**WEST CENTER CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH, UCC October 29, 2017**

***The Greatest***

**The Farewell Sermon of Pastor John M. Barrett**

**WELCOME**

Good morning and welcome to worship at West Center Congregational Church, an Open and Affirming Congregation of the United Church of Christ. I’m John Barrett, the soon-to-be-retired, but seldom retiring Pastor of West Center Church. I appreciate each and all of you making the effort to be here this morning in spite of dire weather forecasts of rain and wind.

*“Though the weather outside is frightful, the Choir is so delightful, and since we’ve no place to go, let it blow, let it blow, let it blow.”*

**THE WITNESS OF ST PAUL** Romans 3:21-26

Our Processional Hymn this morning, “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God” by Martin Luther, is being sung in Protestant churches around the world in celebration of the 500th Anniversary of the Protestant Reformation. The Reformation arguably began on October 31, 1517, when Martin Luther, a German monk, nailed 95 Theses or arguments to the door of the church in Wittenberg, Germany, so that everyone would see them. Most of Martin Luther’s 95 arguments were against the selling of indulgences by the papacy in Rome. Purchasing indulgences was said to insure the departed’s trip to heaven. Even people who had very little were told they needed to buy indulgences for the souls of their relatives and their own souls.

Martin Luther in his study of the New Testament, particularly his study of St Paul’s Letter to the Romans, realized that God’s love for sinful people is a freely given gift through faith in Jesus Christ. Luther believed that indulgences were a fraud, designed to increase the wealth and splendor of the papacy, which, as a matter of fact, was building St. Peter’s Basilica in Rome at the time.

This morning our reading from St. Paul is Romans 3:21-26. These are among the verses that inspired Martin Luther to post his 95 Theses, setting in motion the Protestant or Protest-ant Reformation, 500 years ago on October 31, 1517.

**THE NOW TESTAMENT**

I first read “The Road Not Taken” by Robert Frost in my freshman English class at Denison University. The poem continues to resonate with me over the years, as roads in my life diverge. *(See page 5.)*

**THE GOSPEL WITNESS** Matthew 22:34-46

In today’s Gospel, the Pharisees, who scrupulously obey all religious laws, ask Jesus a question.

**SERMON**

I think it is most appropriate that the Gospel Witness for my final sermon before retiring includes the greatest commandment: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.” Jesus also calls this the first commandment. And I like that Jesus makes a distinction between great and first. The word “great” has connotations of power, size and wealth, implying that others are inferior.

But the word “first,” as in the first commandment, does not have connotations of power, size and wealth, although it does imply that others are of lesser rank.

When Jesus uses the word “great,” he is speaking of prominence, of importance, of value. He is not speaking of power and might.

The Greatest Commandment is to love our Great God, with heart, soul, mind and strength, and the second is like it, to love our neighbors as we love ourselves. Only God and God’s commandments are great. People who talk about their own greatness, like the “Great Oz” in The Wizard of Oz are deluding themselves, as well as attempting to delude others.

Greatness is not the personal property of the powerful, the weighty and the wealthy. Greatness comes in the love of God and love neighbor that we demonstrate. Both Martin Luther and Martin Luther King, Jr. were great men, not in the conventional sense, but because Martin Luther and Martin Luther King, Jr. prove their desire to serve God and humanity, going so far as to put their lives on the line for their faith.

I would like to “Make America great again,” not through power, wealth, and isolation, but through application of our national values, including our national empathy and our national generosity.

America as a great nation would be “one nation, under God with liberty and justice for all,” and Lady Liberty lifting her lamp beside the golden door, welcoming the tired, the poor, the wretched and homeless to this great, open-armed and open-hearted country of ours.

Amen.

Members and friends of West Center Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, here we are: this is my last Sunday and that was my last sermon as your pastor. The years have sped by all too quickly. As I told the Congregation last January when I announced my retirement, I was afraid that if I did not set a date to retire, I would find myself preaching here into my 80’s. And I want to have time for some other things and some other adventures with Roberto while I still have my health, my mobility, and my wits about me.

And my retirement is good for West Center Church too. It is good for the church to go through the adventure of the pastoral search process --- discussing and realizing who you are as a church, where you want to go, and how you can get there.

Change is loss, but change is also opportunity --- opportunity for life and love and laughter in ways yet undreamt of.

When I walked through the front doors of West Center Church in January 2001, I did not expect to be walking out sixteen years later! I had come that winter Sunday to meet Pastor Allan Ross and to interview for a short-term, part-time position developing the West Center Church Christian Education program for both children and adults, and doing some writing for the Church.

Like Jesus, I was given a forty-day trial, a forty-day trial to see to see if West Center and I were a good match for what was planned to be a six-month position. And the way things turned out, it has been a good match. Later in 2001 I became Associate Pastor with Senior Pastor Allan Ross. The short-term, part-time position had become both full-time and long-term.

When Pastor Allan Ross retired in 2004, I became Acting Pastor while the church underwent a year-long search for a Settled Pastor. At the conclusion of the search process I was called to be the Senior Minister of West Center Church. I was installed on January 30, 2005.

The position of Associate Pastor that I had had was not filled, but over the years we have had seminary students who were studying for the ministry, serving as Associates in Ministry: Celia Milton, Christina-Jean Alexis and Chaplain Al Castillo, during my years here. We thank them for their dedicated service.

