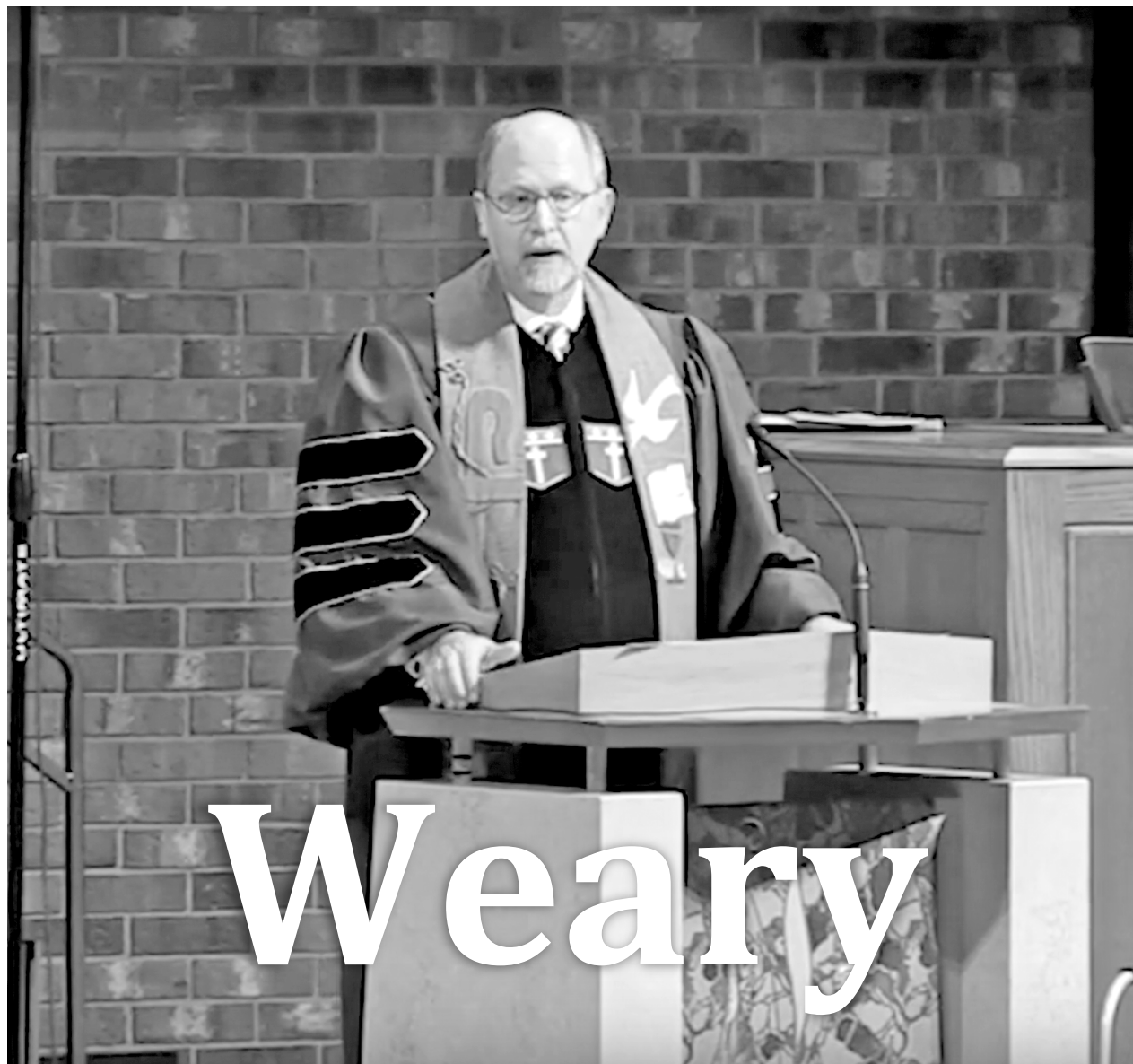


Rev. Dr. Mark A. Fowler · November 13, 2016
II Thessalonians 3:6-13
On the Election, 2016



First United
Methodist Church

DOWNTOWN FOR GOOD

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Introduction

Communication to me began to come from some of you in the midnight hour when the trajectory of the election was clearly on an unexpected path with this inviting, but I thought at the moment, a cruel question: “What will your message be for Sunday?”

