

MAYFLOWER CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH  
3901 NORTHWEST 63RD STREET  
OKLAHOMA CITY, OK 73116  
DR. ROBIN R. MEYERS, SENIOR MINISTER  
405-842-8897  
cyaunday@mayflowerucc.org  
www.mayflowerucc.org  
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### INTO THE DEEP

I woke up this morning and realized that this is the last of a certain kind of Sunday morning for me. Since my ordination in 1979, I have never had an associate minister. I have walked down the aisle of every church I have served either by myself, or with a layperson joining me as a worship leader – or from time to time with a guest preacher, but never with a colleague, never with a partner in ministry.

Next Sunday morning, at this service, I will be joined by Chris Moore, hired last Sunday by a vote of the congregation, and enter a new phase of my life and the life of this church. This is the last Lone Ranger Sunday for me, and it represents the biggest change I have ever made in the way I understand my vocation and my obligations to this congregation.

It might sound as if I'm exaggerating a bit, and your response might easily be, "It's about time," or "join the club," or "what took you so long?" but the truth is I have been afflicted with the belief since childhood that the easiest way to do everything was to do everything yourself. The way to make sure everything got done the way you liked it, all the time, was to make sure you were the only person doing it!

There is a certain simplicity to this. When you succeed you get all the credit; when you fail you get all the blame. In a sense it is like being single opposed to being married. The single life can be lonely, but it is also less complicated. A large part of yourself is not lost in the covenant you make with another person, and you can make your way through the day thinking mostly about how you are affecting you, not how you are living in relationship with another.

Even if that other person would add richness and depth and bring talents and capacities and insights that you don't have to the relationship, you go it alone because a covenant is always more work than having no covenant. The ego must stand down; you must take delight in the accomplishments of another; you must move from center stage to stage left or right, or consider not being on stage at all.

I woke up thinking about these things not because I am a melodramatic narcissist, who thinks my last Sunday morning as the Lone Ranger at Mayflower is really big news on Super

Bowl Sunday, but because this story of Jesus helping his disciples to fish had a whole new relevance and power for me when I read it in light of the changes that I am making in the way I live and work and think of ministry myself.

Yesterday I was back in my home church, Plymouth Congregational Church in Wichita, Kansas, where Shawn and I got married, and Blue got baptized, and I first felt the impulse to go into this strange and wonderful vocation. Shawn and I had driven up to Wichita on Friday to listen to two of my favorite historical Jesus scholars in the world, Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan.

Plymouth has joined the ever-growing number of mainline churches that want to bring the best in scholarship about the Bible and the meaning of the Christian life to laypeople who will not be going to seminary or doing graduate study in theology, but who want to learn new things at every stage of their lives. And so here are two of the most famous members of the Jesus Seminar in Wichita, Kansas, of all places, where neither of them had ever been, speaking to a packed house about the historical Jesus and the life of faith at this time of radical paradigm shift in the church. This morning, in a church that once struggled with my father's preaching because they thought he was too liberal, John Dominic Crossan is giving the sermon, and Marcus Borg is giving the pastoral prayer.

Shawn's mom and dad came along also, my in-laws who are life-long faithful Presbyterians and life-long Republicans until they changed their party affiliation several years ago and voted for Barack Hussein Obama. Both in their 80's, they are reading books by Spong, and as we speak, they are sitting in a Sunday school class at First Presbyterian where a group of their friends are reading and discussing my book, "Saving Jesus from the Church." Bless their hearts, every once in a while, someone in the class, when confused by something in the book will turn to Shawn's father, Forrest, and say, "Forrest, you should know the answer to this. He's your son-in-law!"

I looked around the sanctuary of Plymouth Church yesterday and saw people I knew as a teenager who have decided that the John Birch Society, to which a few of them belonged, may not have the last word on God. And what made this possible is the new senior minister at Plymouth, Don Olsen, who is pushing this congregation out into deep water.

