

There is today, particularly for us here at First Plymouth Congregational Church today, a remarkable conflation of sacred and secular stories, of national and global events, of personal and universal struggles. We are at once witnesses and participants, leaders and followers, instigators and receptors of life- and world-changing events.

Today is the exact 50th anniversary of the dedication of our church building. From the overcrowded and tired facility at 14th and Lafayette this congregation took the bold step of moving so far outside downtown Denver that there were dirt roads leading here and not much else. As I have noted before from this pulpit, it is worth observing that the events in our church that we hold up as most memorable and most defining, are those moments when we risked: when we collectively overcame the doubters, naysayers and pessimists and chose to be led by vision and not by fear.

There are two national events that are also occurring right now. First, this is Martin Luther King, Jr. weekend—a time to remember a courageous American and the great and defining struggle for civil rights which he led. Many risked much and lost much in asking for equal rights. And just as in First Plymouth Church, the events that we honor as a nation, the defining moments for us as the American people, are almost exclusively those times when we risked: when we collectively overcame the doubters, naysayers and pessimists, and in the case of civil rights, the racist and hateful, and chose to be led by vision and not by fear.

The second secular event occurring now is the inauguration of our nation's 44th, and its first non-Caucasian, president. And although only the future will tell if he will lead effectively or not, many of us here, and certainly many of the national columnists, regard this moment in American history as defining: nearly every commentator I read now—liberal and conservative alike—states that rarely in human history is the choice of paths so momentous. Our global village is at once gripped by parochial fears and their resultant, irrational fundamentalist hatred and violence—as in the Mideast—and is also expectantly hopeful, almost irrationally so, with the promise of change toward peace and reconciliation. Paths are being chosen; time will reveal their ultimate ends.

There is one other curious event happening today, at least for the traditional Christian church. Today is the second Sunday after Epiphany. This is actually no small thing. As you know, the church year begins with Advent, and Advent always begins with the end in mind: the eschatological vision of God for the final reconciliation of all creation. In Advent we practice active waiting and prepare for Christ's coming. And after that chronologically brief but experientially long liturgical season our expectant souls are then filled with incarnational love and promise as we are nourished by the Christmas presence of the One who came in the past, who is present in our midst now, and who has yet to come and for whom we wait. After that briefest of liturgical seasons (Christmas, all 12 days of it), we observe Epiphany, recognizing Love's light as present in all lands, to all peoples. And then, the first two Sundays after Epiphany (January 6), the Church traditionally celebrates two events critical for our discipleship. The first Sunday after Epiphany is when we remember the baptism of Jesus and we renew our own vows. For those of you who were here last Sunday you experienced a service of unusual power as our lives were re-blessed and rededicated to God. And on the second Sunday after Epiphany, today, it is the church's tradition to remember the call of the disciples: both those who ministered with

Jesus then, and those who minister with him now. The stories read each year on this Sunday ask us to choose again whether or not we will follow love incarnate when it calls our names, whether or not we will risk this moment, *this* moment, as a defining one in our lives, whether or not we will choose to overcome the doubter and the naysayer and the pessimist in each of us and choose to be led by incarnate love and not by anxious fear.

In an age of high anxiety it is hard to develop the capacity for spiritual maturity when the society around us is exhibiting so much disquiet. Anxious systems, whether they be families, organizations or nations, universally manifest similar behavior. Think about this. Anxious systems are highly reactive. In them we also see a herding mentality take hold—togetherness becomes more important than self-differentiation, thus making it harder for rational thought and individuation. Also, blaming becomes obvious in that people start using 'you' language and very little, if any, "I" language; it's always someone else's fault. And finally, a quick fix mentality takes hold, usually claiming that if we could just go back to the way things were in the past, we would be okay in the present. Families, organizations and even nations must choose at these times which voices will be dominant. Will we follow faith and vision or will we follow anxiety and fear? Will our ends be based on the finest of who we are and thus dictate our path? Or will our ends be dictated by angst, thereby ensuring that our vision and our actions can be no more mature than the least mature, most anxious among us? Families, organizations and even nations must choose at these times which voices will be dominant.

Obviously I am taking the time to discuss some of the behaviors we may see and choices we may have to make due to the confluence of events on a local and also global scale. From our church's own witness to discipleship as we face a budget crisis, to our nation's embarking on a new road at a time when our economy is deeply struggling and armed conflict on the world stage is growing in reality and potential, mature visionary response is more critical than is usually the case. And as a Christian community we look to Christ and to the faithful witness of the Church throughout the ages, at least at those times when the Church has been at its finest, in order to gain direction and wisdom, in order to gain that mature response. This is a lot easier said than done.

