

Good morning from a still hill in Rockport....

Earlier this week I wrote about three “universal spiritual needs” in my Spring meditation. The first is the need for belonging and relationships. The second is the need to explore the meaning of life, suffering & death. The third is the need for reconciliation. I continue to think about these needs – as they relate to my life, your life, all of our lives....

This morning the theme of my sermon is a question, “Do you love me?” Depending on who says these words, and how they are said, they highlight the challenge of our day – without love, can there be belonging and relationship?

“Human beings thirst for companionship. They seek friendship, sometimes any friendship at all. Even someone diseased with the dislike of other people seeks company, whether with themselves, or with their books, or with their room, or with their own solitude, because the human spirit is made for love.” These words come from Chiara Lubich, Catholic founder of the Focolare Movement, “which aims to bring unity among people and promote universal family. Lubich was a charismatic figure who broke with many female stereotypes as early as the 1940’s, opening a previously unheard of role for women in society and the Roman Catholic Church. She is considered a notable figure in ecumenical, interreligious and intercultural dialogue.... She took her place in the history of contemporary spirituality among teachers and mystics for the authentic Gospel-based inspiration, universal outlook, and cultural and social influence that distinguish her charisma, spirituality, and work.” (from en.wikipedia.org) She died in 2008 at the age of 88. If you look up more information about the Focolare Movement, you will find that the organization is not without fault, or scandal. As with any group, or individual leaders of that group, or with any of us for that matter, there are dark marks, dark times, dark decisions we wish we hadn’t made....

But still, that “universal spiritual need” for belonging and relationships persists, insists and continues regardless of our personal shortcomings. I believe Jesus knew that. “Keep on trying,” I believe the Gospels remind us over and over. Keep on trying and one day, maybe, we’ll come close to getting the message, the answer to Jesus’ question to his disciples, “Do you love me?”

Blessings to each one this first day of May..... I hope to see many of you in worship this morning in a few hours..... Susan

“Do you love me?”

A Sermon for the Federated Church of Thomaston

Thomaston, Maine

Sunday, May 1, 2022

Rev. Dr. Susan Stonestreet

Scripture: John 21:1-19

After these things Jesus showed himself again to the disciples by the Sea of Tiberias; and he showed himself in this way. Gathered there together were Simon Peter, Thomas called the

Twin, Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two others of his disciples. Simon Peter said to them, **“I am going fishing.”** They said to him, “We will go with you.” They went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing.

Just after daybreak, Jesus stood on the beach; but the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to them, “Children, you have no fish, have you?” They answered him, “No.” He said to them, “Cast the net to the right side of the boat, and you will find some.” So they cast it, and now they were not able to haul it in because there were so many fish. That disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, “It is the Lord!” When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put on some clothes, for he was naked, and jumped into the sea. But the other disciples came in the boat, dragging the net full of fish, for they were not far from the land, only about a hundred yards off.

When they had gone ashore, they saw a charcoal fire there, with fish on it, and bread. Jesus said to them, “Bring some of the fish that you have just caught.” So Simon Peter went aboard and hauled the net ashore, full of large fish, a hundred fifty-three of them; and though there were so many, the net was not torn. Jesus said to them, “Come and have breakfast.” Now none of the disciples dared to ask him, “Who are you?” because they knew it was the Lord. Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish. This was now the third time that Jesus appeared to the disciples after he was raised from the dead.

When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, “Simon son of John, **do you love me** more than these?” He said to him, “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.” Jesus said to him, “Feed my lambs.” A second time he said to him, “Simon son of John, **do you love me?**” He said to him, “yes, Lord; you know that I love you.” Jesus said to him, “Tend my sheep.” He said to him a third time, “Simon son of John, **do you love me?**” And he said to him, “Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.” Jesus said to him, “Feed my sheep. Very truly, I tell you, when you were younger, you used to fasten your own belt and to go wherever you wished. But when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go.” (He said this to indicate the kind of death by which he would glorify God.) After this he said to him, “Follow me.”

John 21:1-19

Will you pray with me. Beckoning God, you call to us every day, whether we hear you or not. You call us to love you as we love one another. We say we do, and then.... sometimes we don't.... love one another.... or even give you a second thought in the busyness of our daily doings. So we come to worship to be reminded of what's important in life. Give us a heads up again this day, O God, that we can answer that question, "Do you love me?" in the affirmative. Amen.

I was planning to focus on fish this morning in my sermon. Fish are a big deal in Christian theology... in the New Testament... in Jesus' teaching about who he was, what he came to do, and why he did any of it. In our text that Laci read,

Jesus makes a big deal out of going fishing and eating fish. His “fish stories” are peppered throughout the Gospels. I won’t detail them this morning.

But it seems to me Jesus was the holy Julia Child of his day! His passion was food and feeding people... in all ways... feeding their souls, their minds and their bodies. And fish keep showing up in Jesus’ kitchen of life... then and now.

