

Good Sunday morning from a still half dark hill in Rockport....

I'm thinking about empathy this morning – “It is the ability to step into the shoes of another person, aiming to understand their feelings and perspectives, and to use that understanding to guide our actions. That makes it different from kindness or pity.” (from greatergood.berkeley.edu)

In the past week I've had the opportunity to experience empathy, or its opposite -- little or no appearance of caring, from a variety of people in the medical world due to my brother's receipt of a pacemaker for his heart at Maine Medical Center in Portland last Tuesday and his stroke (unrelated to the pacemaker insertion) on Thursday attended to at Pen Bay Hospital in Rockport.

I have been reminded this past week that empathy seems to come easily and naturally to some, and with great difficulty to others. And so I remind us all that the characteristics of a demonstration of empathy are these: Listen attentively, even though there might be reasons for you to be distracted by other things; look in the eye of the one in need of your empathy while listening to them – don't look at your watch or appear annoyed at their interruption; mirror back to the one in need of your empathy what they are saying to you; say comforting words, not words that indicate annoyance at the interruption of their need for empathy; somehow “make contact” with the distress of the person in need of your empathy.... And lastly, as at the beginning of this list – listen attentively.

I have to confess that there have been moments in my twenty years in ministry when I have appeared to have less empathy than I perhaps should have. We all have these moments – either because we're tired, or feeling overworked, or dealing with our own problems or simply needing to take a break from demonstrating empathy to the needs of others as we focus on our needs. And so, this week, I have been reminded of the gift of expressing empathy toward a person in need of my/your/our listening ear, attentiveness and caring response. My brother and I have experienced both tremendous empathy from some who have served us in the medical world this past week, and a few who seemed not to have a clue about what the word empathy means at all. May I fall into the first category and not the second moving forward. How about you?

I hope to see many of you in church this morning. I will *plan* to tape the sermon below to send out via Facebook later today. My apologies for not getting my sermon sent out two weeks ago. My thanks to the congregation for giving me a Sunday “off” last week, not knowing what was to come in the days following last Sunday!

Blessings to each one this first day of August.... Susan

"I am the bread of life"
A Sermon for the Federated Church of Thomaston
Thomaston, Maine
Sunday, August 1, 2021
Rev. Dr. Susan Stonestreet
Scripture: John 6:24-35

So when the crowd saw that neither Jesus nor his disciples were there, they themselves got into the boats and went to Capernaum looking for Jesus.

When they found him on the other side of the sea, they said to him, "Rabbi, when did you come here?" Jesus answered them, "Very truly, I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves. Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. For it is on him that God the Father has set his seal." Then they said to him, "What must we do to perform the works of God?" Jesus answered them, "This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent." So they said to him, "What sign are you going to give us then, so that we may see it and believe you? What work are you performing? Our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, 'He gave them bread from heaven to eat.'" Then Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world." They said to him, "Sir, give us this bread always."

Jesus said to them, "**I am the bread of life.** Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty."

John 6:24-35

Will you pray with me. Holy God, giver of bread, sustainer of life, comforter in all things, be among us in these moments of reflection. What IS the bread of life? Help us to discern your bread of life from a donut at Dunkin' Donuts. Amen.

Here these words from preacher Arthur John Gossip in 1929: "There are many who tell us these days [remember this is in 1929] with a noisy emphasis that the Church is an extraordinarily ineffective institution, an outworn absurdity that can quite safely be neglected in the living of our lives, and ignored altogether in our calculations of the things that really matter in the world. Some raucous and perspiring spirits, of course, go much further, declaring angrily that, worse than being merely stupid, it is a positive nuisance and a main hindrance to progress, inasmuch as, through its thin, far-off hopes and insubstantial dreams and fairy

stories of another life, it keeps doping people into tame and wicked acquiescence with things as they are, whereas they ought to be up on their feet, with a hot fury in their hearts, and breathing hard as they tug desperately to bring some semblance of order into this wild, topsy-turvy chaos of a world. Out of the way! they cry; and are quite cross about it. But, even apart from these exasperated folk, many who would like to believe in the Church are not sure that they do, and look at it a little queerly."^[1]

Gossip opened his sermon entitled, "How To Make Our Services Effective" with these words, almost one hundred years ago! Talk about prophetic speech! Here we are now, in the twenty first century, wondering what's going to happen to church participation as more and more people, in our country at least, identify themselves as "none's," meaning "none of the above" on any form that asks for their religious preference. How do we turn what Gossip described as an "extraordinarily ineffective institution and outworn absurdity" some one hundred years ago into a vibrant and valuable part of people's lives?

