

Good Sunday morning from a very cold hill in Rockport.....

Once again, we are worshiping together “from afar”.... that land of cyberspace that has kept us in touch in ways we could never have imagined before March, 2020! Hopefully, by February we again be able to be back together in person on Sunday mornings. That’s only if this latest covid surge here in the midcoast of Maine and beyond has slowed down, and more and more people are vaccinated against this virus nightmare....

Professor David G. Lose writes in *Making Sense of the Christian Faith*, “In some ways, we come to church because the gospel promise – that the God who created and still sustains the vast cosmos not only knows that we exist, but cares deeply and passionately about us – can be hard to believe for more than about seven days in a row.” And so, whether we meet in person, or on line or through Facebook, or any other means, worshiping together is important to us, yes?

So again today we worship together from afar, but bound to one another in our hope that future days will be brighter for us all....

Blessings to all this cold Sunday morning in January..... Susan

p.s. I will download this morning’s scripture reading and sermon to the Federated Church of Thomaston Facebook page and my Facebook page freerangepastor for anyone who chooses to tune in.....

p.s.s. As always, thank you to those of you who send me your e-mail responses to my writings. I don’t always get a chance to write back to each one of you, but I appreciate all your responses! They keep me motivated to continue writing.....

**A simple online worship service for Sunday, January 16, 2022
as prepared by Rev. Dr. Susan Stonestreet
Pastor of the Federated Church of Thomaston**

A Call to Worship

This is a gathering time –

a time to come together, settle in, and remember who we are.

We are the church, whether in person or in cyberspace,
but always in spirit, yesterday, today, and tomorrow.

We are greeted by the Spirit of Jesus
who welcomed all to the table of life.

Abiding in mutual love we stretch out our hands in friendship

and discover the presence of God.
We remain in God's love,
Yesterday, today, and tomorrow....

**A Prayer of Martin Luther King, Jr.
on the occasion of celebrating his birthday on January 15, 1929**

Most gracious and all wise God, before whose face the generations rise and fall;
Thou in whom we live, and move, and have our being....
We thank thee for all of thy good and gracious gifts, for life and for health;
for food and for raiment; for the beauties of nature and human nature.
We come before thee painfully aware of our inadequacies and shortcomings.
We realize that we stand surrounded with the mountains of love
and we deliberately dwell in the valley of hate.
We stand amid the forces of truth and deliberately lie.
We are forever offered the high road and yet we choose to travel the low road.
For these sins O God forgive.
Break the spell of that which blinds our minds.
Purify our hearts that we may see thee.
O God in these turbulent days when fear and doubt are mounting high
give us broad visions, penetrating eyes, and power of endurance.
Help us to work with renewed vigor for a warless world,
for a better distribution of wealth and for a brother/sisterhood
that transcends race or color.
In the name and spirit of Jesus we pray. Amen.

A Reading of Scripture – 1 Corinthians 12:1-11

Now concerning spiritual gifts, brothers and sisters, I do not want you to be uninformed. You know that when you were pagans, you were enticed and led astray to idols that could not speak. Therefore I want you to understand that no one speaking by the Spirit of God ever says, "Let Jesus be cursed!" and no one can say "Jesus is Lord" except by the Holy Spirit.

Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the discernment of spirits, to

another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. All these are activated by one and the same Spirit, who allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses.

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Corinthians 12:1-11

A sermon based on 1 Corinthians 12:1-11
“Now concerning spiritual gifts....”

Will you pray with me. God of many members, but one Spirit, help us bring it all home to you this day. Help us to be good and productive members of *your* body, and not lone rangers looking out only for ourselves. Help us to *be* your body in the world, O God, living as Jesus would have us live moment by moment. Amen.

“Church is...” If we were together this morning, in physical body rather than via cyberspace, I would ask you to complete that sentence, “Church is...” But since we’re not together in body, I’ll tell you how my favorite theologian, Frederick Buechner, defines “church”: “The visible church is all the people who get together from time to time in God’s name. [That would be us on Sunday mornings!] Anybody can find out who they are by going to church to look. The invisible church is all the people God uses for [God’s] hands and feet in this world. Nobody can find out who they are except God. [That’s us all the rest of the time, out doing for others when we’re NOT together in church on Sunday mornings!]

