

*Excerpts from various 2016 (May to November) Sermons Related to the
Presidential Election
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A Common Dream

We harbor a common dream, a dream that our warming globe, caught in climate change, will be cooled by cooler heads and calmer hearts and careful minds.

We harbor a common dream, a dream that our dangerous world, armed to the teeth with nuclear proliferation, will find peace through deft leadership toward nuclear détente.

We harbor a common dream, a dream that our culture, awash in part in hooliganism, will find again the language and the song and the spirit of the better angels of our nature.

We harbor a common dream, a dream that our country, fractured by massive inequality between rich children and poor children, will rise up and make education, free education, available to all children, poor and rich.

We harbor a common dream, a dream that our nation, fractured by flagrant unjust inequality between rich and poor children, will stand up and make health care, free health care, available to all children, poor and rich.

We harbor a common dream, a dream that our schools, colleges and universities, will balance a love of learning with a sense of meaning, a pride in knowledge with a respect for goodness, a drive for discovery with a regard for recovery.

We harbor a common dream, a dream that our families, torn apart by abuse and distrust and anger and jealousy and unkindness, will sit at a long Thanksgiving table, this autumn, and share the turkey and pass the potatoes, and slice the pie, and, if grudgingly, show kindness and pity to one another.

We harbor a common dream, a dream that our decisions in life about our callings, how we are to use our time and spend our money, how we make a life not just a living, will be illumined by grace and generosity.

We harbor a common dream, a dream that our grandfathers and mothers, in their age and infirmity, will receive care and kindness that accords with the warning to honor father and mother that you own days be long upon the earth.

We harbor a common dream, a dream that women—our grandmothers, mothers, sisters, daughters, granddaughters, all—granted suffrage less than 100 years ago, will be spared any and all forms of harassment and abuse, verbal or physical, on college campuses, in homes and families, in offices and bars, in life and work, and long having suffered and now having suffrage, will in our time rise up to be honored, revered, and compensated, without reserve, but with justice and mercy.

We harbor a common dream, finally a dream not of this world, but of this world as a field of formation for another, not just creation but new creation, not just life but eternal life, not just health but salvation, not just heart but soul, not just earth, but heaven.

Pride and James P. Comey

Remember last week, and our prayer for forgiveness of sin? We confessed lust, gluttony, avarice, sloth, anger, envy and... 'integrity without humility', pride. Say you were an attorney general in a state with a governor's election ten days away. You find a folder on your desk, empty, but with a pending potential investigation. You feel that your integrity requires that you tell the whole inhabited earth about a pending possible investigation about which you know nothing. You remember your Boy Scout law (trustworthy, loyal, helpful, friendly, courteous, kind, obedient, cheerful, thrifty, brave, clean and reverent), and decide your integrity requires a statement. But what of your humility? (The scout motto—a good turn daily—not just the law). Humility would require you to consider due process, to consider past practice near elections, to consider the advice of your colleagues in law enforcement, and to consider the nuances of the situation and your conscience. Integrity, alone, bulldozes blazes and blasts past all these. Harm is done. Integrity without humility is the worst of the seven deadly sins—pride. When we grow up, sometimes, we recognize the peril of integrity alone, the great steed of integrity, without the bit and bridle and saddle of humility—pride.

Cultural Demise and Cable News

You may have been reminded, in our season, of the choices made in cable network so-called journalism, where the two, confusion and timidity, have been found in full this year, in equal measure.

You may have been reminded of the cultural demise all around us, to the shame of us all, the acceptance of bullying and demagoguery, the normalization of vulgarity and sexism, the accommodation of buffoonery and megalomania, our willingness

to have our children and grandchildren so surrounded in a culture careening into a nihilistic abyss. *'Yes, I really got him. Low energy. That was a one day kill. Words are beautiful things.'* Can you hear that?

Institutions are far more fragile than we sometimes think, especially the bigger ones. They all require trust, commitment, integrity, self-sacrifice, and humility on the part of their leaders, or over time they disintegrate. It is not just the processes, the systems, the organizations and structures that matter, it is the people. No amount of systemic adjustment can ever replace the fundamental need, across a culture, for good people. No wise process has any chance against unwise people. Do not assume that institutions that have been healthy will always be so. Do not presume that free speech in newspapers, that due process in political parties, that honest regard for electoral results simply exist. They do or they don't. It depends on the people who inhabit, support, and lead them. Beware a time like ours when *the best lack all conviction, while the worst are full of passionate intensity (Yeats)*.

