

## LAUGHTER AND TEARS, JOY AND WEEPING

October 30, 2011

Well, it's great to be here with you at Union Church in Green Bay. I have very much enjoyed my time in your community, your congregation. I particularly want to thank your pastors, Chuck and Peggy, and your moderator, Barbara, for their invitation to be with you in this way. It's a great privilege. I'm particularly impressed that you were able to arrange for the Packers bye week during my visit.

But the truth of it is different, isn't it? That is, in these days it's the church that plans its schedule around sports schedules and football. That really is one of the themes of this weekend: the wider culture no longer revolves around the church or Christian faith in the way that it once did. And in some surprising ways, the church is a mission outpost in an increasingly unchurched world. Let us join together in a word of prayer.

*We pray, O God, that my words...our meditations...being together in Your holy presence would renew and brighten our lights, that we would keep our lamps trimmed and burning; even as the days darken that you would enable us by Your grace to endure, and to persist, and to triumph in Your way and with Your power. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.*

Okay, so my text today is from the book of Ezra. Who? I don't think I've ever preached a sermon in my life on the book of Ezra. But then again, I've never preached a sermon in my life with a red Cardinal attached to the pulpit mike. New is good! But I was kind of struck by this passage from Ezra in some recent reading. It follows on Israel's really difficult, traumatic experience of exile in Babylon in the sixth century BCE. Israel had been conquered by a superpower...a neighboring superpower...Babylon. Jerusalem had been devastated. The temple had been dismantled, brick by brick. All the known markers of the world seemed to be in a jumble, and the people were taken to a strange land not their own.

But now in Ezra, the people have miraculously and joyfully returned from exile in Babylon, and they have set about the task of rebuilding. And here in this passage, the cornerstone is laid for the new temple. And it's laid amid great ceremony. Listen:

*All the people responded with a great shout when they praised the Lord, but many of the priests and Levites and heads of families, old people who had seen the first house on its foundations, wept with a loud voice when they saw this house, though many shouted for joy, so that the people could not distinguish the sound of the joyful shout from the sound of the people's weeping.*

That sounds like kind of a mess. I mean, what's going on is that you've got old people weeping and you've got other people shouting for joy. It's hard to tell if the people are mourning, or rejoicing, or happy, or sad. And after a long season of struggle, the people are now making a new kind of beginning. And to mark the occasion, a great day is

planned...a great day of acclamation. There are trumpets and cymbals, and the clergy are all dressed out in full vestment. There's great oratory. There's the whole nine yards.

But it's a mess. Some who remembered the old temple looked at the new one and they just weep in disappointment. *This? This?* Others rejoice in the new shape of things. There's laughter and tears. There's weeping and rejoicing. What I want to know is how this report got by the PR people. I mean as a staged public event, if you were an event planner, you probably wouldn't call this a success. And yet it sounds to me true. It sounds to me about right. There is both joy and there is grief. There's laughter and there's tears.

I mentioned yesterday, we have two sons and a daughter. And just two years ago, both of our sons got married. I don't know why they both got married in the same year...maybe sibling rivalry, you know, just never stops. The oldest got married second. He got married in October. They just had their second anniversary. The younger one got married first. He got married in July. And both weddings were wonderful, but the run-up to the weddings wasn't always easy...at least for me.

My wife did one of those slide shows that you see sometimes these days at receptions and weddings about the couple. And she had worked on it for a long time. (We were living then in Toronto for a year; I was teaching there.) And finally on the plane ride back to Seattle, she says: *OK, it's done. You can look at it.* So she hands me her Mac and I press the button to roll the slides. And as I watched all these pictures go by of my sons (the youngest son is nine years older than my daughter), my boys...then young men...I was surprised. Shocked would not be too strong a word to describe my reaction. I don't cry easily, but I was just melting down there in 24B. And they weren't tears of joy. I was grieving. Looking at picture after picture of my boys, I was overwhelmed by the sense of an ending. I considered wailing and rending my garments, but you know how crowded airplanes are these days. And my wife, beholding this tearful lump beside her and knowing that I was to officiate at the upcoming July wedding, says: *Geez, you'd better get your act together, you know! I don't want you embarrassing us.*

So the text from Ezra seems to me honest. Every new beginning is also an ending. We don't move forward without letting go...not of everything, but of some things. The great Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann has paid particular attention to the exile story in the scripture. Listen to what he says of this time.

