the fullness of God's kingdom would be brought again into reality

through Israel. I like so much what the Biblical commentator William Barclay has to say about this.

It is strange how a thing takes its proper place and acquires its true character when it is set in the eyes of Jesus. So long as they had thought that Jesus was not listening and that Jesus had not seen, the argument about who should be greatest seemed fair enough, but when the argument had to be stated in the presence of Jesus it was seen in all its unworthiness. If we took everything and set it in the sight of Jesus it would make all the difference in the world to life. If of everything we did, we asked, "Could I go on doing this if Jesus was watching me?"; if of everything we said, we asked, "Could I go on talking like this if Jesus was listening to me?" there would be many things which we would be saved from doing and saying. And the fact of Christian belief is that there is no "if" about it. All deeds are done; all words are spoken in His presence.

Remember Moody's comment, "Integrity is what you are in the dark." The disciples, at least at this point, lacked integrity.

Jesus, again, sought to teach them. He even makes the appropriate gesture: he sits down. Sitting is the traditional means by which a teacher's authority was conveyed. Students stood. The teacher sat. It is for that reason that we still refer to colleges and universities as "seats of learning." It is why we refer to an "endowed chair" in a subject. For that matter, it's why there are buildings called 'cathedrals,' because they were built to house the chief teacher's, the bishop's, chair. When Rome is referred to as "the Holy See," it's just fancy language for the holy seat. Anyway, Jesus sat and he taught them once again what really matters, what constitutes a disciple's integrity, the integrity which makes us whole, truly human persons.

A disciple's integrity is based upon being conformed to the will and the mind of our Lord. We gain our soundness and completeness through our incorporation into his divine life and through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. Greatness in God's kingdom is based upon possession of the disciple's integrity. As usual, Jesus turns everything on its head. It's not that he abolishes ambition, says that we aren't supposed to be concerned for personal growth or development, but that he changes its focus. Instead of an ambition to "get ahead," ambition to rule, Jesus substitutes the ambition to serve. He replaces the ambition to have people do things for us with the ambition to do things for others.

What Jesus does isn't just an exercise in idealism. Rather, it carries with it a great deal of commonsense application. After all, when all is said and done, who is it that we remember? Those individuals of integrity, who have offered themselves in service for others, these are the people whose memory continues among us. Persons of integrity can be selfless community servants, like Benjamin Franklin or Mohandas Ghandi. They can be tireless workers for the less fortunate in society, like Congregational minister, social gospel preacher, hymn writer ("O Master Let Me Walk With Thee") and inner city worker Washington Gladden, or the contemporary saint, Mother Teresa of Calcutta. I would venture to say that almost anyone here could also name individuals who have

demonstrated the disciple's integrity and have had an influence on our own lives as a result of it.

Jesus illustrated his point by calling a child over into the midst of the assembly and saying that, "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me." We have to remember that in the Graeco Roman world, a child was of very little account. Children were, at best, to be tolerated until such time they became useful adults – which they did far earlier than children do in our culture (since, by now, childhood continues until just after graduate school?). So a child was powerless, worthless, if you will, and Jesus told his disciples – and tells us – that it's in welcoming such, even in becoming like them, that we inherit the kingdom. It's a radical idea, one that we Christians have never really, fully grasped to this day.

The disciples began to have this integrity when, following the resurrection, they started to live it, they started to live it out in the midst of the gathered church. It's this integrity that James references in his letter to the churches to whom he ministered. If one is to be a person of integrity, and thus to be truly wise, one manifests behavior resulting from a certain attitude toward people and life. "And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace."

In other words, one is living out right relationship between those in one's home, one's church, and in one's community. The ambition to serve becomes the engine that drives the community of faith. There is a passage in Saint Benedict's Rule for Monasteries that reflects this so beautifully and, I believe, carries in it the commonsense approach every Christian community needs to have in order to grow in love with God and with each other. It's called "the good zeal." Benedict was writing about the year 529 AD.

As there is an evil zeal of bitterness which separates from God and leads to hell, so there is a good zeal that keeps us from vice and leads to God and life everlasting. Let Christians [monks], therefore, exert this zeal with most fervent love; that is, 'in honor preferring one another.' Let them most patiently endure one another's infirmities, whether of body or of character. Let them vie with one another in obedience. Let no one follow what he thinks good for himself, but rather what seems good for another. Let them cherish fraternal charity with chaste love, fear God [love their abbot with sincere and humble affection], and prefer nothing whatever to Christ. And may he bring us all alike to life everlasting.

There you have in that simple rule written originally for monks, but which can be used by every Christian as a guide to Christian life, the essence of what a disciple's integrity is. It is to be possessed of the good zeal for serving God and serving one another, without reference to status or position. Those things simply shouldn't matter in a Christian community.

At root that service is to be shown in right relationships. We are to care for each other with a deep, unfeigned, sincere, and holy love. Yet, unfortunately, most churches

seem to be more into the ambition of who's out to be greatest, than who's out to be least! (Sometimes it comes in the contest to see who is really "in charge" or who is going to get his/her "way.") That's why James chides his communities about all the conflict that is going on inside them. You see, what matters is not who is in charge, because this is not our church, its Christ's church. Christ is in charge and each one of us is merely called to be servants of each other, as we seek to serve the Head, who is Christ. As Benedict says, we are to endure patiently each other's infirmities whether of body or of character. It means we serve each other even in our shortcomings, regardless of how annoying they might be. That service is to consume us and to be done, as James says, "with gentleness born of wisdom."

