

“We’re Not Making This Up”
October 25, 2026

Jeremiah 45:1-5
John 14:8-17

I was standing outside the church last Sunday morning when a member arrived. Smiling, she asked if she could come into this “non-Christian” place.

I’d read the news, so I responded with a bemused but welcoming “Of course!”

The “news” wasn’t just the old slam that liberal Christianity is a “halfway house to atheism” or that UCC stands for “Unitarians Considering Christ.”

The news was the report that Iowa State Auditor and candidate for Governor, Rob Sand, attended worship services at—brace yourselves—Plymouth United Church of Christ in Des Moines. And the Fox News report said it like that was a bad thing

Among the things that Fox found objectionable about Plymouth UCC is that it is “open about its progressive slant,” that the “about” page on the church’s website featured an image of churchgoers at a gay pride parade, that the church does not take the Bible literally and that it “has been an Open and Affirming congregation for more than 30 years.” And that’s not all. Fox added that “an image of the church included in a profile compiled by the United Church of Christ shows it flying a pride flag on its grounds, noting that the church ‘is a progressive powerhouse in the region.’”

Not good things, apparently.

Plymouth has a long history of faithful advocacy for social justice. And a spokeswoman for Sand described the congregation as a place of “traditional services with liturgy and classic hymns,” which Sand prefers. You know that he would find all of that here on this corner as well. In fact, by attending Plymouth on a regular basis, Sand has been rubbing elbows with some former members of our congregation who now worship there. And that’s a *good thing*.

Several other Democratic politicians also worship at Plymouth. Yes, in spite of what many would have you believe, Democrats do go to church.

We might laugh a little at all of this.

My concern, however, is that this is just the most recent attack on liberal Christians in this election cycle. The Rev. Lindsay James, the Democratic candidate in Iowa’s Second Congressional District, is a Presbyterian minister. At the Family Leadership Conference, her Republican opponent said she “*calls* herself a pastor.” The implication, of course, is that a woman couldn’t *really* be a pastor. James’ opponent included her along with the Rev. Sarah Trone Garriott, a Lutheran minister running in Iowa’s Third Congressional District, saying: “I call them PINOS—Pastors in Name Only, because they’re not real pastors, right? They don’t profess the gospel of Jesus Christ.”

As more people rediscover the long and faithful liberal Protestant Christian tradition, some are upset. They lash out in these strange ways. We even heard the President claiming that Texan Senate candidate and Presbyterian seminarian, James Talarico, was “insulting Jesus.”

Certainly, someone might be insulting Jesus.

My better nature tells me not to pursue that matter. Although I might have found a new role model in the Rev. Adam Hamilton, the United Methodist megachurch pastor running for the Senate in Kansas. Someone recently said, he’s a pastor, “But he can be rhetorically brutal, when the situation merits it.”

I will simply say that rather than insulting Jesus, liberal Christians have been listening to him. At our best, we are ready to admit there is much we *don’t know* about him, so we seek to pay attention to when Jesus speaks. And Jesus speaks about welcoming the stranger, about caring for the poor, about feeding the hungry. His words continue to challenge our assumptions and our actions; they continue to show new possibilities when we see that things are not right with ourselves or our world.

As the attacks on liberal Protestants increase, it is important to remember that we are not just making things up as we go along. And we should be clear about this when speaking to others.

Mainline denominations such as the United Church of Christ are descendants of the great Protestant reformers who challenged empires and reordered societies. Our tradition has continually fostered important innovations in meeting social needs. Our tradition has produced powerful voices of prophetic judgment and has frequently given birth to great movements of moral protest and social change. We are the ones who addressed such issues as racism and civil rights, welfare for children and families, the proliferation of nuclear weapons, the protection of the environment, reproductive rights and choice, hunger and homelessness and poverty in America, and the fundamental rights of LGBTQ people.

We stand in a long tradition of those who faithfully listened to Jesus and acted from what they heard.

Let us remember and tell others that as liberal Christians, we approach the Bible in a thoughtful, studied way, recognizing the right of individual conscience, affirming that each one of us is guided by the Spirit of God in our different understandings of scripture. And our understanding is never final. We believe, as John Robinson expressed it to the passengers of the Mayflower before they left for the New World: “God has yet more truth and light to break forth from God’s Word.”

In this congregation, we share a liberal faith in the God made known in Jesus. We respect questions. We know the answers that we have discovered are provisional at best. This is a faith that helps us to live in the presence of God with all the uncertainty and wonder that we experience.

