

Good Sunday midmorning from a cold, cloudy, still ice-covered hill in Rockport.....

Last Sunday morning I was thinking about passages. This morning I'm reflecting about another kind of passage -- amusement park rides! One of my readers this past week wrote, "I think of these passages [of life] as going through a tunnel, kind of like an amusement park tunnel ride. Some of the scenes are wonderful, others give you pause for thoughts. So I go through the tunnel enjoying the ride and the beautiful scenes, yet dealing with some things that I need to understand and [all the while] praying like heck at the scary parts, knowing that I will get through them and there's a light at the end of the tunnel. It's called the 'Awesome Ride of Life.'" Wise words, these.... thought and written like a true pastor! Come to think of it, we're all pastors of one sort or another! Ordained or not, each one of us is called to listen and to reflect back to another assurance that all will be well, blessings will come later if not sooner. As pastors we acknowledge the mistakes and misgivings of others and of ourselves, and then move on..... Yes, this "Awesome Ride of Life" comes with scary, dark times and uplifting, joy-filled times. We are to relish both -- for what they teach us through our woes, for what they give us in their blessings.....

Blessings to all this cold, still somewhat ice laden second Sunday of February
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 later today for anyone who would like to tune in.....

p.s.s. **NEXT SUNDAY, February 20th, we will be back in our church having worship together in the flesh!** We'll meet downstairs for the next two Sundays and then beginning in March we'll be back upstairs in our sanctuary.... This is all assuming we don't have weather that will prevent us from gathering, or another upswing in the number of covid cases in our area! We'll have coffee hour right after church next Sunday, so we can catch up with one another and simply enjoy time together **IN PERSON!!!**

p.s.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, February 13, 2022
as prepared by Rev. Dr. Susan Stonestreet
Pastor of the Federated Church of Thomaston**

A Call to Worship

Today we gather, one more time through cyberspace,
to worship, to wonder, to hope, and to pray
that blessings will come no matter what may....
happy or not, joyful or sad.

We gather to remember, to reflect, to look forward
and to just be in this moment, together in cyberspace,
no matter our distance from one another in the flesh.

We gather, in the name of the One and the many
the Holy Spirit has sent to show us the way to new life in you this day.

Let us worship God!

Amen.

A Prayer of Confession & Words of Assurance *

Faithful God, you remember us, but sometimes we forget you.

Generous God, you give us gifts, but sometimes we don't even notice them.
Sometimes we even leave them unwrapped and never discover what you've given us.

Righteous God, you offer us your law and commandments so that we might live
faithful and joyful lives,

but sometimes we forget your teaching, or we don't pay attention or do our
homework.

Ever-present God, you stand ready to hear our cries of sorrow and grief,
but sometimes we cannot even tell you the pain on our hearts,
and so we carry our heavy burdens alone.

Covenant God, you call us into everlasting relationship with you,
but sometimes we just cannot understand what that means.

You give us everything and we want more. You offer us eternity and we want longer.

We find ourselves bargaining with you,
because we don't understand how to accept such amazing generosity.

Forgive us, gracious and loving God.

Open our hearts and minds and souls to comprehend your goodness,
to remember your amazing acts of liberation,
and to trust in the future to which you call us.

We pray to you, O God, and ask for forgiveness for our blindness and self-
centeredness.

We will do our best, from this day forward, to hear, accept, remember, and trust
in the good news of your amazing gift of mercy and forgiveness and love for each of
us.

Amen.

* From *Seasons of the Spirit* for Sunday, October 6, 2013

Scripture reading for February 13, 2022 – Luke 6:17-26

He [Jesus] came down with them and stood on a level place, with a great crowd of his disciples and a great multitude of people from all Judea, Jerusalem, and the coast of Tyre and Sidon. They had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases; and those who were troubled with unclean spirits were cured. And all in the crowd were trying to touch him, for power came out from him and healed all of them.

Then he looked up at his disciples and said:

"Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.

Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled.

Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh.

Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man. Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven; for that is what their ancestors did to the prophets.

