

Blessings, Everyone!

August 30, 2020

Keeping in Touch With Our Church Family

Celebrations and Concerns:

We hold in prayer:

Carole Jolie – grieving the loss of Don
Marlene Joe – grieving the loss of Gil
Martha Hubley – grieving the loss of Bud
Cheryl Holmes – grieving the loss of her mother
Rae Kay's children – grieving the loss of their mother
Our church – grieving the loss of all of them

We hold in prayer:

Bob L'Heureux – painful arthritis all summer
Mattie Cummings – working on the COVID-19 front lines and will be moving to Maine sometime soon (Mattie—Do we get to vote on this??)
Dianne Simmons – working on the COVID-19 front lines
Betty Tebbetts – who has recovered from COVID-19 and is doing fairly well

Thank you to:

Jim Holmes – for faithfully ringing the church bell every Sunday morning and for sending us pictures of the church so we remember what it looks like
Bob Farmer, Bill Guenon, & Beth Hook for another successful bottle/can drive
Those (like Evelyn Till) who faithfully support our church even though they live thousands of miles away
All those who have been faithful in the yearly pledges to the General Fund, the operating expenses of our church
All the new members of our church family who are supporting us financially in ways that are helping us survive this difficult time.

Missing our Sunday morning Music Makers: Michael Larson, Darlene Sanderson, Beth Hook, Jim and Cheryl Holmes. You contribute so much to our worship!

Happy to see Beverly Lees returned from Florida

We recently received a note from World Vision thanking us for our faithful support of World Vision's ministry to children and their families throughout the world.

Last week I said, "Please let me know if there are any newsworthy items that I can include in upcoming missives. If you don't, I may be forced to give you updates on how the Red Sox are doing this year—especially in comparison to the Yankees." Thank you so much for responding (Karin Farmer)! Even though you responded in excess of my expectations, I have decided to share the following, simply because it makes an important point.

I know a lot of you are discouraged by the way the Red Sox have stumbled out of the gate at the beginning of this strange, shortened season, how their ragamuffin pitching staff has not lived up to "expectations," and how they remain mired in last place in the American League East. Some of you are still not convinced that the trading of Mookie Betts, who is currently hitting .300 with 11 home runs for the first-place Dodgers was "for the good of the team," as we were told. The proof, of course, is in the numbers. After the first 25 games, the Sox had 7 wins and 18 losses. You might think that this is the worst start in Red Sox history, but if you did, you would be wrong.

It may or may not be of any consolation to you, but I remember how the 1932 Sox began that season with a dismal 4 wins and 21 losses. At the end of the season, their record was 43-111, which left them 64 games behind the New York Yankees. Even I felt sorry for them at the time. To be fair, the Yankees had a pretty good team that year. Their roster included Babe Ruth (RF), Lou Gehrig (1B), Tony Lazzeri (2B), Frankie Crosetti (SS), Bill Dickey (C), with Lefty Gomez, Herb Pennock, and Red Ruffing on the mound. I think they are all Hall of Famers.

The moral of this story is, "No matter how bad things are right now, they could be worse." Please let me know if you find this comforting.

The Pastor's Reflections

"So, let us not grow weary in doing what is right, for we will reap at harvest-time, if we do not give up. So then, whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all, and especially for those of the family of faith." (Galatians 6:9-10)

Last week, after I finished my reflection, I found myself drawn back to one of the scripture passages that I had chosen to illustrate the point I was making about the importance of perseverance. It is the above passage from the apostle Paul's letter to a group of newly founded congregations or churches in Galatia. Galatia was a territory located in north central Asia Minor dominated by the Gauls, a Celtic tribe famed for warcraft and cunning from the third to the first century BCE, after which it became a Roman province.

Paul's letter to the Galatians is regarded as one of the most important historical and theological documents from early Christianity. Theologically, the letter is the first complete statement and self-definition of Gentile Christian theology, indicating that the Christian faith had already begun to separate itself from Judaism. Paul identifies the reason for his having written this letter as his attempt to prevent these churches from shifting their allegiance away from him and aligning themselves with competing Jewish-Christian missionaries. Paul assures his readers that the gospel they received from him, which is based solely on justification through faith in Christ, is fully sufficient for their salvation, their eternal inheritance in the Kingdom of God. They don't need to become Jews first in order to become Christians. I think this was an important message in the history and evolution of the early church.

Getting back to the passage: first, let me confess that I am well aware that some of you, particularly those of you who are clergy, and particularly my son, Corey, who is the pastor of a UCC church in Groton, are not thrilled with the way I use scripture. I shamelessly employ the discredited approach that is called "proof-texting." In proof-texting, the preacher chooses a theme for the sermon or reflection and then combs through scripture to find passages that support what he/she is going to say. And eventually we find them! The problem with this way of preaching is that, with a fair degree of persistence, one can find a scripture passage that supports practically every point of view, no matter how immoral, scientifically unsound, psychologically unhealthy, and un-Christian the point of view may be.

