

“Sunday words” for May 30, 2021

Good soggy Sunday morning from a hill in Rockport!

It is good to be back into some degree of “normalcy,” whatever that means now as we move into a time of loosened restrictions and a chance to see people’s faces once again, not just their eyes peering over their masks. Almost daily I remind myself of how fortunate I am to be here, to have a roof over my head that doesn’t leak, to have food in my refrigerator, always, to know that the birds will surround me with their colorful promise of the rainbow of God’s presence in my life. Do you have such a place in your life? I am so aware that for some, this place has to exist only in their heads, in their memories, in their hopes for the future -- a sanctuary that comes in many forms, no matter the despairs and difficulties of each day and night. In our text for today from the Gospel of John, religious leader Nicodemus comes to Jesus “in the dark of night” for spiritual enlightenment. Spiritual enlightenment – what does it mean to you? Do you seek it? Do you believe in it? Let me know your thoughts.

It is also the day before Memorial Day. This weekend is the beginning of the Summer season in Maine – with clogged roads, clogged grocery stores, and clogged sidewalks. Being a quiet introvert, I don’t welcome all this noisy clogging, but I do know how to get away from it. Do you? Where are your quiet spots, your havens from the challenges of the Summer season in our little corner of the world? I know, I know.... more people here in the Summer bring business and prosperity in much needed ways. I hold on to that reality as best I can as I sit in traffic trying to drive through Rockport and Camden, Rockland and Belfast.

Read all below as you wish and will. Just come, just seek, and you never know what you might find out about yourself and those around you in these coming months.

Here’s a few thoughts to ponder this day, in light of our reading of John 3:1-17 this morning....

Hafiz, 14th century -- "I wish I could show you, when you are lonely or in darkness, the astonishing Light of your own Being."

Friedrich Nietzsche, 19th century -- "[The one] who has a why to live for can bear almost any how."

George Eliot (Mary Ann Evans), 19th century -- "It seems to me we can never give up longing and wishing while we are thoroughly alive. There are certain things we feel to be beautiful and good, and we must hunger after them."

Elie Wiesel, "Night," 20th century -- "He explained to me with great insistence that every question possessed a power that did not lie in the answer."

Ann Voskamp, 21st century -- "But, someone, please give me--who is born again but still so much in need of being born anew--give me the details of how to live in the waiting cocoon before the forever begins?"

Blessings and love to all this soggy day, Susan

Federated Church in Thomaston
United Church of Christ United Methodist Church
All Are Welcome
Sunday, May 30, 2021 – Trinity Sunday & Memorial Day Sunday
Rev. Dr. Susan Stonestreet, Pastor Alice Billheimer, Organist/ Choir Director
Lector: Ursula Kruse-Vaucienne

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

TY to Galo, Frances, Doug and others for ringing our bell every night since early last year in honor and memory of all those who have served in so many ways to help those who have suffered from the covid virus. The last ringing will be tomorrow night at 8 p.m., Memorial Day. We hope to join them.

Prelude Let the Savior In -- from an old Dutch hymn melody

Call to Worship

Leader: People of faith, where shall we look for God?

People: Do we look to the heavens? Do we look into the eye of a storm? Where shall we look for God?

All: We look around and see that God is with us, where we have seen the God of creation, where the body of Christ is at work, where the Spirit is living and moving. Let us worship God!

***Opening Hymn** "America the Beautiful" (see insert)

An Invocation....