If you would like to see a list of the pastors of West Center Church and their years of service, I invite you to read the West Center Church Pastoral Chronology. I prepared this list for our church’s ninetieth anniversary last June, and I thought it would be appropriate to share it again today, as one era is ending and another beginning.

*(See page 6.)*

I hope it goes without saying that I have greatly enjoyed my sixteen years here at West Center Church. Looking back, in some ways I am like The Man Who Came to Dinner, in the 1939 Broadway play by George Kauffman and Moss Hart of the same name. The Man Who Came to Dinner slips on ice in front of his host’s house and becomes a houseguest for over a month. Then, when he is finally departing, the man slips on the ice yet again and is brought back inside. Well, you get the idea.

Knowing about The Man Who Came to Dinner encouraged me to retire at the end of October, rather than waiting until the end of December, when the snow flies. I hadn’t considered Nor-Easters in the fall, but I’ll be careful walking this afternoon, and you be careful too, please.

But I do want to thank you, the members and friends of West Center Church. I thank

you for the warm reception and affirmation that you have given me over the years.

I thank you for listening to my sermons week after week, and for remarking on them whenever I said something remarkable. After doing the math, I think I have preached about 630 sermons at West Center Church since 2004, and for the most part, writing the sermons and preaching them has been more joy than chore.

I also want to thank everyone who has come to church, everyone who has been or is a Church Officer, everyone who has volunteered for any of the church boards and committees. I thank everyone who has chaired or is chairing a church board or committee, anyone who has had a question, a comment, a suggestion or a difference of opinion.

I thank you for your participation in Bible studies, film screenings, and the various discussions we’ve had over the years. Your interest and involvement have been most gratifying. I thank you for singing in the Choir, and I thank Arnold for his artistry and colleagueship in planning worship. I thank Adam Cococcia for his management of our extensive facility, and I thank all the ministers of West Center Church who have preceded me, particularly Allan Ross.

And finally, I want to thank you, West Center Church members and friends, for sharing your lives with me, sharing your lives with me in the context of our Christian faith: sharing births, baptisms, confirmations, marriages, sicknesses, disabilities, deaths, funerals and memorial services.

Your life sharing has been a privilege for me, a highlight of my ministry among you that I will always cherish. For as the old song goes, “I am the Church. You are the Church. Yes, we’re the Church together. All of God’s people, all around the world, yes, we’re the Church together.”

Amen.

**HYMN OF RESPONSE**  *Many Gifts, One Spirit*

Our Hymn of Response was written by one of my ministers, the late, great Rev. Al Carmines, who was Associate Minister at Judson Memorial Church and later Minister of Rauschenbusch United Church of Christ, both in Manhattan.

**WEST CENTER CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH, UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST**

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**The Road Not Taken** by [Robert Frost](https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/robert-frost)

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,

And sorry I could not travel both

And be one traveler, long I stood

And looked down one as far as I could

To where it bent in the undergrowth;

Then took the other, as just as fair,

And having perhaps the better claim,

Because it was grassy and wanted wear;

Though as for that the passing there

Had worn them really about the same,

And both that morning equally lay

In leaves no step had trodden black.

Oh, I kept the first for another day!

Yet knowing how way leads on to way,

I doubted if I should ever come back.

I shall be telling this with a sigh

Somewhere ages and ages hence:

Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—

I took the one less traveled by,

And that has made all the difference.

**The Senior, Associate and Interim Pastors of West Center Church**

**1927-2017**

The Rev. Deane Edwards (1922-26) RCB\*

Dr. Louis N. Sweet (1922-26) RCB\*

The Rev. William Thomas Heath (Founding WCC Minister, 1927-33)

The Rev. Oliver C. Weist (1933-49)

The Rev. William Alexander Leath (1950-55)

The Rev. Kenneth Stokes (Associate Pastor)

The Rev. Lawrence Lowell Gruman (Associate Pastor, 1954-56)

The Rev. J. Everett Bodge (1956-67)

The Rev. Charles W. Lovitt (Associate Pastor, 1956-57)

The Rev. Paul E. Gibbons (Associate Pastor, 1957-58)

The Rev. Roger F. Burlingame (Associate Pastor, 1962-66)

The Rev. Charles Koomrian (Interim)

The Rev. Roy Burchell (1968-84)

The Rev. Roger Wm. Johnson (Interim)

The Rev. Elice Higginbotham (Interim)

The Rev. Robert White (1987-93)

The Rev. Russell Clausen (Interim, 1994-95)

The Rev. R. Allan Ross (1995-2003)

The Rev. Bob Gross (Associate Pastor)

The Rev. John M. Barrett (Associate Pastor, 2001- 2003)

The Rev. John M. Barrett (Acting Pastor, 2004)

Celia Milton (Union Seminary Intern, 2002-03)

The Rev. Christina-Jean Alexis (Associate in Ministry, 2008-10)

Chaplain Al Castillo (Associate in Ministry, 2011-13)

The Rev. John M. Barrett (2005-2017)

*\* The Rev. Edwards and Sweet were ministers of the Reformed Church of Bronxville.*

*During the earliest years they preached on alternate Sundays to the Reformed Church of Bronxville families that became West Center Church in 1927.*

*The original name of our church was the West Center Branch of the Reformed Church.*