

DELIVERED AT TRINITY CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH, UCC CONCORD, MA

Defiant Hope—Christian Witness in a time of Climate Crisis

SCRIPTURE:

Of the many churches founded by the Apostle Paul, none was more fractious than the gathering of troubled believers in the pagan city of Corinth. In the passage I am about to read, it's clear that the Christians in Corinth are questioning Paul's authority. You can almost hear the whisper campaign. "I wonder if he's made it all up? All that stuff about meeting Jesus on the road to Damascus. Maybe he came up with that since he never actually met Jesus when Jesus was alive. What gives him the right to tell us what to do? Let's demand that he prove his authority to us. Let's make him bring to us a letter; a letter from Peter or from James, the brother of Jesus. How else can we believe him?" But Paul doesn't take the bait. Instead, he turns it around. Rather than respond defensively, Paul embraces his accusers. He says to them, "You are my letter of recommendation. You are the best evidence there is that my ministry has not been in vain." Hear now this unusual passage from Paul's second letter to the Christians in Corinth, beginning with chapter 3, verse 1. Listen to the word of God for us today. Paul writes:

Are we beginning to commend ourselves again? Surely we do not need, as some do, letters of recommendation to you or from you, do we?^[2] You yourselves are our letter, written on our hearts, to be known and read by all;^[3] and you show that you are a letter of Christ, prepared by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts^[4] Such is the confidence that we have through Christ toward God.^[5] Not that we are competent of ourselves to claim anything as coming from us; our competence is from God,^[6] who has made us competent to be ministers of a new covenant, not of letter but of spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.

I don't know what you consider to be your most important spiritual discipline... but for me, every morning my first waking thought is gratitude – gratitude that God has given me at least one more day to serve, one more opportunity to inquire and testify, one more chance to seek and bear witness to truth. By embracing the spiritual discipline of gratitude, I find that I am free to bring my full self to whatever challenges and opportunities may come my way. When the Apostle Paul instructs the Ephesians to give thanks in all things (Ephesians 5:20) I believe that this is what he's getting at.

And so this past week, in anticipation of joining you this morning, I've been giving thanks for you!

- I'm grateful to Bob for extending to me a warm invitation to share in the ministry of God's word, and for the way he serves as a vessel for the Holy Spirit. I join you in giving thanks for all the ways God is using him to make Christ's presence known here in Concord and beyond.
- I'm grateful for the generous financial support your congregation consistently offers the Mass. Conference and the national UCC, and for your intentionality and clarity in communicating how those dollars are used, as evidenced in your bulletin.
- And I'm grateful for the many ways you seek to understand and follow Jesus, magnify God's call to love, and live into the shared vision of the UCC: United in Christ; a Just World for All.

At the close of this sermon I'll return to gratitude, but for now, let me say thank you for being such a blessing to our life together as the United Church of Christ. Thank you for upholding and blessing one another. And thank you for reaching out to those in this community who would never imagine that a church like the United Church of Christ exists. Those seekers need the blessings you have to offer!

Let us pray:

May the words of my mouth, and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable unto you O Lord; our strength, and our Redeemer. Amen

The Easter story carries with it countless lessons. Because we already know the ending it's easy to miss one of the most important of these lessons. The possibility of resurrection lies outside our expectations. It is un-precedented. No one was prepared for it. Even after Jesus raised Lazarus. Even after Jesus healed Jairus' daughter. No one—except possibly Jesus—saw it coming.

Fast forward to our current situation. Over the past year, every week we have witnessed any number of unexpected events. And some of them have even been positive! For example, let's remember that one day after our President was inaugurated:

- 500,000 people gathered in the streets of our nation's capital to send a bold message that women's rights are human rights.
- And across the globe, ten times that number – 5 million people – marched in 673 sister marches. Altogether, this was the largest demonstration in human history.
- And then there was Boston's response to Charlottesville last August, when over 40,000 marched against a white supremacy rally that drew a crowd of 50 or so.
- And then there's hurricanes Harvey, Irma and Maria:
 - For Houston, Harvey was the 3rd "once-in-every-500-year-flood" in 3 years.
 - That rain was so heavy that it bent the tectonic plate by 2 cm.
 - If Harvey's rain had all fallen on Manhattan, the water would be a mile deep.
 - The ongoing human suffering—especially in Puerto Rico—not only is it unexpected – it's unprecedented – beyond our understanding.