He attended a lecture I gave at University Congregational Church, the church my father founded after leaving Plymouth, last fall, and we talked about the Jesus Seminar and the tectonic plates that are shifting under the church these days. Now he has made it possible for his congregation to learn about the latest scholarship as well, and in every such event that I have attended, guess which denomination has by far the largest number of participants. The Methodists – they outnumber everybody. John Wesley would be so proud.

Yesterday, John Crossan, who was given the name Dominic by the Catholic religion he joined as a young man, said this: "Have you ever noticed how many of the stories about Jesus

are fishy.” Not as in suspect, but as in they are about water, fish, and the hard day labor that is catching enough fish in worn-out nets and in worn-out boats to make it through another day.

It was the late 20’s of the first century, and a Galilean man named Jesus (a very common name in those days) had moved from Nazareth to Capernaum by the sea. There he lived among fishermen, who were mostly chosen to be his disciples. He is a prophet in the Jewish eschatological tradition, which just means that he was part of that movement in an occupied land that looked forward to the day that God would free the Jewish people and establish Jerusalem as the spiritual capitol of the universe. God would do this, the prophet said. And then, Crossan reminded us, Jesus did something amazing.

He said, “God has done it...is doing it...the reign of God has begun. It is no longer a future event, about which we pray and wring our hands. It is here and now, and God will not do it without us. We must become partners with God in order to accomplish the future that God intends for creation. For without God we cannot, without us, God will not. So push out into deeper water.

None of us, in the end, can afford to be lone rangers. We cannot live our life in the shallow end of the pool. The big fish are in the deep end. The end where we can’t touch the bottom, the dangerous end, the end where we must either tread water until we are exhausted, or learn to float, suspended by faith.

Fishing is not just about extracting food from water. If the Psalmist is right, and the earth belonged to the Lord and so everything on it belongs to God, and not to us, then to whom do the fish belong? How shall the resources of the earth be distributed so that everyone has enough? Jesus was never talking about salvation from sin so we could get into heaven. He was talking about distributive justice so that everyone had enough, and the household of God would be in order.

In those days you could judge the Householder, as the head of a family was called in those days by observing his home, not after an extreme makeover, but on a normal day when upon visiting and walking through his home you saw children with enough to eat, enough to wear, and protected from harm. If you didn’t see that, then the householder was embarrassed.

Dom Crossan said to us yesterday that Jesus is saying that the whole world is God’s household, and if some don’t have enough, it is the Householder who is embarrassed. It is God who is shamed by our failure to provide enough for everyone. And then he said, “Why isn’t there a Constitutional Amendment requiring a living wage in this country?” How can there be enshrined in our Constitution the promise that all persons are created equal, and we protect life, Liberty, and the pursuit of happiness when none of this is possible if you don’t have a job.

At that moment, I looked at the ceiling of Plymouth Church for cracks. The tectonic plates are indeed grinding against one another. Not just with disastrous results, as in Haiti, but

socially as well in a world that allows some to have more than they can ever spend while others spend the night wrapped in cardboard.

I preached from this very text in this very pulpit 15 years ago and Mark Falk heard it and started the medical mission in Nicaragua. After the service he said to me, “Robin, I’m going to push out into deep water.”

The gospel message isn’t that Jesus is the only one about whom it was ever said, “This is the son of God; this is the divine one, the holy one, the one born of a virgin, the Lord.” All those things were said about Caesar, and what was radical wasn’t that those claims were unique, but that they were made about Jesus. It is a clash of visions. Rome said we have the answer: peace through violence and victory. Jesus said, that is not what God wants. The reign of God is peace through justice, and justice can only be achieved non-violently.

I think there is great significance in the words of Jesus when he says, “Put out into the deep” (meaning to push out away from the shore even further) and then let down the nets for a big catch of fish. True to form, Peter is incredulous, but then they can’t haul up the catch because of its bounty.

