

“The Greatest City”

Sunday, October 22, 2006

The Rev. Dr. W. Frederick Wooden



Fountain Street Church
Grand Rapids, Michigan

Printed by
THE EXTENSION SERVICE
of
FOUNTAIN STREET CHURCH

Single Copies..... \$1.00

Copyright © 2006 by Fountain Street Church

To the reader: This sermon was only part of a service of worship with many components working together, all of which were designed to be experienced in a community context. In our "free pulpit" tradition, its concepts are intended not as truths to receive, but as spurs to your own thought and faith.

“The Greatest City”

READING from Whitman's *Song of the Broad Axe*

A great city is that which has the greatest men and women. If it is a few ragged huts, it is still the greatest city in the world.

Where the city stands with the brawniest breed of orators and bards; where the the city stands that is beloved by these, and loves them in return, and understands them.

Where no monuments exist to heroes, but in the common words and deeds; where thrift is in its place, and prudence is in its place.

Where the populace rise at once against the never-ending audacity of elected persons; where outside authority enters after the precedence of inside authority.

Where women enter the public assembly and take places the same as the men; where children are taught to be laws unto themselves; and to depend on themselves.

Where the city of the healthiest fathers stands; where the city of the best-bodied mothers stands; where the city of the faithfulest friends stands;

There the great city stands.

* * * * *

SERMON

Free the mind. Grow the soul. Change the world. That's what I believe Fountain Street Church is about. Over the months I have been here I went searching for the simple message embedded in the words and stories that are the past and present of this church. It took a while, and I continue to sift through it all, but what came to me were those three phrases – free the mind, grow the soul, change the world. At various moments each of them have been paramount, and at every moment all have been in place somehow; but whenever the church forgot this was its identity, the spirit flagged and despair set in. Yes, there is more, but these commands – free the mind, grow the soul, change the world – are the core. When you did this well, greatness resulted.

Anyone who has been here over the last two weeks has heard me say this already. First I explained the principles underlying this vision, something I shall pursue in depth this winter. Then I laid down the first priority for reclaiming this mission – becoming a learning church. Education, in its broadest sense, is the core ministry of this church because it is the place where freeing the mind and growing the soul take front row seats. In unfettered learning – intellectual, moral, spiritual learning - we free our minds so we can grow in new ways, ways we always wanted but did not always know. To be true to this great mission, education is the most powerful means we have. We have to be The Learning Church.

But one could then ask, to what end? As John Milton said in arguing for free

speech and unfettered learning, it is not just for the pleasure of "ever staring on... but to discover onward," to equip us to live better lives. If what we learn does not affect how we live, then why do it at all? If the great end in religious instruction is, as I quoted Channing last week, to awaken the soul, the result should be a person more alive than before – someone who knows what William James did, that the secret to living a meaningful life is to spend it on others.

If our duty is to grow our souls, it is also our duty to share them in service. Indeed, we have not truly lived until we are sharing our life. The natural result of becoming a learning church is to become a serving church.

To that end, and the second part of my vision for the future, I believe we must create a model social ministry equal to that model educational ministry, one that embodies the principles of liberal religion, instructing its members and inspiring its neighbors. Just as we say we trust deeds more than creeds, so our deeds as a church must inspire trust in others. Let our faith be shared by how we live more than what we say.

What would such a social ministry be like? For one, it would be manifold, serving in many ways. We would be physically present in meeting needs of the homeless and the helpless. We give food now, but only recently have we actually served it. We are tutoring in the schools with students now, but we can do so in larger numbers. We would be walking the walk, as they say, as I was this week at a rally against the ballot proposal to end affirmative action.

We would be educating ourselves and others about the complex and seemingly intractable issues such the economy versus the environment, race and affirmative action, church and state, sexuality and public policy. Our great speakers have done this for years, but more by accident than design. I have asked politicians to come and explain the role of religion in public life, but so far they have not. But this month we will host a meeting of organizations at work in the schools, and I shall be meeting with the Community College president to ask how we can be better partners in educating the public about what matters to this city. Because we are not a brand name religion, we can inform without bias, without prejudice. Impartiality and fairness can be our reputation, something no other house of worship can claim.

