

# Mystic Congregational Church, UCC

## Mystic, Connecticut

Sermon from March 8, 2009

Rev. Ann M. Aaberg  
“Safe or Sorry?”

Scriptures:  
Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16  
Mark 8:31-38



Large numbers are fascinating. I especially like it when large numbers are stated in terms of how many things placed end-to-end will circle the globe or reach the moon and back. Like the number of hot dogs Americans consume in a year. We've been hearing a lot of large numbers lately. Millions of jobs lost. Billions of dollars' worth of economic stimulus programs. Billions of dollars' worth of bail-outs. A trillion-dollar deficit. A trillion-dollar projected price tag for health care. Millions and billions and trillions. Big numbers, huge efforts, mammoth proportions.

Just this past Friday we held this year's local ecumenical *World Day of Prayer* service here in our sanctuary and, again, we entertained the colossal nature of what we were doing. We joined with 170 countries around the globe to pray for the needs of this world. A worldwide prayer service started by women missionaries nearly 75 years ago, this worship phenomenon follows the path of the sun around the world on the first Friday of March every year. Thousands upon thousands of voices in thousands of languages and dialects using the same order of service, designed each year by women in a different country. Huge and humbling at the same time.

Several of you met and fed the *Peace Walkers* last week who passed through Mystic on their 55-day walk from Massachusetts to Washington, D.C. We were all struck by their desire to leave as little of a footprint here as possible, as they inquired about whether or not we composted our garbage, and as they carefully pulled out their own bowls and cups for dinner. They had done the calculation before embarking on their walk that, if the 18 of them had used paper products for 3 meals per day for 55 days, they would have added at least 3,000 paper plates to the trash. Another sizeable number.

Rev. Barbara Marston, the interim pastor at the Union Baptist church up the street, provided our reflection Friday at our *World Day of Prayer* service and she also spoke of large numbers—how many voices would it take to make world peace happen? And she told a story of a bird sitting on a branch and counting each of the nearly weightless snowflakes as they landed on his branch until the next-to-nothing weight of the 3,743,127<sup>th</sup> snowflake broke the branch. That one snowflake making all the difference.

So as I began to listen to our passage this week for what God might be wanting us to

hear, I zoned in on Jesus' words to the crowd and his disciples: "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me."

And I thought of big things, big risks, brave Christ-like deeds of historical proportion. I pondered the story of the *Amistad* which we celebrate today: not so much of the bravery of the people aboard who wrestled their rightful destiny back into their own hands, but those abolitionists on shore, many of them our Congregational forebears, who dared to support them. I thought of murdered nuns and priests in Central America in past decades. I thought of people lying down in front of tanks. People in all corners throughout history taking up their crosses, going against the pervading culture, risking injury and death, to live out Christ's call to love our enemies, to turn the other cheek, to put down our swords.

And I thought especially of the early Christians who, for hundreds of years and beyond, gathered in secret, lest they be hauled off by the authorities, and the martyrs who were willing to go to their deaths in defense of Christ and the gospel. And I wrestled with how today in our church here in Mystic we might be called to take up our crosses: to take up our crosses when we don't have to gather in secret, when we need not fear persecution and death when we assemble on Sundays. I was thinking about big things—world peace and global warming and human rights.

And then I remembered our deacon Walt Keach last Sunday after church. I happened to look over by the piano and he was down on one knee supporting this large, heavy cross, placing it, with some difficulty I might add, into its stand so that we might be reminded of Christ and our call during this Lent. He and Alan Greener had carried it down these back stairs for us. And I remembered our sexton who shoveled snow last week despite his painful back. And our secretary who came in exhausted after her time away to make sure our newsletter got out on time. And the women who take dirty tablecloths home to wash them after coffee hour. And the people who come in early to make sure the lights are on and the heat's turned up. And the ones who volunteered to make birthday cakes last month. And the nearly 100 people who have said "yes" to serving on committees here next year. And everybody who automatically starts putting chairs and tables away after an event in the parish hall. And the collection counters and the coffee makers and the candy sellers and the card senders and the teachers and the officers and the parish visitors. And many, many more. All denying themselves, all bending down to pick up and shoulder their crosses to carry them into the future of our church, for the love of Christ.

And today in the most secular culture in America's history, when church membership and attendance figures are on a downward slide in mainline Protestant churches all over the country, when church finds itself in competition with shopping and sleeping, five souls have made up their minds to be decidedly countercultural and join our church today, vowing to follow Christ. Positioning themselves squarely underneath the cross to lose their lives in order to save them.

Five people. Not thousands. One hundred on our committees, not millions. Sixty children in our Sunday School, not billions. Nobody risking arrest or torture or death for their faith, but declaring in no uncertain terms to our wider culture and its very strong pull that they are not ashamed of Jesus and his words. That they are willing to lose their lives out there which set our

minds on human things in order to save our lives in here which are focused on divine things.

Friends, most of us have not been tested in the way that Jesus was, in the way our early Christian forebears were. We live relatively safe lives. But in taking up the little crosses we bear to further the way of Jesus, we can prepare ourselves to shoulder the big ones. Our cleaning up the parish hall can grow beyond our walls to cleaning up the environment. Our seeking justice for the people aboard the *Amistad* 150 years ago tells us we can continue to take that risk for the millions of others in our world who live without dignity, without human rights. And our speaking the truth in love to each other as we negotiate what it means to be God's church together can certainly expand to transforming our world into a peaceful one.

Let us be strengthened and empowered by witnessing our small numbers – our handfuls and dozens and few – knowing that it only takes one snowflake to break a branch, one voice to finally tip the world into harmony. One life and One Savior, One God to follow to show us how. Amen.