And that is why the apostle he says, "Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom." True wisdom, then, doesn't have so much to do with how brilliant we may be. Rather, it's about how we live out lives of humility and integrity. I like what one author has written. He says, "Humility has nothing to do with being self effacing or apologetic. It has a lot to do with the ability to truly listen to another person without thinking of refutation, with the ability to let the other be wrong without over correcting them, with the ability to hear the message under the words and not judge them. The wisdom that comes from God would be as kind to the self and others as God would be. To be a person of integrity means to act the same whether someone is looking on or not, whether another is involved or not. That, I think, is wisdom." I agree – it is wisdom and it is the good zeal, which leads to life.

One who listens to Jesus' teaching and allows it to take root in everyday living becomes what the Psalmist pictured for us so beautifully today. One who possesses the disciple's integrity "is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yield their fruit in due season, and their leaves do not wither." If we don't feel that we yet have this integrity, well, as James says, "you do not have because you do not ask." A disciple's integrity is born of learning how to ask God for what we need, including how to live in right relationship with each other. That will bring us soundness, incorruptibility, completeness and true humanity – that will also make us persons of integrity. That will make us children of God. And may he bring us all alike to everlasting life. Amen.

Swaddled

First Congregational Church – Wauwatosa, Wisconsin

Christmas Eve – December 24, 2006

Rev. Steven A. Peay, Ph.D.

[texts: Isaiah 9:2-7/Titus 2:11-14/Luke 2:1-20]

“And she gave birth to her first-born son and wrapped hi in swaddling cloths, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.” [Luke 2:7 RSV]

There is something strangely comforting in that word ‘swaddling.’ The word is derived from the Old English word for ‘swath,’ and denotes a band of cloth for wrapping infants and this gained its other meaning, ‘to envelop.’ I did a ‘google’ search on

‘swaddle’ and came up with 748,000 entries. I learned that swaddling infants has been medically tested, most recently in Belgium, and has been shown to be most beneficial. The study demonstrated that swaddled infants – newborn to about three months is the best age, they said – not only slept better, but also showed better responsiveness. I also discovered that you can get various types of swaddling blankets, ranging from thirteen to fifty dollars in price. What struck me was that more than one pediatrician praised “the ancient folk wisdom” of swaddling. Babies who feel warm and secure tend to sleep better. Well, don’t we all?

Could the desire to be warm and secure be the reason why there is this great warm fuzzy each time we read this passage from Luke? Could these same hopes for warmth and security be the reason why there are these soft smiles for the myriad art works depicting the nativity, or the emotion we feel as we sing “round yon virgin, mother and child,” or even at the sight of a five-year-old ‘Mary’ plunking a baby doll into a manger? There’s something to this and it seems to be behind the point the scripture wants to make and it is the point of the Church’s teaching on the Incarnation – the enfleshment of God – in Jesus born of Mary. And the point is this: the God who spoke creation into being and holds it in being loves us so much that Love, with a capital ‘L,’ comes into our world to envelop us by taking on our humanity, our frail human bodies. Mary may have swaddled her first-born, but her first-born swaddled us with Divine Love and Divine Life in the process!

To my mind, no one as understood this better or articulated it more clearly than Julian of Norwich. This 14th century hermitess living in her little room attached to the tiny Church of Saint Julian possessed a soul and a mind that felt, thought, and loved profoundly. In her Revelations of Divine Love she writes: “...our good Lord showed a spiritual sight of his familiar love. I saw that he is to us everything, which is good and comforting for our help. He is our clothing, who wraps and enfolds us for love, embraces us and shelters us, surrounds us for his love which is so tender that he may never desert us. And so in this sight I saw that he is everything that is good, as I understand. And in this he showed me something small, no bigger than a hazelnut, lying in the palm of my hand, as it seemed to me, and it was as round as a ball. I looked at it with the eye of my understanding and thought: What can this be? I was amazed that it could last, for I thought that because of its littleness it would have suddenly fallen into nothing. And I was answered in my understanding: It lasts and always will, because God loves it: and thus everything has being through the love of God.”[Revelations of Divine Love Edmund Colledge, OSA and James Walsh, SJ translators, p. 183] Wonderful! God who holds reality, like a hazel nut, cares for you and for me. Even though all around us it might seem that destruction and madness reign, God’s love never deserts us.

The world around us seems a very uncertain place. Thanks to the great advances in technology and the internet we’re not only Time magazine’s person of the year, we’re also vulnerable to being hacked, spammed, and having our identities stolen. Change seems to be coming faster and faster and as we expand in knowledge and ability, we also expand in stress and expectations. The nation that introduced the forty-hour week now works, on average, ten to twenty hours more. We’ve now passed the Japanese in the

number of hours worked. Still, in the midst of the change and the challenges one thing doesn't change: God loves us, God values us and God bids us to do likewise – for self and for others.

People who know me well know just how much I enjoy Julian, and what a profound theologian I think she is. Well, the passage that hooked me is this: “For as the body is clad in the cloth, and the flesh in the skin, and the bones in the flesh, and the heart in the trunk, so are we, soul and body, clad and enclosed in the goodness of God. Yes, and more closely, for all these vanish and waste away; the goodness of God is always complete, and closer to us beyond any comparison. For truly our lover desires the soul to adhere to him with all its power, and us always to adhere to his goodness. . . . That is to say, there is no created being who can know how much and how sweetly and how tenderly the Creator loves us.” [p. 186] I read that passage as a seminarian almost thirty years ago and it moves me still. God swaddles us, not to restrain or to restrict us, but to free us to love, to know, to be, to shine as light in darkness and to experience the wonder and fullness of what it means to be made in the image and likeness of God.

When we forget this, as we so often do, we end up restricting and limiting ourselves. The wonder of God's love and care for us is reduced to mere sentimentality and we begin to confuse the delight of spiritual childhood with a form of childishness. Two cartoons from last Sunday's Journal-Sentinel illustrate this, at least for me. “Family Circus” showed Jeffy saying his bedtime prayers, which included his Christmas present wish list. His sister Dolly overhears and goes running to her mother. “Mommy! Jeffy's going over Santa's head.” Isn't that how many of us think about God, someone we turn to only to get what we want and when we want it. “Grand Avenue” showed Gabby writing out her rather extensive Christmas list and asking her brother if she'd forgotten anything. His response, “The religion on which the holiday is based?” To which she responds, “Nonsense! My faith in consumerism is alive and well.”