In fact, they can’t even lift the nets into the boat, and so they summon their partners to help them, and everyone who sees this, including James and John, is amazed. Then, in a rather bizarre moment, Peter is said to have suddenly thrown himself down in a fit of unworthiness, and tells Jesus, essentially, that he should not even be hanging out with the likes of such a sinner. Jesus answers by calming him down, and then saying to all of them: *Do not be afraid: henceforth you will be catching [people].*

At first the water in this story is shallow water. In fact it is used as a form of crowd control, like a police barricade. In fact, everything about the text is shallow at first. There is a flat, even a deflected ordinariness to it all. A bunch of fishermen doing what fishermen do when they haven’t caught anything but need to stay busy – washing and mending their nets. When the fish aren’t biting, fishermen pass the time; they whittle, they chew, they spit. They theorize about what went wrong, and they make excuses for themselves by blaming the time of the year, the water, the rain – anything but their own skill as fishermen.

Then along comes the latest, and most popular claimant to the messianic throne, Jesus of Nazareth – followed by a crowd so large that he must escape in a boat to put a little space between them. He teaches by the water because “water and meditation are forever wed” as Herman Melville reminded us, but also because water amplifies sound.

In fact, one of the great shifts that is represented by the enlightened one from Nazareth, whose real name was Yeshua, was that God did not need to be remote or frightening. God is not some external energy that one taps into for special favors. It is something that abides within each

of us, who are made in God's image. Therefore it is not about what God can do, but about what, with God's presence and power within us, we can all do. It's a partnership. It's a covenant.

"Put out into the deep water" says Jesus, because in the life of faith there is a direct correlation between risk and reward. The quality of grace that is available is directly related to the depth of one's surrender to the need for that grace.

Peter knows this won't work, of course, because Peter knows everything about fishing. This is futile, but this is also Jesus who is asking – so he goes on record as believing it won't work, and when it does, he is suddenly overcome with feelings of unworthiness and decides that he is in the presence of someone so holy and so in touch with God that it would be better if Jesus just disappeared and never had anything to do with him again. This "woe-is-me" fit apparently has no effect on Jesus, whose response is not: "Pull yourself together man...[or]...get up off the bottom of the boat, you look ridiculous...[or]...Please spare me this groveling." Instead he says something very familiar to those who know the gospel. He says, simply: "*Do not be afraid.*"

For if you will follow me, even into deep water (or perhaps especially into deep water), then you will gather an even more amazing catch. Only it won't be fish. It will be human beings. But first, you have to put out into the deep.

If you have one great complaint against the church of Jesus Christ it is this: we are spending too much of our time in shallow water. We sit around and discuss reasons why the fish won't bite: We're too high church; we're too low church. People don't appreciate our kind of music anymore; TV has stolen our attention span; young people don't understand the importance of tradition; too many preachers are cartoon characters, and too many parishioners are like the "church lady." We're too close to the city; we're too far away from the city. People just don't care about values anymore.

So we all work like crazy on five-year plans and ten-year plans; we referee staff squabbles, and we tinker with the service, believing that if we find the latest, greatest liturgy, or write the perfect sermon, things will start to happen. Meanwhile we spend our time at potluck dinners worrying about someone who said that someone was upset with something we said, didn't say, or might have said.

And slowly, but surely, we stop living. We never go to see a good movie, or read a good novel, or just sit quietly and think about what in the world we have been called to do – and start dropping our nets into deep water.

Our message, lived out in the world, will save both the church and the world. And our message is not that we are the only people on earth who know the truth, and everyone else must think like us. Our message is two-fold: 1) that God's life is poured out universally on everyone – from the Pope to the loneliest wino on the planet; and 2) God's love doesn't seek value, it creates

value. It is not because we have value that we are loved, but because we are loved that we have value. Our value is a gift, not an achievement.

Lucky for us, this does not depend upon perfection, since Jesus obviously wasn't interested in perfection or he would not have picked Peter. He wanted people who would quit spending all their time in the shallow water, complaining that nothing deep ever happens to them. Despite the rampant individualism of American culture, we are not 300 million self-help projects pursuing what we think the world owes us. We are a nation forged by the word *covenant*, and called to take care of one another in good times and in bad.

