

“Sunday Words” for May 23, 2021

Good morning from a semi-sunny/cloudy hill in Rockport!

Last Sunday I was thinking about changes. This Sunday I’m thinking about repetition, beginning with a confession – my sermon this morning is mostly a repetition of the sermon I delivered, via cyberspace in my “simple on line worship service,” last year on May 31st. Repetition is “the act of repeating, or doing, saying, or writing something again; repeated action, performance, production, or presentation.” (iPhone Dictionary)

Repetition is *not* helpful when it is a rote repeating of words with no context, and little thought or effort put into the importance of the recurrence of the original words. Repetition *is* helpful when it gives us a nudge to remember important things – biblical passages that hold great depth of meaning, i.e., the 23rd Psalm for some of us; reminders of important events of the past, i.e., Pentecost in the Christian tradition, Christmas Eve, Easter; the renewal of vows in marriage; the honoring of veterans who have died in the line of duty to their country.... So repetition can be a crutch for the lazy sermon writer.... or a profession of renewed faith in the traditions and texts and rituals of our lives.

A few quotes to affirm the value of repetition:::

“Constant repetition carries conviction.” ~ Robert Collier, 1885-1950, American author of self-help and New Thought metaphysical books in the 20th century

“It’s the repetition of affirmations that leads to belief. And once that belief becomes a deep conviction, things begin to happen.” ~ Muhammad Ali, 1942-2016, American professional boxer, activist, entertainer and philanthropist

“One can ascend to a higher development only by bringing rhythm and repetition into one’s life. Rhythm holds sway in all nature.” ~ Rudolf Steiner, 1861-1925, Austrian philosopher, social reformer, architect, esotericist, and claimed clairvoyant

“You affect your subconscious minds by verbal repetition.” ~ W. Clement Stone, 1902-2002, businessman, philanthropist and New Thought self-help book author

“Whatever we plant in our subconscious mind and nourish with repetition and emotion will one day become a reality.” ~ Earl Nightingale, 1921-1989, American radio speaker and author, dealing mostly with the subjects of human character development, motivation, and meaningful existence

“Any idea, plan, or purpose may be placed in the mind through repetition of thought.” ~ Napoleon Hill, 1883-1970, American self-help author who believed that fervid expectations are essential to improving one’s life

“This is the lesson that history teaches: repetition.” ~ Gertrude Stein, 1874-1946, American novelist, poet, playwright, and art collector

“Repetition for no reason is a sign of carelessness or pretentiousness, but there are plenty of good reasons to repeat words and phrases.” ~ Steven Millhauser, 1943-present, American novelist and short story writer

What are the repetitions in your life that sustain you and keep you hopeful?

Blessings to each one this Sunday morning.... Susan

p.s. I’ll copy below my sermon and text. Due to technical error (rather the challenges of this computer user!) I can’t copy the bulletin for this morning’s service! I will post the text and my sermon on my Facebook page, freerangepastor, and on the church’s Facebook page, the Federated Church of Thomaston, later today.... And my amazing webmaster, Phil, also posts these complete “Sunday words” on my website www.freerangepastor.org under the sermon archives tab.

p.s.s. Let Alice or me know if you have suggestions for hymn choices or other music for our worship services.... We’ll do our best to meet your needs and desires....

“all together in one place”

A Sermon for the Federated Church of Thomaston,

Maine

2021

Rev. Dr. Susan Stonestreet

Sunday, May 23,

Scripture: Acts 2:1-21

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. Amazed and astonished, they asked, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts

of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power." All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, "What does this mean?" But others sneered and said, "They are filled with new wine."

But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them, "Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say. Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o'clock in the morning. No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel: 'In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams. Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy. And I will show portents in the heaven above and signs on the earth below, blood, and fire, and smoky mist. The sun shall be turned to darkness and the moon to blood, before the coming of the Lord's great and glorious day. Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.'" Acts 2:1-21

Will you pray with me. Amazing, surprising God, remind us of the true meaning of Pentecost today. Help us to remember we *are* the church Jesus came to inspire us to start, even though he himself was a devout Jew. Teach us to be the church you would have us be in the best ways in these hard times. Tap us with your Holy Spirit this day, O God, for we long to be touched and sent out to do your will in our tender world that is hurting in so many ways. Amen.

I think I've mentioned before that I heard Archbishop Desmond Tutu speak some years back at a preaching conference in Atlanta. Archbishop Tutu started out by saying, "When I get up to preach I always remember the story about the old minister who had gone to bed with his wife. As they lay there in the dark, she took his hand and said, 'Oh honey, I can't sleep. Preach me one of your sermons.'" Then Archbishop Tutu and all of us laughed and laughed, and all knew it was true – we work hard not to put our congregations to sleep each Sunday. Some days that's a real challenge, depending on the Scriptural text we're talking about and depending on our preparation and skill in delivery! There's a term thrown about in clergy circles – it's the "Saturday night special" – and it's not about a firearm of any kind. It's about sermons written on late Saturday nights to be delivered in less than twelve hours!

I was taught in seminary it's o.k. to use some humor and to tell a joke infrequently in a sermon, but Archbishop Tutu obviously had different instruction in the craft of sermon writing, because his sermon was full of jokes and stories and

fun. It was also full of the wisdom and goodness and grace of God. If there was ever a man full of the Spirit of God, it is Desmond Tutu. It was a gift just to be in the presence of the man and most likely a once in a lifetime experience for me.

One of his stories was about one of his grandchildren. He said not long ago his wife was standing next to one of them while the little boy was signing pieces of paper and handing them back to other children. She asked him what he was doing, and he said, "I'm signing autographs." She said, "Why are you doing that?" He said, "Grandpa signs autographs." She said, "Yes, but your Grandpa has done many things." He said, "What has Grandpa done?"