So here's another way to put that question: "Is Jesus YOUR 'bread of life,' or would you do better with a coffee and a donut from Dunkin' Donuts on Sunday morning and throughout your week?"

But really, how do we make this place, religion, the faith community a focus of people's lives? Any ideas? (get responses)

One response comes from a commentator of our passage from the Gospel of John for this morning. "Our hungers are so deep. We are dying of thirst. We are bundles of seemingly insatiable need, rushing here and there in a vain attempt to assuage our emptiness. Our culture is a vast supermarket of desire. Can it be that our bread, our wine, our fulfillment stands before us in the presence of this crucified, resurrected Jew? Can it be that many of our [earthly] desires are, in the eternal scheme of things, pointless? Might it be true that he is the bread we need, even though he is rarely the bread we seek? Is it true that God has come to us, miraculously with us, before us, like manna that is miraculously dropped into our wilderness?"^[2]

Whether Jesus is your cup of religious tea, or another form of spiritual substance quenches your thirst, my guess is all of us, **each one of us** is hungering, thirsting for "something more" than checking off our "to do" lists each day or counting the days until we can relax and "enjoy life."

A few years ago I had the privilege of co-officiating a memorial service for a friend with Rev. Abby Pettee, Interfaith Chaplain for Pen Bay Medical Center and

ordained Deacon of the Episcopal Church. My friend's wishes were that her service be eccumenical, meaning drawing on aspects of more than one religious path. And so, Abby and I drew from the Catholic Misal, the Episcopal Book of Common Prayer, and the UCC Book of Worship and created a service we hoped would be nourishing in some way for all present. The church was filled -- with Catholics, Episcopalians, Protestants, I'm sure a number of "none's," and probably a Baptist or two. Almost everyone came forward to receive Communion. We all sang Catholic hymns. I began the service with, "In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit," and made the sign of the cross. More than half of those gathered shared in making that sign with me. One of my friend's nephews said to me after the service that he was definitely raised Catholic, but that he felt we all had things to learn from other faith traditions, and that the service for his aunt certainly proved that.

Maybe this *is* what's missing in church that is causing the number of "none's" to go up and the number of church goers to go down. Maybe we need to understand and accept the fact that the bread we receive comes in many forms, and it's o.k. to like some of several different kinds of bread. Today it is Jackie's delicious Finnish bread which we will receive in holy communion! The final verse of our text for today from the Gospel of John reads, "Jesus said to them, '**I am the bread of life**. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.'" (John 6:35) Jesus is the "bread of life" for all who have a taste for what he offers. Each of us is called to discern what nourishes us. What nourishes *you*?

Martin Luther, German professor of theology, priest, author, composer, and a key figure in the Christian Reformation in the early 1500's wrote of Jesus this way: "In his life, Christ is an example showing us how to live; in his death, he is a sacrifice, satisfying for our sins; in his resurrection, a conqueror; in his ascension, a king; in his intercession, a high priest."

In today's vernacular this statement might go like this:

For some, it is Jesus as teacher and healer during his lifetime – who shows what it means to be "christ-like" in human behavior.

For some, it is Jesus in his death, in giving up of his life for humanity that forgiveness for human sin is found.

For some, it is Jesus resurrected, overcoming death and giving strength in times when death enters our personal worlds.

For some, it is Jesus ascended, sitting with God in judgment and in compassion which brings relief from human injustice and hatred.

For some, it is Jesus in his prayers, in his tears, in his acts of mercy for others as a caregiver who brings the greatest comfort in times of human tragedy and need.

All of these ways of believing in Jesus are authentic and life sustaining. Each of them speak of some aspect of Jesus' being which makes him both human, like, us and divine, like God.

Central to our faith in Jesus, no matter which of the ways I've listed above, is Holy Communion, the Lord's Supper. Bread is necessary for life – bread symbolizing all food and drink which we must have to survive. For John's early hearers and readers, the stories of their ancestors receiving "the manna in the wilderness" left them hungry for the source of this sustenance.

And so John tells us they said, "Sir, give us this bread always." (John 6:34) And so, each Sunday, we appear here and in one way or another repeat, "Sir, give us this bread always." And once a month we *act out* our receiving of this bread of life in our communion service – because it is not just *seeing* this bread and this fruit of the vine that gives us nourishment. We must *act it out*.