We would tithe, giving a dollar to the wider community for every ten we spent on ourselves. What would Grand Rapids think if we invested \$100,000 a year in schools: supplying libraries, opening summer wading pools, providing scholarships, supporting ACCESS, and more? What would the community think if they saw our name on park benches, brick walkways, benefactor lists and at testimonial dinners? What would people think when FSC is a community booster as much as a critic, an investor as much as a questioner? The proposed budget for 2007 contains a small step in this direction. It seeks to take all cash collected in Sunday and return it to the community. That would be \$20,000, about 1.6% of our budget. Is it only coincidental that this is probably close to the percentage people give to the church? If we raise ours, would you raise yours?

We would stand by other groups, lending our moral support to those advocating for change. Long ago we supported the ACLU and Planned Parenthood when others would not. What about Amnesty International in these tortured times, or Oxfam and

UNICEF in these faith-based times. We would be hosting events for The Interfaith Alliance that preserves the separation of church and state, and the American Friends Service Committee or the UU Service Committee who model responsible world missions. And sometimes, when need arose, we'd speak truth to power and would tell government in no uncertain terms.

This is just a sketch. You have to decide what we should do, even whether we should do it. But I firmly believe a church does not live its faith as a community will earn no faith from the community. The triangle in our logo, old and new, suggests the bell tower which rings each week. This is our presence in the wider community, which is not a literal bell, but the sound of lives at work.

In a sense, I am asking us to be models for the community itself, to be like Whitman's Great City, which is not esteemed by its temples and streets, its plazas and walls, but by the spirit of its citizens who are alive to themselves and each other. I believe that future generations of this wider community will measure our integrity not by our dissent from others' doctrines but by our fidelity to our own values. As it says in the Christian scripture, "be ye doers of the word not merely hearers... by their fruits ye shall know them."

This all sounds very earnest, and it is. I am convinced we liberals have become weak and small compared to others because we ask nothing of ourselves. Smitten with personal freedom, we have decided nothing can be asked, nothing demanded, nothing expected because that would compromise individual liberty. I say this is lazy and indulgent. Just as we know freedom itself is never free, but requires vigilance of mind and body, so spiritual liberty is not an end itself, but a means to something even greater. It is not enough to be free from tyranny. We must use that freedom for something.

"Most men lead lives of quiet desperation," said Thoreau. "and go to the grave with the song still in them." Oppressed without and within, most of us struggle to find meaning in our lives. Many find it in family, work, god and country. But I say these are all ultimately false. They matter, yes, but they are not the core, the heart. So no matter how hard they work to satisfy family, boss, bank account, church or even citizenship, they will find something missing. What is missing?

Themselves. They want lives, real lives, lives abundant in power and grace, and nothing can give that to us except that we find the power and grace within us, the hidden transcendence, the divine DNA that makes us children of God, the thing we have that no one else has and set it loose in ourselves and the world. This is the song in us. It is what we were meant to be, and when we find it, we come alive. It is our joy.

It is about ministry. Frederick Buechner, writer and theologian, defines ministry as the place where your deep joy meets the world's deep hunger. The learning church helps you find your deep joy, the thing inside you that makes you alive. The serving church connects that joy with the hunger. It takes you to where your joy can serve others, and where others can partake of your joy. We want to find our song and the people who need to hear it.

When this happens, we are truly alive. We know our lives matter because we are giving something real, something utterly our own, and that this gift is enriching others.

What else can we want? Some might say eternal life. I say that hope is small compared to the large possibility of living a life that makes an eternal difference. So let us try to live as though our lives could matter forever; that if we could give our great joy to the world, really live our ministry, that song would never cease to echo in the ears of God.