

## Sermon TUMC – September 10, 2017 – Gathering Sunday

Our job in stormy times

[Romans 13:8-14](#)  
[Matthew 18:15-20](#)

Welcome back! It is good to be together.

It's stormy out there these days. There are literal hurricanes blasting people out of their comfortable homes, and figurative hurricanes, blasting many of us out of our comfortable assumptions about politics, culture and civility. It's especially hard for those of us who are not used to such storms and such discomfort.

We are not the first, others around the world (and throughout history) have had to deal with deranged leaders, arbitrary laws and threats of violence – and with hurricanes and monsoons on a regular basis – but to us in North America, it's a little more unfamiliar and therefore scary. It's getting real.

I don't know about you, but these weather systems – especially the political ones – tempt me to live with a great deal of anxiety. They want to create a parallel psychic storm of fear and uncertainty inside of me. I constantly need to turn to God to try to hear those words of assurance, "Peace be still," from when Jesus calmed the storm or cast out demons. Sometimes the anxiety storm quiets down; but there are also times when it just needs to be navigated. I need to hang on tight to my commitment to following the way of Jesus and hope not to drown. For those times I turn again to God, but also to you, my faith community.

I'm going to borrow an image from Greek mythology as an illustration. It's an episode of the Iliad when Odysseus (or Ulysses) and his crew must take their ship past an island where there are creatures called Sirens. The Sirens are known to sing seductive songs that attract sailors to their island, only to destroy them once they've given in to the song. In order to avoid being taken off track during their crossing by the island, Odysseus gives all his sailors wax to put in their ears so they don't hear the Siren's song. Then he ties himself to the mast of the ship and tells them that, no matter what he says, no matter how much he pleads, they must leave him tied to the mast until they have successfully avoided the island and that tempting song. At one point it gets very very difficult for him to stick to the plan. Odysseus begs the crew to untie him, the song is soooo beautiful, so tempting, but they remember what they promised, and they keep him tied and they all successfully pass by the island without being destroyed.

Apparently during dangerous storms and high winds, it is helpful to tie some things down, including ourselves, if necessary.

So, this morning, I'd like to tie a few things down for us as a church, as we begin a new season at TUMC during stormy weather in the world around us, when anxiety and despair call out to us temptingly.

Today I am wearing stole that I received as an ordination gift almost a year ago, when you confirmed my call to ministry. It was made by some Latin-American women who call themselves Tejedoras de Esperanza – weavers of hope. It has a cross, which I understand to represent Christ's love. It also has a cup, which I understand to represent Christ's community, and a heart. Our denomination does not use liturgical stoles, nor do I have plans to start using one regularly to preach, but today I wanted to use it as symbol of ministry and a symbol of hope. We all know and we believe as Anabaptists, especially that we are all ministers to each other and to the world through the gifts the Holy Spirit gives to us to be the church. Being faithful in that is what will keep us hopeful in the world.

As of this season I've begun serving you in a somewhat new role of Pastor. We may have different ideas and expectations about what that ministry might look like at this juncture, and we will continue to sort that out in relationship. I did find a working description of what it means to be a pastor by author Eugene Peterson that captures some of how I understand this role:

“The biblical fact is that there are no successful churches. There are, instead, communities of sinners, gathered before God each week in towns and villages all over the world. The Holy Spirit gathers them and does [her] work in them. In these communities of sinners, one of them is called pastor and given a designated responsibility in the community. The pastor's responsibility is to keep the community attentive to God.”<sup>1</sup>

So, as a fellow sinner, my commitment to you, my church community, is to do that: to keep us attentive to God, and to continue to carry out a ministry of hope in times of despair; to stay tied to the mast of faith in God, in Jesus' way of love and peace, and the Spirit's renewing and empowering energy.