Bread sitting on the counter in the wrapper will not give us nourishment. It will get moldy, if it sits there long enough untouched. The eating and drinking of bread and juice which we enact each month in communion symbolically links us to those first followers of Jesus in ways which are impossible to receive unless they are acted out.

As the Bible is simply a religious history book if its message is not ingested and digested, so it is with the bread of life. Bread only provides nourishment if it is eaten. Jesus only provides sustenance if he is believed in and shines through our actions towards one another.

Which way of believing in Jesus is most life-giving for you? Is it in his teaching and healing during his time on earth? Is it in his giving of his life for the sins of humanity? Is it in his conquering of death? Is it in his judgment and compassion with God regarding injustice? Or is it in his pastoral care and deep feeling for all who are in need or crisis?

The Gospel of John preaches of Jesus' life-giving bread this way, "Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty." (John 6:35) May we never tire of saying, "Sir, give us this bread always." (John 6:34)

Let the people say, "Amen." Let us prepare to receive the Lord's Supper.

**Federated Church in Thomaston
United Church of Christ United Methodist Church
All Are Welcome
Sunday, August 1, 2021**

Rev. Dr. Susan Stonestreet, Pastor Alice Billheimer, Organist/ Choir Director
Lector: Mary Lou Steger

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 Meditation from a Monastery Choir -- Frederick Chopin

Call to Worship

Leader: Be with us, God of grace, as we open ourselves up to experiencing more of faith and more of life.

People: We long to grow in humility and patience, to grow in our understanding of how the body of Christ is knitted together.

All: Teach us how we can build each other up as your community, the Church. Let us worship God!

***Opening Hymn** "Guide Me, O Thou Great Jehovah 127 blue

An Invocation....

A Prayer of Confession & Words of Assurance (see insert)

A Moment of Silence

SERVICE OF THE WORD

Scripture Reading John 6:24-35

***Gloria Patri**

Message "I am the bread of life" Rev. Dr. Susan Stonestreet

***Hymn of Meditation** “Break Thou the Bread of Life” 599 blue

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 The Master Has Called Us (tune "The Ash Grove") Welsh melody

***Doxology No. 95 Blue**

***Prayer of Dedication**

Service of Holy Communion (see insert)

***Closing Hymn** “He Leadeth Me: O Blessed Thought” 128 blue

Benediction

Postlude "The Worship of God in Nature" -- Beethoven

Revised Common Lectionary Readings for Sunday, August 8, 2021
1 Kings 19:4-8; Psalm 34:1-8; Ephesians 4:25-5:2; John 6:35, 41-51

A thought from Arthur John Gossip, pastor and preacher, writing in the late 19th-early 20th centuries:

“There are many who tell us these days with a noisy emphasis that the Church is an extraordinarily ineffective institution, an outworn absurdity that can quite safely be neglected in the living of our lives, and ignored altogether in our calculation of the things that really matter in the world.”

Prayer List

Hold in your prayers all those affected by the corona virus 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 dealing with the ravages of cancer near and far..... And 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** 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 will be having brain surgery; Enid, Ann Foster, Carol Moss, Fred Bagnall, Harriet Williams, Julie Pollitt, Zeke Bryant, Sally Harjula Elliot, Helmut Steger, John Flaherty, Doug and BJ Thomson, Heather Van Buskirk, and **Gail and the rest of the family of Michael in southern Maine who died this past week....**

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 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

Tuesday-8/3/21.....5:00-7:00 pm: Weight Watchers
Sunday-8/8/21.....9:30 am: Worship Service
Suggested Food Pantry Donation..... Cereal

Deacon for August: Jackie Harjula
Reminders for next Sunday, 8/8/21

Greeter/Usher: Arlene Woodman Coffee
Host:

Lector: Margie Kinney

Flowers: Sandra Caron
Collection Total for Sunday, July 25, 2021:

Pledges - \$665.00
Loose - \$ 26.00
Rental - \$200.00 (WW of ME)
Total - \$891.00

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

^[1]Arthur John Gossip, from his sermon "How to Make Our Services Effective," which appears in *The Hero In Thy Soul: Being An Attempt To Face Life Gallantly*, New York: Charles Schribner's Sons, 1929, p. 144, reprinted by Kessinger Publishing, www.kessinger.net.

^[2]No immediate information for the source of this quotation.