Since last November (2016) I've been signing my emails "Sharing the yoke of defiant hope." When we accept God's claim on our life, God expands our imagination, unites us with allies, amplifies our hope and provides us with opportunity. This is especially true when we find ourselves living in perilous times. God is offering to shape our lives and witness by calling us to a defiant hope, and it's time for us – all of us and each of us – to embrace this calling.

Of course, that's easier said than done. So much of what we are exposed to each day ends up deadening, deflating or defeating our hope:

- Look back at our President's decision to withdraw from the Paris Climate Accord—we'll talk more about that after worship. But that's not all.
- The Environmental Protection Agency has been gutted, and our National Parks have been de-funded.

- At least once a week we see a headline in “the real news” like “Earth now Warming at a Rate Unseen in 55 Million Years”¹
- And all too frequently, one of our elected leaders uses their bully pulpit to say something like what Michigan Congressman Tim Walberg said in late May (2017): he’s not concerned about the effects of climate change — if it exists — because God will “take care of it.”²

It’s only human that in response to this relentless onslaught of bad news, we become vulnerable to the enemies of hope – fear, despair and cynicism – and the pessimism these enemies breed. And for many of us, once pessimism takes over, our imagination shrivels and we become passive and complacent. Too often, we forget Jesus’ most frequent admonition: “Fear not!”

But optimists can also be passive and complacent if they assume that all will go well without their efforts. Optimists often convince themselves that somehow, the mess we’ve created will get straightened out, and in the meantime, what matters most is to stay positive about my life and the lives of those I love.

So what do I mean by defiant hope?

- Think of the young shepherd David as he quieted his trembling hands so that he could gather up a few smooth stones, while all around him grown men dressed in armor trembled.
- Or bring to mind the Indian champion of non-violence who once said, "First they ignore you, then they laugh at you, then they fight you, then you win."
- Or consider the carpenter's son from Nazareth who assured those around him that they could move mountains and that the truth would set them free.

Hope begins when we expand our imagination beyond what we can reasonably expect.

- For example, in 2009 Stanford Professor Mark Jacobson proposed – and later proved – that each of the 50 states—and virtually every country – could transition to 100% renewable energy by the year 2050.³
- Here’s another example. Within a few days of President Trump’s cancellation of the Paris Climate Accord, the mayors, governors, and business leaders representing over \$6 Trillion dollars of the US economy declared their commitment to meet the guidelines of the Paris agreement.⁴
- And speaking of expanding our imagination, let me share just two facts about solar energy:
 - First, the cost of solar today [2016] is less than 1/200th the cost of solar when Jimmy Carter installed it on the roof of the White House in 1979.
 - Second, using only solar panels (not wind, hydro, tidal, etc), if we covered only .3% of the Earth's land area (which is the size of Spain) we could power all of humanity's electricity needs. The cost would be 10% of world Gross Domestic Product or about \$5 trillion (which is less than what we paid to bail-out the banks in the last recession).⁵

If I were to say “we can do this!”—could I get an Amen?

Defiant hope believes that we are called by God to change what appears to be inevitable, and that God has given us everything we need to engage.

What if it's true that things are always darkest, just before the dawn? Don't you think that Good Friday was darker than the darkest day any of Jesus' followers had ever imagined?

If Franklin Delano Roosevelt had gone to the auto industry in 1939 and asked them to stop doing what they were doing and instead, build the largest industrial plant in the world and use it to construct something they'd never built before – something with over a million parts – and do this with such urgency that within six months not only would the building be fully constructed, but they'd actually be assembling one of those new things every 24 hours... if FDR had said this in 1939, Edsel Ford would have said, "Mr. President, you're nuts!" But when FDR said it in 1941, Edsel knew that things had grown much darker; and within six months the Willow Run manufacturing complex was churning out a B-24 Liberator Bomber every 24 hours.⁶

Do you see what I mean when I say, "We can do this!" Can you say it with me: "We can do this!"

