

**“One Year In”**  
**Sermon by Pastor Tom Warren**  
**Peace United Church of Christ**  
**July 6, 2014**

This is the morning that I want to spend talking with all of you about, not so much the past year but, what is going to come next and what I hope will be the guiding of the spirit in our lives together. The first thing I want to say is just that this past year was really not about me very much. It was really about us because anyone who is honest about ministry, any pastor who is honest about ministry, will say something like “You are really only as good as your congregation”. So, we need to be very clear that whatever we are able to do together, it is because we will do it together. I give all of you a great big “Amen!” for the last year—12 months that we’ve been together—which has gone very quickly from my point of view.

The second thing I want to say is that I want to take you back to two very penetrating questions that were thrown my way when I was in seminary and I was trying to find my local church where I would intern.

Some of you may have noticed in our Peace Press for July that we have a seminary intern who is going to be joining us in September from Wake Forest Divinity School. We will look forward to that because I know that Peace Church has a long history of having wonderful interns who go on to do wonderful things. We are looking forward to how that plays out.

When I was going to find my local internship in St. Louis, where I went to seminary, I went to a small urban Evangelical & Reformed UCC church, not too different from Peace Church. It was Epiphany UCC, and I had a meeting with the pastor following worship in that church. So, the plan was, Tom come down, worship with us, and then after church, you and I will have a get-together to determine our relationship and the internship itself.

There were two penetrating questions that came my way. We arrived for worship at something like 9:30 in the morning at Epiphany Church, and Reverend Vosler was there to greet me at the door and he said “Hello, Tom. How are you? We are glad to have you. Where is your Bible?” I said “Uh...I left it at home.” He said “We don’t do anything without the Bible.” That was a penetrating question, “Where is your Bible?” So, we went to worship that morning. I sat in the pew, still rattled from “Where is your Bible?” and Reverend Vosler and I met after church. We sat down, and he began by asking me some questions. He wanted to get to know me and so forth and so on, so he asked me this second penetrating question: “How has Jesus changed your life?” I replied “Uh...I recycle.” He giggled. He said “Well, that’s good.”

Those are the kinds of questions that really go to the heart of what we are to be about. We are (as I am sure you have picked up from the sermons) people of the Book. We are people of the narrative, the Hebrew Bible, Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament. This is our story, so we are the people of the Book, and one of the things we are going to continue to do, I hope, is find new and colorful ways to re-invigorate that truth. We are all, of course, people of the Book and we have been people of the Book, but there is sort of a “re-grounding” that has to take place in our lives together in becoming people of the Book. Somehow mainline Protestants have grown kind of timid about this reality. We are not really on top of our Scripture like the Baptists are. They can quote Scripture and they leave us in the dust. We need to get there so that we can be in the discussion about our Book.

That second question “How has Jesus changed your life?” is a question which is never fully answered and always has a new answer for us if the spirit is moving in our lives, so how has Jesus changed my life? Twenty years ago the answer was “Recycling”. Today that answer is very different because the spirit is moving in our lives—every one of us, so Jesus is changing our lives in different ways all the time.

As you noticed in that liturgy that I developed today, I went, very intentionally, through the life of Jesus, starting with His birth, ending with the Holy Spirit coming to the early church in the Book of Acts. One of the reasons I did that was because sometimes in the season that we read those stories, we can miss the power of those stories because of everything else that goes with the season. At Christmas, we are all preoccupied with the holiday season. By the time we get to Christmas Eve, frankly, some of us are worn out. There is, with all of these seasons, a lot of sentimentality—family memories, church memories and so forth and so on, so it is not hard to miss the power of the Scriptures when we are in the moment of the season.

I want to talk about these moments. The reason I want to talk about these moments is because I think each of us is charged with cultivating, nurturing and witnessing to the most powerful story in the world. What we say and what we believe is that God did something incredibly powerful in Jesus Christ to which we are all responsible—to know the story, to love the story, to live the story, and to share the story.

When we hear this first narrative about Jesus being born and we sing those wonderful Christmas hymns that we all love, like we sang today, the first thing that we need to remember about that narrative is that Jesus is sent by God to humanity because humanity is in trouble. Two thousand years ago, and today, humanity needs a guide. We are, of course, in pretty rough shape today just like things were in rough shape when Jesus was born.

Christmas is about God making a decisive act, sending this Child, Jesus, to humanity to give humanity a chance and, of course, it is an odd story. It is about a baby that is born in a stable. It is about a baby born on the margins of society. This is not royalty. This is a very unique birth, so we are charged with that wonderful, wonderful gift. God sent Jesus to humanity. Jesus was then baptized in the Jordan. The spirit comes down on Jesus. We all get baptized in that same spirit. The power of that story is that Jesus, through that baptism, is placed into solidarity with humanity. Jesus is one of us—God with us, God with the human family.