But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation.

Woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry.

Woe to you who are laughing now, for you will mourn and weep.

Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets.

A sermon based on Luke 6:17-26 “Blessings and Woes”

Will you pray with me. Eternal God, be with us in the coming moments as we do our best to ponder the holy words of our sacred ancestors. Help us to find a blessing from you in their message to us this day as we think of loved ones gone by, loved ones in our midst, and loved ones to come on this Sunday before Valentine's Day. Amen.

Here's the bottom line for today -- what goes around comes around. You've heard me preach about this before! What goes around comes around is a mantra I try to live by -- in my personal life and in what I see of other people's actions. Jesus proclaimed the same in many different ways in his short time in ministry -- what goes around comes around. If what we do and all we say comes from a place of goodness and justice, we will be blessed. If what we do and all we

say comes from a place of hubris and haughtiness, a place of privilege and pride, we will not be blessed.

Take note, though, that as we finish confessing our sins when we pray together a prayer of confession, there always comes an assurance of pardon or words of forgiveness and the invitation to do better.

But what does it mean to be blessed, really? We say "bless you" to someone when they sneeze. "Bless you," we say to someone when they have done something nice for us. We say "what a blessing" when the storm passes us by, or when the sick baby lives or the oldster among us recovers from a fall or pneumonia. We bless others, and sometimes they bless us.

In the late first century, blessings must have seemed hard to come by for those early Christians living in a Roman world. They were forced to put their faith to the ultimate endurance test. They were not free to worship God as they chose. They were supposed to worship the Roman emperor. From within their Christian community, immorality and apathy weakened their hearts and their commitment to God. From without, their refusal to practice idolatry often led to martyrdom. Some of us are familiar with the telling of this unfortunate reality for our early Christian ancestors.

Into this world stepped the writer of the Gospel of Luke. He wrote what has been called "the most beautiful book in the world," to explain and proclaim the universal significance of the life and death of someone who would come to make a difference for all time. As with the other Gospel writers, Luke had his own point of view and a particular audience in mind when he put his story together. Luke was a Gentile, like us!, writing for Gentiles. He was most likely the only Gentile author in the New Testament.

The authors of the Gospels were not neutral in their interpretations of what they had seen and heard of Jesus' life and death. I will always remind us they were not writing newspaper accounts. They were not writing historical reports. They wrote down their stories so as to make a difference in the lives of those early Christians who listened to and read their words. Jesus made a difference then. Jesus still makes a difference, or we wouldn't be worshiping here this morning!

Our scripture reading from the Gospel of Luke relates "The Sermon on the Plain," as it is commonly called. Even though the text for today doesn't include verses seventeen through nineteen, they are important for the understanding of the passage. "He came down with them and stood on a level place, with a great crowd

of his disciples and a great multitude of the people...." (Lk 6:17), verse seventeen describes.

The corollary to Luke's "Sermon on the Plain" is the longer "Sermon on the Mount," described in the Gospel of Matthew. It was preached from "up on a mountain" where "his [Jesus'] disciples came to him." (Matt 5:1) The "Sermon" Luke describes is shorter than Matthew's. It has fewer teachings and its beatitudes, its blessings, are written in the second person -- "Blessed are YOU poor, for yours is the kingdom of God." (Lk 6:20) rather than in the third person -- "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven," as Matthew writes (Matt 5:3)

Three points stand out to me as I reflect on all of this. First, Luke speaks of Jesus delivering the blessings while he stands *among* the people -- his disciples and a great multitude of people. Matthew positions Jesus up on a mountain *with only his immediate disciples near by*.

Second, Luke speaks of Jesus referring to the *literal poor*. Matthew speaks of Jesus referring to the poor *"in spirit."*

Third, Luke speaks of Jesus talking directly *to* the people -- you poor, you who are hungry, you who weep now. (Lk 6:20-21) Matthew speaks of Jesus talking *of* others -- the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, those who hunger and search for righteousness. (Matt 5:3-6)

Do these points make a difference? The different, to me, is the type of relationship implied in each account. Jesus preached of relationships. He taught of justice and fairness for all. Luke tells us that Jesus stated in the "Sermon on the Plain" that he *supported people in their suffering*, all kinds of suffering, and encouraged them to "hang on," for they would receive the kingdom of God. They would be filled and they would laugh. Matthew tells us that Jesus described in the "Sermon on the Plain" the *ideal character of a disciple*.