Two recent examples of the use (or abuse) of proof-texting come to mind. The first is from a televised interview last year with Robert Jeffress, the pastor of a large evangelical church in the southwestern part of our country and one of President Trump's evangelical advisors who preached the morning of his inauguration. Jeffress was outspoken in his support of President Trump's threat to "wipe North Korea from the face of the map" if they refused to abandon their nuclear ambitions, promising that they will be "met with fire and fury like the world has never seen," and that he will "take out" Kim Jong Un. Jeffress maintained that God has given Trump authority to do this in Romans 13, which he said gives the government authority to assassinate evildoers. When the interviewer asked him how he could reconcile this stance with the

teachings of Jesus, particularly as articulated in the Beatitudes, Jeffress said that he didn't care what Jesus said, and he certainly didn't want a president that embodied the Sermon on the Mount. Well, he certainly got what he asked for! However, I found that a curious statement from an avowed Christian pastor.

The second example of the use (or abuse) of proof-texting relates to something that is currently happening in Poland. According to the New York Times, the Polish government, emboldened by a recent narrow election victory and undeterred by criticism from European leaders, is considering withdrawing from a treaty aimed at curbing domestic violence and protecting women's rights. The treaty, known as the Istanbul Convention, has recently been caught up in a maelstrom of disinformation and populist rhetoric, cast as a threat to national sovereignty and twisted by conspiracy theorists and smear campaigns. What struck me is the stance that some Christians in Poland have taken in their effort to undermine this treaty. They maintain that the treaty, which they erroneously believe also supports LGBTQ rights (which, obviously, would be a good thing), *stands in violation of their God-given rights as Christians*, and thus needs to be repealed. So, apparently, the freedom to beat one's wife with impunity is a God-given right! I could probably find the scripture passage(s) that support such a bizarre understanding of Christian morality if I had the time and the inclination. We already know some of the (actually very few) passages of scripture that demonize LGBTQ people and justify depriving them of their human and constitutional rights. Once again, I am puzzled by how a declared Christian could square such a stance with the teachings of Jesus.

The other, the more acceptable way of preaching, is to ground one's sermon on the texts that are listed for a given Sunday in the Common Lectionary. This approach has the laudable effect of forcing us preachers to struggle with passages of scripture that we find difficult to understand, that may not support our personal biases in approaching the complexities of what it means to be a Christian in today's world. Personally, I find it difficult to preach from the lectionary rather than from what is alive and vital for my parishioners, my counselees, our country/world, and me. I align myself with that great old-time preacher Harry Emerson Fosdick, who once said, "Two cheers for the lectionary."

But that's not the point. What was my point? Oh yes, the scripture passage that reappears in this week's reflection. Paul tells his parishioners, who may have already been experiencing persecution or were tempted to stray from the Gospel as he had preached it to them,

So, let us not grow weary in doing what is right, for we will reap at harvest-time, if we do not give up. So then, whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all, and especially for those of the family of faith.

Paul is encouraging his parishioners to persevere. He is telling them not to be discouraged by what is happening to them and to the world in which they live as Roman subjects. He tells them not to be drawn off center, not to grow weary in their efforts to do what is right, not to abandon their efforts to live a Christian life. He promises them that what they are trying to do as little churches and as individual Christians will bear fruit, that they will "reap at harvest-time," if they do not give up. This may refer to the predicted Second Coming, the Day of Judgement, the apocalyptic event that was believed would usher in the end of time--an event that, obviously, never happened.

I confess I am troubled by the last line of this passage, the one that says that we should work "for the good of all," but "*especially for those of the family of faith.*" Really? Is Paul saying that we should try extra hard to be kind, to be helpful to Christians? To those who belong to our particular church or our denomination? I know there were particular conditions that confronted these early emerging churches, but I find this kind of tribal thinking contrary to the teachings of Jesus (at least in the latter stages of his ministry, following his interaction with the

Syrophoenician woman who sought healing for her daughter). That sounds a lot like what some people say about the church's mission outreach—that "charity begins at home," that we should reach out to those who are "of our own kind" (whatever that means). If we, as a church, did this, we would not be supporting Tenzin Norzin, a little Tibetan refugee girl whose family is living in Dharmasala, the home of the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan Buddhist refugee community in northwestern India, helping her to be brought up within the uniqueness of her own Tibetan culture and within her own faith--Tibetan Buddhism. I think that Jesus would approve of this particular mission outreach (and all the other missions we support).

As I mentioned last week, the part of this passage of scripture from Paul's letter to the Galatians that I like is the part where he tells us to persevere. As I mentioned, there are times during this pandemic ordeal when we need to just keep putting one foot in front of the other. But Paul goes a step further than I went last week. He tells us that this matter of perseverance is grounded not in our own self-interest, but in the "good of all." He tells us that it is not a matter of self-survival, but a matter of "doing what is right." In this passage, Paul is trying to pry us away from a narrow self-focus and self-interest. In relation to the extended pandemic period that we are experiencing, he is reminding us that we are all in this together.

