

“Sunday words” for May 22, 2022

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

It’s pear season! I like pears.... when they’re ripe and juicy and sweet. I don’t like them when they’re still hard or when they’re over ripe and mushy. I didn’t know how to tell when a pear is ripe... before this past week. They stay pretty hard for quite a while. How’s a person to know when they’re ripe? So, I did what we do nowadays when we want to learn something – I “googled it”.... I found out pears ripen from the inside out, not outside in.... like bananas. When the stem end gets just slightly soft, a pear is ripe. Who knew?

And so, I got to thinking.... about people, about each of us, about how we treat one another, about how I, dare I say it, judge others and how they judge me. We’re a judging lot, aren’t we? Maybe that’s why we seem to be in such a sorry state now in our country and around the world – using hateful, unkind words about one another, carrying prejudices about one another because of our religious practices, our politics, our personal relationships, our color....

We tend to judge from the outside in, rather than considering what’s inside first and then coming to conclusions about a person’s motives, ideas, beliefs, etc. Maybe if we stopped in our thinking tracks when we pass judgments on another’s words and behaviors, and considered what inside of them makes them say and commit harmful, dangerous, even deadly actions, we could move forward in more positive ways. What do you think?

There was another major hate crime this past week in a grocery store in Buffalo, New York. Ten people were killed. Three more were injured. The fellow who committed this atrocious act apparently believes in the “replacement theory,” which conveys the idea that white people are going to be wiped out because black people have more children. I know, it’s hard to grasp, isn’t it? What has gone on *inside* this person to lead him to commit this *outward* deadly act? What caused him to have a hardened heart inside, so hardened that he was willing to kill those unlike him outside?

I wasn’t able to get a “Spring meditation” written and sent out this past week because I couldn’t get my mind off this horrific news of senseless killing once again. I just had to sit with it. Then, I read about how to tell if a pear is ripe – from the inside out, not outside in – and I started to wonder what the world would be like if we could begin to consider one another from the inside out, not outside in.... What do you think?

Blessings to each one this cloudy Sunday morning.... I hope many of you can join me in worship this morning. We'll be thinking about hospitality, with Lydia, "a seller of purple goods and a worshiper of God," from the Book of Acts.... Susan
p.s. I'll try to get my sermon posted on my Facebook page, freerangepastor and the church's Facebook page, the Federated Church of Thomaston, later this afternoon...

"...come and stay at my home...."
A Sermon for the Federated Church of Thomaston
Thomaston, Maine
Sunday, May 21, 2022
Rev. Dr. Susan Stonestreet
Scripture: Acts 16:9-15

And a vision appeared to Paul in the night: a man of Macedonia was standing beseeching him and saying, "Come over to Macedonia and help us." And when he had seen the vision, immediately we sought to go on into Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them.

Setting sail therefore from Troas, we made a direct voyage to Samothrace, and the following day to Neapolis, and from there to Philippi, which is the leading city of the district of Macedonia, and a Roman colony.

We remained in this city some days, and on the sabbath day we went outside the gate to the riverside, where we supposed there was a place of prayer; and we sat down and spoke to the women who had come together.

One who heard us was a woman named Lydia, from the city of Thyatira, a seller of purple goods, who was a worshiper of God. The Lord opened her heart to give heed to what was said by Paul. And when she was baptized, with her household, she besought us, saying, "If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come to my house and stay." And she prevailed upon us. Acts 16:9-15

Pray with me. Hospitable God, help us to accept your invitation into your household. Remind us that worship doesn't always happen in a church. Help us to remember that our hearts can be open to you in more ways than we might imagine. Surprise us again with your open door policy this day. Amen.

Can you remember when you first realized that you believed in God? I don't mean when you first checked "Protestant" on a form which asked you to indicate your "religious preference." I mean when you first had a deep and genuine sense that you believed in God?

Some people say they never had a deep and genuine sense that they believed in God... until they were near death. When I'm meeting with a family after the death of their loved one – which I've been doing a lot lately because the local funeral homes have been calling me to officiate graveside services for individuals who have no church home – one of my first questions is always, "Did your loved one believe in God?" And I've yet to have a family answer, "No." to that question. They always say "Yes! My loved one didn't go to church, but they believed in God."

