

## ***If Only***

A Sermon for Morning Worship  
United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT  
September 27, 2015  
Text: Numbers 11:4-17

By a quirk of fate I now see as a gift from God, Peter and I had the good fortune to be traveling to the Washington, DC area this past week for a long awaited visit with Peter's brother Kevin. When we negotiated these dates, no easy feat with Peter's and my schedules not to mention Kevin's, we had no idea they coincided with the Pope's visit to DC. At one point a few weeks ago, Kevin mentioned it but only in the context that it might cause problems with our plans to visit Arlington National Cemetery where Peter's parents are buried. But I didn't give it much thought.

We were living in DC during the last papal visit of Pope John Paul II in the early 80's and I don't recall it as much of a big deal. People were excited for sure and the traffic was nuts and the pickpockets had a field day – that was on the news – but that visit was all about Catholics and masses on the Mall in downtown DC. It wasn't about the Pope calling the leaders of the most powerful nation in the world to account. It wasn't about the Gospel of Jesus Christ being lifted before Congress as a compelling reason for legislators to pay attention to how what they do impacts the least of these in 21<sup>st</sup> century life – the poor, the marginalized, and even Mother Earth herself. If I hadn't seen it myself, heard about

it myself from people who got up at 3am just to stand outside the Capitol Building, I would not have believed it. A call to compassion grounded in the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the same Gospel preached from this pulpit every Sunday, was the benchmark of a speech to Congress. With God truly all things ARE possible.

I don't know how much of the little details of this past Thursday were actually on the news here but there is one additional story connected to that address to Congress that you may not know about. Apparently, the Pope had been invited to lunch in the Congressional dining room after the speech. At some point, I don't know when, the Pope notified the good folks on Capitol Hill that he would not be joining them for lunch after all, thank you very much. It seemed he had another luncheon engagement – at a homeless shelter a few blocks away. No wonder folks are paying attention to this Pope.

And people are paying attention to this Pope and what he says in extraordinary. Newspaper coverage in the *Washington Post* along with the *Huffington Post* and tons of other news outlets have featured several “man in the street” type articles based on interviews with random people about the Pope's visit. Noteworthy to me were the number of people of people who self-identified as either agnostic or even atheist who commented that they “really like this guy.” His message of compassion for the

marginalized and for the care of the earth really touched them and surprised them, they said. It's not what they usually thought of when think about Christianity was what several mentioned.

But the thing is, dear friends, that Pope Francis' remarks to the Congress of the United States were decidedly Christian. The Gospel of Jesus Christ is grounded in nonjudgmental love and compassion for everyone, but especially for those at the margins like the poor, the homeless and the immigrant. And part of this loving compassion means caring for the earth because the impact of climate change is already being felt first and most deeply by these people already eking out an existence at the margins of society. There can be no doubt that what Pope Francis preached from the center podium of the United States Congress was Gospel truth, even though it was a far different Gospel truth than what many wanted or expected to hear.

Now I know there are some who feel the Pope should never have addressed Congress due to the separation of church and state but since he wasn't trying to evangelize anybody, I don't see that as a valid argument. He was just stating the truth about the world's realities as he understands them from a Christian perspective. Some articles suggested he was actually trying to heal our deeply divided and all too often mean spirited government. I'd like to think so but even that is not what I think is most extraordinary about all of this. What is extraordinary is

that Pope Francis did more to lift up all of Christianity from the pit of fundamentalist narrow-mindedness where it has languished for far too long than I believed would ever be possible again. And he did it by proclaiming not the judgment of God but the love of God made real for us in the person of Jesus. He reminded the whole world in that speech that we are to love the other as much as we love ourselves, no matter what. Period.

Of course, in the *Washington Post* on Friday, there were folks already trying to roll back or water down the power of this message. One Presidential candidate said that the Pope had no business talking about climate change since he's not a scientist. Apparently that person didn't know the Pope had been a chemist before entering the seminary. Another candidate said that the Pope was obviously only talking about legal immigrants when he said that compassion to the immigrant and the refugee was a mandate from God's own self. But he wasn't. He meant all the immigrants and refugees. He didn't qualify it because Jesus didn't and the Pope wanted everyone to remember that. One Congressman was upset that the Pope had even been invited to speak to Congress in the first place so he boycotted the event. The thing is, they had no trouble giving away his ticket. Not much of a boycott to my way of thinking.