***In this crisis of life and faith, Israel had to let go of the old order of king and temple that God had taken from it. It had to receive from God's hand, a new world which it did not believe possible and which it would not have preferred or chosen.***

Now, Brueggemann has paid such careful attention to the exile because his theory is that we in the Protestant mainline have experienced a kind of exile time of our own. The world where our churches were dominant and flourished readily, and without question standing at the center of the culture is, in some ways, over. And Israel's task is now ours:

to let go of an old world of king and temple and to embrace a new world we might not have preferred or chosen. If we're going to enter into the new reality and make a new beginning, there's some grief work to be done. Moreover, moving ahead means letting go.

As I watched that slide show scroll by, I grieved the end of my time as a father of two boys, of a chapter of life and of all the things we had done: sports, camping, hiking, fishing. But here's a little secret. When my sons got married, they were ages 31 and 35, respectively. It had been a long time since I had had two boys. But I hadn't – even though that was true – I hadn't woken up to that reality until I watched this slide show. I had some work to do in order to let go and embrace a new and emerging reality.

In a somewhat similar way, Christendom – which I spoke of yesterday – has really been gone for quite a while, and yet many of our congregations are only now beginning to face up to this new reality. In his famous study of transitions, psychologist William Bridges writes: *Every transition begins with an ending. Some known world must be surrendered.*

So change does not happen easily. That snapshot from the book of Ezra of a new beginning of the cornerstone being laid at the new temple gets it right. There's weeping, and there's laughter...there's tears, and there's joy.

Well, why speak about these things? As I work with congregations in North America, I would like to think that we can move forward without letting go of anything. I would like to think that we can change without experiencing any loss...that we can have just a magic fix or a silver bullet that will make everything better. Sometimes, in fact, congregations' ideas for the future are really an attempt to return to an idealized past. Lyle Schaller, a famed church consultant, was working with one congregation that presented to him their strategic plan, and what he thought of it. And Lyle is kind of a tough old bird, so he said: *Well, if next year turns out to be 1957, this is going to be a great plan. But because next year is likely to be 2007, you may have a problem!*

Now, I also point to Ezra in this strange report of weeping and joy to say that change does mean loss. I think we have to be honest about that. It means that, along with the shouts of joy, there is weeping. It means that not everybody is happy. Sometimes our criterion for a good church is that everybody is happy. That's not really realistic in church or in life.

Not long ago I worked with a congregation in upstate New York – in Syracuse – and after experiencing their worship I asked a few questions. The service had been all organ. I happen to love organ, but we live in a world where few people ever hear it. There was also a handsome grand piano at the front of the sanctuary. I said: *Do you ever use the piano? Only in the summer.* Then quietly: *Our music director doesn't really like the piano.* Second question. *Could the choir come down out of its loft* (they were up there where some of you are in the back) *and sing in front and lead the congregation's praise of God* (as yours has been doing)? Answer: *No, they would hate that. You have to*

*understand, several of the choir aren't even members. They just come to sing. The rest of the time they do email and New York Times crossword puzzles.* So even what one might think of as relatively simple changes can bring some weeping and perhaps some joy.

So why, given this would we want to change...given the fact that there are losses...why would we want to engage the challenges and the opportunities of a new time? Well, there's a negative reason, and there's a positive reason. The negative is if we don't, our churches will die. Many have already and more will. The positive reason (I, for one, believe) is that the reformed Protestant tradition – our way of being church – has a crucial something to contribute to the whole church and to American society. Our unique concern for personal faith and social engagement is a precious heritage that ought not be lost or squandered, which begins to suggest some of the positive reasons for doing this work that you are engaged in.

God is doing a new thing in our time. As with the biblical Israel, we are invited, in Brueggemann's words, *...to receive from God's hand a new world which we would not have preferred or chosen.* Already this new world is, I think, taking shape. It's emerging. The cornerstones are being laid. Some of it takes place in the hallowed precincts of long-established churches. One of your sister churches where this is happening, I think, is Plymouth Church in Milwaukee.