God's embracing, enwrapping and enfolding our world and ourselves in love is not about what we see illustrated not only in those cartoons, but also in our consumerist culture. I like what Fleming Rutledge, an Episcopal clergyperson, wrote several years ago in *The Christian Century*: “Grown-up people seem to become addled at this season as they try to recapture their lost childhoods. One of our leading mail-order companies put this verse on its Christmas shipping boxes a couple of years ago: ‘May you find among the gifts / Spread beneath your tree / The most welcome gift of all / The child you used to be.’ A typical greeting card says, ‘Backward, turn backward, O Time, in your flight / Make me a child again, just for tonight!’ Harmless, you say. But in a culture like ours, where parents have very little time to spend with their children, and where an obsessive pursuit of youth has caused an 800 percent increase in cosmetic surgical procedures in ten years, a focus on becoming childlike at Christmas seems guaranteed to skew the message of the incarnation. In these stress-filled times, virtually all of us, as we get older, will seek relief by visiting, in our imaginations, a childhood Christmas of impossible perfection. These longings are powerful and can easily deceive us into grasping for a new toy, new car, new house, new spouse to fill up the empty spaces where unconventional love belongs. Our longings are powerful, our needs bottomless, our cravings insatiable, our

follies numberless. For those who cannot or will not look deeply into the human condition, sentiment and nostalgia can masquerade as strategies for coping quite successfully for a while -- but because it is all based on illusion and unreality, it cannot be a lasting foundation for generations to come.”

What we celebrate at Christmas, God’s taking human flesh in Jesus born of Mary, is not an exercise in sentimentality or unreality. We recall and celebrate God’s swaddling us with love not to regress, but to progress. As the writer to Titus says, “For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all, training us to renounce impiety and worldly passions, and in the present age to live lives that are self-controlled, upright, and godly, while we wait for the blessed hope and the manifestation of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ.” God’s loving us and identifying with us is meant to empower us to live differently, to live lives of loving service that go beyond narrow self-interest or mere self-concern.

We are swaddled, clothed in God’s love so we might live in defiance of the prevailing currents of self-interest and negativity. It was G. K. Chesterton who said, “A religion that defies the world should have a feast that defies the weather.” I agree and join with theologian and storyteller John Shea, then, in bidding you to have a defiant Christmas! Defy the stress, the rush to sentimentality, the push to perfection, and the shallowness of mere acquisition. Defy them all by celebrating and lavishing time on the things that really matter: our relationship with God and with the people we love and with whom we share life. Defy the push to make this glorious feast and merely an exercise in economics and a day off of work by living in love, in forgiveness, showing patience and forbearance. All the gentleness, the kindness, and the love of this great celebration defy all of the pressures and the resulting despondency. One thing matters – God loves us. Our dignity, our worth and our being are wrapped, swaddled in that simple, but profound fact. So with Leo, long-ago Bishop of Rome I say, “Christian, be conscious of your dignity” and live it out – even in the manner in which you leave this meeting house, drive home, and how you spend time with family and friends.

God has swaddled us and I leave you with what Shea calls the text for a “defiant Christmas card.” This was written in 1513 by Fra Giovanni, his prayer is mine for us all: “I salute you! /There is nothing I can give you that you have not; but there is much that, while I cannot give, you can take. /No heaven can come to us unless our hearts find rest in it today. Take Heaven. /No peace lies in the future that is not hidden in this present instant. Take Peace. /The gloom of the world is but a shadow; behind it, yet within our reach is joy. Take Joy. /And so at this Christmas time, I greet you, with the prayer that for you, now and forever, the day breaks and the shadows flee away.” [quoted in John Shea *Starlight: Beholding the Christmas Miracle All Year Long*, p. 12-13.]

Easter: The Prevalence of UP!

First Congregational Church - Wauwatosa, Wisconsin

Easter - March 23, 2008

Rev. Steven A. Peay, Ph.D.

[Texts: Acts 10:34-43 / John 20:1-18]

What a different scene it must have been on that long-ago morning. For a start, there would not have been a foot of fresh snow on the ground! While the last bit of darkness still lingered, in the safety of the half-light, the women came scurrying with their loving, sad burden of embalming spices, oils and linen on their way to the tomb. Hurrying, not wanting to be seen, they headed to finish caring for the body of Jesus; came to make sure that he was properly buried. After all, they had looked after him during his short public teaching ministry, it was the least they could do now that he had died that brutal death at the hands of the hated Roman occupiers. And then they got there and someone had tampered with the grave, the stone over the entrance was moved. Mary, from Magdala, hurried away to tell his disciples.

Having received her news, it was now the men's turn to hurry to the tomb. She had told them that the stone was moved, but had said more, something about the body not being there either; obviously a conspiracy by those who wanted to discredit Jesus and his ministry "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb and we do not know where they have laid him," she had said. Simon Peter - with the sting of his triple denial of Jesus still on his mind - and John, the beloved disciple, came at a dead run. They got there, John the younger one first, but both held back, fearful, hesitant at what they will - or won't - find. So, they stood there, peering in and were quite amazed at what they discovered.

