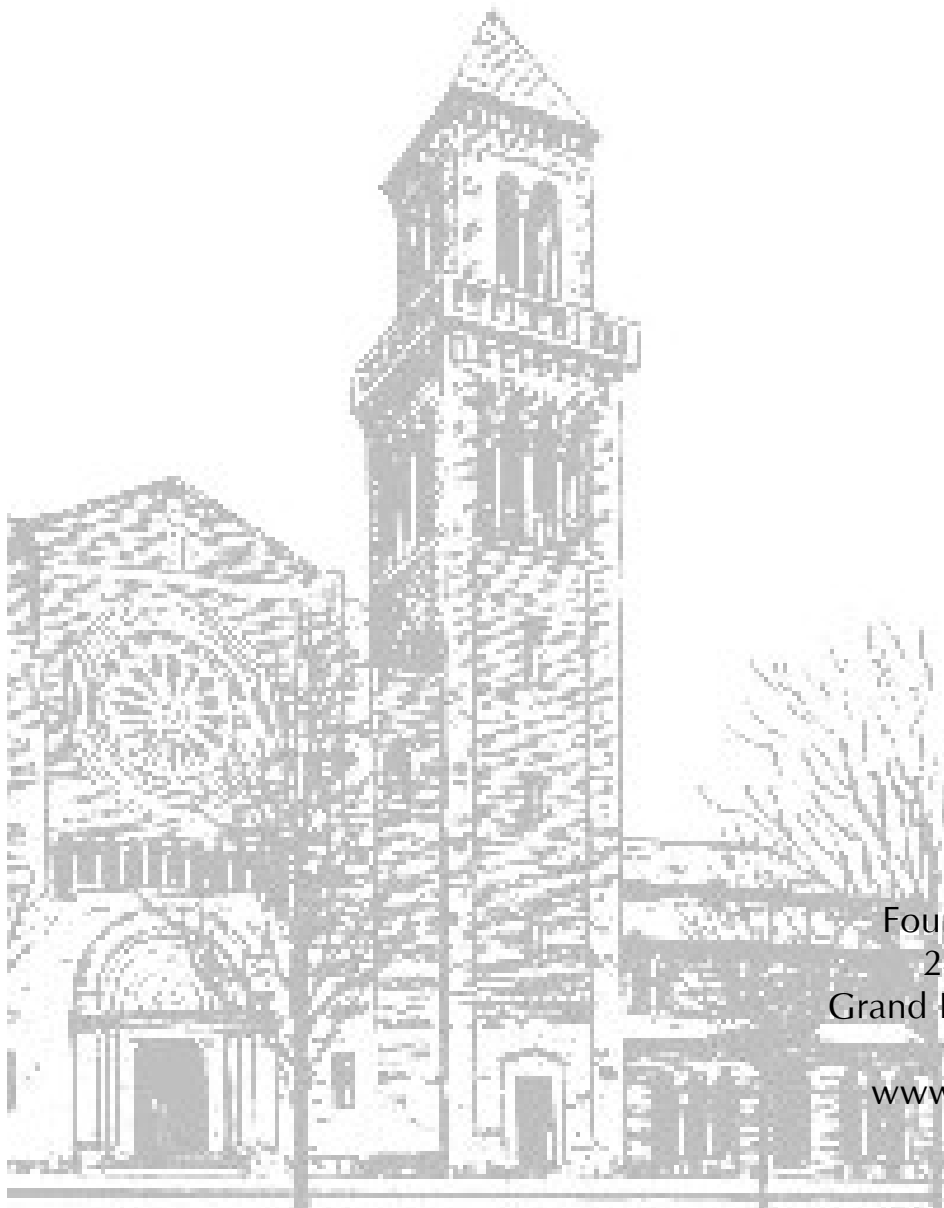


"Can These Bones Live?"

Sunday, November 12, 2006

The Rev. Dr. W. Frederick Wooden



Fountain Street Church
24 Fountain St., NE
Grand Rapids, MI 49503

www.fountainstreet.org

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.

“Can These Bones Live?”

READING – Ezekiel 37

The Valley of Dry Bones

The hand of the LORD came upon me, and he brought me out by the spirit of the LORD and set me down in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. He led me all round them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry. He said to me, ‘Mortal, can these bones live?’ I answered, ‘O Lord GOD, you know.’ Then he said to me, ‘Prophesy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the LORD. Thus says the Lord GOD to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. I will lay sinews on you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live; and you shall know that I am the LORD.’

* * * * *

SERMON

Freedom is about choices. And real freedom is about real choices, namely those that have real consequences. By all measures the November 7th election produced some real choices last week. The twelve year dominance of the Republican Party was turned out and a buoyant Democratic Party was invited to offer a new path. Precisely what that path should be is not known.

Votes by themselves do not reveal their motives or desires. Already the experts who write columns and editorialize have begun to read the tea leaves. From all I can see, despite all these wise analyses, the American people are far from united in why they made this choice. Perhaps the reason there are so many opinions about why is due to a more basic question that no one is addressing – do we have a sense of purpose as a nation? Why does the United States exist?

