

Good cold, partly sunny LATE Sunday morning from a hill in Rockport.....

So, here we are on the fourth Sunday in Lent.... The sun is shining somewhat, the air is March crisp, the birds are singing and Daylight Savings Time has begun! What's not to give thanks for this day..... I'm a bit late getting these "Sunday words" and simple worship service out.... I think I *fell back* this morning as Daylight Savings Time *sprang forth*! I'm tired.... I need a DST nap today....

We bought a new pot of sorts that was delivered this week. It is a tagine – pronounced "ta-ZHINE". It flew to us all the way from Emile Henry's in France! I didn't know about tagines until recently. A tagine is "a large, heavy North African cooking pot with a conical lid." (iPhone Dictionary definition) In one of the recipes that came with our tagine, this instruction is given: "Shape the chicken into a pyramid in the centre of the tagine and arrange the vegetables and olives around it harmoniously." What a lovely way to describe how to prepare a tagine recipe! Shape and arrange "harmoniously." I don't think I've ever read a recipe written with such flare and artistry.... We'll be preparing our first tagine meal this evening or tomorrow evening. I'll write about how it turns out.....

So harmony is on my mind this morning – harmony in a pyramid of vegetables and chicken, harmony in our country, harmony in my own mind and heart. Harmony is "a consistent, orderly, or pleasing arrangement of parts." (iPhone Dictionary definition) We think of harmony in music, finding harmony in the Gospels, harmony in our households and congregation, harmony even in the recipes we share with one another. What are you doing today to reflect and promote harmony around you? Let me know your thoughts.....

I know I've said this before, **AND** I want to say again how much I appreciate all your responses to my meditations, especially in these challenging times. I don't always get a chance to respond to each of your reflections, **AND** please know I read all of them, ponder them, and give thanks for them.... Your support spurs me on and gives me hope for the future of us all.....

Blessings to each one on this first Sunday in Lent..... Susan

p.s. I will ATTEMPT, AGAIN, to download today's scripture reading and sermon to my Facebook page later today: freerangepastor for anyone who wants to tune in.... and to the Federated Church of Thomaston's Facebook page.... Last week, again, this download did not happen for some reason.....

A simple online worship service for Sunday, March 14, 2021

the fourth Sunday in Lent
as prepared by Rev. Dr. Susan Stonestreet
Pastor of the Federated Church of Thomaston

A Call to Worship

We come together this day, still in a space of spirit rather than flesh,
but always in a space of longing for the Word made flesh in Jesus.

We come together to reflect, to recall, to remember and to trust....
in the love of God, in the fellowship of Jesus, in the shadow of the Holy Spirit
that hovers over and around us all... whether we know it, or believe it.

Let us worship God together in spirit this fourth Sunday of Lent.

Amen.

A Meditation for the fourth Sunday in Lent – 1 John 4:7-12

Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God;
everyone who loves is born of God and knows God.

Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love.

God's love was revealed among us in this way:

God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him.

In this is love, not that we loved God
but that God loved us and sent his Son
to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins.

Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another.

No one has ever seen God;

if we love one another, God lives in us, and God's love is perfected in us.

Amen.

Reading of Scripture – John 3:14-21

And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light,

so that their deeds may not be exposed. But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.”

“For God so loved the world....”

A sermon based on John 3:14-21

Will you pray with me. Ever-loving God, work with us yet again, will you? Help us to learn that how to love is the greatest and most precious lesson you have to teach us. Help us to see in Jesus *the example* we are to follow every day of our lives. Wake us up to *the encouragement* you offer us in Jesus’ willingness to live and to die as you would have us live and die – with hope and courage and faith.... even in the darkest of times. Amen.

Would you be willing to die for another person? My guess is.... many of us would – be it for our spouse or partner, or our children or grandchildren, or a life-long friend, or for one of us in our congregation. I like to think I would die for any those I’ve named, if it came to that.... that the ending of my life might save yours or theirs.

It seems to me most of us would be willing to die for someone we hold dear and close in our lives. But would we be willing to die for.... say, an abuser of children, or a mass murderer, or Hitler, or someone who would fly an airplane into the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center in New York City, or any of so many others who since 2001 have done dangerous and deadly harm to others?

Hm.... I would have to think long and hard about that one, and my guess is.... my answer would be, “No, I’m not sure I would be willing to die for a person who has purposely done harm to another person or many people.” My love for all of humanity is pretty strong. My love for some individuals.... not so much.