[Buechner goes on,] Think of them as two circles. The optimist says they are concentric. [Visible church inside the invisible church outside] The cynic says they don’t even touch. [visible church on the one hand, invisible church on the other hand] The realist says they occasionally overlap. [hands joined with crossed fingers]

In a fit of high inspiration, [Buechner writes] the author of the Book of Revelation states that there is no temple in the New Jerusalem [that’s life after death], thus squelching once and for all the tedious quip that since Heaven is an endless church service, anybody with two wits to rub together would prefer Hell.”^[1]

Now, I’m here to tell you I hope you do not see *our* church services on Sunday mornings as endless and the other side of Hell!

For me, church is this –
an oasis filled with seekers after truth,

hopeful fallen souls continually getting help standing up and then falling down again,
people desiring to do good in the midst of so much in the world and in our individual lives that is not good, and
lovers of life and members of the body made up of all God's people.

Those of us who identify as Christians are called to consider ourselves as members of the body of *Christ* within the household of all God's people. In our passage this morning from Paul's first letter so long ago to those early church folks in Corinth, the metaphor of the human body was central in his thinking and writing.

It's brilliant, isn't it? It's an image we can relate to, even two thousand years later! The body, the human body, is not just a foot, or a hand, or an ear, but a whole being with many members, all working together and carrying each of us through life –

sometimes robustly and with youthful energy,
other times with great difficulty and even with some parts needing to be taken off, or tragically removed,

and yet still other times seeming downright "out of body,"
as when we dream,

as when I am mesmerized watching a male Cardinal sitting in absolute stillness on one of our suet feeders while looking toward the other suet feeder where the female Cardinal lands..... all taking place on the other side of my den window,

as when we sit by the bedside of a loved one feeding them little spoonfuls of soup because they are too weak to eat alone and without help.

Being the body of Christ doesn't mean we're perfect or specially chosen by God for a place in the front pew of life. Being the body of Christ means we are accepted as we are, and it would be a fine gesture if we extended a hand of warmth and fellowship to all others.

Yes, the church is *all* of us, inside and outside of the sacred walls of the Federated Church of Thomaston where a great cloud of witnesses surrounds us every time we bow our heads to pray, stand up and sing and reflect on the wonder of the wisdom of the Bible.

I think of Hank, and Harriet, and Ben, and Dot and so many others many of you have known whom I didn't have the privilege of knowing.

Yes, they and we are called to be the church, the body of Christ, for those who will come after us... to sit in our pews, to stand in this pulpit, to serve in our community, to pray and hope for a good life for all people in the world, no matter their religious persuasion, or no persuasion at all.

My study of scripture tells me Jesus didn't teach, and pray, and proclaim that we had to all *bealike*, but that we *take a liking* to each other, and to those we don't know, and to those we might consider to be strangers, foreigners to our particular ways of thinking and believing and living. The body of Christ is a multifaceted body.

And we know bodies come in all shapes and sizes and colors and persuasions. Just walk down the aisles in Hannaford's and you'll discover that! Just walk through the lobby of any hospital (when we're allowed back in!), or down one of the halls of the Barbara Bush Children's Hospital at Maine Medical Center in Portland. You'll see that little hurting bodies come in a wide array of human flesh and blood, each one as precious as the next.

We come to church, it seems to me, to remind ourselves that we are not alone. We need one another – big bodies, little bodies, hurting bodies, healthy bodies, broken down bodies. We need the companionship of one another.

