



MYERS PARK BAPTIST CHURCH

Inclusivity | Spirituality | Community | Justice

“A SERMON ABOUT SERMONS”

Sermon delivered by Rev. Dr. Tim Moore, from
Jeremiah 1:4-10 on May 31, 2026, Trinity Sunday.

At the end of worship when a friend of mine preached a sermon that addressed a controversial topic, one of his church members greeted him at the sanctuary door with these words: “I come to church to feel good and happy. That was not a happy sermon.” My friend, who pastors a church somewhat like Myers Park, replied, “I’m not sure the point of worshiping God is so that we can feel good and happy. Perhaps we could talk about that sometime.”

When the two of us talked about his end of worship interaction, my friend said that he felt this gentleman represented not only a significant portion of people in his church, but also at American churches in general. I fear he is right. There was a time when preachers were expected to “step on people’s toes” when delivering a sermon. By that, folks meant that the sermon said something that caught their attention or made them face something they didn’t want to face or challenged their thinking in some way.

Not only was this type of preaching—stepping on people’s toes—tolerated, but in fact it was expected to a certain extent. Today, my friend and I agreed, this is no longer true. Many of our pastor friends feel they must carefully watch what they say from the pulpit because church members might be easily offended.

In 1518 Ulrich Zwingli convinced the city council of Zurich, Switzerland to reform the city’s churches. He was the priest at the Grossmunster, or the Great Church, in the city. It was the year after Martin Luther had started the Protestant Reformation. Zwingli, like Luther, had been deeply reading the New Testament and came to believe that the Christian Church needed significant reforms.

Zwingli radically changed worship. The Lord’s Supper changed from a sacrifice of Jesus’ body to a memorial, a time to remember his life, death, and resurrection. He removed all the statuary in the sanctuary—mother Mary, the disciples, the crucifix—took out the stained-glass windows and he removed the organ. Worship changed from what we still might experience in a Catholic service to basically a 2-hour Bible Study. Zwingli was convinced the Bible was the key to reforming the Christian church and preaching about the Bible was the way to get there.

When he changed worship from a service of music, art, prayer, and communion into a 2-hour sermon on the Bible, however, he changed worship from a total body experience to an exercise of the mind. As you might imagine people were eventually bored by two-hour sermons. Attendance dropped so severely that the city council passed a law that required people to attend worship at least once a quarter.

There's a reason there are Lutherans named after Martin Luther and Calvinists named after John Calvin, but there are no Zwinglists. Zwingli was brilliant but he made more enemies than friends. Zwingli did make a lasting impact; Baptists celebrate communion in the exact way that he first taught 500 years ago. And though none of us would tolerate a 2-hour sermon with nothing much else in worship, Zwingli started the emphasis on preaching that became a Baptist emphasis for worship.

So, I want to ask, now that I've shared these two short stories, what do you want out of a sermon? Why do you attend worship, especially on a beautiful summer day

The passage we read a few minutes ago records Jeremiah's call from God. In this short passage God tells Jeremiah what he is to say. There are three lines to the call. The middle line is a repetition of the first line—this is typical for ancient Hebrew poetry. The poetry lines up like an X. Look at the passage printed in your worship guide—it's the last three phrases in the passage. The left side of the first line and the right side of the last line are tethered to each other and then the right side of the first line and the left side of the last line correspond. The middle line, by being a repetition of the first, serves as a space between the first and the last. They are the blank spaces to the left and right of where the diagonal lines cross in the middle.

So, what's the message of the X?

Jeremiah is to pluck up and to plant; he is to tear down and to build up. Two metaphors: one agricultural, the other architectural—same message.

Now, if you read the complete book of Jeremiah, there's a whole lot of plucking up and tearing down. The planting and the building up are there; it's just towards the end. Jeremiah's ministry was about de-constructing the theology and the beliefs and the status quo of the religious community in Jerusalem—that was the plucking up and the tearing down. AND it was about re-constructing their theology, their beliefs, along new lines for a new day.