Both messages are important. We need to hear them both. We need to hear the *intimacy* of the personal message of Jesus to those who were suffering AND the *proclamation* of what it meant to lead a "disciplined," faithful life. *An assurance and a responsibility are implied.*

Blessedness comes in many forms. It has a long and varied history in the Bible beginning with Genesis when God blesses Abraham. (Gen 1:1-3) I won't go through them all.... I know many of you are preparing for your Super Bowl festivities later today and you don't want to be here listening to me til noon!

The words preserved on the oldest scrap of scripture we have are the familiar words of the blessing of Aaron in the Book of Numbers which begin, "*Ye va re ka adoni vi yish mer a kah.*" "May the Lord bless you and keep you." (Num 6:24) This blessing of Aaron was found not that long ago on a piece of silver in a tomb, just south of Jerusalem, that dates from about 600 BCE. That's approximately 2,600 years ago.

The prophet Jeremiah from the Hebrew scriptures proclaimed, "Blessed are those who trust in the Lord, whose trust is in the Lord. They shall be like a tree planted by water, sending out its roots by the stream.... I the Lord test the mind and search the heart, to give to all according to their ways, according to the fruit of their doings." (Jer 17:7-8, 10) To trust in God is to be blessed, Jeremiah says.

What are we to make of the blessings and woes proclaimed by our sacred ancestors? How do we interpret them for our lives? In this early 21st century, we may *be* blessed with good health, good looks, money, a nice home, a decent job. Or, we may *not* be blessed with these things. In either case, God delivers us a blessing if only we practice our faith in God with our words and our actions. "What goes around comes around," again and again, later, if not sooner....

But today's text needs to go beyond the "Sermon on the Plain" and includes three more verses, "But I say to you that listen, love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. Do to others as you would have them do to you." (Lk 6:27-31)

The Golden Rule, as it has become known, appears only in this passage from Luke and in a passage from the Gospel of Matthew (Matt 7:12) in the New Testament, but the idea of the Golden Rule is found in many cultures. "[It] dates at least to the early Confucian times (551-479 BC) according to Rushworth Kidder, who identified that this concept appears prominently in Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Judaism, Taoism, Zoroastrianism, and the rest of the world's major religions."¹¹ Before I started seminary in 1995, I had no idea the Golden Rule was from the Bible! I simply thought it was just a good general rule to follow in one's life!

To be blessed by God is to acknowledge that the relationships we have with God and with one another are the most fragile and consequential connections of our lives. Living by the Golden Rule may seem like an unrealistic and outdated

way to get through our 21st century days. But we have to keep trying. We have to remember how fragile each one of us is, no matter how much we disagree with one another about too many things. Do to others as you would have them do to you, and you will be blessed. What goes around *will* come around. All the saints watching over us will be pleased with our progress, and that includes Hank, and Muriel and Fred, three of the beloveds of this worshiping community.

"Ye va re ka adoni vi yish mer a kah." May God bless you and keep you this day. Let the people say, "Amen."

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

Especially today, we hold in prayer the family and friends of Kathleen's nephew, Heath, who died last week from cancer.....

Especially today, we continue to hold in prayer the family and many friends of Fred Bagnall who died on January 28....

Especially today, we continue to hold in prayer the family and many friends of Muriel Pinkham who died in the very early morning hours of January 22....Dear Muriel, we love you..... rest in peace now and forever....

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

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, 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, February 20, 2022

Genesis 45:3-11, 15; Psalm 37:1-11, 39-40;

1 Corinthians 15:35-38, 42-50; Luke 6:27-38

¹Golden Rule information from en.m.wikipedia.org