

Good cool Sunday morning from a hill in Rockport....

It's the last Sunday of September and the first Sunday of Fall. Endings and beginnings, beginnings and endings.... the older I become the more I seem to pay attention to these milestones of living! Do you? And today, our theme is steadfast love – the steadfast love of God through it all – the endings and beginnings, the beginnings and endings. The trick, it seems to me, is to find a balance in all of it so I don't fall into darkness of mind in the midst of the endings, and into acceptance that the new beginnings don't last forever....

One of my favorite quotes from a theologian is this one by Dr. Luke Timothy Johnson that he wrote for his very large commentary on the New Testament, now in its third edition, *The Writings of the New Testament*. "The human mind is capable of holding in fragile equipoise many and logically conflicting ideas."

And isn't that true? Every day we are called to somehow hold the hard reality of the news of the day "in fragile equipoise," in balance.... with the not-so-hard to deny fragility of life, the beginnings and the endings, the ups and the downs of just l-i-v-i-n-g through each day. I find this challenge to become more challenging each day now – hard to balance, hard to not become cynical in light of the news, and hard to not escape into the dream of a new beginning for each of us into a time of peace, prosperity, goodwill and love for all people, not just for those who think exactly as we/I do.....

Yes, Dr. Johnson's words come to me most days now.... are we capable of holding it all in "fragile equipoise," the endings and the beginnings, the beginnings and the endings of life?

Join me in church this morning, one way or the other.... AND, I will try to get back to posting my sermon for the day later today.... I've taken a brief hiatus in these past few weeks and will try to step back into posting each Sunday again now – on both my personal Facebook page, freerangepastor and on the church's Facebook page, the Federated Church of Thomaston....

Blessings to each one this last Sunday of September and first Sunday of Fall.... Susan

"...steadfast love..."

A Sermon for the Federated Church in Thomaston

Thomaston, Maine
Sunday, September 25, 2022
Rev. Dr. Susan Stonestreet
Scripture: 107:1-3, 17-22

O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good;
for his **steadfast love** endures forever.
Let the redeemed of the Lord say so,
those he redeemed from trouble
and gathered in from the lands,
from the east and from the west,
from the north and from the south.

Some were sick through their sinful ways,
and because of their iniquities endured affliction;
they loathed any kind of food,
and they drew near to the gates of death.
Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble,
and he saved them from their distress;
he sent out his word and healed them,
and delivered them from destruction.
Let them thank the Lord for his **steadfast love**,
for his wonderful works to humankind.
And let them offer thanksgiving sacrifices,
and tell of his deeds with songs of joy.

Psalm 107:1-3, 17-22

Will you pray with me. Dependable and ever present God, we come to you longing for security in our unstable lives. We come desiring to know if you really are out there, somewhere, anywhere beyond our imaginings. O God, give us a sign. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts as we seek you out this day, be acceptable to you, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

What does it mean to be steadfast? (get responses) The word "steadfast" occurs twice in the nine verses from Psalm 107 that we read today. In the whole psalm of forty-three verses, the word "steadfast" occurs six times. In each case "steadfast" is linked to the love of God... the love of God for all who are or who have been in trouble in their lives in one way or another – from thirst and hunger of all kinds, from being a prisoner of many forms in darkness, from sinfulness in

word and deed, from physical adversity stemming from natural disaster, from wickedness and oppression.

It seems the bottom line of Psalm 107 is about giving thanks to God, in the midst of much turmoil and trauma, for God's steadfast love. Through thick and thin, God never fails. No matter the trial, no matter the loss, no matter the sickness of body or mind or heart, God's steadfast love is there for the taking... or rather... the receiving.

We don't have to reach out and look for and then grab God's love and hold onto it tightly so it doesn't fade away. That's a human trait, not a divine one. We have only to be open to receiving God's love in all its forms and functions in the midst of all our fits and starts and failings and frustrations. God's love never fails. God's love is forever. God's love is steadfast.

In these troubling times we're living in now, steadfast love sometimes seems like an imaginary thing, doesn't it? Is there much of anything at all that is truly steadfast?