But to do this, every day, each one of us needs to do two things:

- we need to face the challenge...
- and we need to join with others to take some action.

That may sound easy, but here's the rub: Three out of four American voters think global warming is happening; and 2/3 of Americans rarely or never discuss it.⁷

So our first task is to end this silence. And it turns out that the biggest predictor of people's willingness to take action to defend creation is whether they are in regular contact with others who believe and act like them⁸. In other words, by breaking our silence and sharing our views and values with others, we will empower one another to take action.

And this is where church comes in. Looking back, slavery would not have ended if it hadn't have been for church. And just as the church responded to God's call over 200 years ago, God is calling the church of today to defend God's gift of creation.

That call could be heard in July (2017) when a resolution I wrote in response to the US pull-out from the Paris Climate Accord came before our national UCC Synod. 97% of UCC delegates from all over the country affirmed:

- that clergy need to preach on climate change; and
- that we have a moral imperative to resist all expansion of fossil fuel infrastructure.

Humanity will not make the changes science says we must unless the church becomes a center for conversation, discernment, support and action.

Let me say it one more time: Defiant hope believes that we are called by God to change what appears to be inevitable, and that God has given us everything we need to engage.

And one thing more: defiant hope inoculates us against the epidemic of despair that so often accompanies the release of the newest climate science or the shock when a government official

denies it. In a recent Op Ed piece, Bill McKibben worries that the impact President Trump's decisions are having on the climate could mean that his term will last forever⁹. But this reality is not the final word—because the future is not yet written.

And if any Government official denies science, or deletes climate data, or forbids the sharing of ongoing scientific investigation, or supports policies that will rob from our children their future... none of this is the final word—because the future is not yet written.

Can you say it with me: “The future is not yet written!”

Yes—God is calling us to change what appears to be inevitable.

And remember: God has given us everything we need to engage.

Mind you: there's no guarantee of success. In 2011 when 1,253 of us were arrested in front of White House, we never expected President Obama to stop the Keystone XL pipeline from being built. And when he did, we celebrated. But one short year later, America held an election. And one of our new President's first Executive Orders was to grant a permit to build the Keystone XL pipeline¹⁰. While some would call our efforts a failure, I would remind them that our actions have already prevented almost two billion barrels of the dirtiest crude from being extracted and burned.¹¹

So yes: God doesn't promise success. But God promises unswerving support while we engage our calling.

The best example of defiant hope I know of are a group of teenagers known as Our Children's Trust¹². These teenagers have teamed up with some attorneys, scientists and film-makers, and together they have built a legal case showing that it is the duty of the government to protect the climate, and that they have a Constitutional right to a future not wrecked by climate change.

After taking legal action in almost all 50 states, in February 2018 Our Children's Trust will come before Judge Aiken at the U.S. District Court in Eugene, Oregon. The case is called Juliana vs. the United States and its youth plaintiffs are now age 9 to 21.

This is not only a legal campaign – it's a moral campaign, seeking to expand the universal moral principle of the Golden Rule to recognize future generations as our neighbors – what I call Golden Rule 2.0.

When the trial begins early next year, I hope and pray that thousands of congregations will hear sermons on this future-shaping witness - and many of those sermons will be delivered by teenagers.

This is how we write the future... this is how we shape history: by envisioning new

possibilities and acting on them as if they were inevitable¹³. And all the while remembering Gandhi's wise counsel: "First they ignore you, then they laugh at you, then they fight you, then you win."

Now let's be clear – Gandhi doesn't offer a time line! And many of us may not live to see the fruits of our actions to protect God's creation. But we know that courageous moral witness will inspire others as they receive the power of the Holy Spirit.