Giving ultimate loyalty to penultimate reality is sin at its depth. To support an organization at the cost of honor, of integrity, of honesty is to give ultimate loyalty to penultimate reality. That is, to support a political party at the cost of honor, integrity and honesty is to give ultimate loyalty to penultimate reality. This is sin at its depth. That is, to support a denomination at the cost of honor, integrity and honesty is to give ultimate loyalty to penultimate reality. In the hour of judgment, the organization—party or church or other—depends on the courage and integrity of individuals to resist idolatrous loyalty to penultimate reality and to respond with courage and integrity to ultimate authority. You cannot serve God and Mammon. Giving ultimate loyalty to penultimate reality is sin at its depth.

Persistence in Jeremiah

In 1980 with 12 Cornell students, and for a full year, we studied Jeremiah. Two of those then young graduate students are now teaching at Brown University, and are part of the extended Marsh Chapel family. Last year they reminded me that the group had asked to study Jeremiah, high above Cayuga's waters, and I had wondered 'whether they were ready for him'. They said they were, and they were. In all these intervening years, with student and campus groups from Cornell, McGill, North Country Community, Syracuse, Lemoyne, Colgate Rochester, the University of Rochester, United Seminary and, now, Boston University, we have returned in group study to Jeremiah. Never, though, have I been more grateful for Jeremiah's evocation of the stark suffering divine love of God, for Jeremiah's unswerving realism, than this fall. In the autumn of demagoguery and its partial

acceptance by America, I kneel and kiss the ground, thankful for Jeremiah and his divine human realism.

I am eternally thankful for Jeremiah's realism about what horrors can befall people and a people when they forget their identity.

I am eternally thankful for Jeremiah's realism about what happens to a people whose leaders have and live values diametrically opposed to the nation's own values.

I am eternally thankful, painful as it is to hear the words, for Jeremiah's realism about how naïve in selfishness a people can become, and how earth shattering that foolishness can be.

I am eternally thankful for Jeremiah's realism about the crucial importance of diplomacy rather than violence, and about what happens when megalomaniacal leaders mock diplomacy.

I am eternally thankful, if such can be said, for Jeremiah's own wretched suffering as he watched his beloved country exchange their birthright of justice for a mess of material pottage.

I am eternally thankful for the clarity, not confusion, for the courage, not timidity, of his voice ringing out across 25 centuries to say to you in a way you cannot avoid: if you follow leadership that is immoral, unjust, unloving, unwise, you will get what you deserve, and the desserts will be disastrous. In real time.

I am eternally thankful for Jeremiah's pitiless reproach for people whose own religion bluntly teaches them to tell truth, honor others, seek justice, protect the poor, who then select leaders who say they have done and will do the opposite, and then are proven to have done. We have been warned.

I am eternally thankful for Jeremiah's realism which—did you hear?—includes at the end, encompasses at twilight, for all the suffering the divine love endures, including Jeremiah's own slave death and unmarked grave in Egypt, a grace note, a ringing bell, a song sung, a word spoken, a hope, that one day *'says the Lord, I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah... No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, "Know the Lord," for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord...*

Jeremiah's Hope

Now that his beloved country is in ruins (are we beginning across our own cultural landscape this fall to catch a glimpse of his woe?), Jeremiah does something great. Remember: the city is burned, the temple is wrecked, the population is slaughtered or in chains, and the nation is destroyed, soon to spend two generations in Babylon, by the rivers of Babylon, where to sit down and weep, as tormentors mock, 'sing to us one of the songs of Zion'. But Jeremiah buys a plot of land. One day, a long time from now, he muses and prays, there will be some manner of restoration: 'I cannot see it. I cannot hear it. I cannot prove it. Sometimes I cannot believe it. But, hoping against hope, I will buy some land, and someday, somebody, somehow will use it'. This is faith: to plant trees under which you will not sleep, to build churches in which you will not worship, to create schools in which you will not study, to teach students whose futures you will not know—and to buy land which you will not till. But someone will. Or at least, that is your hope. That is why, as darkness is falling across a confused, frightened, and benighted land, you have done some things this fall. You offered a morning prayer. Good for you. You sent a check to support some leader or candidate. Good for you. You went and volunteered to make contacts and calls on his or her behalf. Good for you. You spoke up and spoke out, regardless of the fan mail, family disdain, and other costs. You did something. Will it make a difference? It may not. But it does make a difference, for you, if for no one else. Go and buy your little plot of land.