We take seriously, not our own sufferings, but the suffering of God in the world. We pray for the poor, the hungry, the homeless, the victims of disasters. We also find ourselves welcoming the homeless, feeding the hungry, and working for policies and practices that would lessen poverty in Iowa City and around the globe. We believe and we act—that is faith.

As a result, in our individual lives and in our united efforts to follow in the way of Jesus Christ, we are bound to encounter difficult times.

We listened this morning as Baruch, the scribe of the prophet Jeremiah, complained of his situation, saying, “Woe is me, for the LORD has added grief to my trials. I have worn myself out with my labors and have had no respite.” My guess is that you’ve felt something like this at times. Maybe you came here this morning feeling worn out and with no respite.

And how does God respond? By telling Jeremiah: “This is what you shall say to Baruch: These are the words of the Lord: What I have built I demolish; what I have planted, I uproot. So, it will be with the whole earth....I am about to bring disaster on all humankind...but wherever you go I shall let you escape with your life.”

On the surface those aren’t the most comforting words.

But listen to them in the depth of your soul. They speak to us in these days when the news can so often lead to us to despair of the future. In these days, of course, we are aware that it’s not God who is demolishing and uprooting. Others are tearing down democratic norms, trampling on decency, and attacking people of faith.

Out of fear or despair or frustration we might be tempted to give up and withdraw from the world. Nihilism or an otherworldly spirituality might seem appealing or sensible.

The words of the prophet encourage us even when disaster seems ready to befall all creation. In just such a time as this, we realize, as Dietrich Bonhoeffer once put it, “that the world lies under the wrath *and* grace of God.” Our commitments are renewed, our strength is regained, our hope is restored, not because all is well but because when we face the shadows, we discover the light that shines even there.

Our lives are held in God’s care even in the midst of the world’s chaos.

As Protestants living out a continuing reformation, we are not or simply jettisoning our past for something more convenient and less demanding. Nor are we embracing change for the sake of change.

We are following in the way of Jesus Christ that he put before us when he told his disciples: “Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact will do greater works than these.” Throughout his ministry Jesus was clear that the work he did was God’s work. Before his death, he said that those who follow him would become co-workers with him. We who follow in these days are empowered by God’s Spirit to show the character of God—love, peace, and mercy—in what we do.

Indeed, our work is in a sense *greater*, Jesus says, because we announce the whole Gospel story of the Word made flesh, the One who is both crucified *and* resurrected.

From the start, the Christian faith, following the resurrected Christ, has been about discovering the new truth that God is revealing for new times. Yes, we have a tendency to make an idol of the past and the ways things were in an imagined golden age. When we would yield to that temptation, Reformed Protestant faithfulness to the living Christ turns our ears toward the new truth that God is speaking and turns our eyes toward the light that shines from the future. We are constantly invited by God to go further.

Reformation Sunday is not a time for looking backwards and worshipping our history or enshrining the very human men and women who were our ancestors in faith. It is a time to open ourselves to the ways in which the Spirit of God continues to renew and reform the church in our own time. This day is about our present and our future, not our past.

As an election approaches, as attacks on the faith of others increase, as advertisements become increasingly vile, our Protestant faith calls us to continued involvement in the political process, seeking what is good for all—the *common* good—not just what is good for the already-very-well-off.

As we become a more diverse society, and as people are drawn into different special interest groups, the need to care for the public's life and sense of itself is becoming even more important. Our task as Protestants is to help our nation and our world see larger realities and value the long-term health and well-being of the whole creation more than the issues that dominate the latest news cycle.

Our world and our time require a humble faith, one that is at home among other faiths, comfortable in asserting our own beliefs and comfortable in living alongside those with different affirmations. The gift of the United Church of Christ is a form of Christianity uniquely suited to help us negotiate our way in a world where faith matters and in which religions are many. Not everyone appreciates that gift, but we must use it and generously offer it to others.

While it is true that God depends on us and uses us for working in the world, it is God who is at work. Today, Mainline Protestants are experiencing a renewed sense of mission and strength in many places, including, of course, here on this corner, here in this city. Again, we are not just making things up. We can claim a proud history and out of that we can continue to find

new ways of addressing current challenges as we live by faith.

We live by faith—faith in the God who is our refuge and our strength, a very help in times of trouble.

We are Protestants.

We live by faith.