I think you know what they found. We sang about it, prayed about it, and talked about it already this morning. I mean, it is the reason we're here - isn't it? We know the story and that it is about what happened to Jesus. Yet, when we slow down a moment, give a moment's thought to it and read the story over again, it is about what happened to Jesus, but it is also about what happened to those women and men - and it's about us and every one who has ever read, heard, or thought about the story

There is this great chain reaction going on, one after another, starting with Mary and working all the way up to us sitting here today. The reaction is this - they believed. They believed that something had happened to them, that they had experienced something altogether different than they had ever expected. Yes, what happened to them was what happened to Jesus. Yes, he rose from the dead. Yes, he overcame darkness and evil, and the human predilection to look down and to be down. What happened to Jesus happened to them and that is the prevalence of up. God looks to lift us up, not to put us down, even when we do it to ourselves, as we most often do. God's will, God's word to us in his Son is never "down," but always, ever it is "UP!"

So the resurrection isn't just something that happened to Jesus. It happened to those around him, too. After their experience of the empty tomb the Risen Lord appeared to them, more than once, and talked with them, walked with them, broke bread with

them, even fried fish for them. And in his coming to them he made his story their story and in sharing it, year after year, century after century, it is our story, too. What happened to Jesus happens to us. They encountered the Risen Lord and believed - and so do we, so should we.

Now the question is what did they believe and what should we believe, when we say that we believe in the resurrection of the dead? Almost from the first instant, people have tried to discredit that belief. They have derided it, flat-out denied it, mythologized and de-mythologized it, thought of it as merely metaphor or as purely mystical. There is just one difficulty; this is one point where the Scriptures are fairly clear, the tomb was empty, Jesus was raised, this event really happened, period. Theologians and scholars have tried to articulate it, but it is best expressed in the simple reality of a believer's life, because that is where the reality, the prevalence of up will be most clearly evident.

It was just such a believer who had a conversation with Joseph Donders, a missionary and university teacher in Africa, one day. This is what Donders recalls of the conversation:

Some days ago I talked with a very old lady, though she herself would not like to be called that old. She told me: "As you know, life has its ups and downs. The older you become the better you know: it is light and darkness, sun and shadow, sweet and bitter, good and evil, sickness and health, virtue and vice, progress and regress, falling and rising, life and death, Good Friday and Easter!" [Joseph Donders *Christ the Divine Network*, p. 94-5.]

What we should believe about the Resurrection is the prevalence of UP. What our Easter faith declares is that God will overcome the darkness and the evil in the world and the UP of life will triumph, does triumph over the down of death.

Rowan Williams, the Archbishop of Canterbury and a gifted theologian, tells us that the Resurrection forms communities, that when the Church is living and acting as God intended, it becomes a community of welcome and liberation, a community freed from guilt and shame, a place where UP prevails. Part of that UP is when the Church is able to admit its own shortcomings and failure and reach out of them to embrace and reconcile others. Above all else, the Resurrection community that is the Church is where forgiveness and reconciliation are foremost and it is to be a safe, a loving, a welcoming and radically - that is at the root, at its core - a place of hospitality. Easter, the prevalence of up, forcefully tells us that we can not linger in our victimage - self or other-imposed - but, like Jesus, we are called up and back into life. For us Easter is every bit as much about the here-now as it is about the hereafter, because it begins with how we live and act right here and right now.

Several months ago I was introduced to the work of a Marquette University professor, Dr. John Zemler. (Rev. Schaal has a very fine interview with him coming out in the upcoming issue of *The Congregationalist* magazine.) Zemler, a former military officer and a Biblical scholar, suffers from PTSP (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder). PTSP

is a disease we're hearing more and more about as veterans come home from service in Iraq and Afghanistan. Zemler has suffered with it for several decades and says, "A good friend of mine calls it Post Trauma Soul Disorder. It's a soul wound." Dealing with a wound to the soul means looking deep inside and Zemler has done that through his faith, through Scripture and the Church's life of worship.

Zemler believes that he has received a healing, not a cure, but a healing. He talks about how scripture and the Church's worship year have been the means to that healing. He says, "The liturgy goes through the lifecycle of Jesus Christ, Especially on the forty days of Lent we co-suffer with Christ. Due to the nature of the liturgy you simultaneously as an individual and as a part of the community . . . enter into mystical communion with Christ." Zemler has said elsewhere that "Christ was there before the pain, is here just now as I am typing with the pain, and he will continue to be with me after the pain is gone and the tears are wiped away." ["Heavenly Hope" in A Heart for the Future: Writings on Christian Hope Robert Boak Slocum editor] He has said, "I'm old fashioned. I think Jesus rose from the dead. A lot of New Testament scholars don't believe that. I think he healed. I think he's the Son of God." I guess I am old fashioned, too, because I believe the same thing and I've seen proof of it time and time again.

What Dr. Zemler has experienced, what has brought his healing is the essence of what we believe as Easter people - the prevalence of UP. The prevalence of UP - the essence of our Easter faith - is that God IS with us, renewing, restoring, reconciling, forgiving, healing and sustaining us regardless of our situation. That is what those first believers came to understand as Jesus' story became their story. It is the same for us when we make Jesus' story, the Resurrection story, our story, too. The whole point is that we are to live that belief, not just think about it or talk about it. We are to live it and to make it real in how we deal with people every day and not just on Easter Sunday.

The prevalence of UP speaks to us in our deepest needs - as it spoke to the women and men who sought Jesus on that long-ago morning, or Donders and the old woman in Africa, or John Zemler up the street at Marquette, or any of us sitting here right now. The prevalence of UP speaks to us through the uncertainties and scary points of the world, the shaky economy and markets, and the terrors of the nightly newscast. The message is consistent; it remains the same as it did on that first Easter morning: God is life, God is UP, not down, and the Risen Christ, his empty tomb, and those who believe testify that it's true. UP will prevail. Easter is the prevalence of UP - now it is up to us to be an Easter people and to show that to be true.

Will you join me? Will you believe in the prevalence of UP? Then live it.... live it and make the world a different, a better, a more loving place because you do. It is what happens when Easter breaks out and Easter, as you, as we now know, is the prevalence of UP! Christ is UP....Christ is Risen! Christ is Risen, Indeed! Alleluia! Now, go live like it - that's what makes the difference. Amen. Alleluia!