But for one who wears a yoke it is an appropriate question. Because it is a question that draws a leader of a spiritual community out of their reflections upon themselves and puts us square in the middle of a congregation that speaks to itself as leaning progressive but counts among its pillars and its faithful a great diversity – and that word indicates a core value of ours – a great diversity of political and social perspectives, various points of view and places of dis-ease. “What will you say?” Unity in diversity is an ongoing good that we claim. And if we continue to work at it in a diverse yet divided culture I pray that we are leaven in the loaf for the greater good.

Throughout scripture and across history the question has been raised during wearying times of dramatic and uncertain transitions such as we find ourselves in. This one, regardless of where you stand, was marked with tearing rancor, deep despair, cavernous division and the politics of fear. “Is there a word from the LORD?”

I am reminded that in the midst of the thunder of words and whirlwind of feelings that have flooded our senses and raised our emotions in these last months, intensified in recent days, that God’s voice may not simply be louder, but still and small, and we must attend to it immediately. We are told in scripture that it may come in whispers and phrases or, in Saint Paul, in a mirror dimly. And so, I offer to you these fractured reflections in what is still to me a dim mirror:

One

We are admonished by Paul in this second letter to the Thessalonians to be the church first and foremost. We are reminded that we cannot be idle or sporadic or casual in the practices we hold as core to what we are called to be. We, at First United Methodist Church, are committed to open hospitality to one another and to the world. We nurture our diverse spiritual journeys along with the work of transformation to a more just and loving world after the manner of Jesus. We inscribed it in the entry to the Sanctuary, the words of John Wesley:

*“Do all the good you can,
By all the means you can,
In all the ways you can,
In all the places you can,
At all the times you can,
To all the people you can,
As long as ever you can.”*

Paul’s synopsis to the Thessalonians: “Do not be weary in doing what is right.” Quoted as the closing admonition in the concession speech as it appears again in Galatians, “Do not be weary in doing what is right.”

Two

The affirming image that I learned as a child of Norman Rockwell’s “Four Freedoms,” especially “Freedom from Fear,” has emerged in my mind as a promise for which I ardently hope. The purpose of the Constitution of the United States “In Order to Form a More Perfect Union” coupled with the embrace of the Declaration, “amongst all who are created equal and endowed with unalienable rights...” has stirred in my soul. The words of the President-elect that echo the vision of Lincoln...“to bind up the wounds of division” and “come together as one united people.”

I do not hide myself under a bushel as if I have been raptured out and am even-handed. And so who I am when I hear those words can be tempted to cynicism to even shift from my core beliefs from John Wesley about the core goodness of humanity to my colleagues who write and say, “Are you beginning to believe in total depravity now?” Or to isolate with those who simply tell me what I want to hear and I believe. But I serve a church that values diversity and a congregation that comes from many places and for many reasons. And somebody once told me that Sunday morning came every seven days whether I wanted it to come or not.

Then the words of Anne Frank came, one whose life was in hiding and death in a concentration camp of typhus at age 16: “It’s a wonder I haven’t abandoned my ideals, they seem absurd and impractical. Yet I cling to them because I still believe in spite of everything that people are truly good at heart.”

Three

So, I begin with confession as do the traditional worship services of the Christian faith. In my own commitment to be faithful to the prophetic advocacy that is embedded in the faith we share in Jesus, for the least, the lost and the marginalized, the oppressed and the foreigner, the outsider and those who should have been considered impure; in that advocacy I have muted other voices. I cannot bear to take that, in the whole world, I am struggling now with my own family. I have been embarrassed by what I consider intolerant words and actions that were often brutal calls to pay attention. They had expectations of being included but were frustrated with being left behind or left out or not heard. These are people who nurtured in me the values of inclusive love, an hospitable table, the possibilities of a promising life. They were nurtured in me and guide me still. However, I (and I am not alone) muted the deep disappointment that turned to anger, that simmered in rage and finally found an ugly voice that I did not recognize. And, I stopped listening and comforted myself with the late night jokes that played on the difficult conversations, with Uncle Frank, at Thanksgiving. Except my Uncle Frank’s name was Mom...and Dad...Sister...Son. And now I must summon the strength and humility to listen...not to the ugly that caused me to recoil, but the experience that gave rise to that outpouring. Major life promises and trusts were perceived to be broken...and quiet desperation that was ignored. And the same in children grown to adulthood whose hope unborn has died.