Fish... who knew they could hold so many mysteries of faith, reveal the tales of the abundance of God’s table, and be the visual aid Jesus used so often to get across his message!

You probably know the story of how the simple picture of two lines drawn in the sand that look like a fish represent the Christian faith. “The figure of the fish was first drawn by early Christians in the time of persecution as a mark of identity and it appears in early Christian iconography. [One person would draw a curved line in the sand. And if the person they were talking to drew another curved line underneath it that crossed the first one, so that it looked like a simple drawing of a fish, they knew they were both followers of the Way of Jesus. You see them on bumper stickers on people’s cars all the time. Sometimes I wear one around my neck, like today, not to let people know that I like fish, but that I identify myself as a Christian.]

The first letters of the Greek words [*Iesous Christos Theou Uios Soter*] ‘Jesus Christ, God’s Son, Savior’ also make up the word *fish* or *ichthus* in Greek.”^[1]

The second half of the reading for today focuses not on fish, but on love. Here it is – John 21:15-19.

In our text for this morning from the Gospel of John, Jesus asks Simon Peter three times, "Do you love me?" And three times, Simon Peter says, "Yes, of course I love you!" And Jesus commands him to take care of his sheep. We know, two thousand years later, Jesus doesn't mean four-footed sheep, but each one of us.... each one of the people Simon Peter came in contact with. To show love is to tend others, and to feed them in all ways.

We don't see much of that going on nowadays, do we? At least we don't see much of it in the news. We're scrapping with one another.... in our country in our politics and around covid mask mandates.... around the world.... in our communities.... sometimes in our families.... maybe even in church sometimes.

Unfortunately, we seem to be doing a lot more scrapping than loving right now. I think about this a lot. Maybe you do, too. In Ukraine, we are witnessing a

people who so passionately love their homeland they are continuing to fight for it, and die for it, rather than turn it over to a dictator.

"Do you love me?" Jesus asks Simon Peter. And Simon Peter immediately says he does, and gets annoyed when Jesus asks him the same question three times. I wonder if Jesus might be thinking under his breath, "Peter, Peter, Peter..... I don't think you have a clue what it means to really love, to really tend, to really feed my sheep. You think you do, but you haven't been tested enough yet to grasp what it means to love unconditionally, fully and with passionate commitment."

And then.... Jesus gets to the point that really hits home with me. He tells Peter, "When you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go." (Jn 21:18) Oh baby, that's the part I don't like to hear, now coming close to my seventy-fourth birthday.

I understand from the text that we're supposed to interpret this as a reminder of Jesus being nailed to a cross.... taken where he did not want to go.... led to his death. I get that. But what about now? Where are *we* being led that we'd rather not go? Who's got that belt tied around our waists, now or in the not-so-distant future?

Wait a minute! *I* want to be in control of my life! *I* want to decide where I'm going and how I'm going to get there! But sometimes it just isn't so. The older I become, the more I have to accept the realization that I'm not always going to be in control. As the years go on, I'm realizing I need to bloom where I have been planted -- at my age, in my ministry with all of you, with my aching back, and not the best eyesight. More and more I'm not going to be the one doing the planting of myself!

I can't imagine Jesus would have chosen where he was planted in the end. I've said before and continue to wonder why he didn't just marry Mary Magdalene and have a couple of children and go out into the desert, maybe doing a little preaching now and then, but living a long, rich life with the Mrs. and their children and grandchildren. But, that wasn't to be so. Jesus had to bloom right where he was planted, even if it was being nailed to a cross and hung out to dry.

HOW can this be a good story? HOW can we bloom where we are planted when we don't like the soil we're stuck in? I don't know about you, but I keep waiting for things to get back to normal, when I'll be more in control of myself. Back to normal, I say, why can't we *get back to normal?*

I want to read you a poem by Richard Jones entitled, "Normal -- Tent Revival, 1957".

When things get back to normal
God will put on black robes and ascend to the mercy seat
to judge the world, the ruined cities, the devastated hills,
the living and the risen dead.
When things get back to normal,
He'll open the Book of Life and read what each [one] has done,
said, and written, reciting our words and deeds to the angels
to see if there is any forgiveness like honey on our tongues.

When things get back to normal
all will stand before God and be burned like dead branches
or blessed with the incomprehensible fire of mercy.

When things get back to normal,
we will be standing on the threshold of heaven,
a kingdom of singing where at last we will learn
the meaning and purpose of poetry.

Back to normal.... I've come to the conclusion since the beginning of the covid pandemic in early 2020, and now in the midst of the world's struggle to hold onto democracy, rather than give in to dictatorship, that it's never going to happen. We can't get BACK to normal. Each day is a NEW normal. And the sooner we accept that fact of life, the easier it will be to bloom where we are planted.... even though it might not be in a lovely garden, but in an annoying patch of weeds, or in a stubborn crack in a broken sidewalk.