A Department of Peace? Nonsense, it will never happen, you say, as you dip your toes in the shallows. Peace in the Middle East? Impossible when you are dealing with evil people who want to die, you say, as you sip your wine at the edge of the baby pool. Health Care for all Americans? Can't afford it, we say as we stand ankle-deep in our religious commitment to tax cuts as the answer to all problems.

Faith is not personal *or* political, it is personal *and* political. It's not whether you are born again to living in the depths. Faith, said William Sloane Coffin, Jr., once the preacher at prophet at Riverside Church in New York, is....

*....being grasped by the power of love. Faith is recognizing that what makes God is infinite mercy, not infinite control; not power, but love unending. Faith is recognizing that if at Christmas Jesus became like us, it was so that we might become more like him. We know what that means; watching Jesus heal the sick, empower the poor, and scorn the powerful, we see transparently the power of God at work. Watching Zaccheus climb the tree a crook and come down a saint, watching Paul set out a hatchet man for the Pharisees and return a fool for Christ, we know that our lives too can become channels for divine mercy to flow out to save the lost and suffering.*

Doctrines and creeds, said Coffin, are not what we worship; they are merely signposts, while love alone is the hitching post. Doctrines, let us not forget, supported slavery and apartheid; some still support keeping women in their places and gays and lesbians in limbo. Doctrines can divide, while compassion can only unite. When it comes to religion, we have to both recover our tradition, and recover from it!

The church of Jesus Christ is now a sleeping giant in America, stretched out after a long nap upon the hearth side of conspicuous consumption and patriotic fervor. Having pulled its own teeth in service to the Empire, it is left to gum the food that nobody finds nourishing anymore. Meanwhile the fewer risks we take, the smaller is the catch, the more we complain that fishing just isn't what it used to be.

Maybe we are the problem, because we continue to spend most of our time in the shallows. And if we think we have problems, then consider the suffering that others have

endured in this and every age. Besides, it was Martin Luther who said, “God can carve the rotten wood and ride the lame horse.”

Surely then the likes of you and me can let down our nets into deep water. And if we can't haul aboard all the fish, we'll call for help. I say let the age of the lone ranger end. Let a time of deeper covenants begin. Let's get out of the baby pool and drop our nets in deep water. If we want peace, let's work for justice, and if we want health care for all, then lets refuse to be silent and speak the truth: a disease treatment industry that makes money off of sick people is immoral. Single payer is the deep water.

If the Supreme Court wants to practice judicial activism of the worst kind and overturn a hundred years of precedent, treating corporations like people with free speech rights who can spend billions to buy candidates, then we will have to push for a Constitutional Amendment to limit the effect of money on our perishing democracy.

If our economic woes on Main Street are of no concern to those living in a parallel universe on Wall Street and it can't be business as usual? For starters, if you own a Bank of America credit card, cut it in half and send it back with a letter saying you can't support criminal behavior. Get out of the shallows and into the deep.

And when it comes to this church, pray for us as we enter a new phase of our life together. Pray for the medical mission in Nicaragua, for 363, for Whiz Kids, for our kids who spent the night in this church and made us pancakes this morning – and all the boards and committees working to make certain that church is not just a place you go to see your friends and alleviate a little guilt, but a place where the human family is reconciled, all are truly welcome, and we can invite the world into the depths. This may be my last Sunday as the Lone Ranger, but next Sunday will be the beginning of something deeper, and wider, and more abundant.

I invite you to come next Sunday to the early service to hear Chris preach his first sermon as our new associate minister, and we will let down our nets into deeper water. How do I know this will work?

Because we are fishers of people.

Amen.