This ancient call by God to Jeremiah is also the basic process for adult learning. By the time we humans reach our mid-20s, we have basic assumptions for how life works. From that point on in life, in order to learn new ideas adults have to pluck up the old things in order to plant the new ones. Sometimes the change is barely perceptible to us—a new science discovery might be fascinating but not impact us emotionally. Easy learning.

But sometimes new information or new concepts strike at the heart of our emotions because they impact our faith, or our understanding of our family, or heritage, or history, or identity. The old construct must be torn down—which involves grief, a letting go of a particular image of yourself, or your family, or your faith—in order for a new concept to be built. **This is why new information like the 1619 Project meets such resistance, today.**

Because the new information wrecks the concepts of many white people about this nation's history and possibly about their own family lineage. Grief is painful. People do or say all sorts of regrettable things when a family member is dying that they wouldn't do or say if grief wasn't hurting them.

Jeremiah's call serves as a preaching model. One of the tasks of the preacher is "To pluck up and to plant; to tear down and to build." But because we're Baptist, it's not my job to pluck up and plant for you. **That's for you to do for yourself.** This idea is embedded in Myers Park's tradition of a "free pulpit" and a "free pew." Let me see if I can explain this.

The longest part of a Catholic worship service is the liturgy around communion, because the most important thing in the service is the Eucharist—taking communion. And when you are given the communion wafer you are to swallow it whole, to eat all of it.

In Baptist churches **the sermon** is the longest part of a worship service because Baptists generally think understanding the Bible is the most important part of the service, but **unlike a communion wafer, you are not to swallow it whole.** When you take a sermon, you are supposed to chew on it for a while, maybe for the rest of the day or longer, but certainly for as long as the worship service. It's okay for you to spit some of it out, or the whole thing for that matter, but only after you've chewed on it for a while.

My job as a preacher ends where your job as listener begins.

It's my job to deeply read scripture, work at understanding the times in which we live, pray about this congregation and what God may be speaking to it and prepare a sermon out of all of those intersections. Once the words leave my mouth I give them to God. **I'm not preaching at you; I'm preaching with you.** We are on a journey together to understand God and this life and its meaning. Once the words leave my mouth in a sermon, I give them to God. Between this pulpit and your pew, the Holy Spirit brings those words to you. **And what you hear, may or may not be the words that I say.**

We take a sermon from our experiences and identities as a person—young, old; female, male, non-binary; Asian, Black, white; gay, straight; rich, poor; happy, sad—from all the definitions that shape our experiences. We hear things differently because of our experiences as people. What the preacher says will have different meanings to different people because of who they are as people.

I'm hoping that when you take a sermon—for the next few months here, my sermons—you will NOT be asking whether Tim is right or not, or whether you like or dislike what I am preaching. **The sermon is not about me.** Let me tell you from the start: I'm not infallible. I've been wrong before and will be wrong again. Craig, I may have withheld that information from you and the HR Committee; I just hope this won't constitute as a breach of contract. **The point is: What I believe and think is irrelevant; you don't need to believe like me. I want you to wrestle with these ideas and then believe like you.**

I'm hoping that when you take a sermon, you are wondering: what is God saying to me in these words? If I find myself struggling with these words, even agitated by these words, what does this struggle mean to my faith? Where is God as I take this sermon?

There was a problem when Zwingli changed worship in Zurich from a traditional medieval Catholic service into a 2-hour Bible study, and being boring wasn't it. The problem was two-fold: he believed that faith is cerebral—in our heads—that we can just think our way to God; secondly, he mistakenly believed **HE** could provide the answers. But Zwingli was right about one really important thing: Ideas change the world, and they change us.

Preaching the sermon and taking the sermon are equally important. **The preacher may have more theological degrees or studied the Bible more than you, but the preacher hasn't experienced God any more than you.** Chew on the sermon but don't swallow it until you've tasted what God is revealing to you.

Why do you attend worship? What do you want out of a sermon?

Surely, it's more than to feel good and happy as the gentleman said to my friend as he left the sanctuary. Maybe it's to be plucked up and replanted, to rethink an old idea so that God can breathe something new into us. Don't we hope to encounter the living God here? To pluck up what has grown stale in us and to plant a new beginning. May it be so. AMEN.