But there was one.... whom the Gospels tell us.... died for *all* of us, no matter how good, or bad, or upstanding or immoral we might have been in the past. The Gospels tell us that one was Jesus. Jesus died that we might live. Jesus died to show us the way to love and live and die for one another and for God. In Jesus’ life and death, we have *the example* of how we are to live and die, and *the encouragement* to get on with living and dying with courage and hope and faith.

“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.” John 3:16. This is probably the most recited verse from the Gospels, even the entire New Testament of the Bible. You see it in the stands of sports gatherings on a poster held high

over the heads of others so it can be visible in TV broadcasts. You see it in signs held by people standing beside busy intersections in towns and cities. You see it displayed on bumper stickers. It's everywhere. And I will confess to you, as I probably have in the past, that this verse and this passage from the Gospel of John is one of the most difficult for me to preach from in the entire Bible. I wrestle with it every time I offer words about it. I struggle with it. But wrestling and struggling with biblical texts is never in vain, but always with something to be gained, something to be learned, something to give me a greater sense of faith as a Christian.

Why do I struggle with this verse and text? Two reasons. First, the God I believe in is bigger than the God described in this text, bigger because I believe in the wideness of God's mercy being open to all people, not just those of us who identify as Christians. To my reading and understanding, this text is too exclusive, too exclusionary, too negative for my acceptance of Jesus as the Christ in my life.

The second reason I struggle with this verse and text every time I hear it proclaimed as the passage of the Bible that proves that Christians have the only path to eternal life is this -- Jesus was a Jew. He was born a Jew, he lived as a Jew, he died a Jew. According to biblical commentaries written over the past two thousand years, the Gospel of John was written sometime between thirty and seventy years *after* Jesus was crucified. John's audience was probably still made up of Jews who came to profess Jesus as their Messiah. But never forget this -- Jesus was a Jew. There were no Christians sitting in pews of churches in Jesus' lifetime or people standing on street corners or in sports arenas waving signs with "John 3:16" on them. Remember that Gospel writer John didn't pen his book until sometime between thirty and seventy years after Jesus' death.

But as much as I struggle with this text, I am reminded that in the Gospel of John, "The verb 'believe' appears more frequently than in any other New Testament writing. But the noun 'faith' is completely absent. Since verbs imply action, this places strong emphasis on the dynamic aspects of believing, which is conveyed in this passage by parallel references to 'coming to the light.'"^[1]

I want to share with you some words of Reverend Dr. Gerard Sloyan, Roman Catholic priest and theologian, who died at the age of 100 just last February. I find his commentary on the Gospel of John to be very helpful. He wrote, "Jesus is a sign of division throughout this Gospel. Faced with him, people either come to believe in him and thereby walk in the light or choose the darkness of non-belief (John 8:12) and can expect judgment, that is, condemnation

(3:19). There is a constant struggle over religious truth going on in the Fourth Gospel between Jesus and his protagonists and those who actively resist them. Its colors are primary; there are no pastels or shadings. The author is totally self-confident. Where he and his community stand, there is Jesus and vice versa.

The modern preacher of the Fourth Gospel has a powerful weapon in hand but needs to avoid self-righteousness. The weapon has to be turned most often upon the preacher and congregation, not upon long-dead antagonists of Jesus.... John's Gospel is a sharp weapon that can be grasped by handle or blade to the grasper's advantage or destruction. Every paragraph is an invitation to do the one or the other.... Does this mean that we have no assurance in this Gospel that the events and words conveyed to us really happened as described? They happened, to be sure, *but as described*, namely in John's narrative world. That is the truth of this Gospel, as of the other three. It gives us the significance or meaning of Jesus Christ as one author and his community perceived it. John does not produce a work of fiction. His narrative is historically based. But its primary goal is persuasion, not a chronicle of events."^[2]

So here's two questions for us today – are we persuaded, as individuals, that Jesus provides us the way to receive God's love for us? Does the Gospel of John offer us a scriptural hand to hold as we make our way through our days, or does this Gospel demand we make a choice, a decision, to cut some people out of God's grace while allowing others to receive God's grace?

I believe it is not in our power, nor do we have the right to cut anyone out of receiving God's grace, no matter how it may come to them – as Christian, as Jew, as Muslim, as Hindu, as a non-believer of any and all things that speak of religion. Gospel writer John offers us one way to align ourselves with the Christian understanding of God. But I will always remember this – Jesus was a Jew, in his being born, in his living, in his dying.