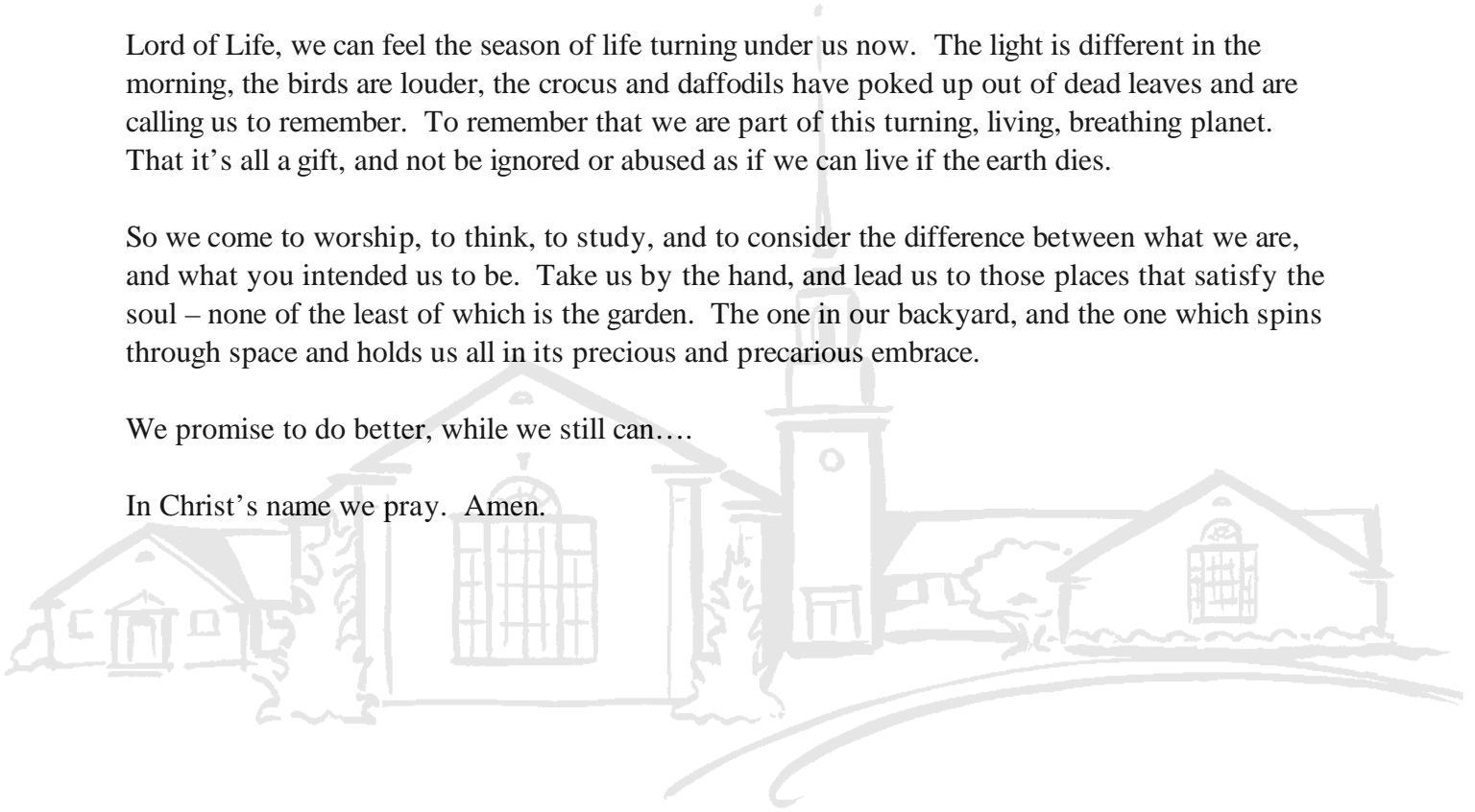
Pastoral Prayer for Sunday, February 7, 2010

Lord of Life, we can feel the season of life turning under us now. The light is different in the morning, the birds are louder, the crocus and daffodils have poked up out of dead leaves and are calling us to remember. To remember that we are part of this turning, living, breathing planet. That it's all a gift, and not be ignored or abused as if we can live if the earth dies.

So we come to worship, to think, to study, and to consider the difference between what we are, and what you intended us to be. Take us by the hand, and lead us to those places that satisfy the soul – none of the least of which is the garden. The one in our backyard, and the one which spins through space and holds us all in its precious and precarious embrace.

We promise to do better, while we still can....

In Christ's name we pray. Amen.



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