Our text for this morning details a story of Paul, who had a deep and genuine sense of belief in God, first as a Jew who knew well the Jewish law, and then as a follower of Jesus. We'll save for another time the story of Paul's conversion which led him from being a persecutor of the followers of Jesus to be the first proclaimer of Jesus after his resurrection. In the text we consider this morning, Paul had an encounter with a woman who also had that same deep and genuine sense of belief in God. The text says simply she was "a worshiper of God." (Acts 16:14)

Paul had a vision in the text Dave read from Acts this morning. Even though this vision did take place in the middle of the night, it wasn't a dream. The Greek word used, *hor-ah-ma*, is not the word for dream in Greek. A vision, in the biblical sense, is "something gazed at, a supernatural spectacle, stared at intently." It can be an "experience in which a personage, thing, or event appears vividly or credibly to the mind, although not actually present, often under the influence of a divine or other agency." (from iPhone Dictionary)

And in this vision Paul saw a man who beseeched him to come to Macedonia to help them. So he took the vision to heart and sailed with his companion to Macedonia, "concluding that God had called [them] to preach the gospel to them." (Acts 16:10) They arrived in Philippi, the leading city in the district of Macedonia, and after some days, on the sabbath, they went outside the gate of the city, down by the river, where they "supposed there was a place of prayer." (Acts 16:13)

This was a novel situation for Paul. Generally, when he entered a new town he would find the synagogue and use his privilege to address the Jewish congregation. Presumably there was no synagogue in Philippi. By Jewish law, if there had been ten male Jews permanently living there, the quorum required by Jewish law, it would have been enough to constitute a synagogue. As it was, it was left to a small group of women to maintain a limited form of worship and prayer.

So Paul and his companion walked outside the gates of the city and gathered by the river with this group of women who had come there to pray. One of them was named Lydia. She is the only one of the women named in the story. She was "a seller of purple goods, who was a worshiper of God" the text tells us. (Acts 16:14)

Purple cloth goods were a luxury that only the very wealthy could buy in those days. The expensive dye for the cloth came from Lydia's home city, Thyatira. So she was probably a businesswoman of some standing and wealth since a considerable amount of capital was needed to trade in such goods.

As a "worshiper of God," Lydia was probably a Gentile (like us!) who believed in God and followed the moral teachings of scripture. But she also could have been a Jew, as much as a woman could be a Jew in those days without the support and standing of a man to give her credence as a Jewish wife.

An amazing thing happened when Paul and his companion sat down with Lydia and her companions -- "The Lord opened [Lydia's] heart to give heed to what was said by Paul." (Acts 16:14) The Lord opened her heart -- what DOES that mean? It doesn't say that Paul preached and THEN the Lord opened her heart. It says the Lord opened her heart and THEN she heeded Paul's words. She was laid open in her heart to pay attention to Paul's words and to take them in.

The heart, *kar-dia* in Greek, is spoken of often in both the Hebrew Scriptures and in the New Testament as "the center of inner life, the source or seat of all forces of the soul and spirit." We send "heart-felt" wishes to people in times of sorrow or loss. I "learn by heart" passages of scripture. To open one's heart is to let in the light of God and to risk revealing one's inner most thoughts.

I was forty-one before God opened my heart to take heed, to pay attention, to words of scripture. We don't know how old Lydia was. Beyond this particular chapter and these particular verses of Acts, we know nothing more of her. But the text tells us she did one more thing after Paul baptized her and her household. She said to Paul and his companion, "If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come to my house and stay." (Acts 16:15) The text then reads, "And she prevailed upon us." Some translations say she urged, or besought Paul and his companion.

These last words of the passage are curious to me. The Greek verb used here is *par-ak-al-eh-o*. It means to call near, to invite, or to force or compel or urge forcefully or irresistibly. The author of Acts could have used a verb like invite, or convince, or ask to get across the idea that Lydia welcomed Paul and his

companion into her home, but instead he used a verb that implies more force or some pressure on Lydia's part.

I was in sales work for fifteen years with American Express before I began seminary. I have a great dislike for pushy sales people. Lydia was in sales. This passage leads me, as a former seller of investments, to believe she used pretty forceful words to get Paul to accept her hospitality.

What are we to make of this? Our ongoing theme *here*, in this church, is one of hospitality -- inviting others into our church and our lives to share space and time and attention. But I think we're a little more laid back in our hospitality than Lydia was with Paul and his companion!

Lydia "prevailed" upon Paul to come to her house and stay. "If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come to my house and stay." (Acts 16:15) The verb for "judge" here can have a legal meaning, but it also can mean to "distinguish" or "decide." Perhaps Lydia is asking, "Can you distinguish my faith in God, Paul? If you can, please come and stay at my house so I can show you hospitality and we can pray together."

Perhaps what we learn in this text is this: Lydia's *heart* is opened, Paul's *mind* is opened, and thus the *door* is then opened wide for these people to come together in prayer and faith and trust -- to form the first church in Europe, and the first started by a woman.

If Paul had not had his vision telling him to go to Macedonia,
if Lydia's heart had not been opened to hear Paul's words,
if Paul had not accepted Lydia's forceful invitation to stay at her home,
we might not be gathered here this morning in a Christian worship service! For this was the first time Paul moved west into Europe to spread the word of Jesus's Way.