John 3:16-21 begins with two of the most well known verses in the Bible, “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.” (Jn 3:16-17)

1 Corinthians 13, known as “the love chapter,” which includes another of the most well known verses in the Bible, reads, “And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.” (1 Cor 13:13)

And 1 John 4:7-12, perhaps not known by heart so well by many Christians, certainly offering the “bottom line” of God: “Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love.” (1 Jn 4:7-8)

After seven years of seminary education, and twenty years of ministry, I’m pretty clear on this belief – whatever point of view you would like to profess and proclaim about faith, religion, Jesus, God and life can be supported, or denied, by some verses of the Bible somewhere. The question becomes, it seems to me, which verses point to life and love and which verses point to death and division? I can’t speak for any of you, but I’d rather focus on the passages that point to life and love. I’ll leave the passages that point to death and division to others.

In Jesus’ teachings, his parables, his healings, his questions, his living.... we are to see examples of how we ought to live. We are to receive encouragement for doing good, for being compassionate towards others, and for loving.

In Jesus’ dying, and then in his resurrection, we are to receive encouragement. This isn’t the end, folks. Today, here where we live and breathe, this isn’t the end. From Jesus we see an example of how to live.... and encouragement as we consider the years to come, our deaths to come, as surely they will.... Through his death and resurrection, a new community of followers of Jesus who came to be known as Christians was born. We are all invited to join. Have you? Do you? Will you?

Let the people say, “Amen.”

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

And 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 and alcohol among their members....

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 pray for our new President, and Congress, that they might do the right things in office for the betterment and future of all of us.....

And add to our prayers,

deep prayers for Hank and Lucy as Hank endures his cancer journey with the help of Hospice at home now....

and prayers for Coretta and her family as they mourn the loss of Coretta's Aunt Ruth as she passed away unexpectedly in late February....

Carrie Connors and the Hedstrom family of Camden as they deal with the aftermath of a fire that took their home and 14 year old Theodore Hedstrom....

and a request from Mimi for Kendall, who is 49 and has hereditary neuropathy. It is progressing rapidly and at some point he will be in braces. Mike Sodano, who has had three-way bypass surgery this week, a friend of Mimi's and known to many in Thomaston, "Cody," who doesn't live locally but needs prayers for guidance; and Ed Lee, Enid, Ann Foster, Carol Moss, Fred Bagnall, Harriet Williams, Julie Pollitt, Zeke Bryant, Sally Harjula, Elliot, Trish Perry, Helmut Steger, John Flaherty, George Ng, Doug and BJ Thomson, Heather Van Buskirk, and Michael and Gail in southern Maine,

Please send me the names of those you would like for me to add to this list next Sunday.....

AND those you would like for me to remove from this list.

A Benediction

*Life is short, no matter the length of our days.
We do not have much time to gladden the hearts of those
who make the way with us.
So be swift to love.
Make haste to be kind.
And may the creator of us all,
the redeemer of us all,
and the sustainer of us all
be with you now and forever.
Amen.*

(adapted from the words of Henri Frederic Amiel, 1821 – 1881,
Swiss moral philosopher, poet & critic)

Readings from the RCL (Revised Common Lectionary)

For Sunday, March 14, 2021 – fifth Sunday of Lent

Jeremiah 31:31-34; Psalm 119:9-16; Hebrews 5:5-10; John 12:20-33

Words to ponder today about "atonement"..... even though I don't specifically write about atonement in my sermon today!

“Atonement literally means what it says: at-one-ment, making something that was broken whole again.” ~ David J. Lose, Professor of Preaching, Luther Seminary, in Making Sense of the Cross

“Man cannot measure the bounds nor fathom the depths of divine forgiveness....” ~ James Talmage, 19th-20th century English chemist, geologist, and religious leader

“Atonement = the doctrine concerning the reconciliation of God and humankind, especially as accomplished through the life, suffering, and death of Christ.” ~ iPhone Dictionary

“Forgiveness is unilateral. God isn’t waiting for us to get it together, to clean up, shape up, get up – God has already done it.” ~ Rob Bell, American author, speaker and former pastor, in Love Wins: A Book About Heaven, Hell, and the Fate of Every Person Who Ever Lived

“Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, is the holy of holies of Jewish time. It is that rarest of phenomena, a Jewish festival without food. Instead it is a day of fasting and prayer, introspection and self-judgment when, collectively and repeatedly, we confess our sins and pray to be written into God’s Book of Life.” ~ Jonathan Sacks, 1948-2020, British Orthodox rabbi, philosopher, theologian, author and public figure

[1]Jouette M. Bassler, in *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Volume 2, Lent Through Eastertide, General Editors, David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008, p. 119

[2]Gerard Sloyan, in *John, A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1988, pp. 6-7, 10.