There's a quote by Stephanie Paulsell, writer and professor at Harvard Divinity School that goes like this: "We need places to pray as if someone were listening, to study as if we might learn something worth writing on our hearts, to join with others in service as if the world might be transformed. Churches are places to learn to practice, with others, a continual conversion of life, a permanent openness to change."²¹

There's a key transition in that quote – "as if" – we need to pray, to study, to join with others... "as if" the world might be transformed. *What would life be like* if we truly lived "as if" all could be well? Too often, it seems to me, we live "as if" nothing will ever be well, no problems will ever be solved, no amount of effort expended will ever correct the injustices of the world. Paulsell says, "Churches are places to learn to practice, with others, a continual conversion of life, a permanent openness to change."

She quotes theologian Kathryn Tanner who defines Christian practices as "doorways through which we enter an argument. Through Christian practices, she says, we participate in an argument over how best to live as disciples of Christ and learn to live our way into new and unexpected answers."³¹

In closing, here's three questions I pose for you today: Does the open doorway into the household of Christ beckon to you? What member of the body of Christ calls you to act this day? What spiritual gifts do you have to share with the rest of us? Let the people say, "Amen."

To hold in our prayers this day.....

From our most recent bulletin and more....

Please hold in your prayers all those affected by the coronavirus and the families of those who have died from the virus....

And all those families affected by the use of addictive drugs among their members....

And all those dealing with the ravages of cancer near and far.....

And all those affected, which should be every one of us, by the cruel condition of racism which continues to take the lives of too many of our Black brothers and sisters, as we approach Martin Luther King, Jr. Day

And all those who have worked tirelessly for the building and rebuilding of our nation into one people, under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.....

And add a prayer for Tammy Whirty, a friend of Margie's, dealing with cancer challenges, and, from Jackie a request for prayers for Kyle Cloudier, continued prayers for Ursula recovering...and for "Cody," who doesn't live locally but needs prayers for guidance; Kristin Parker O'Neal, Jo Ann Parker's daughter, who has had brain surgery and is home now!; Enid, Ann Foster, Carol Moss, Fred Bagnall, Julie Pollitt, Zeke Bryant, Helmut Steger, John Flaherty, BJ Thomson & family of Mimi's Uncle Doug, Heather Van Buskirk, and for Tiffany, Lucy's granddaughter.....

Please feel free to contact Susan by phone (207)322-1948 or by email at freerangepastor@gmail.com to have her add or drop any names from the prayer list AND to let her know if you would like for her to stop by for a visit sometime. She's always glad to have a chat with you!

A Benediction

Go into this day with peace and love in your hearts.

May God bless you and keep you.

May God's face radiate upon you and flood you with grace and tender mercies.

May God smile upon you always and cover your life with peace.

Amen.

Readings from the RCL (Revised Common Lectionary)

for Sunday, January 23, 2022

Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10; Psalm 19; 1 Corinthians 12:12-31a; Luke 4:14-21

Words to ponder today about “accountability”

“Accountability is the glue that ties commitment to the result.” ~ Bob Proctor

“No individual can achieve worthy goals without accepting accountability for his or her own actions.” ~ Dan Miller

“You can’t talk about leadership without talking about responsibility and accountability...you can’t separate the two. A leader must delegate responsibility and provide the freedom to make decisions, and then be held accountable for the results.” ~ Buck Rogers

“A body of men holding themselves accountable to nobody ought not to be trusted by anybody.” ~ Thomas Paine

“We must reject the idea that every time a law’s broken, society is guilty rather than the lawbreaker. It is time to restore the American precept that each individual is accountable for his actions.” ~ Ronald Reagan

“It is wrong and immoral to seek to escape the consequences of one’s acts.” ~ Mahatma Gandhi

“Having authority implies accountability. If you reject the blame for failures under your watch, people reject your leadership.” ~ Rick Warren

“Think of these things, whence you came, where you are going, and to whom you must account.” ~ Benjamin Franklin

^[1]Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking, A Seeker’s ABC, Revised and Expanded*, New York: HarperCollins, 1973, 1993, p. 17.

^[2]Stephanie Paulsell, “Soul experiments,” *The Christian Century*, quoted on the back page of the July 24, 2013 issue.

^[3]Stephanie Paulsell, *Honoring the Body, Meditations on a Christian Practice*, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003, p. 6.