Opening one's *heart* to God, opening one's *mind* to new ideas, opening one's *door* to a stranger can lead to all kinds of new experiences and new revelations! But I've been struggling with all of this in the last few days because in this past week, we have learned of a different revelation – a young man killing ten innocent people and injuring three other innocent people in a grocery store in Buffalo, New York. Supposedly he went on this killing spree because he feared people of color and believed in the notion of "replacement theory." This is a white supremacist belief that non-whites will eventually replace white people because they have higher birth rates.

It's hard for me to grasp this notion, this revelation. I hope it's hard for you to grasp it, too. We, as people of faith, as people who profess that we follow the ways of Jesus, need to do everything we can to open our doors and our hearts to people of every color, all ethnic origins, all those who might not look just like us.

Because it's like this.... It's about hospitality, folks! It's about the hospitality of God inviting us into God's household, no matter who we are, or where we've been, or what the color of our skin might be. Jesus was a Jew, a Middle Eastern Jew, who had to have had dark skin. He would have looked very different from us white Protestants.

I asked you when I began a few minutes ago if you could remember when you first realized you believed in God. If you haven't been able to put your finger on that memory in these moments, I hope you'll spend some time thinking about that this afternoon and throughout this next week.

How and when did God "open your heart" to hear the words of scripture with new ears, to live in faith the way Jesus taught his early followers to live? Opening up to all the possibilities of new life and new relationship which God offers us through a wide open door is a gift of faith to be cherished, and to be shared. It is to be shared with all of us, no matter the color of our skin....

Let the people say, "Amen."

Federated Church of Thomaston
United Church of Christ United Methodist Church
All Are Welcome
Sunday, May 22, 2022

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

We ask that you are respectfully silent once our worship service has begun.

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

***Bold print** indicates that the congregation speaks these responses and prayers.*

GATHERING FOR WORSHIP

Welcome and Announcements

Prelude Grant us Thy Peace -- Charles Gounod

Call to Worship:

Leader: God of all nations and peoples, may our gathering in your name this day be marked with wideness of your embrace,

People: with the welcome of your love, and with our eager receptiveness to your ways.

All: Send your Holy Spirit to flow among us as a life-giving river, granting us and all creation your peace. Let us worship God!

***Opening Hymn** "Happy the Home When God Is There" 445 Blue Hymnal

A Prayer for Guidance (see insert)

A moment of silence....

SERVICE OF THE WORD

Scripture Reading Acts 16:9-15

***Gloria Patri** No. 338 Red

Message "...come and stay at my home..." Rev. Dr. Susan Stonestreet

***Hymn of Meditation** Blue "Close to Thee" 407 Blue Hymnal

RESPONDING IN FAITH

Sharing Our Joys and Concerns With God and Each Other

Pastoral Prayer followed by 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 Meditation on the traditional hymn tune "Greenwell"

***Doxology** No. 95 Blue

Prayer of Dedication

***Closing Hymn** "Shall We Gather at the River" 723 Blue Hymnal

Benediction

Postlude Trumpet Tune -- Jeremiah Clarke

Revised Common Lectionary Readings for Sunday, May 29, 2022
The Sunday before Memorial Day
Acts 16:16-34; Psalm 97; Revelation 22:12-14, 16-17, 20-21; John 17:20-26

“We know almost nothing about Lydia [in our text this morning], but what we know fascinates us. Who was this woman making her way independently in a world run by men? Who was this Gentile who sought the God of Judaism? The text tells us only that she was a ‘seller of purple goods, who was a worshiper of God.’ However, in just those two phrases, Scripture with its stunning brevity shows us that work and worship both had their place in the life of this remarkable, busy woman.” ✍ Ronald Cole-Turner in *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Vol. 2

PRAYER LIST

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, And Rev. Wayne Sawyer

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

Sunday-5/22/22.....9:30 am: Worship Service

Suggested Food Pantry Donation.....Canned
Vegetable

The flowers this week are given by The Hernandez Family in memory of Galo III's
Dad, Galo Hernandez Jr. for his birthday.

Deacons for May, 2022: Dave Billheimer and Doug Schroeder

Reminders for next Sunday, May 29, 2022:

Greeter/Usher: Doug Schroeder and Kurt

Leidenroth

Coffee

Host:

Lector:

Jackie

Harjula

Flowers:

Collection Total for Sunday, May 15, 2022:

Pledges - \$846.00

Loose

- \$ 49.00

Total - \$895.00

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

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

Sixth Sunday of Easter

*"The moments when we meet and reckon with contradictions
are turning points where we either enter or evade the mystery of God."*

~ Parker Palmer, Quaker, author, educator, and
activist

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