Sometimes it takes place in quite untraditional and surprising forms. Ten years ago the church that I served in Seattle decided to start a new church, and I remember when we began to talk about that, and someone came to me and said: *Well, I didn't think mainline churches started new churches.* And I said: *Therein lies the problem.* So we started an intentionally multiracial, multicultural church that is today alive and growing and has lots of young people.

Now let me share with you two marks of the new church I see emerging. First, the new and renewed churches are clear about their core business, or what I called this weekend purpose. That is, they are clear that they are religious; that they are spiritual organizations or communities. They serve the poor and meet human needs, but they aren't social service agencies. They foster friendships, but they aren't social clubs. They are concerned about ethical and moral issues and justice in our society, but they're not political parties. Though they steward an historic building and are inheritors of a valued history, they are neither museums nor historical societies. They are – without apology, with confidence, with boldness even – the church. They are communities where people encounter and experience the presence of the living God, the loving lordship of Jesus Christ.

I noted in my presentation yesterday the comments of Kirk Hadaway, a researcher for the faith community today's study. He writes: *People expect churches to provide a setting for religious experience and answers to ultimate questions. Instead, many mainline churches (he writes) seem to fear religious experience and avoid "imposing" answers.* While we ought never be arrogant, we cannot lose confidence in the gospel.

Recently I was invited to speak at a church in New York City, a historically prominent church: Plymouth Church of the Pilgrims. It occupies an entire city block of Brooklyn. And I got there a little bit early for my talk, and I was met by the moderator who was an elderly African-American gentleman. And he asked if I'd like to take a tour of the church, and I said sure. So we began going around. Now the reason this church was particularly prominent was that throughout much of the nineteenth century its preacher was Henry Ward Beecher who was the leading pulpit voice of the time and the leading pulpit voice of the abolitionist movement. The church, in fact, was known as the Grand Central Station of the Underground Railway...and I read that your church was a stop on the Underground Railway.

So we're touring around and this gentleman says to me: *Yes, twenty years ago I was worried that our church might have closed its doors by now.* We were in the sanctuary which seats twelve hundred people, and he said: *Yeah, we just had about fifty mostly older people here for worship and I was really worried.* And then he brightened and he said: *Something has changed. We're experiencing a kind of renewal, a kind of revival.* I said: **Really. What's happened?** And he said: *Well, our new pastor didn't do it all, but he's been important.* And I said: *Oh, really. What did he do?* He said: *Well, he got us studying the Bible.* And then he said: *He gives a great Bible study. In fact, he can summarize the entire message of the Bible in just six words.*

And, you know, kind of my red alert goes on there: either this guy is a genius or a charlatan, and I'm kind of betting on the latter. *Six words summarizing the entire scripture? Really? What might those six words be?* And he gets this big grin on his face and he says: *The six words that summarize the entire message of the Bible are: I am God, and you are not.*

Now, that may sound silly or simplistic, but this church had this great storied past and then had a steady long period of decline. And as I spoke with this man, I think what I understood was that they were both blessed by and burdened by their past, and they felt it was all on them. And they had kind of forgotten that God was a living power, and that they could turn to God and depend upon Him, and that they could open themselves to the living Christ and be led.

Another factor, I think, in that experience was this church is right across the East River from where 9/11 occurred, and it had brought them, frankly, to their knees. So I think one sign, one mark of living churches, is a profound faith in a living God. That's one characteristic of churches that have surrendered their established status and made a new beginning. They're clear and they're urgent about their essential work and core purpose as spiritual communities, and they stick to their knitting. Another way to describe this might be to say *going deeper in the faith that has been entrusted to us.*

Now a second characteristic of congregations that I see that are responding well to the challenges of this new time is that they develop what I call an outward orientation. There is a concern to reach people who are looking for God. And one of the paradoxes of our time given the sometimes decline and the struggles of churches, is that ours is also a time

of great spiritual hunger. Often we miss that opportunity, however. We become overly focused on the church and its fate and survival and miss our risen Lord who has gone ahead of us to care about people who are looking for God.