These are people who taught me and nurtured me in the ways of love, in the ways of Jesus. Nelson Mandela’s words came to me. They are a bit harsh for what I really mean to say, but Nelson Mandela, who suffered the imprisonment of apartheid, when he was attempting to bring together a divided country, concluded, “People must learn to hate, and if they can learn to hate they can be taught to love for love comes more naturally to the human heart than the opposite.” And my confession is that I don’t have the corner on what love is. I am convicted that I cannot weary in doing what is right.

Four

I am reminded on this Veteran’s Day weekend how difficult it is in certain circles to have a child in the military and now a veteran. When Steven was overseas in Iraq and Afghanistan, Susan and I were living and working in pacifist and peace circles with which we felt extraordinarily comfortable. Circles at the seminary and in the church in an era of a professional and isolated military. You didn’t want him to go but he did. It is difficult to be in an extended family where the majority of my children’s generation joined all branches of the service in the wake of 9/11. There

are more of their generation in the service than any other generation in my family that goes back to the American Revolution. Thirty percent come home with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, twenty commit suicide every day, many are homeless. This is not a day of vacuous honor for bravery, but to commit ourselves to the practices of our faith and the focus of our mission in hospitality, love, justice, nurturing diverse journeys and commitment to the transformation of the world for justice and love in the way of Jesus. And to recognize that we live in a complicated and complex world.

Five

But if I begin kneeling in confession, I rise in renewed commitment to the values that we as a congregation have articulated:

To be jolted into awareness that if we fail in not wearying to do what is right there are those who will go hungry because they fear or lose freedom or are muted in their self-expression or truly go without food to sustain them.

I rise, in an advanced community, which I have embraced as my own, and have sought to be identified with to my friends and to my colleagues. I am proud to live in the heart of a great institution of higher education in which we all take great pride. But I do not know even how to comprehend why the chancellor had to issue a ban...on a *noose*... We are committed to standing against racism and fostering the beloved community of unity.

And so I rise, and kindle in my heart the light of millions. Emma Lazarus: "Give me your tired, your poor, Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, The wretched refuse of your teeming shore. Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me, I lift my lamp beside the golden door!" and pray they will live without fear, but in the hope that liberty promises.

I rise to call the church to be the source of the exercise and practice of the love of God, nurturing it as the primary and unbreakable relationship that we share as the church. That it is the end of our teaching, our preaching, our outreach and our witness. For without the love of God, I am lost. I rise with the clear understanding that the justice of God is the social compact and covenant we share in the activity of ministry together.

I rise to embrace and affirm that all of God's children are ALL of God's children. That they deserve to be free from want and to live in safety, security and freedom. To reclaim the word sanctuary as a pillar of the church's value of safety...not only in its building, but in the trust of its people...to shield those who now fear because of the color of their skin or their sexual identity or their religion or their background or their economic status or age or health...sanctuary.

I rise...yet am weary. Not weary enough to stop doing good, not weary enough to reach out and hold us all accountable to the vision articulated. Despite my cynicism and doubt, to hold us all accountable to the words of Lincoln repeated by the President-elect, to bind up the wounds of division and come together with the *world* as a united people.

The blessing again of Anne Frank, that the final forming of a person's character lies in their own hands: "So finally I twist my heart around again so that the bad is on the outside and the good is on the inside and try to find a way of becoming what I would so like to be, and could be, if there weren't any other people living in the world."

Anne Frank, at the age of 16, in hiding: Everyone has inside of them a piece of good news. "How wonderful it is that nobody need wait a single moment before starting to improve the world."

I rise. And I pray, as a church, you rise with me. Amen.