The problems that propelled this change of government - the several wars under way (namely the symbolic wars on terror and the continuing war on drugs, as well as the actual wars in Iraq and Afghanistan), the dawning reality of global warming and the fallout of global trade, the constant wrestling of politics and money and religion – all bespeak a babble of voices that have competing ideas of what American means. Add to these the din of the market itself, its nearly constant presence telling us to buy this and that, do this and that, so that we cannot help but define our lives by where we live and what we drive and what we wear and eat and how we entertain ourselves. How could we even hope to find a unifying idea about America?

But there is one, and America has forgotten it in the noisy clamor of our modern world of bread and circuses. We are becoming like the valley of dry bones, a place where there the winds make much noise and rattling but no life. And as Ezekiel felt called to preach to the dry bones, that they might live again, I am so moved now; to preach to the dry bones of sectarianism, jingoism and consumerism, with the hope

that a renewed spirit will wrap them in new flesh.

Because what America is about is very simple. Indeed, it is all in one sentence, a sentence we all know, but no one seems to see it for what it is - our national mission statement, to borrow a phrase.

"We the people of the United States, in order to form a more perfect union, establish justice, insure domestic tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general welfare, and secure the blessings of liberty for ourselves and our posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution of the United States."

Making that sentence come true is what the nation is about. And if the resurgent Democratic Party seriously truly wishes to lead, this should be its platform. I say this because if we truly think about it, this sentence really is a guide to the purpose of our nation. Let's take a really good look.

"We the people," the first and foremost clause is also the first and foremost idea. This means the United States is the people, not the states or the national government or any other agent of power. The framers explicitly took this step and it is decisive. I take it to mean all the people, not some of the people. Further, it is only the people and not companies or churches or any other 'bodies' like non-profits or think-tanks or even political parties. Only people, actual human beings, are the United States and they are the ultimate sovereignty and authority for the United States. They who would lead will serve the people, period.

"In order to form a more perfect union," means that the work of the Constitution is to improve the union of the people. What it was in 1789 was not the end but the beginning. It has been amply amended over the years to form a more perfect union. And the words "more perfect" tell us that it is still an on-going project. The nation, the people and the Constitution are always capable of being "more perfect" as we come to know more about ourselves and the world. What's more, it is about the whole, not the parts. Individual freedom is vital, but the purpose is a community, a nation, of individuals held together by a common cause larger than individual liberty.

"Establish justice," means the rule of law, and its inescapable correlate that all citizens individually are subject to the law even as the law itself is subject to the people collectively. This phrase means to mete out equitably and surely, and assure that none are above the law and none are ground down by it. Note that the word is justice, not law. Justice is the outcome. The law, like the previous clause can always be more perfect, in pursuit of justice.

"Insure domestic tranquility," reaches beyond the rigor of law to address the character of life, to provide that the exercise of freedom among people and peoples does not demolish social order, that the liberty of one is not a tyranny over another, that the prosperity of one group is not purchased by the privations of another, creating a volatile society. It creates a sense that community and cooperation are essential so that the atomized world of individual freedom and competition does not unravel the very fabric that sustains those freedoms.

"Provide for the common defense," tells us that defense must be for all of us not

some of us, that we should not enter into war to serve the interests of the few; and that we are to defend, not attack. On its face it challenges anything like empire and invasion, making any external military action something that demands an explanation because it is, *prima facie*, a violation. Equally important, the word defense means it is not limited to military means. We can defend ourselves diplomatically and economically and morally.

"Promote the general welfare," prevents the federal government from favoritism and also mandates that it advance the health of the whole country. It can neglect neither. Therefore, the powers of the state must never enrich some at the expense of others, nor may the government refuse to serve the general well-being of the nation because it may threaten the comforts of the few.

"And secure the blessings of liberty for ourselves and our posterity," is the richest of all the clauses, for it does not limit itself to mere freedom, but requires the government to seek also the blessings of liberty. And not only seek them but secure them, make them dependable, not only for those now alive but those yet to be born. In other words, the task of the Revolution, to secure liberty, now becomes to secure both liberty and the blessings of liberty. And not for ourselves only, but also those yet unborn.

This is what America is about. And the party that claims this as its platform and principles will prevail. It is liberal, if that means seeking ever greater freedom and further perfection. It is also conservative in preserving freedoms already won, protecting them from erosion. Its devotion to human justice and compassion is constitutional, but so is its will to defend the nation from threats and its principles from betrayal. It sees itself as a promise as much as an inheritance, something we are to give to our posterity in better shape than we ourselves received it.

This is the real "Contract with America," the original and still binding contract. My advice to the Democratic Party of 2006 is that now it should haul out this sentence in front of the country right now and say "This is what America is about, what Americans want, and therefore what the Democratic Party is making itself accountable to." If it does, we all succeed. If it does not, we all fail.

It really is not all that complicated - a single sentence. But I assure you it is not easy. Real freedom, real choices, are never easy. The founders knew that and we should remember it. It will take some rare courage, not seen on either side of the aisle for a long time. But if there was ever a moment when nobility stood a chance, this is it.

The country is asking for someone to be worthy of its hope. Breathe on us, say the dry bones. Tell us we can yet live. Assemble our broken bones of self and society, parent and child, neighbor and neighbor. Make us citizens not just clients and customers. Put the flesh of freedom on us, they say, and the sinews of courage. Give us the nerve to live by principles as well as power, the vision to believe in tomorrow as well as today, ears to hear and eyes to see, legs to stand and hands to work. America is yearning to believe it can live up to something. And what would be better than that one sentence?

Can it really be that simple? It was once. Why not now?