I always wondered why is it that Jesus had to be baptized. He got baptized because God is with us, equal with us and, yet, something far greater than us. In Jesus, we find that God is with us. We are not alone. So, when we celebrate the baptism of Jesus, and when we think about our own baptism, we reflect upon the power that God loves us, that God is there with us, throughout every day of our lives. Through that baptismal, mystical experience, God is with us and we, of course, are with God in our community. So, Jesus was sent by God. Jesus is in solidarity with humanity and Jesus, in his life, is revealed to be in service to humanity. Jesus was sent by God to humanity. Jesus is in solidarity with humanity, and Jesus, through his life, models service to humanity. Our call, as people of faith, is to be in service to our brothers and sisters, wherever there is suffering, pain, struggling, and loneliness. Whatever besets the human family, we, as a church, are called to engage that suffering, and the story is that this is how we will find our lives. This is how we will find our meaning for living, by being in relationship with our brothers, being in service to them.

The story of Jesus goes on so that we find Jesus at the Last Supper. This, of course, is Holy Week. Jesus is living in community with humanity at this point. Jesus has followers and He has been creating a community of believers and, at that Last Supper, they are breaking bread together like we just finished doing, and they are finding in that breaking of bread that they are one community. More important than that is, they are one community that is now very clearly under threat. I want us to think for one second about that phrase “under threat”. The biblical story is that Jesus was under threat by Rome, the Empire, by other Jewish authorities, religious authorities. There were lots of folks who were not pleased with Jesus, so they lived in their community under threat.

One of the consciousness-raising points of our community is to figure out what it is about how we live that we may very well be under threat, that our faith and what we believe and what we stand for are under threat. We must struggle with that. Why is it that (according to Rosina this morning) we who live for peace and love and community should be under threat?

The story goes on to the death of Jesus. The point of that story is that the earthly powers hate him and want him dead and kill him on a Roman cross. Jesus' death is about state power exterminating those who threaten that power. It is a moment of despair for the community that had gathered around Jesus, but it is not the end of the story.

The next story is about resurrection. It is about life victorious over death. It is about eternal hope for humanity, that the powers of darkness in the world, the powers of evil that are real in our world, do not get the last word, so there is a community that all of a sudden, even though Jesus has been crucified, he is now risen, and the community of faith is alive with hope and ready to go out and spread this word about Jesus.

Then, that last story read this morning was "The Church Is Born". We just had Pentecost with new members joining and teens being confirmed and so forth and so on. When that Holy Spirit comes to the church, something new happens. They speak differently. They share differently. They live and organize themselves differently, and in the ways that they live and organize themselves, others are attracted to that community. Others start to notice that there is something going on with that bunch of people. That is the promise for us as a community of faith—that we will be that special community. We will be that community that people start to recognize and say "Man, they are really doing something different over there, and I want to be a part of that community", where they are raising their children with an alternative story, a story of life in the midst of a land of death. They are raising their children in a community of love and support and they are reaching out to their neighbors, not with the building of walls but with the opening of doors and more people are welcome. All people are welcome in this community.

Here is what I hope for in the coming year, and it is something that I think will take more than a year. It is something that we will always be working on, but it is something in this coming year that I hope we will work particularly on. It is not something we will achieve in totality and say "Well, we did that", but it is something that we will continue to strengthen. What I see for us is a move towards intentionality, that we would become a church that is intentional about what it believed, about what it did, about what it does, how it reaches out in the community, how it witnesses in the world. We would be very intentional (I looked it up in the wonderful Webster's Dictionary. What does "intentional" mean? It means "to act with focus and declared intent"—this is who we are, this is who we are going to be, and this is how we are going to do it), and we would grow because we know who we are, we know what we are about, and we know what we believe, and we live out that biblical story and we know how Jesus has changed our lives, and we know what Jesus wants for this world. Jesus wants us to change this world around, starting right here on this corner, to plant seeds and to be part of a spiritual awakening in our lives, in our community together and in our wider world because our land needs a spiritual awakening. We are dead and we need to be a part of bringing this land alive again in its spirit. We can do it. We can be a part of that. We can't do it alone, but we can be a critical part of bringing our city, our neighborhoods, our nation and, indeed, the whole world into being a part of this transformation. It has happened before, and it can happen again.

My hope is, my energy is, and your energy is that we can bring them all together so that next year, and in the future, we can be a catalyst for growth, renewal, hope and strength—all in the name of Jesus Christ. Thank you for the year that we have had together. I cannot wait for the next year to begin. Thanks be to God. Amen.