Remember Jeremiah.

The prophet Jeremiah excoriated his people, hoping against hope to keep them in faith along a tenebrous edge. For four decades he challenged, criticized, and vilified his beloved country, and its leadership, and its people. They heeded him not.

The prophet was the victim of the nationalistic hysteria of those who favored revolt, a rejection of their own best selves. Untrue to themselves and to their history and to their God, and heedless of Jeremiah's words, his beloved people subsequently suffered the great distress of 587bce, in which the northern Assyrians conquered them, their city was burned, their temple destroyed, their nation buried, and their population deported to Babylon. Judah became a vassal state, a province of Babylon. Yet for four decades before this disaster, Jeremiah spoke truth to his wayward people, four decades of unheeded sermons.

Jeremiah lived from about 650 to 580 bce. King Josiah in 621, heeded his word in part, but himself was killed in 609. And then the defeat in Carcamesh in 605, and then the partial deportation in 598, and then, the end, apocalypse 587bce. Along the way Jeremiah counseled diplomacy and even capitulation, to no avail. He was condemned to death, but survived, thrown in a cistern, yet prevailed, until his own deportation, and probable death, in Egypt. Anathoth, 2 miles from Jerusalem was his *home*; Hosea was his *model*; harlotry the main *image*: ‘Again and again he exhorted his countrymen to obedience and persisted in his call to repentance and change of heart although he came to feel that their moral sense had become so atrophied that repentance was impossible.’ He urged the people not to listen to the *optimistic predictions* of the prophets. Jeremiah’s opponent, the prophet or pseudo-prophet Hananiah wrongly predicted the defeat of Bablyon, wrongly predicted the return of exiles and wrongly predicted the restoration of the temple treasures. Is there any word from the Lord, plaintively King Zedekiah asked Jeremiah?

Yes, Jeremiah whispered, there is: *You shall be delivered into the hand of the king of Babylon.* (37:17).

Jeremiah exclaimed: False prophets deceive people with their optimism. The temple has no efficacy in and of itself. The true circumcision is not of body, but of mind and heart. Even the Bible can lead astray: Even the Torah may become a snare and a delusion through the false pen of the scribes.

By the way, notice some of the themes from the sixth century bce: Deportation, false optimism, betrayal of heritage, forgetfulness of history, ineffective leadership, personal failings which damage the nation, turning of a deaf ear toward the voice of God. *“For my people are foolish, they do not know me; they are stupid children, they have no understanding. They are skilled in doing evil, but do not know how to do good.”*

Jeremiah, whom we have heard in the background of our worship and preaching for some weeks, speaks to us today, and continues into late October. He warns of the tenebrous edge.

May his memory help us.

We Get the Leadership We Deserve

For us, as part of a national culture now careening toward decay, our memory is failing us. Rhetoric and rancor that befit no civilized people we have somehow

accepted, acceded to, accommodated. We forget Emma Lazarus and prefer demagoguery. We forget Lincoln and support nativism. We forget King and accept narcissism. We forget Jesus the crucified and cleave to the cry of triumphalism, out of fear and out of exhaustion and out of amnesia, both a cultural and a Christological amnesia.

Yet on the horizon today we hear and see demagoguery—America First, Birtherist, Misogynist, Racist, Xenophobic, Narcissistic (don't you love all these Greek rooted words?) bigotry. *I sure did that well. 'Low Energy'. That was a one day kill. Words are beautiful things.*

Over time, we get the leadership we deserve.

We desire a faith amenable to culture, and a culture amenable to faith. For what good is a baptized cleansing if we are simply thrown back into the mire? Personal and social holiness are married to one another. Loving faith expects loving culture.