Where Was Your Church Before. . .?

First Congregational Church – Wauwatosa, Wisconsin

24th Sunday after Pentecost-Reformation Day

October 26, 2008

Rev. Steven A. Peay, Ph.D.

[texts: Deuteronomy 34:1-12/Matthew 22:34-46]

The Reformation was a turbulent time in history. The question of Church Reform, and the attempt to achieve it, created a great amount of havoc in society at large, as well as in the Churches. It was, of course, a deeply personal and emotion issue and, unfortunately, we have many recorded incidences of less than respectful and sometimes outright violent behavior done by followers of the Prince of Peace on other followers of the Prince of Peace. Yes, there are times when being a Christian has been even more difficult than it ordinarily is and the midst of a Church fight, alas, is one of those times.

One of the favorite questions the apologists – the defenders, because to be an apologist doesn't mean to say "I'm sorry," but rather offer a defense – of the Roman Church liked to ask those seeking reform was, "Where was your Church before Luther?" Their obvious goal was to point out that what was going on was absolutely new and that the Protestants had no claim on historic Christianity. The answer, most often, was, "Where was your face before you washed it?" Which, of course, made the point rather powerfully that the Church has been there all along, what the reform was trying to do was to clean it up.

I came across a different answer, given by someone in the Anglican tradition, that I thought was fairly powerful. Sir Henry Wotton was asked this same question in Rome – "where was your religion before Luther?" Rather than answering in the same old way, he responded, "My religion was to be found, then where yours is not to be found now, in the written Word of God." There, in essence, is the nature of what it means to be in a Reformed Church. At the heart of it is the Bible and everything we do and everything we're about has to revolve around our study, our understanding and our practice of what we learn there. At the core of the Reformation was a concern to return to the source, to return to the essential part of what it meant to be a follower after Jesus Christ. It has been said that the church is always reforming (*ecclesia semper reformanda*) and so it should be, because our striving should be to become more and more conformed to the Word – the Incarnate One, who is Jesus the Christ – and communicated to us through the written Word, which is the Bible. Thus, Congregational divine (theologian) John Owen would call us to recover, "the old, the beautiful face of Christianity."

Jesus was challenged by the scribe to get into a tangle over the Law. There were, scholars tell us, 613 laws that governed every aspect of Jewish life. Now, Jesus is being asked to pick the greatest of them. What the scribe hoped was, obviously, that they would get into an argument over this and head into the thicket of the law. Almost as the character of Thomas More talks about in the play "A Man for All Seasons" says when he talks about being able to go deep into the law and hide there as in a deep forest. However, Jesus doesn't bite, he's not drawn in. Rather, he goes right to the heart of the

law, the underlying reality on which it is based – love. John Shea puts it beautifully when he writes: “Jesus does not choose one commandment. And, in a sense, he does not choose two commandments. He articulates the underlying structure of love that all law and all prophecy is built on. Living in relationship of love to God and neighbor is of the essence. Love is also an interior reality and so there is a stress on the inner space from which an action comes. If you can structure your awareness around love of God and neighbor, you will be able to make your way through the labyrinth of laws and the demands of the prophets.” How true and Karl Barth points out in *Church Dogmatics* it is in Jesus Christ that we meet both God and our neighbor.

Augustine, writing in the 4th century would say that it all comes down to this: “Love and do what you will.” Now, when he says this he is mindful that the love to which he refers is nothing less than the absolute self-giving love demonstrated by Christ on the cross. If all of our actions are driven by that kind of love, then we’re truly living as a follower of Jesus Christ and we’re demonstrating right where our church, our faith, our life is coming from – God and God’s Word.

Furthermore, this tells us that we should be acting in this manner for all the right reasons. Let me illustrate using a story from Shea: “One day a certain man hurriedly headed out the door for work. In his path was his three-year-old son playing with blocks. The man patted the boy on the head, stepped over him, opened the door, and went outside. Halfway down the walk a guilt bomb exploded within him. ‘What am I doing?’ he thought to himself. ‘I am ignoring my son. I never play with him. He’ll be old before I know it.’ In the background of his thoughts he heard the pounding rhythms of ‘Cat’s in the Cradle,’ Harry Chapin’s ballad to lost fatherhood. He returned to the house and sat down with his son and began to build blocks.” After two minutes, the little boy said, ‘Daddy, why are you mad at me?’”

The man was doing the right thing for the wrong reason – and the little boy picked up on it, as little ones are apt to do. He was playing blocks because of the “guilt bomb” that went off inside him. There’s a big difference between doing something out of guilt and doing something out of love. It is one thing to do something from the heart and an entirely different thing to do it because it is expected. That “from the heart” part is what Jesus emphasizes here and insists on when we forgive our brothers and sisters.

The point of the Reformation was to get the Church to come, again, from where it started – the heart, from love. How we live out our Christian faith, how we express our stewardship toward God and the people with whom we live in covenant relationship has to come from love and not from guilt, not from expectations, and not from dread of “what will people think?” If guilt is our motivator, if our only concern is making sure we “look good” – whether to God or to others – then we’ve missed the point and the dirt is still on our face.

We’re living in a tough time, a scary time, an uncertain time – compounded and heightened by the ability to communicate every tick of the stock market or shift in politics almost instantaneously. Obviously, this is not the best time – and I’m just going

to be honest – for a Church or any organization to be looking for money. A survey has said that the two things that go first when money gets tight are donations to charity and trips to the dentist. Well, I'm here to tell you that what we do to support the Church isn't charity – it's a loving act of support. (And don't neglect your teeth!) The last thing I want to do is set off a "guilt bomb," so what I'm asking you to do is to look into your heart, look to what Jesus teaches. If we love God with all our "heart, soul and mind," we'll give to God's Church what is right and not what is left over.