Jesus' "new normal" was as a savior for those of us who call ourselves Christians, not just as senior citizens with aching backs, failing eyesight and a longing for the good ole days when these pews were full, and Sunday School and Boy Scout gatherings were rich and well attended.

But our "new normal" can still thrive on holy fish and Jesus' love.

Here's two closing thoughts for today – first, Jesus was the master chef, the holy Julia Child of his day – focusing on food, and specifically on fish, as a way to “hook” people into his message.

Second, Jesus asked Simon Peter if he loved him three times. And three times, Simon Peter answered that of course he loved him. And Jesus said, and I paraphrase here -- "Show me. Show me how much you love me. Take care of others. Give them something to eat. Tend to them, wherever they are in life, wherever they have been planted.... as you say you tend to me, even as I am being planted where I did not plan to bloom."

Love one another. Bloom wherever you've been planted.... Bloom with gusto and good humor. Bloom with grit and a grin. Bloom, that others might follow your blossoming until we are all thriving in a garden together, tended by God. Love one another as you are loved. And, oh, by the way, along the way, never stop asking the question, “Do you want to go fishing?”

Let the people say, "Amen."

Federated Church in Thomaston
United Church of Christ United Methodist Church
All Are Welcome
Sunday, May 1, 2022 – Third Sunday of Easter

Rev. Dr. Susan Stonestreet, Pastor Alice Billheimer, Organist/ Choir Director
Lector: Laci DeVarney

Please be respectfully silent once our worship service has begun.

An asterisk () indicates where you are invited to stand.*

***Bold print** indicates that the people speak these responses & prayers.*

GATHERING FOR WORSHIP

Welcome and Announcements

Prelude Morning Song -- Felix Mendelssohn

Pastor: Generous God, you give us life, and hold out the hand of fellowship to us.

People: You stand with us in our distress, and rejoice with us in our joy.

All: We take seriously our call to extend this blessing to all those we know now and will meet in the days to come. Let us worship God!

***Opening Hymn** “For the Beauty of the Earth” #92 (Blue Hymnal)

A Prayer of Confessions & Words of Affirmation

A Moment of Silence

SERVICE OF THE WORD

Scripture Reading

***Gloria Patri No. 70 Glory Be to the Father....**

Message “Do you love me” Rev. Dr. Susan Stonestreet

***Hymn of Meditation** “Jesus Calls Us” #398 (Blue Hymnal)

RESPONDING IN FAITH

Sharing Our Joys and Concerns with God and Each Other

Pastoral Prayer & The Lord’s Prayer....

Our Father who art in Heaven, hallowed be Thy name. Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, on Earth as it is in Heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors, and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil for thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever, Amen.

Offertory Just a Closer Walk with Thee -- hymn tune based on an American folk melody

***Doxology No. 95 Blue “Praise God From Whom All Blessings Flow....”**

***Prayer of Dedication**

Service of Holy Communion (see insert)

***Closing Hymn** “For the Healing of the Nations” #428 (Blue Hymnal)

Benediction

Postlude Minuet-Finale -- Johann Sebastian Bach

Revised Common Lectionary Readings for Sunday, May 8, 2022

Acts 9:36-43; Psalm 23; Revelation 7:9-17; John 10:22-30

Especially we continue to hold in prayer our Ukrainian brothers and sisters....

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, 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... And for Arlene from NH

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!

ANNOUNCEMENTS

Thursday-5/5/22.....10:00 am – 2:00 pm: Quilters
Sunday-5/8/22.....**MOTHER’S DAY**.....9:30 am: Worship Service
Suggested Food Pantry Donation.....Tuna Fish

The flower arrangement this week is given for all the Grandchildren from Nance Brown.

Deacons for May, 2022: Dave Billheimer and Doug Schroeder

Reminders for next Sunday, May 8, 2022:

Greeter/Usher: Doug Schroeder and Kurt Leidenroth
Host:

Coffee

Lector: Sandra Caron

Flowers:

Collection Total for Sunday, April 24, 2022:

Pledges - \$1856.00
Loose - \$ 235.00 of which \$100.00 each is designated for Muriel and Fred.
Investment Income -\$ 513.00 NE conference UMC dividend.
Total - \$2604.00

The 2022 weekly budgeted operating cost for the Church and parsonage is \$1623.00 per week.

“There remains something subtle, intangible and inexplicable. Veneration for this force beyond anything that we can comprehend is my religion.”

~ Albert Einstein

**Federated Church of Thomaston
United Church of Christ
&
“United Methodist Church
Together Since 1929**

Sunday, May 1, 2022

*“The most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious.
It is the source of all true art and all science.”*

~ Albert Einstein

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To contact the pastor via e-mail: freerangepastor@gmail.com

WiFi password is #1Church

^[1]Hoyt L. Hickman, Don E. Saliers, Laurence Hull Stookey, James F. White, *The New Handbook of the Christian Year*, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1992, p. 283-284.