

NOT ANOTHER ONE!

A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Arthur M. Suggs
Preached on the Fourth Sunday after Epiphany, January 31, 2016

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

A Much Broader Look at Our Church

I used to do a State of the Church address on this Sunday each year, when I would put the church in the context of whatever year it was. I would look at how we were doing and would examine various facets of the church vis-à-vis our context.

Today, however, rather than pick through the day-to-day or week-to-week events or talk about what happened in 2015, I'd like to look at the church from a much-broader context, a broader perspective.

I've been pastor here for eight years now, and I'm going to *try* — the emphasis is on the word *try* — to tell you what I'm up to, what my agenda is at this church. What I'm trying to do is hard, and I'm not sure how successful I'm going to be, but I'm going to give it my best to tackle something a bit difficult.

First, a Question:

Is There a Broad Purpose for FCC?

Is there a broad purpose, a broad calling for First Congregational Church of Binghamton, New York, in 2016, the early part of the Twenty-First Century, other than survival? Other than institutional maintenance? My answer is yes. And that is what's hard to articulate.

After you've heard my best attempt, what I covet from you is your help. If what I say is something that you're able to buy into, something that resonates within you at the

soul level, then what I covet is your intellectual, emotional, and energetic support for it. That's what I hope for.

Let's Start with a Bit of History: Luther's Ninety-Five Theses in 1517

Now, to tell you about my agenda for this church, I do need to start with just a bit of history. You'll see why in a moment.

The year was 1517 when, on October 31, Professor Dr. Martin Luther nailed his "Ninety-Five Theses on the Power and Efficacy of Indulgences" onto the door of All Saints' Church in Wittenberg, Germany. This act is seen as the signal moment for the Protestant Reformation. That's when the Reformation really caught fire and took off.

The Ninety-Five Theses of the title indicate that Luther had a number of real problems with the church — indulgences, communion, the clergy, the Pope — as a matter of fact, ninety-five problems. Let me hone in on one of them, the selling of indulgences.

There's a notion that the church managed to persuade people that when you die, first of all you're a hard-core sinner. And so when you die, you're going to be judged by God. But God looks over to the Pope, to the bishop, to the priest for sort of a thumbs-up or a thumbs-down signal about the deceased. And the church was able to persuade people that the local churchmen had an inside track on advising God what to do with your soul.

And these higher-ups could be *influenced by money* to the point that at one time in the Middle Ages, the church owned more than fifty percent of all of Europe. *What a business model!* So the more I thought about indulgences, the more evil they seemed, the more poisonous they were, the more ways in which they wrecked lives.

Luther's Predecessors in the Reformation Movement: Wycliffe in 1384, Hus in 1415

And so the reformers railed against this obscene practice. Thanks largely to the Ninety-Five Theses in 1517, the church was eventually forced to rid itself of the practice of collecting cash for indulgences.

However, Luther didn't just think up those Ninety-Five Theses all by himself. They were part of an underground culture at that time. A whole century earlier, a Czechoslovakian priest by the name of John Hus (We actually have a John Hus church in town.) was also railing against the very same things, to the point that it got him burned at the stake in 1415.

To use round numbers, a whole century before Luther, another guy bought it big time for the same reasons. And John Hus didn't think these things up on his own either. He got them from John Wycliffe in the British Isles, who died of a stroke in 1384.

Time goes by, 1384, 1415, 1517. Then after Luther, some rather serious intellectual heavyweights caught the fire and spread the Reformation. So Melanchthon, Bootzer, Zwingli, Calvin, and others took the Reformation and spread it far and wide, to the point that only fifteen years later, in 1530, the Church of England split from the Church of Rome. And then ninety years later, in 1620, the Pilgrims, who are the spiritual ancestors

of the United Church of Christ, landed on Plymouth Rock.

So when was the Reformation? It's hard to answer because it's an ongoing revolution, something that spread and has a history. It has roots and continues to have influence. That's why it's almost impossible to answer the question, "When was the Reformation?" From 1380, Wycliffe, to 1620, the Pilgrims, is 240 years, and the drum beats on.

So, Another Question: Did the People Then Realize Their Part in a Revolution?

Did the people of that time, part of the Reformation — the monks, like Luther; the lay people; the artisans; the farmers; the peasants; the people who attended church on Sunday mornings; the clergy; the nuns; the Christmas and Easter types, who wanted that tie to the church but made it thread-like — did any of them have a sense that they were part of the largest evolutionary leap that the church had ever before made?

I doubt it. I would bet there were a few who had a sense of it, but probably not many. Probably the average person — clergy, monk, nun, lay person — had a sense that yes, there was a controversy going on, and they're battling it out over some issue, but not a sense of how momentous it was in the history of the church. Did they know they were part of that large evolutionary leap? Generally, no.

What About Us? Do We Know We're Part of an Even Bigger Revolution?

Generally, no. And that's why it's hard for me to articulate this prospect, that our Reformation is still going on after the time of Luther's Ninety-Five Theses almost 500 years ago. It is difficult to persuade people that they are part of some huge, momentous change when there are so many empty pews.