One of the most important things we need to do together is pray. Much like smart phones and electrical outlets, I don't know how prayer works. I just turn it on. We could maybe have a theological discussion or a study about it, but the truth is that people over and over again in our community

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<sup>1</sup> Eugene Peterson, *Working the Angles*

report that they can feel our prayers. They can tell when we are praying for each other, so let's not stop doing that. [*Explanation about bedtime prayer cards.*]

During hurricanes people begin to look out for each other in ways that they did not before. They seek out folks who need help, they rescue neighbours and they generally band together to face the adversity and join forces. Part of hurricane survival includes getting down to basics, having a plan, putting important documents into waterproof containers, making sure you have supplies and energy sources. All the focus goes into what needs to be done, the non-essentials are left behind.

Quite simply, in these stormy times in our world, it is the church itself that is essential. Not TUMC *per se*, certainly not buildings called churches, nor programs, nor even religion, but people who are committed to follow the way of Jesus. People committed to living out Jesus' values in a world desperately in need of them: Sacrificial love, compassion, power for transformation, reliance on the Divine, reconciliation, inclusion of the marginalized, forgiveness, grace, freedom from shame. When Jesus had a chance to talk about *his* job description here's how he put it, quoting Isaiah 61:

*'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,  
because he has anointed me  
to bring good news to the poor.  
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives  
and recovery of sight to the blind,  
to let the oppressed go free,  
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.'*

Following Jesus, even in hard times, means taking part in this releasing, healing and recovering mission.

Our other scripture passages for today are also part of the church's job description.

When needing to get things down to the essentials, Paul and Jesus and Moses before them would pack the following in their waterproof bag: Love your neighbour as yourself. (Leviticus 19:18)

To love someone means to give to them a value equal to or greater than to yourself. In these divisive and hateful times, this is our calling.

Romans is a letter by the apostle Paul to a church that needed encouragement and direction. In this letter, before the section we just read, there are some beautiful images of the church as a body with many members in Romans 12 (and some more troubling bits about paying taxes at the start of Romans 13). Here's how Paul breaks down the church's task in practical terms (which one speaks especially to you?):

“Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honour. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, ‘Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.’ No, ‘if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads. – [or better understood, you will bring them to repentance].’ Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.”

I’ve been thinking of printing this up and posting it on the bulletin board as a manifesto.

Imagine if all Christians really made a renewed commitment to do that in today’s stormy world! Imagine if we made common cause with other groups who try to practice compassion! It’s the stuff of poetry and song lyrics!

But living in community is not so easy.

The other passage, Matthew 18:15-20 begins with the assumption that there will be conflict even among Jesus-followers who are trying hard to practice love. It is a favourite passage among Mennonites (aka Anabaptists) because it involves a process about how to deal with the inevitable interpersonal struggles. One of our most dearly held hopes as Anabaptist Christians is that reconciliation is possible.

Years ago, growing up in Brazil as a daughter of missionaries, it was a country that was very much divided into Catholics versus Protestants (or vice versa). Those were the two categories that you could be. I’d often be asked what was a Mennonite. Sometimes I’d say, “it’s sort of like Baptist.” Other times I’d give a little history of the Reformation and Anabaptism – “Anabaptists are like the reformers of the reformation.” And other times, especially if I suspected I was talking to someone who was what I call a spectator Christian – you know, people who occasionally go to church, but for whom it makes little difference in their lives – I’d say that being a Mennonite wasn’t just about going to church, it meant that to be a Christian you had to live all aspects of your life in ways that were like Christ.

That's still my favourite answer and my challenge to us here at TUMC at this time. Let us live our lives in ways that are like Christ. *Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.* (Rm 12.2) But we mustn't forget that this is all empowered by God's Spirit, not by sheer force of will or adequate process.

Transformation, love and liberation of the other do not come naturally or easily. They are in many ways a result of us allowing ourselves to be transformed by God. We need each other's help and we need practice in small and large ways, so that when Love is really needed – as it is now – we can pull it out like an old habit. This is why we gather and this is why we persist as a church. Let's stay on task at this time of storm and tie ourselves to this mast of Christ-like love.

Here's what Jesus has to say:

*“Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.”*

May it be so!