This expanded, more enlightened focus is an important factor in our ability to persevere, to bounce back when life knocks us down, to rise above the difficulties of the present situation. We need to have a vision. We need to be sustained by this vision. We need to think not only of ourselves, but also (Jesus would say "primarily") of our brothers and sisters in our state, in our country, and around the world. For example, should the United States, the United Kingdom, and the European Union utilize all the power we have to fight our way to the front of the line when a vaccine becomes available (as the three of us already have)? Or should we consider prioritizing distribution to those parts of the world like Africa, South America, and particularly India that are in dire straits, to people who need it far more than we? In the upcoming election, is our focus on what will benefit us, or what will contribute to the greater good for all? Is it really all about our country, our economy, or do we see ourselves as an integral and important part of the world in such a way that we care about the economies, the standard of living, the health care system of developing countries as well?

As we make our way through these difficult times, we need a vision to guide our steps, a vision that shows us where we are heading. This has to be about more than personal survival. It has to be about more than increasing our own pleasure and decreasing our own pain. The existential psychiatrist Victor Frankl, when he was first incarcerated in Auschwitz, believed that the physically strong and medically healthy would have the best chance of surviving. This is not what happened. As time went on, Frankl realized that the inmates who survived were the ones that had a meaning in life. In his book, *Man's Search for Meaning* (originally published as *From Death Camp to Existentialism*), Frankl documents how the inmates who survived were the ones that looked after their comrades, who would share their last crust of bread with someone who needed it. They were the ones that never gave up hope—hope that they would someday be released, that they would be reunited with their loved ones. It was their vision that sustained them in a situation that is far, far worse than anything we are going through with this pandemic.

At a time like this, I take comfort in our church's mission outreach. Whether the economy is buzzing along or not, whether the stock market is up or not, we reach out to those in special need—because this is what it means to be the church. For those of you who are just beginning to get to know us, this is a list of our mission recipients:

<u>January</u>	The Tibet Fund (<i>Tenzin Norzin sponsorship</i>)
<u>February</u>	The Pastoral Counseling Centers of Massachusetts
<u>March</u>	Abby's House
<u>April</u>	Worcester County Food Bank

<u>May</u>	Church World Service
<u>June</u>	Heifer International
<u>July</u>	His Royal Ministry – Haiti
<u>August</u>	Rape Crisis Center of Central Mass (<i>now called Pathways for Change</i>)
<u>September</u>	Stop Girl Trafficking Project, American Himalayan Foundation
<u>October</u>	Straight Ahead Ministries
<u>November</u>	World Vision
<u>December</u>	Salvation Army

For those of you who are just getting to know us, feel free to join in our support of these very worthwhile charities.

I don't know if you have noticed, but sometimes life doesn't turn out the way we expected. Sometimes it doesn't go as planned. There are times when we have to let go of our attachment to the way we wanted things to be in order to embrace (or struggle with) the reality of things as they are. There will come a time when we will be able to get back to a more normal life, though it probably will never be exactly as it was or exactly as we want it to be. But, in the words of the civil rights anthem of the 1960's, if "we keep our eye on the prize," if we keep our eye on more than our narrow self-interest, we will do more than survive; we will transform our society.

I would like to close this reflection by sharing a Zen story, a true story that I find both inspiring and humbling. It is called "The Three Sutras," and it is a story about perseverance in the service of a vision, a higher calling. A sutra, by the way, is a written copy of what is believed to be the actual words that Shakyamuni Buddha spoke—his sermons and his teachings. Here is the story as related by Paul Reps in his book *Zen Flesh, Zen Bones*.

Tetsugen, a devotee of Zen in Japan, decided to publish the sutras, which at that time were available only in Chinese. The books were to be printed with wood blocks in an edition of seven thousand copies, a tremendous undertaking.

Tetsugen began by traveling and collecting donations for this purpose. A few sympathizers would give him a hundred pieces of gold, but most of the time he received only small coins. He thanked each donor with equal gratitude. After ten years, Tetsugen had enough money to begin his task.

It happened that at that time the Uji River overflowed. Famine followed. Tetsugen took the funds he had collected for the books and spent them to save others from starvation. Then he began again his work of collecting.

Several years afterwards, an epidemic spread over the country. Tetsugen again gave away what he had collected to help his people.

For a third time he started his work, and after twenty years his wish was fulfilled. The printing blocks which produced the first edition of sutras can be seen today in the Obaku monastery in Kyoto.

The Japanese tell their children that Tetsugen made three sets of sutras, and that the first two invisible sets surpass even the last.

Be well. Stay safe. Be patient. Be disciplined. Persevere. Don't give up. Think of others. Keep the faith. Focus on the broader, the bigger vision. See through the illusion, the

delusion of the self-cherishing mind, the thief that takes away our sense of inner peace and that brings suffering to ourselves and others. Trust in God. Don't let the light go out.

Pastor Paul