Where was our Church before ... where it always is in the teaching of the law of love. "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'" There is the Church always reforming – in the law of love.

It's Not About. . .

First Congregational Church – Wauwatosa, Wisconsin

20th Sunday after Pentecost – October 18, 2009

Rev. Steven A. Peay, Ph.D.

[Texts: Job 38:1-7/Hebrews 5:1-10/Mark 10:35-45]

"You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. 43But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, 44and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. 45For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many."

I came across a number of things this week that made me stop and think long and hard about the readings we've heard today – and especially about the Gospel reading. One of the things was an article in the most recent issue of *The New Yorker*, a literary review essay looking at children's books, noting that in the picture books coming out now the children are in charge. Quite frankly, not having ever been a parent, I don't want to get myself into the problem of commenting on how children are raised. However, I do think that there are times when some points of good common sense are ignored, all in the name of the promotion of "self-esteem."

I won't go through the lists of books, but one, titled "Pinkalicious," caught my eye, since it purports to be a parable about gluttony. A little girl and her mother bake pink cupcakes on a rainy day and as fast as they are baked, the girl eats them. "More, more, more," is all she says, caught up in a tantrum of self-indulgence, until she finally turns pink and eventually deep red. Along the way, her parents take her to the pediatrician who prescribes a steady diet of green food ("Yuck" is her response) to get her color back to normal. Here is what the critic said, "By the final page, the girl has learned a lesson about healthy eating, and her parents have been thoroughly steamrolled." [NY p. 84]

On the bright side, there was the book by Kevin Henkes, “a Wisconsin artist, whose Midwestern good sense is paired with a cheery pastel palette.” His book, “Lilly’s Purple Plastic Purse” has the title character get into a situation with her teacher where she says and does some unkind things. The critic’s thoughts about what the author tries to teach were good: “Lilly, unlike her fictional peers, doesn’t revel in her clever misdeed. Instead, she spends the evening feeling, ‘simply awful’ about the bad thing she’s done. Lilly skips cartoons and puts herself in the uncooperative chair. She then confesses to her parents, who help her focus on what she can do to make amends. Henkes’s book is squarely traditional in message, yet in the context of modern picture books its confidence in the idea that young children are capable of sympathy – even moral growth – feels positively radical.” [NY, p. 86]

Jesus’ message to the two disciples who came to him on that long-ago day was also positively radical, because the teaching that Jesus offered went to the root of how human beings are supposed to live in community and, particularly, how Christians are to live. James and John got confused. They thought that living a life of discipleship, of being followers of Jesus is a form of career ladder. Jesus has been teaching about the coming kingdom and these two fellows thought that they could obtain a special spot in it; a place that would guarantee them certain prestige, if not power.

Several years ago Kenneth Carder wrote something in *The Christian Century* that spoke directly to this. “Everybody wants to be somebody. Since the dawn of history, human beings have been trying to move up the scale of importance. The clincher used by the serpent to tempt Adam and Eve was ‘when you eat of [the tree of good and evil], your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil’ (Gen. 3:5). Henri Nouwen says that ever since then, we have been tempted to replace love with power. ‘The long painful history of the church is the history of people ever and again tempted to choose power over love, control over the cross, being a leader over being led.’ This is a theme running through the Bible, through human history and through our own psyche.”

The theme Carder and Nouwen identify is precisely what I picked up in “Pinkalicious” and in the literary critic’s lament. What is it? Well the theme is: “ME.” “Me...ME...ME!” “Me, Myself and I.” And the response – from Genesis to Revelation – is: “It’s not about YOU!” That, by the way, is what Jesus essentially says to those two “wannabes.” He says to them, point-blank, “You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?” When he does that, he’s using a metaphor for the suffering that he’s going to experience. Jesus knows that the way of self-giving love that he’s traveled only comes to glory by means of humiliation and death – only through the Christ. So, he’s honest with them, tells them that they don’t get it, and asks that hard question, to which they blithely answer, “We can.”

Those eager fellows – “We’re able!” -- will desert Jesus at the point of his betrayal and arrest. They will run away. And even those who get upset with them for asking Jesus this favor, will do the same. Peter – “I’ll never deny you!” -- will go so far as to deny that he’s ever even known Jesus. Could they drink the cup? Not then. It will

only be after the resurrection that they come to grips with who Jesus is and what it means to be his follower. Perhaps they remembered what Jesus told them about leadership and service after they had asked for favor and the rest had become upset? Did they drink the cup? Eventually.

I think that this incident in the Gospel helps us to understand both what we heard in Job and in the Letter to the Hebrews. Job comes to grips with the reality that it's not about him. He asks to make his appeal to God and when the opportunity comes, he realizes that he isn't in a position to speak to God, because he doesn't have the breadth or the depth of experience. As one author put it: Now Job begins to realize that his sufferings are part of the vast scheme of events that is much too transcendent for any mere mortal to grasp. No one can call the wisdom of God into question. 'Who has put wisdom in the inward parts, or given understanding to the mind?'" God is greater than we are and God's ultimate will, as we are told again and again in Scripture, is for our good. Sometimes, even though it is difficult, we have to stand in the mystery and simply trust God.

The Letter to the Hebrews talks about trust, too. It is a long and detailed argument that Jesus is the true Messiah. Part of that argument is about his becoming a priest – remember that the word 'priest' means a bridge-builder – and doing so in a way that is able to encompass all of humanity. The author writes: "So also Christ did not glorify himself in becoming a high priest, but was appointed by the one who said to him, 'You are my Son, today I have begotten you'; 6as he says also in another place, 'You are a priest forever, according to the order of Melchizedek.' 7In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. 8Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered; 9and having been made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him, 10having been designated by God a high priest according to the order of Melchizedek." Notice that Jesus doesn't think it's about him, rather he understands that his work is to point to the Father, to remind us that it's about God, not us, and that God is trustworthy.