80% Agree: Wall, Deportation, Ban

Some express surprise, a sense of mistake, regarding the willingness of a grand old party, a party of Lincoln, to nominate a particular candidate. Yet there is no surprise or mistake about the nomination in question. 80% of voters in that party agree with these three propositions: Muslims should be banned. A wall should be built along the Rio Grande. Undocumented immigrants of all ages and stages should rounded up, arrested, jailed, and deported. (New York Review of Books, p 8-10, June, 2016) If you are in conversation with a member of such a party, chances are 4 out of 5 that you are in conversation with these views. No surprise. No mistake. You see? The shadow falls on us. Shadow. Dark. Twilight. The tenebrous...

Pause, Boston, to remember who and whose you are. How, why and for what purpose did your forebears arrive here in 1630, and in the years thereafter? Why did Jonathan Winthrop drift and write out in the Boston harbor that year? To deport immigrants? To erase religious freedom? To wall off and wall up borders? Hardly. Their original hope, so often expressed only in the breach in years to come, was the very opposite. Not to deport immigrants—they were themselves immigrants, as were your people. You Lutherans in Wisconsin and Iowa. You French Canadians in New Hampshire and Maine. You Irish and Italians in Albany and Buffalo. You Scots and English in North Carolina and Florida. Not to deport immigrants—they were themselves immigrants, as were your people. Not to deny religious liberty, but to find it and live it, in a new land, a

New World, where your creed could be yours indeed. Not to fortify borders, but to expand them, and expand them they did, so that the original dream would be city set on a hill, a last best hope, like the moon, a lamp of the poor. We walk along a precipice, a philosophical cliff, a tenebrous edge.

May this memory help us.

Humility and Humiliation

For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.

Can one acquire humility without enduring humiliation? (repeat) It is a serious question. Discomfort, we ignore. Pain, we obey.

For us, as part of a national culture now careening toward and into an apotheosis of hubris, the similitude of Luke 14 hits home. The way of the long future is along the path of humility. But we get tired of humility, because it is a tiring and tiresome talent to hone. We get tired, and if we get scared when we get tired, if a portion of fear is laden into a potion, poisonous potion, of pride, and if that fear potion is potent enough to carry us, we forget who we are. We forget Emma Lazarus and prefer demagoguery. We forget Lincoln and support nativism. We forget King and accept narcissism. We forget Jesus the crucified and cleave to the cry of triumphalism, out of fear and out of exhaustion and out of amnesia. We forget the advice of the author of Hebrews: *Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it. Remember those who are in prison, as though you were in prison with them; those who are being tortured, as though you yourselves were being tortured.* We turn aside from the prophetic voice of Jeremiah, *Has a nation changed its gods, even though they are no gods? But my people have changed their glory for something that does not profit.* Can we acquire a modicum of humility, that measure we will minimally need as a people, without enduring humiliation? Can we learn without learning the hard way? Can we see the pending consequences through the lenses of humility, without needing, in order to learn, a full experience of humiliation? Or, as so often in history, will we need to drink the bitter cup of full cultural and national humiliation, in order for humility to return? I would like to be optimistic... Sometimes people just have to learn the hard way. To learn what? *Pride goeth before a fall.*

For us as individuals, who have known more than our share, as our guest reminds us, more than our share of elbowing our way to the head of the table, the similitude

of Luke 14 hits home. Narrow is the gate and straight is the way that leads to life, and few there be who go therein. We all, one way or another, get born on third base and think we hit a triple. We all see a turtle on top of a fence post and think he got there by climbing. We all preach our version of the sermon, *Humility and How I Achieved It*. We all have one set of arithmetic for our own deeds and misdeeds and another for others, one abacus for our own intentions and another for those of others. We all can stand a little and more than a little house cleaning when it comes to the rooms marked off by what we think we did when we didn't and what we think we didn't when we did. There is, that is, still a place in the pilgrim faithful heart, for the quiet Yankee voice of self-criticism. There is still a value in the teacher who began every class bowing to the students, not knowing what range of genius might already be present. H R Niebuhr in the evening hunted up a student whom he had chastised in the morning, asking forgiveness. Can we learn without learning the hard way? Can we see the pending consequences through the lenses of humility, without needing, in order to learn, a full experience of humiliation? Or, as so often in history, will we need to drink the bitter cup of full personal humiliation, in order for humility to return? I would like to be optimistic... Sometimes people just have to learn the hard way. To learn what? *Pride goeth before a fall.*

Cultural Amnesia

What is going on with us in this country, anyway? Have we forgotten who we are? A cultural amnesia? A Christological amnesia? Have we forgotten the love we had at first? Have we forgotten how to make a place for someone left out, someone somewhat different, someone 'other'? Have we mixed up our heart and our treasure? What is our heart's treasure? What do we stand for, when push comes to shove? There is a reckoning coming for us, as people and as a people.

