



# The New England Church Pulpit

New England Congregational Church UCC  
Aurora Illinois

PRACTICING THE PRACTICAL

June 28, 2015

Philippians 2.1-8

*If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross.*

In his book *The Word Before the Powers*, Charles Campbell tells the story of 5,000 French villagers who sheltered 5,000 Jews during the Holocaust. It was risky in the extreme, laying their own lives on the line to shelter the lives of others. When asked what allowed them to resist the German Reich so heroically, the villages shrugged their shoulders, nonchalantly. Heroes? They were merely church-going Christians who felt compelled to do as Jesus would have done. They didn't particularly feel courageous but by practicing courage in the face of death, they became courageous.

One of the most helpful things I learned in psychotherapy, both in studying it and from my psychiatrist, is that we change our attitude by changing our behavior. We change our mind by changing our actions. Attitudes, perceptions and prejudices are very difficult to alter, so the best way to change the way we think about something is to act according to the desired change. To overcome our fear of flying, we must practice flying. To move from hating to loving, we must first do loving things to the people or things we hate. Behavior alters attitude. So while it may be insight into the obvious, but it works. And I've always thought of church as the place we come to practice such activity.

On Facebook, on Friday, after the Supreme Court affirmed marriage equality, this post:

Ok People of God, the Supreme Court gave a lot of hurting, wounded, oppressed people some Good News today. Now it's your turn, Church. You say you are in the Good News business, so prove it.

We prove what we believe by acting it out, by putting our beliefs into practical application. It's the way we model for our children and grandchildren what it means to have integrity and how we step out into the scary world of the unknown to act on what we believe, even if uncomfortable.

Communities of faith and societies, and individuals that live within them, stand against the principalities of evil by practicing activities that undermine evil. We learn to be generous by giving. We learn to be loving by doing loving deeds and acting in loving ways. Practicing courage, we become courageous. Practicing hospitality, we become welcoming and hospitable. Practicing hope, we become hopeful, until such virtues becomes second nature to us. This is the way we make tangible the scripture today: *Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Do not look to your own interests, but to the interests of others.*

Many people want to serve God, but only as advisors. God doesn't need those who ply their trade in "oughts" and "shoulds," or who deal in merchandise of theory or words of salvation. When you love without condition, then God becomes known in the flesh. When you practice patience and joy, a holy patience and joy are known. It's about practicing what we preach.

The Sufis, the mystics of Islam, say that this world can be heaven—when we love and bless one another, serve one another, and become the instruments for one another's inner growth and salvation. This world can also be a hell—in which we experience pain, betrayal, loss of love, and lack of caring. Both aspects of the world are part of the divine order. This world is a place to taste the nectar of paradise and also to feel the coals of hell.

The world is our mirror, say the Sufis. It mirrors our faults and failings as well as the Divine within each of us. The task for the Sufi is to polish the mirror of oneself so that one can catch the reflection of heaven during life—unmistaken, undistorted, and in all its glory. "Your heart is a polished mirror," the Sufi writes says. "You must wipe it clean of the veil of dust that has gathered upon it, because it is destined to reflect the light of the divine secrets."

Some of you may remember the story that made its way around the World Wide Web a few years ago about a young boy with learning disabilities who could not understand things that other children understand and could not perform as other children perform. Nonetheless Johnny wanted to play baseball with some boys he had seen playing in the park. His father boldly asked one of the players if his son could join them, and after a bit of hesitation, one of the kids said 'sure.' They were losing anyway, so why not go down being kind.

When it was Johnny's turn at bat, the score was tied, there were two outs and the next batter could be the winning run. So now it was decision time by the team: give Johnny the bat and risk losing, or risk hurting a kid who had already been sidelined most of his life. Johnny was given the bat, and when the first ball came across the plate, Johnny swung and missed. The pitcher moved closer in order to give Johnny a chance to at least make contact with the ball. And that he did. A slow ground ball came rolling right back to the pitcher. The pitcher could have gotten him out at first and easily won the game for his team, but instead he threw the ball on a high arc to right field, far beyond the reach of the first baseman.

Johnny was slow in running the bases and didn't even understand what he was supposed to do, so was hesitant at every turn. Any one of the opposing team could have tagged him out along the way, but instead they picked up on the pitcher's intentions. The outfielder threw the ball past the third baseman's head, and with a bit of coaching, both from his own team and the opposing team, Johnny ran to home plate and was cheered as the hero who hit a grand slam to win the game. That day everyone won because some rather insightful and generous boys practiced the art of selfless humility.

Jesus tells us that sometimes we win by losing. We learn kindness by practicing the fine art of being kind, and we learn to be inclusive by including. The crowd at this game was satisfied beyond their imagination by the small act of a young pitcher who realized the large implications of throwing the ball—and the game—to give another kid a chance at feeling important and included.

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Amen.

—Gary L. McCann

## PASTORAL PRAYER

Eternal spirit, breath of all that breathes and love of all that loves, we come apart from our noisy world to this quiet place to practice breathing and loving so we will feel your presence. You are always with us—in the air we breathe, in the breeze that blows, in the breath of those around us. In this time of worship, may we be receptive to your love and responsive to your holy, ubiquitous presence in each breath we take.

We bring to you our weaknesses: fears to be allayed, anxieties to be overcome, discouragements to be driven out, wrongs that need righting. We need the refreshment of your rain for our parched souls; we seek your harmony for our discordant hearts; and if, in the midst of summer, we find ourselves in a winter of discontent, remind us by the beauty of a blooming flower of a new life that springs ever eternal in the very core of our being.

We bring to you our minds. Fallible though they may be, they are agents of dignity and meaning and prompt us to love and caring. Enter our minds, that we may think more deeply, proclaim our faith more intelligently, and plan more wisely for the good of the whole human race.

We bring to you our celebrations: the achievement of a child in summer sports camp; the rainbow that shone above the White House this week; the empowerment of those relegated to the margins; of the achievements of modern medicine and the prospects of providing it for everyone; of friends, family, and the upcoming holiday that reminds us of the privilege and responsibility of freedom.

We bring to you our heartaches: the families in Charleston who have been burying their dead this week; the ever-advancing atrocities of ISIS; the diagnosis of illness; the millions living in poverty while millions wallow in plenty; those whose pillows are wet with tears of grieving and broken hearts. We offer our prayers and ourselves as healing agents, and seek the presence of your spirit for them.

We give thanks for this day, and pray you to send us out in it to celebrate, to love, to care for others, and to practice our skills at being your emissaries of peace and hope. In the name of the Christ, amen.

(Certain phrases of this prayer were taken from  
*A Book of Public Prayers* by Harry Emerson Fosdick)