As I watched all this unfold this week, I realized the Pope was giving all of us who claim the name Christian an incredible

gift and like all really wonderful gifts, we hadn't asked for it and we weren't expecting it because we thought it wasn't possible. Simply put, the Pope gave Christians credibility again. His message of love and compassion and care for the earth framed within and grounded by the Gospel of Jesus Christ was new information to so many people who heard it this week. Think about that! People who knew about Christianity, who had heard about Jesus, never knew the part of Jesus' message the Pope proclaimed so simply and so powerfully to a room filled with some of the most powerful people in the world. The Pope in that moment gave credibility back to all Christians because he taught the world that Christianity was always supposed to be about so much more than sin and redemption from sin so you can go to heaven someday. Christianity – the Gospel of Jesus Christ – was always meant to be about the realities of life every day, the here and now. It was always supposed to be about God's love and our response to that love which is love for the other. Everything else is just so much noise and it's the noise that people got tired of so they just left the church. It's the noise that drove people away. It's the fear of encountering the noise if they came back to the church that's kept people away. But the Pope rose above all the noise – the noisy gong and clanging cymbal that Paul writes about in the 13<sup>th</sup> chapter of 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians. "If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a

clanging symbol,” Paul writes. Love is everything for those who claim the name Christian, Pope Francis reminded millions of people during his speech to Congress this past week. And that by itself is a miracle.

But miracles can get old. We get so we take them for granted. We get so they don't even seem like miracles anymore. We may even complain about them. That's what happened in the story we read this morning from the book of Numbers. This story is one of several stories in Numbers which are known as the rebellion stories because they are all about the people of Israel, now freed from Egypt but wandering in the desert due to their repeated rebellions against God's will. They just don't get what it means to be the people of God. They don't seem to appreciate the gift of freedom Moses gave them through the power of God. “If only we had meat to eat,” they complain in today's story. It seems they were getting tired of manna, the food God provided for them each night so that they could gather it each morning to cook for the day's meals. The text says they boiled it, they ground it, they made it into cakes and baked it. But, they were just sick of eating the same thing all the time. So they complained. And they daydreamed about all the good food they had had to eat in Egypt – cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions and garlic – they remembered and they craved this food once more. They missed Egypt!

Needless to say Moses just had had it by this time and the text describes one of those wonderful moments when Moses just has it out with God. “Why have you treated your servant so badly,” Moses asks God. Why have you saddled me with the burden of these people who do nothing but complain he demands of God? How am I supposed to deal with them? How am I supposed to find meat for them to eat? And he goes on, and on. He rants. He raves. At God. He even goes so far as to say to God, “I am not able to carry all this people alone for they are too heavy for me.” They are too heavy for me to carry, he says to God. If this is how you intend it to be, then just put me to death because I can’t handle it anymore.

Now this is where it gets extraordinary. You’d think God would be really angry with Moses for sounding off like that. I mean, it’s God and Moses basically just said to God, I’ve had it. Take me now. Just like Fred Sanford used to say on the old “Sanford and Sons” comedy show. “Take me now Lord, I’ve had enough!” But God doesn’t. God does something surprising and infinitely better for Moses. Find the elders among the people, God tells Moses, and bring them to the tent of the meeting. I will then come and talk with you there and “I will take some of the spirit that is on you and put it on them and they shall bear the burden of the people with you so that you will not bear it all by yourself.”

In other words, God tells Moses – I can see you’re at the end of your rope so let’s get you some help. And God sets the whole plan in motion. God doesn’t judge Moses. God doesn’t yell at Moses or the whining people. God offers a better answer when the people cry out “if only we had better food.” God offers a better answer when Moses said “if only I didn’t have to take care of these people all by myself.” God offers a better answer to all of us when we find ourselves in those “if only” moments of life. Those are moments we all have when we are just overwhelmed and under-equipped to deal anymore. Those are God moments, if only we open ourselves to finding God in them.

I think Pope Francis had one of those moments this past week as he was getting ready to speak before Congress. One of the sidebar stories I heard on NPR early last week was that it was rumored the Pope was pretty nervous about the visit to the US, not to mention the big speech before Congress. He knew his English wasn’t that great and he’d never visited here before. And the US can be pretty intimidating to folks the first time they visit. So, I’m pretty sure at some point this past week the Pope had an “if only” moment. “If only” I hadn’t said I’d give that speech he probably thought. I wouldn’t have to risk speaking a language I’m really uncomfortable with. I wouldn’t have to say things I know will make some people really angry. But, the thing is, when the Pope’s schedule was being planned he anticipated those “if only”

moments for himself and he built in an antidote. Do you know what it was? All those lunches and dinners with the homeless. The Pope built those into his schedule at precise intervals because he knew it would be those encounters with the people at the margins, the people he knew Jesus loved and so he loved them too. That was the Pope's antidote to paralyzing, self-centered "if only" moments – eating a meal with the homeless. Can you imagine what might happen if we all did the same thing? If we all reached outside ourselves when we feel most like giving up and giving in? It might just change the world. Jesus did and we might too – if only we'd give it a try. Amen.