Now Grandma Tutu probably didn't launch into a lecture about how Grandpa is one of the most well-known and respected world wide peacemakers of modern times, but in the innocence of childhood we can see the gift of modeling behavior, even if it is slightly displaced as it was for Archbishop Tutu's grandson.

And on the day of Pentecost, we are reminded of the importance of modeling behavior –

the behavior that demonstrates the best of the best of the Christian church –
the all inclusive call to people of every nation, every tongue, every race to meet and converse in the language of God –

the language of God that surpasses all knowledge and trumps all our differences in doctrine, in action, in faith –

so we might truly begin to understand one another.

That seems like a pipe dream too often, doesn't it?

With violence erupting again in the Middle East and a very fragile cease fire happening at the moment,

with the effects of a deadly virus that has killed millions of people around the world,

with the on-going racial inequality and strife in our country, and

with our political figures at odds day in and day out....

how are we ever going to become kindred spirits with the Holy Spirit?

I don't know about you, but for me it is hard to imagine the scene of that first Pentecost after Jesus' death. Do we really think a time will come again when we will truly understand one another, listen to one another even if we speak different languages, and accept one another for whoever we are?

That first Pentecost took place when the Holy Spirit of God descended on this group of people from many nations who had come together in one place in Jerusalem for the annual "Festival of Weeks," the spring barley harvest. This was

a Jewish festival. “When the Jews were no longer an agriculture-based society, the rabbis gave the festival a new meaning, a commemoration of the giving of the Law of Moses on Mount Sinai. God shaped a new people through the establishing of a covenant.”^[1]

On *this* particular Pentecost, as it is detailed in our reading from the Book of Acts for today, something new and very strange happened. “As *we* celebrate Pentecost, it is important to keep in mind that we are telling the story of a *particular* day in our sacred history. It is not that God’s Spirit had never been given before.

Throughout scripture, we hear the story of how God has come near to humankind, strengthening and encouraging those who walk in God’s ways. But in this instance, the community was empowered in a new way. The *Christian* community began with an event celebrating God’s Spirit, present with the people. This community is then empowered by the Spirit to move out into the world, doing God’s work and telling the good news [of Jesus] to all.”^[2]

Would that it were that simple then or today. The Book of Acts offers many details of how things went in the earliest church, before there was doctrine, before there were mega-churches, before there were denominations all offering their own interpretation of what Jesus “*really* meant.”

If you’ve read the entire Book of Acts, and I recommend that you do, you know things did not always go smoothly in those first church committee meetings, coffee hours, and events like the ones we hold in this church. There was dissension. There were splits. There were disagreements about how the ministry of the young church should work.

Yet, through it all, there was God’s Holy Spirit reminding the people again and again of the reason for the existence of this new group of followers of those who would come to call themselves Christians. The reason was, and remains, Jesus – his ministry, his healings, his proclamations of the holy power of God in one’s life, his willingness to lay down his life for the sake of others, his love for God and for all those he touched then and touches now.

I witnessed the healing power of Jesus’ love and touch some years ago in the action of a little girl whose family didn’t even go to church. Standing in Seaview Cemetery in Rockport, I was officiating a graveside memorial service for a young woman who had died all too soon. I watched her daughter, little seven-year-old Lainey, minister to her grieving daddy and all who were present there with her beside her mommy’s new grave. Her daddy bent down to be on her level, and she

reached up and took his glasses off and wiped the tears from his eyes with a Kleenex. Then she put his glasses back on and smiled. It was a poignant moment that brought me back to the power of the Holy Spirit to act unexpectedly in the life of this non-religious family. It brought me back to some of Jesus' words of children.

From the Gospel of Mark, Jesus said, "Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it." [And Mark tells us] Jesus took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them." (Mk 10:14-16) At this graveside service, a young father and I and all who were grieving the loss of Lainey's mother, were invited into the kingdom of God and blessed by this little child who understood the power of love, the power in taking a simple action to dry her daddy's tears.

There was a dove release at this graveside service. First a lovely white wicker basket was opened and three white doves flew up into the tree shading the graveside where we stood. Then Lainey, with her daddy's help, opened a second basket and another white dove flew out and up into the tree where the first three were waiting for it. Then they all flew off westward toward Washington, Maine, where they "home." You see, the first three doves wouldn't fly home until the fourth one was with them.

On this day of Pentecost, we are invited to fly home, but not alone, not without someone at our side to dry the tears from our eyes.

On this day of Pentecost, we are given the opportunity to share in one another's burdens, whether we are together in person or not.

On this day of Pentecost, we are called to try again and again to understand one another, no matter who we are or where we are in life's journey in the midst of renewed racial and ethnic strife in our country and around the world and in the midst of the worldwide pandemic that has gone on for over a year now.

On this day of Pentecost, we are encouraged to be one in spirit, even if we are not of one mind, or one religion, or one political party, or one color. We are in this stormy, chaotic time together whether we like one another or not.

Through the humor and wisdom of Archbishop Desmond Tutu, and the tender and loving actions of a little girl towards her father at her mother's graveside, here's our lesson for this day of Pentecost – Our call as people of faith is to wait for and with one another, to wait for and with *allothers* in need of God's

mercy and grace, as we laugh together and dry one another's tears that we might fly into God's kingdom together, one in the Spirit.

On this day of Pentecost, let the people say, "Amen."

^[1]From *Seasons of the Spirit Congregational Life for Lent-Easter*, May 31, 2009, p. 132.

^[2]*Ibid.*