A slightly different way to put this is to say that congregations that are primarily concerned about meeting the needs of their own members and focused inwardly tend to decline. Churches that have an outward orientation, which are engaging new people, which are caring about people who are looking for God, who welcome people to the life of faith, who help people to go deeper in faith and to be sent in to the world to serve God and neighbor, tend to be growing. And we might call this reaching wider. So what I'm commending to you in some sense is going deeper and reaching wider.

Let me give you an example of reaching wider, a quite simple one in some ways. At that new multicultural, multiracial church that I mentioned that we started ten years ago, there was a barbecue being planned for this past first Sunday of fall; you know, kind of a let's-get-back-together-after-summer sort of thing. So plans were made for the barbecue after worship to happen on the church playground which is behind the church building. It's kind of hidden. And then a young man said: ***Hey, we shouldn't do this just for ourselves. We should put on this barbecue for the neighborhood.***

Now that new church is in a densely populated area that's not particularly well off. Its food bank serves five thousand families a month. Moreover, in front of the church there's a large grassy kind of median in the middle of the road. So the barbecue was moved out front, and it was for the neighbors, and people came. And the church got out of its comfort zone and got to know the new neighbors. I find vital churches are reaching wider, getting to know the new neighbors, caring about people of all sorts and conditions who are looking for God. So digging deeper...and reaching wider.

Now, sometimes God uses us to reach people who are looking for God even when we didn't plan it or maybe even desire it. A few years ago as a newer pastor of a congregational United Church of Christ, I suggested to the worship board that we have an Ash Wednesday service. This was not something this church had done before. And when I proposed it, the response was: ***Isn't that kind of a Catholic thing?*** And I said: ***No, it's a Christian thing.***

And so, you know, they wanted to be nice to me. I was kind of new, and so they agreed to have it and somebody said: ***Well, you know, we have a guy in the choir who's just released a new CD of African-American spirituals. Why don't we have him give a concert after the service to kind of, you know, entice people to come?*** And so that sounded good, so we asked him and he agreed.

And then the day of the service, there was a full-page article in the arts and entertainment section about him, about his new CD, and about the concert in both Seattle's papers, which we hadn't even asked for. There it was. And so, when I got up to lead the service that night, I crawled out from behind the pulpit and there were like three hundred people, most of whom I had never seen before. And I panicked. I thought, you know, this is

secular Seattle. What are they going to make of this, this long, tortured confession of sin? And, you know, will they think we've done a kind of bait and switch: concert...no ashes!

And so I undertook to explain it to them. I said: *Now, it's not going to be too bad...just hold on to your hats here and we're going to get through this.* Then we got to the time for the pastors to come down out of the chancel and do the anointing with ashes. And I didn't know if anybody would move or if they'd just sit there and, kind of stone-faced, look at us. And I was just stunned when virtually all three hundred of these people surged forward. And I was amazed to look into their faces as I made the sign of the cross on their foreheads and said: *Turn away from your sins and believe in the good news of the gospel* – how many were weeping.

And then later I learned that the music committee had put people at the doors of the church so that those who came only for the concert later wouldn't just come kind of looping in. And this conversation was occurring at the door. Someone says: *What's going on in there?* I mean sometimes, you know, you can get people interested by *You can't go in* (counterintuitive). And so our guy at the door says: *Ashes...Ash Wednesday.* And the person says: *What kind of church is this?* And he says: *Well, it's our new pastor. He's introduced a lot of religious effects.* Now, I would have called them the sacraments or rituals of the church, but you know, whatever.

And then two nights later my wife and I are walking on Broadway. (The street Broadway in Seattle which is on Capitol Hill is in kind of an edgy part of Seattle. It's a part where people tend to be wearing leather and chains and purple hair and stuff like that.) And there were a lot of people on the streets, and we were walking along, and this young lady kind of swoops out, and she stands in front of me and she says: You're the minister of Plymouth, right? Truth is, that if my wife had not been standing next to me, I'm sure I would have lied. But she was, and so I said: *Yes. May I help you?* And she says: *That thing that you did at your church on Wednesday night with the ashes – awesome! And the words you said: Turn away from your sins and believe in the gospel – perfect! I'm coming back. I'll see you Sunday.* And she did. And I kind of staggered on down the street and I said to God: *You know, God, you're amazing.* Amen.

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October 30, 2011