A Memorial Day Prayer of the People* –

**Eternal God, we gather in remembrance this day –
remembering lives lost, honoring sacrifices made, reflecting on dreams pursued.
May we be mindful of those who have died that we might walk freely in our land.
Guide our steps, that we may honor their sacrifice with lives of service, and actions of love.
As we reflect on the dreams represented in each life given, each war fought,
each effort pursued, transform us into reflection of your presence.
Live in us, that others may see in our actions the dream of your promised world –
a world of love, justice, and hope for all.
Amen.**

A Moment of Silence

Special Music “My Country ‘Tis of Thee” signed and sung

SERVICE OF THE WORD

Scripture Reading John 3:1-17

***Gloria Patri**

Message “He came to Jesus by night....” Rev. Dr. Susan Stonestreet

***Hymn of Meditation** “Now Thank We All Our God” (see insert)

RESPONDING IN FAITH

Sharing Our Joys and Concerns with God and Each Other

In remembrance of the several hundred black Americans who were murdered on May 31 and June 1, 1921 in Tulsa, OK as a result of what became known as the “Tulsa Race Massacre.” I don’t know about you, but I never read about this atrocity in my history classes in high school or college. I know about it now.... so I guess I would pray that we not turn a blind eye now that we have learned an obnoxious part of our American history that has been buried outside of our view until the 100th anniversary of this mass killing and destruction of an entire community of our black brothers and sisters.

In honor of Memorial Day and remembrance of all those who have died in wars over the centuries. With a show of hands how many of you have served in battle or lost family members who served in battle. Thank you.....

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 Variations on "Eternal Father, Strong to Save."
(Offering plates are placed in the back of the sanctuary. Thank you!)

***Doxology** No. 95 Blue

***Prayer of Dedication**

***Closing Hymn** "Holy, Holy, Holy" (see insert)

Benediction

Postlude Trumpet Tune -- attributed to Henry Purcell

**Revised Common Lectionary Readings for Sunday, June 6, 2021
Genesis 3:8-15; Psalm 130; 2 Corinthians 4:13-5:1; Mark 3:20-35**

*Our Memorial Day Prayer is "From *Special Services* by Mary J. Scifres. Copyright © 2011 by Abingdon Press. Reproduced by permission."

PRAYER LIST

Hold in your prayers all those affected by the corona virus and the families of those who have died from the virus.... **A**nd all those families affected by the use of addictive drugs and alcohol among their members.... **A**nd all those dealing with the ravages of cancer near and far..... **A**nd add a prayer for Tammy Whirty, a friend of Margie's, dealing with cancer challenges, and, from Blair, prayers for her friend Judith on the passing of her daughter, Lani, 42, from brain cancer, from Jackie a request for prayers for Kyle Cloudier, **and** continued deep prayers for Hank and Lucy as Hank endures his cancer journey with the help of Hospice and for "Cody," who doesn't live locally but needs prayers for guidance; Enid, Ann Foster, Carol Moss, Fred Bagnall, Harriet Williams, Julie Pollitt, Zeke Bryant, Sally Harjula Elliot, Trish Perry, Helmut Steger, John Flaherty, Doug and BJ Thomson, Heather Van Buskirk, and Michael and Gail in southern Maine

Please feel free to contact Susan by phone (207)322-1948 or by email freerangepastor@gmail.com to add or drop the names from the prayer list.

ANNOUNCEMENTS

Tuesday-6/1/21.....5:00-7:00

pm: Weight Watchers

.....7:00-9:00

pm: Music Jam

Sunday-6/6/21.....9:30
am: Worship Service

Suggested Food Pantry
Donation.....Rice

The flowers this week are given in remembrance of all those who have served to keep us free.

Deacon for June 2021: Jackie Harjula
Reminders for next Sunday,
6/6/21

Greeter/Usher: Frances Hernandez
Host: Lector: Julie Brooks
Flowers: Margie Kinney
Coffee

Collection Total for Sunday, May 16, 2021:
Pledges - \$ 490.00
Loose - \$ 44.00
Total - \$ 534.00

The 2021 weekly budgeted operating cost for the Church and parsonage is \$1623.00 per week.

“He came to Jesus by night...”
A sermon for the Federated Church of Thomaston
Thomaston, Maine
Sunday, May 30, 2021
Rev. Dr. Susan Stonestreet
Scripture: John 3:1-17

Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. He came to Jesus by night and said to him, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come

from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.” Jesus answered him, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.” Nicodemus said to him, “How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?” Jesus answered, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be astonished that I said to you, ‘You must be born from above.’ The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.” Nicodemus said to him, “How can these things be?” Jesus answered him, “Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?”

“Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. 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.”

John 3:1-17

Will you pray with me. God of the light, God of darkness, show us how to find in the dark of night what we fumble around for in the light of day. Remind us that clarity of belief does not come necessarily through Bible reading, but rather through lifelong experiential knowing. Amen.

“Life is short. And we do not have much time to gladden the hearts of those who travel the way with us. So, be swift to love and make haste to be kind. And may the blessing of God the source, Jesus the reconciler, and the Spirit who animates life be among us all.”^[1] Can I get an “Amen”?

I wish I could say those eloquent words were mine, but they were penned by the Swiss philosopher, poet and critic, Henri-Frederic Amiel and were published after his death in 1881. They might sound familiar, as I sometimes offer them as our benediction at the end of our Sunday services. Those words have helped me this week, as again, I have trudged my way through some understanding of, and uneasy appreciation for, the Christian theme for today and our text from the Gospel of John for today.

It is Trinity Sunday in the Christian tradition – meaning this is the day we are to focus on the theological concept of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. This is the Sunday when we are called to think about what the doctrine of the Trinity means to us – individually, as a church community, and as those who feel called to follow in the footsteps of Jesus as our teacher and guide.

It has been said that “of all the Christian dogmas, the doctrine of the Trinity enjoys the greatest reputation for obscurity and remoteness from common experience.”^[2] Further, “The doctrine of the Trinity is notoriously hard to understand. It is a human attempt to explain who the Christian church has understood God to be, on the basis of Scripture.”^[3]

Some of you know the Christian doctrine of the Trinity is one of the hardest for me to swallow.... mostly because I don't believe Christianity offers the *only* way to seek and find God. The Christian faith path guides ME, and many of you, but it doesn't, and isn't going to, guide every single person in the entire world.

So what does it mean.... really.... when we sing of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit EVERY Sunday in the Gloria Patri right after our Invocation and in the Doxology right after our offering? What does it mean to you? (get responses)

I sing it by rote memory, but honestly, do I believe what I'm singing? I don't know. I'm still seeking an answer to that question. But one of the most helpful writers to me in this seeking is Frederick Buechner. He writes of the Trinity, “The much-maligned doctrine of the Trinity is an assertion that, appearances to the contrary notwithstanding, there is only one God. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit means that the mystery beyond us [God], the mystery among us [Jesus], and the mystery within us [the Holy Spirit] are all the same mystery.

Thus the Trinity is a way of saying something about us and the way we experience God.... [Buechner goes on to say,] if the idea of God as both Three and One seems farfetched and obfuscating [or confusing], look in the mirror someday. There is (a) the interior life known only to yourself and those you choose to communicate it to (the Father). There is (b) the visible face, which in some measure reflects that inner life (the Son). And there is (c) the invisible power you have which enables you to communicate that interior life in such a way that others do not merely know *about* it, but know it in the sense of its becoming part of who they are (the Holy Spirit). Yet what you are looking at in the mirror is clearly and indivisibly the one and only you.”^[4]

I have to admit that I'm coming to the conclusion that the concept of the Trinity is a human INvention to help us explain and understand, to the limited degree that we can, what is totally beyond all our explaining and understanding.... The concept of the Trinity is not a sign of God's INTERvention into our lives. It is a DDescription of how we, as Christians, understand our faith in God. I know many others would not agree with me in my theological understandings here. But it's not up to *any one of us* to determine what God's plans are for *all of us*.

This takes me back to Amiel's words of truth and love – "Life is short. We do not have much time to gladden the hearts of those who travel the way with us. So, be swift to love, and make haste to be kind. And may the blessing of God the source, Jesus the reconciler, and the Spirit who animates life be among us all."