For example, Bishop Desmond Tutu recalls that when he was a boy, out for a walk with his mother, a priest – who was also a white man – tipped his hat to her. The boy had never seen a white man pay this respect to a black woman. It was this incident – nothing more than the tip of a hat – that inspired Tutu to recognize that religion could provide a path for advancing racial equality.¹⁴

In 1906, when Gandhi was in London studying to become a lawyer, eleven British women occupied the British parliament demanding the right to vote. They were arrested and sent to prison. Writing about them in a piece entitled "Deeds Better than Words" Gandhi declared: "Today the whole country is laughing at them, and they have only a few people on their side.... But they are bound to succeed ...". And seeing them made Gandhi realize – as early as 1906 – that if they could win, so could India free itself from the bonds of British colonialism.¹⁵

Rarely will any of us know who we might have inspired by what we have said or done. But moral courage is contagious; and lives can be repurposed when they encounter defiant hope.

And that brings me to today's scripture. Just as Paul declares to the Christians in Corinth, so I say to you: "You are my letter." And more importantly, you who have taken Christ's name as your own, you are the letter which Christ is writing to the world. You are the means by which the world will come to know and experience Christ's supreme work of reconciling humanity to God, to one another and to all of creation.

And so I say to you: In all your endeavors, let your life be a sign of defiant hope:

- awash in gratitude;
- infused with joy;
- propelled by wonder;
- and always seeking the truth —

because the truth will set you free – free to make full use of all your gifts and capacities in partnership with others – and guided by the Holy Spirit – to protect God's great gift of creation.

Amen.

1.

<https://newclimate.org/2017/03/31/trumps-climate-policies-would-see-us-climate-action-rating-drop-from-medium-to-insufficient/>

2. <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/onpolitics/2017/06/01/tim-walberg-climate-change-trump-paris-agreement/102389286/>
3. <http://thesolutionsproject.org/>
4. https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/01/climate/american-cities-climate-standards.html?ref=energy-environment&_r=0
5. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/quora/2016/09/22/we-could-power-the-entire-world-by-harnessing-solar-energy-from-1-of-the-sahara/#739582f8d440>
6. <https://newrepublic.com/article/135684/declare-war-climate-change-mobilize-wwii>
7. <http://environment.yale.edu/climate-communication/files/Climate-Change-American-Mind-October-2015.pdf> and 67% of Americans think global warming is happening (p. 3); 65% of Americans rarely or never discuss it (p. 15); also April 2017 poll says 75% of voters are either very concerned or somewhat concerned about climate change. <https://poll.qu.edu/national/release-detail?ReleaseID=2449>
8. WAPO May 16, 2016
https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/energy-environment/wp/2016/05/16/why-even-people-who-are-very-alarmed-about-climate-change-often-take-little-action/?postshare=1201463431325891&tid=ss_tw&utm_term=.cccfa59d4944
9. Bill McKibben, NYT April 20, 2017, “The Planet Can't Stand This Presidency.”
https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/21/opinion/the-planet-cant-stand-this-presidency.html?smid=tw-share&_r=0
10. <https://thinkprogress.org/keystone-xl-pipeline-permit-granted-trump-204ee8c97a5e>
11. $9/2011-9/2017=6\text{yrs} \times 365\text{days} \times 830,000 \text{ barrels} = 1.8 \text{ billion barrels} \times 42\text{gals/barrel} = 75.6 \text{ Billion Gallons of oil}$
12. See <https://www.ourchildrenstrust.org/us/federal-lawsuit/> and <https://theconversation.com/earth-on-the-docket-why-obama-cant-ignore-this-climate-lawsuit-by-americas-youth-69193>
13. This insight comes from Walter Wink’s lectionary meditation “These bones shall live - Living the Word” in Christian Century Magazine 1994. (Volume and date of issue unavailable)
14. <http://www.biography.com/people/desmond-tutu-9512516>
15. Rebecca Solnit, THE GUARDIAN March 13, 2017 “Protest and persist: why giving up hope is not an option”
<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/mar/13/protest-persist-hope-trump-activism-anti-nuclear-movement>