

**“Transformative Intrusions”
Sermon by Rev. Tom Warren
Peace United Church of Christ
September 27, 2015**

As most of you know, on Thursdays I take the day off. Most of my Thursdays are spent joyfully mowing the lawn. It is immediate gratification, and it makes the family happy, but this past Thursday I had a distraction in my life. I wanted to watch Pope Francis as he addressed our Congress, and I tried to watch Pope Francis, but with his soft voice I couldn't often hear everything he said. With his broken English (apparently he speaks four languages fluently, English the worst), I couldn't quite understand everything he was saying, but besides the volume of his voice and the broken English which he spoke, I was distracted by the tears.

Any of you who may have watched or seen the reruns of his speech to our Congress noticed that right behind him was Speaker John Boehner constantly wiping his eyes and cheeks from tears that were flowing. As the cameras panned our Congress and all of our Congress people in the hall there, and our Supreme Court justices and guests, there were many people weeping as he spoke. I was taken aback by those tears, and I was taken aback by the crowds that followed him around Washington, D.C. and New York City, where he did a Mass for 20,000 people at Madison Square Garden. Later, in Philadelphia, more crowds followed him everywhere, longing to see him and tears flowing everywhere. What was going on with all of those tears? Democrats and Republicans, both, were crying.

We need leaders. We need people in this world who are not tainted, who are not dirtied by this world and at least for the moment (whether you agreed with what he had to say or not) people saw in Pope Francis an untainted leader. In those scripture readings this morning, they were about direct encounters with God. They were about what we, as human beings, need. We need what are called theophanies, which are just direct encounters with The Holy One.

In our Bible there are encounters with God, stories about these breakthroughs where The Holy One encounters individuals, whether it is through a burning bush with Moses or sheer silence with Elijah, or a spoken word to Isaiah, or that greatest of all revelations to God that, to Christians, is the revelation of Jesus Christ.

I believe that those tears and all of that excitement over this Catholic Pope, who clearly touched people of all stripes, was because we are in desperate need of holiness in our lives again. We are in desperate need of purity, of lives of integrity. We are in desperate need of love, and the church, in all its forms, is in desperate need of a message that gets us out of this partisan broken culture that we live in and simply goes back to this gospel of love. That was what Jesus was about. His time in that first century was, in some ways, not very different from ours. It was a broken time. It was a time of great violence, a time of great oppression, poverty, and all that stuff that we struggle with today. What was so offensive about Jesus is what was so offensive about the Pope. He keeps reaching out across the aisle, across the walls that we have built in this world. He keeps getting out of his Fiat and blessing people...children.

He just came to encourage our nation, as he travels around nations throughout the world, that we have to talk. We cannot love without talking to our enemies. We cannot love without reaching out to the broken. We cannot heal one another unless we see in each other another human being, unless we see in each other the image of God.

In the biblical story, direct occurrences, direct encounters with God really have only been occasionally. Most of the story in the Hebrew Bible of the Israelites is about times when God is not

directly present—difficult times for them when any time God was not directly present, they wandered. They followed idols. They did their own thing, and then ended up lost and hurting. What the Israelites did was develop ways to mediate God, ways in which those Israelite people could experience God, perhaps through human institutions, through human leaders, through the Torah, through the priests, through the Temple, through the kings of Israel. There had to be ways for those Israelite people to be in touch with their God even when their God was not right in their faces, especially when their God was absent and it seemed like the world was going crazy.

This, today, is why the church, in all of its forms—Catholic, Protestant, Orthodox, Evangelical, Charismatic, in whatever form—is so important. We need ways in which to encounter God and to be reminded that Jesus came to love us and to show us how to love others. Peace Church is that place for us. Peace Church is that place where we come week in and week out and we sing praise to God, and we see each other, we look at each other, and we touch each other, and we shake each other's hands. We break bread together and, at least for that hour on Sunday morning, we embody the gospel of love. That is what we are called to do—just love.

The difficult part of the gospel is that Jesus just didn't love certain people. He loved everyone. He loved in such a way that it really made his life difficult. He died for that love. He reached out to those people who were unlovable—Samaritans, prostitutes, tax collectors—all those people, that litany of people who were so unlovable that Jesus said "Follow me. I will show you how to love people".

We are reminded today, in our worship that our call is as simple and as difficult as loving one another and especially loving those who we really struggle with. That is the essence of the gospel. We need each other to do that. We need the strength of this community, of our worship services, of our communion, of our prayers, of our groups, to be able to love the way that Jesus has loved us, so we give thanks again to this community of faith. We give thanks for the gospel, for the God of Jesus Christ. We give thanks for Pope Francis. We give thanks for all the leaders in the world who point us to the gospel of love. In the name of Jesus Christ, we give thanks. Amen.