The reason this is a lot easier said than done is due to the fact that the "doing" of Christ's work in the world has never been overly popular, no matter how widely preached and no matter how widely acclaimed. Jesus preached a gospel, a Good News, of forgiveness, mercy, loving enemies, and sharing bread. He taught that we should turn the other cheek to those who hit us, that we should give from what we still have to the thief who robs us, that we should accept the way of the cross as our Way in the world. And he was executed for his efforts. Now here is the curious thing, in my own lifetime I have heard of people who took this seriously and walked the talk. There was Martin Luther King, Jr., who was assassinated. There was Nelson Mandela who was imprisoned for decades. There was my friend Dean from seminary who served time in a federal penitentiary for breaking into a nuclear weapons facility in Groton, Connecticut and beating those weapons into plowshares with a hammer. There was Dr. Livingstone who gave up all the comforts of "civilization" to love and care for the "uncivilized." There was Simone Weil who starved to death because she would only eat as much as prisoners were receiving in the concentration camps of Nazi Germany. And those are but a smidgeon of the well known ones. It is worth observing that the people we hold up as most worthy and most defining of what it means

to be truly human, and truly Christian, are those people who risked: people who overcame their own doubts and their own pessimism and their own naysaying and their own fear and lived by faith and by vision. Jesus said, "Follow me" and they followed.

This same Gospel gets preached in Christian churches week after week – that same gospel of forgiveness and mercy and compassion and non-violence. And it is not just the preaching. Think of the wider worship life of the church: the rich, rich tradition of 17 centuries of hymnody that we have inherited and which reminds us week after week of the cost of discipleship. Think of Martin Luther saying, "Let goods and kindred go, this mortal life also. The body they may kill, God's truth abideth still. God's kingdom is forever." This preaching and singing of the gospel is the *tradition* of the Church; this is what it means to be Christian: to follow along the Way, to meet the future of God, *particularly* in a time of challenge.

There is an old story, usually believed to be Native American in origin. A tribal elder is speaking to a young boy. "My son, there are two wolves who are fighting within every person's heart: love and fear. You can hear them snarling if you lie very still and when one isn't looking the other will pounce. It is a great and terrible battle and the outcome will determine who you become." The young boy's eyes grow wide as he asks, "But which wolf will win?" The old man answers, "The one you feed."

Today, as world is on a precipice of hope and fear, war and peace, famine and plenty, recession and perhaps depression, it matters deeply which wolf we choose to feed. In an age of anxiety when people are overreacting and busy blaming each other and surrounding themselves with people who think inside the same box, it matters deeply which wolf we feed. When the largest corporations in the world are asking for our hard earned dollars to bail them out of their own mismanagement, and when the small business owner is watching a lifetime of work and all her retirement turn to dust, it matters profoundly which wolf we feed.

As an incarnate community of God's love: it matters deeply which wolf we feed. We are already seeing cynicism rise in the population at large and perhaps in our own hearts. The voices condemning religion are growing louder because it is at the center of so much of the conflict around the globe. Desperation is beginning to mount in families because once secure jobs and once taken-for-granted retirements have evaporated. As an incarnate community of God's: it matters deeply which wolf we feed.

When we are called to discipleship we are not called only to a community of comfort and companionship. We are called to be a light on a hill, a shining beacon of hope, so that others may be drawn to this light so that they too may . . . choose which wolf they will feed.

I give thanks for this church, for its history, past and future, of faithful witness. I give thanks for this church and the risks it has taken in the past, and the love that it feeds, and the risks it will take again in the future. I give thanks for this church and its members who hear Christ calling to follow him, and they follow. I give thanks that we have the guts to teach our children the Way of the cross. From the children we feed in Rwanda to the food we collect today for local food banks; from teaching English to newly arrived Americans to the passionate discussions that happen here over things that matter; from the different bible studies that happen

here every Sunday morning to the willingness to sing outrageous hymns whose messages call us way outside our comfort zones . . . I give thanks for this church and its choice of which wolf to feed.

Our vision is to follow—to follow the Way of peace in a war-torn world. Our vision is to follow the way of mercy when others demand blood; to follow the way of forgiveness when it is so much easier to condemn; to follow the way of Christ even though it ends in the cross. Our vision is to follow, because our goal is God's peace, and it takes us all to get there. Our vision is to follow, and thus to lead, because at critical junctures of human history the world needs the ministry of hands that work and hearts that love. Oh, the risk is worth it when we feed the right wolf. Blessed are we for we live in a defining time. Amen and amen.