If you leave that camp ground on Owasco Lake, and drive southeast for a while, either on the road four hours or in the mind's eye four minutes, you may come down to the Hudson River, and then right out toward the Atlantic Ocean. There is a harbor down there. In the harbor there is a statue. On the statue there is a statement. It reads as follows:

Give me your tired, your poor

Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free

The restless refuse of your teeming shore

Send these, the lost, the tempest tossed to me

I lift my lamp beside the golden door.

Ahab's Shadow: Our Own?

Israel remembered Ahab's shadowy desire for a more convenient God, not out of reverence for Ahab, but because his desire somehow revealed the waxing national desire for a little lower heaven, a little lighter covenant, a little more convenient God. As the distant mirror of the Scripture may teach us, we are so interested because we know this figure and this desire so well.

We, too, want a little more convenient deity. One who will affirm our proclivities and ignore our cruelties

We know this Ahab well. Always a little sideways to the truth...Politically able, morally twisted...at heart faithless...looking for more convenience than the "inheritance of the fathers" allows...at heart hoping for an easy chance, the lottery of life, something for nothing, a quick pleasure, a garden delight.

We get the leadership we deserve.

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Over time, we get the leadership we deserve.

Faith and Culture

We preach and pray at the crossroads of faith and culture. This is true for every congregation, pulpit and place, but especially and keenly so right now at Marsh Chapel. In a new, perhaps conflicted way, across the country, we may be listening this summer for words of grace, out of our holy scripture, out of our traditions, out of our sacred history, and wondering, hoping, perhaps doubting but still hoping, that these as preached may help us make some sense of what is becoming of us, as a people and as a country, in our time.

We desire a faith amenable to culture, and a culture amenable to faith. For what good is a baptized cleansing if we are simply thrown back into the mire? Personal and social holiness are married to one another. Loving faith expects loving culture.

For all the attention we—rightly—give to politics and economics, it is really the cultural realities that have most impact on individual lives, over time. When an 8 year old bursts through the back door, crying, saying that her school friend, from Mexico, we will be deported, hers is a culturally inflicted wound; when an 87 year old woman, in a nursing home, rues the collapse of her life long party, and surveys its demise and damages with the word ‘dismaying’, hers is a cultural assessment; when a candidate, given to insulting his competitors, and branding them with epithets, reflects on defeating one by calling him ‘low energy’ and, months later, in reflection, saying, ‘that was a one day kill’ and then adding, ‘words are beautiful things’ (as my Dad said, ‘its one thing to be tough, but its another to be mean’), we suffer a cultural decline; when a great Christian denomination lacks spiritual leaders, general superintendents, who could simply say, ‘gay people are people’, and then keep silent (only one active UMC Bishop in the Northeast, Peggy Johnson, did so this week), this is a cultural measurement; when only 24% of 17-24 year olds are eligible to seek admission into armed forces (the other 76% ineligible due to obesity, lack of a high school diploma, drug use, criminal record, failure of physical exam or other), here we trace cultural influence; when forms of worship, meant for enchantment, give way over two generations to a pseudo-worship aimed at entertainment, with direct connections to features of Reality TV, professional wrestling, and beauty contests—the same social expressions now driving some political selection and debate—we face a cultural deficit; in short, when a culture, like ours, has a mirror held up to it, as has happened this calendar year, and the image is more appalling than appealing, then some among us may begin to return to, revert to, a reconsideration of our more ancient repositories of wisdom: scripture, history, thought, and scrutinized experience. In an age of broad cultural malaise, some may seek more steadily the reassurance, peace,

insight, and resolve to be found in moments of truth, goodness, beauty—and ordered worship. Those in the pulpits across this country have our work cut out for us in 2016. How shall we invoke and evoke faith fit for culture and culture fit for faith? How will we address incivility in a civil way? How do we oppose demagoguery with democracy? How do we contrast buffoonery with beauty? How does one supplant cultural disorder with liturgical order? How do we combat fear with faith? We have our cultural work cut out for us this year.