Jesus takes up our life into his, all through the act of self-giving love, expressed in his life, his teaching and in his death on the cross. He does this so that you and I can be drawn into God's life and we can be transformed, so that we can live lives of unselfish service. I think this is why back in 451 the Council of Chalcedon will say, "Only as man could he know us. Only as God could he save us."

We need someone who can save us because we live in a self-focused society and the former New York Times reporter Chris Hedges seems to think so as well in an article on reality television shows that he wrote for The Chicago Sun-Times this summer. He said: "The moral nihilism of our culture licenses a dark voyeurism into other people's humiliation, pain, weakness, and betrayal. Education, building community, honesty, transparency, and sharing are qualities that will see you, in a gross perversion of democracy and morality, ridiculed and voted off any reality show." That is a profound statement. The things that we hold most dear, at least we thought we did, are precisely the

things that will get you voted off a reality television show. He say: “Fellow competitors for prize money and a chance for fleeting fame elect to ‘disappear’ the unwanted. Those cast aside become, at least to the television audience, nonpersons. Celebrities who can no longer generate publicity, good or bad, vanish. . . . We have a right, in the cult of the self, to get whatever we desire. We can do anything, even belittle and destroy those around us, including our friends, to make money, to be happy, and to become famous. Once fame and wealth are achieved, they become their own justification, their own morality. How one gets there is irrelevant. It is this perverted ethic that gave us Wall Street banks and investment houses that willfully trashed the nation’s economy, stole money from tens of millions of small shareholders who had bought stocks to finance their retirement or the college expenses of their children. The heads of these corporations, like the winners on a reality television program who lied and manipulated others to succeed, walked away with hundreds of millions of dollars in compensation and bonuses. The ethic of Wall Street is the ethic of celebrity.” [The Chicago Sun-Times July 18, 2009]

What Hedges has to say is hard to hear, but it is important that we hear it. You see, our Christian faith and the example of Jesus stand over against the “moral nihilism” and the “ethic of celebrity.” Our faith reminds us it’s not about us. It’s about God, it’s about others, it’s about the common good and about building up the common good. For some reason we’ve so forgotten the common good we can do that to each other at the economic level and we can treat each other like dirt in our automobiles. Do you see how people drive anymore? The lack of common courtesy is enough to make a preacher swear. I have taken to deep prayer in the car to keep me from saying things that I don’t want to say. All because somewhere along the way people have checked their brains at the door or have decided to irradiate their heads with their cellular telephones. God help us! We need the common good.

We need the common good – it’s not about us. It’s about the Other and others, that’s what it’s about. It’s about that good , not just my good. That’s what Jesus told his disciples that to be great meant to become the servant, to be first meant to come last. He went so far as to model it by serving, rather than by being served and by giving his life, “as a ransom for many.” Jesus taught us what it’s not about. He taught us by his life, he taught us by his self-giving service, he showed us that it’s not about us. It’s about God, it’s about loving God with all our heart, with all our soul, with all our mind and with all our strength – and loving our neighbors as ourselves. It’s about love.

"Christmas Preparation 101"

First Congregational Church -- Wauwatosa, Wisconsin

Second Sunday of Advent -- December 6, 2009

Rev. Steven A. Peay, Ph.D.

[Texts: Malachi 3:1-4/Philippians 1:3-11/Luke 3:1-6]

Responding to popular demand, I am re-working a sermon I preached several years ago. As I think about it, this is really a primer on Christmas Preparation. I pray that its message is helpful to us all in this busy season and during these stressful times.

"A voice cries in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight!"

Actually, it is no different now than it was in the fifteenth year of the reign of the Emperor Tiberius. When John the Baptizer was preaching on Jordan's bank it was the custom to tie important events to important people. So to be consistent let me put it this way: now in the first year of the presidency of Barack, in the seventh year of the reign of James over Wisconsin, when Jill ruled over Wauwatosa, during the high priesthood of what sounds like a law firm, Kwiatkowski, Szymanski and Peay, a voice cries, "Prepare the way of the Lord!" All around us we're invited to prepare, but our preparations are not to make the Lord's path straight. We're asked to prepare to spend money. We're asked to prepare to become frantic with too many parties, too much food, and too many visits with family and friends. We're asked to prepare to deck not only our halls, but our shrubbery, our rooftops, and now even our lawn with little inflatable thingies that light up and have little figures running around in them. The voice cries out in the wilderness of the mall and the media: prepare a perfect Christmas. Prepare the way of Rachael Ray, Paula Dean, of Stewart, both Martha and the late Jimmy, such a wonderful life! Prepare a picture-perfect holiday that even the deep-green Grinch and the skinflint Scrooge would love – not to mention the picky relatives and friends I talked about. And, prepare to be depressed when the family and friends go, the bills come, and our expectations still haven't been met.

My dear sisters and brothers, the voice that calls for that preparation comes from a different wilderness and serves a different Lord! The voice of the prophet, the Forerunner, John the Baptist calls to us across the years and the wildernesses to bid us welcome the coming, the present Lord. John cries out to prepare the Lord's way – to make it straight. This Lord, John's Gospel tells us, is the Father's eternal, creative Word, whom God speaks into human flesh in Jesus the Christ. The way of the Lord is not something obscure, arcane or mystifying: it is God's self-disclosure. The way of the Lord is God speaking God's self into the babble of our world. I so appreciate what the English spiritual writer Maria Boulding has to say:

Together, only together, we can rise to truth, vision and communion. All the beauty and riches that open to us through communication with other persons are possible because God has made us in his image. The Greeks defined man as 'a living thing that speaks'. We speak through verbal change, through body language of mani-fold variety, through literature, art and music, through silent presence to

one another, and through living truthfully in the fellowship of love that binds us together in a common humanity and a common destiny. This destiny is fellowship with the God who is communion, and with one another in him.