In other words, time is running out. What can we do to bring joy into the lives of those around us? And if we're lucky, or blessed, call it what you will.... maybe God, the creator of us all.... Jesus, our holy brother.... and the Spirit, the spark plug that ignites our being once God has created us, with the help of our mothers and fathers!....will help us get out of this life, if not alive, at least accepted and loved in spite of our fragile selves.

But maybe I'm making this too complicated. Maybe I should just say to myself, and accept the notion that "God IS love," Jesus is RADICAL love, and the Holy Spirit HANGS AROUND to help us get with the program!

The Trinity – a helpful concept? Maybe. Very much so to some of us. To others of us, it's a conundrum we don't spend a whole lot of time pondering. But on this particular Sunday, we're called to give it a whirl....

which leads me to our passage for today from the Gospel of John. It includes one of the most well known, if not THE most well known verse in all of the New Testament, "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) You've seen it everywhere – on bumper stickers, flashed across TV screens at sports events, posted on signs in people's front yards. It's everywhere.

Is it true? I don't have a clue.... Maybe it is true, but again, I know too many good, kind, loving, non-Christians to be able to affirm that unless you believe John 3:16 you're out of the club that's got a first class pass to God. Unlike Allegiant Airlines, where you have to PAY to sit down in the plane, I simply cannot believe God tells us we have to pay up before we sit down at the table of eternal life!

I don't mean to be flippant. I do mean to say I believe God is love, Jesus is radical love and the Holy Spirit hangs around to remind us the Christian faith is not a private club but a way, Jesus' way.... to be, to do, to love....

So.... there's this Nicodemus guy in our text for today – a learned, holy man of the Pharisee wing of the Jewish faith. He knew the scriptures he was to teach to others. He knew the sacred laws he was to follow. He was apparently well respected around the Temple.... so well respected he couldn't take the chance of being seen in the light of day going to this young upstart rabbi for a little spiritual counseling. “He came to Jesus by night...” (Jn 3:2) And then he had quite a time, trying his best, to understand what Jesus was trying to teach him about being born anew *from above*, about *believing* – not from book learning and facts of the human birth process, but from experiential knowing of spiritual wisdom that comes and goes where it wishes, like the wind....

I love Nicodemus. I love him because I think he's the role model we all need when we're struggling with many things – belief, what we are to do, how we are to deal with the traumas and tragedies of life, how we are to somehow understand what makes absolutely no sense to us in life.

When do those experiences most weigh us down? I don't know about you, but they way ME down in the dark of night – when I can't sleep, when I go over and over in my head conversations I've had that I wish had gone differently.... disagreements I've struggled with.... problems in ministry and beyond that trouble me. It's not in the light of day they smack me across the face, I'm too taken up in the minute details of each day's events for that. It's in the dark of night they have caused me, over twenty years of ministry, sleepless hours and cost me exhaustion the next day.

This holy Jewish man becomes a believer in Jesus to the point he is one of the two who come to bury Jesus' body after his crucifixion according to the writer of the Gospel of John. (Jn 19:38-40)

Talk about a conversion, an about face in one's belief system....

Talk about radical love in the face of religious conflict....

Talk about God's presence in human flesh then and now....

Talk about the Holy Spirit hovering in every dark corner of our lives....

Wow! Nicodemus is my guy.... pointing me in the direction of Jesus, who points me in the direction of God.

“May the blessing of God the source, Jesus the reconciler, and the Spirit who animates life be among us all this day.” And may Nicodemus lead us through the darkness of our times into the light of a new day.

Let the people say, “Amen.”

^[1]From *The Intimate Journal of Henri-Frederic Amiel*, 1868. Published after his death in 1881.

^[2]In *Homily Service*, Vol. 33, No.3, June, 2000, p. 47.

^[3]Donald K. McKim, *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Vol. 3, Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009, p. 26.

^[4]Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking, A Seeker's ABC*, revised and expanded, New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1993, p. 114.