Look at the side bank of pews on my right: Not a soul there. Same thing on my left: This church holds between three and four hundred people, and we average 75-80 on Sunday morning. And we've never bothered to clean up the balcony. What's the point?

I used to be pastor of First Presbyterian Church, which is now United Presbyterian. So two of the largest congregations in town, Presbyterian-style, joined together. That sanctuary holds nearly 600, and they also have 75 or 80 on Sunday morning.

I had lunch last week with a colleague friend of mine, brought out of retirement to serve the Centenary Chenango Street Methodist Church. With that name, yes, it is the joining of Centenary, which was downtown, and the Chenango Street Methodist Churches, and presently they are averaging 18 on Sunday morning. And this is not to mention what's happening in Europe, where the situation is much more extreme than here.

So Another Question: Could the Mass Exodus from Church Be a Godsend?

Could it be that the mass exodus beginning in the 1960's is the best thing ever to happen to the church? How could that possibly be? It seems society is saying, "I'm sorry. Not good enough. Not worth my time." And then, over the course of a whole generation, the church is forced to ask the question, "Why?" The church is attempting to answer that question, and even more it is attempting to do better.

The Continual Building of the Reformation During the Last Century

Here are some of the things that are happening now because of what has happened in the American church over the last generation. In 1893, strangely enough, church leaders from around the world held

a Parliament of World Religions. They brought in 9,000 people to Chicago. All sorts of people from all sorts of faith traditions, all across the entire globe, to begin talking to each other in that modern age.

And then nothing happened for a century until 1993, when they held another one. Then in 1999 in Capetown. Then in 2004 in Barcelona. Then in 2009 in Melbourne. Then last October in Salt Lake City. They decided a number of years ago to hold these Parliaments every five years, and then they decided at the Parliament here in the United States to hold them every two years now.

Just like the original Reformation, this dialogue between religions is catching on and building momentum. Let me remind you of a quote from Hans Küng:

"There can be no peace among the nations without peace among the religions. No peace among the religions without dialogue between the religions. No dialogue between the religions without investigation of the foundation of the religions."

What Science And Non-Duality Are Doing Is Indescribably Beautiful

There is another organization that I love. I know it's a bit weird, but it goes by the acronym of SAND, which stands for Science And Non-Duality. It is gathering the mystical sides of each of the faiths — Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity, Jews, Muslims, all of them, along with pagans of all stripes — and integrating the mystical sides of those faiths with physics and biology. What SAND is doing is indescribably beautiful. Some of the finest minds on earth are their speakers when they meet. They used to meet annually; now they meet quarterly.

It Is Catching on, Building Momentum, Just like the Reformation of 500 Years Ago

Here in Binghamton, I'm a proud member of a clergy breakfast group that actually goes back before World War II. In those days some of the clergy wanted to foster ecumenical dialogue, so they created this group, all men mind you, six Catholic priests and six Protestant ministers. I was invited to be a part of that group a number of years ago, but it is petering out. We haven't met for breakfast in three or four years now.

Instead it has been largely replaced by the Children of Abraham. Jews, Muslims, and Christians of all stripes are gathering in a very organized, very regular monthly meeting to promote dialogue among the three Abrahamic faiths in our community, and the members are doing a superb job of it.

But despite the Parliament of World Religions and SAND and our little dialogue group, Children of Abraham, more fundamentally the church is only just beginning to realize that our understandings, our definitions of divinity, of God, of the Spirit, of Christ have been woefully inadequate. The church is only starting to redefine what is divinity, what is God, what is the Spirit, what is Christ-consciousness.

And once again what is emerging out of the dialogue with science and with other faiths is beautiful. The church is doing better. It is rising to the challenge.

One of the things that you learn about in classic theology is that God is both transcendent and imminent. It's always part of Theology 101. So God is the God of the universe, God spans the cosmos. But God is also imminent. God is the God of the heart.

And so you learn about that in Theology 101, except that the church has had *no* problem whatsoever with understanding that God is transcendent and has had a *huge* problem with understanding that God is a being within each and every individual within creation. So God is imminent within us, at hand, as much a part of earth as of heaven.

Nobody has said that for a whole generation. God is in heaven; earth is sinful. We must redeem earth. God is as much in the earth as in heaven. God is every bit as much in flesh and blood and bone and sweat and tears as in spirit. It is a different way of looking at the world. It is a different way of looking at our neighbor.

I Want to Be Part of a Church That Does Better

Church has been a place of some of the most entrenched discrimination that the world has ever seen. The problem with clergy, of course, is that they are human. And they have had a love affair with money, sex, and power. The church has been judged by society and found wanting. People have voted with their feet.

I Want to Be Part of a Church That Does Better

The ancient symbol for the church, going back nearly all the way through two millennia, is a ship, symbolizing the church as a safe place above the restless waves. A shelter when riding out the storm. The logo for the World Council of Churches is a globe with a ship upon it. Yet for too long the church has actually impeded the progress of the world.

I Want to Be Part of a Church That Pulls up Anchor and Unfurls the Sails

Thank you.