Our God is a God who gives himself; that is his glory. From all eternity he dwells in unapproachable light, yet he comes to find us, to call us and offer his friendship, and to ask for ours. His Trinitarian glory is self-giving love, and it overflows, as is the way with love; so he is glorified not by remaining inaccessible but by self-communication. This is what Revelation is: God speaking, not to present us with a list of truths we must believe or rules we must obey, but to utter himself.

The way of the Lord is the way of relationship, a way of listening and responding. How do we listen and respond when it is only eighteen shopping days until Christmas? We may not have written a single card. We may not have purchased a single gift, much less wrapped one. We may not have composed the annual letter of "glad tidings" – which most people hate anyway. It doesn't matter. Listen to the good news – it doesn't matter. It really doesn't matter. The voice that cries in the wilderness doesn't call us to prepare for these things. No. The voice that cries in the wildernesses of the mall, of piped-in music, of over-done television specials, and of daily existence calls out us to one thing -- prepare to be BLESSED!

Advent and its prophet John the Baptist, comes striding into the midst of our wilderness of Christmas-is-coming-stress and shouts: "Get ready -- the Lord is near!" Get ready to be blessed! Get ready to have peace spoken to your heart. Get ready to allow God to tear down the obstacles, to make the rough places smooth, and straighten those crooked paths of our lives. Go straight in all of the best ways to go straight – be honest with God, with yourself and be honest with others. Get ready! God is coming to bless, God is coming to love, and God is coming to make us whole again. The salvation announced in this wondrous season is not some arid proposition to be believed, it is a relationship to be lived. This season, then, isn't about living up to some societal ideal, it's about listening and speaking, it's about opening one's self to heal and to be healed, and it's about extending ourselves in self-giving service to others. God's readiness to share life with us, God's eternal 'yes' to us demands a like response. To prepare the way of the Lord, to make God's path straight, is to live in response to God's offer of blessing, to God's offer of presence, to God's offer of peace, to God's offer of relationship.

As John the Baptist's words speak across the centuries to us, so too should Paul's. The confident words he spoke to the church at Philippi still apply to the church gathered on Church Street in Wauwatosa, "the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ." Like Paul, I rejoice and thank my God for you and for the work that you're doing through this gathered community. Good things are happening here as we seek to respond to God's invitation to shared life. We've still got much to do and much to learn together, but the love of Christ, the compassion of Christ is evident in this place. Of course we still have to overcome some complacency and some 'let-someone-else-do-it-ness,' but that's matter for a different conversation coming on the horizon. With Paul, I pray that "your love may overflow more and more with knowledge

and full insight, to help you determine what is best, so that in the day of Jesus Christ you may be pure and blameless, having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ to the glory and praise of God."

As your minister, as your voice crying out in the wilderness, I am calling you to prepare to go straight, and go straight to being blessed. Other voices will call you to become stressed, to inflate your expectations, to forget what this season is really about. Heed the voice that calls you to come into relationship. Heed the voice that calls you to seek the center and to be at peace deep within yourself. The Latin American martyr-bishop Oscar Romero wrote:

Peace is not the product of terror or fear.
Peace is not the silence of cemeteries.
Peace is not the silent result of violent repression.
Peace is the generous tranquil contribution of all to the good of all.
Peace is dynamism.
Peace is generosity.
Peace is right and it is duty.

Heed the voice of peace and the call of Malachi, of Paul, and of John the Baptist who ask us "what really matters?" Isn't what really matters to our families, to our churches, to us, to be at one with God and with each other? Isn't what really matters realizing the wonder of life and relationship in themselves, celebrating who we are rather than what we have or what we may get? God wants to pour blessings upon us, but we must first clear the way and prepare to receive them.

If we hear the voice in our wilderness calling us to prepare, calling us to go straight to God and to be blessed, we should answer by taking some quiet time for ourselves even in the midst of all the hubbub that is the holiday, even if it's only five minutes. Get in touch in that time with God who seeks us and longs for us to respond to God's loving care. If we hear the voice in our wilderness calling us to prepare the way of the Lord, we should answer by seeking to be a healing presence, a calming presence in our home or in our workplace. A gentle word, a loving deed could make all the difference to someone experiencing the stresses of this rather busy, over inflated season. Perhaps the voice calls us to remind people what really matters: relationship. If we spend even half the time focusing on God and other people that we use for fretting whether we've done it all right or not, we'll make a difference. Just imagine what it would be like to really listen to people, to really listen for God speaking through them, and the wonder of discovering new things about them, about self, about God. The best gift we can give is ourselves, our time, and our attention.

The prophet Malachi said the Messiah would come to purify us "like a refiner's fire" or "fuller's soap" (Eugene Peterson's paraphrase The Message said, "like lye soap from the laundry"). Maybe that is what we need? Maybe what needs purifying are our priorities, our understanding of what really matters in daily life? Ultimately, even the so-called perfect gift is discarded or forgotten -- all of us have seen the wondrous toys lying

tossed aside while the boxes and wrappings become the focus of attention and delight -- but a relationship, a caring action never is. Preparation for going straight in God's way, going straight to being blessed involves listening, responding, openness, caring, prayer and time. Advent calls us to prepare in a different way.

Long ago God was ready to speak God's Word of blessing, God's very self into our world. A voice came calling, "Prepare the way!" The voice still calls, the way must still be prepared, because God still seeks to bless us with God's presence. So, you want to prepare for Christmas? Listen to the voice calling in our various wildernesses, which may come to us in different ways, heed its call, prepare, go straight and find the way to be blessed! Because all the rest of it? Well -- say with me -- "it doesn't really matter."