Some words other than steadfast are used in the various translations and interpretations of this psalm. The King James Version uses "mercy" and then "goodness" and then "loving-kindness." The New Jerusalem Bible uses "faithful." The New International Version says God's love "endures forever," and that it is "unfailing," and "great." Eugene Peterson's *The Message* says God's "love never runs out," and that it is "marvelous." The last verse of Psalm 107 receives this interpretation from Peterson, "It's time you appreciated God's deep love." (Ps 107:43)

It's the Jewish translation that sticks steadfastly with "steadfast" throughout all the verses of Psalm 107. And the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible sticks steadfastly with the Jewish translation. Steadfast is as steadfast has and always will remain in the mind of God, in the heart of God for each of us, no matter *our* translation, our foolishness, our waywardness, or our unwillingness to believe it... "O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; for his steadfast love endures forever." (Ps 107:1)

The Hebrew word used for steadfast in this psalm is *CHE-sed*. In Jewish tradition and study the word *CHE-sed* is way bigger than our non-Jewish minds can fathom. I learned this from my Hebrew professor, Dr. Charles Tyer, and from my Old Testament professor, Dr. Ann Johnston, who was also my doctoral advisor. Dr. Tyer and Ann, who are both gone now, have been two of my most

valued mentors for learning what it means to understand and receive the *CHE-
sed* love of God.

I can only speak for myself, but I know as much as I might want to be steadfast in my care, in my work, in my personal life, in my love for another, for all of you... I fall down in my steadfastness sometimes. I realize I'm not very steadfast some days. In fact some days I feel downright the opposite of steadfast.

My computer thesaurus tells me the opposite of steadfast is wavering, indecisive, flickering, uncertain, undecided, vacillating, uncommitted. O.K., the confession for the day from your pastor – my faith in *God* is strong, but my faith in *myself* as a follower of Jesus is sometimes a little shakey -- wavering, indecisive, flickering, uncertain, undecided, vacillating, and uncommitted. Tell me I'm not the only one who has trouble with "commitment issues."

I get "the God thing." It's "the following Jesus thing" I tend to trip over and to which I keep having to remind myself to give more attention. I can *talk* the God piece quite well. After all, I've had seven years of seminary training and twenty-two years of ministry to help me know how to do that!

But lots of people now seem to have trouble discerning what it means to call oneself a Christian. We clearly do not all have the same understanding of what it means to be a Christian. For some, being Christian means to be exclusionary to all others who are not Christian in the way they are. For others of us, being Christian means doing whatever we can, day in and day out, to live out the radical love of Jesus for all people, no matter who they are. Our challenge is this – to hold onto that *steadfast radical love* of Jesus in all that we do.

It's walking the Jesus piece that causes me to stumble and scrape my faith-based nose. It's in trying to walk the Jesus piece that I'm reminded of the importance of humility and receiving God's steadfast love without condition – no matter my small, and large, personal missteps. For I do believe God forgives us for our insignificant, and our major, errors and wrongdoings.

This is the time to think about our failings and faults and how we will either carry them forward like heavy sacks... or crosses... on our backs, or leave them beside the spiritual road we all travel... so we can move forward more lightly and with more steadfastness in our faith. We do all travel that road, you know, whether we believe it or think about it or not.

From birth to death, from even before birth to after death, the road less travelled, it seems to me, is the one that leads straight to God. We too often get

sidetracked from God and God's steadfast love for each of us and make a lot of wrong turns in life. I know I have. But I also believe I've made a few right turns, too.

It is the road that has bumps that remind us we are fragile and fault-full human beings. But it is also the road that has smooth stretches of God pavement, too. *This* road is the way of Jesus, the one who came to show us how to live and how to die – to live in right relation with one another and with God, and to die in right relation within ourselves and in the palm of God's steadfast love that endures forever. Let the people say, "Amen."

Federated Church in Thomaston
United Church of Christ United Methodist Church
All Are Welcome
Sunday, September 25, 2022

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

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 The Master has Called us -- Traditional Welsh melody in a setting by Gerald Peterson

Call to Worship

One: We come to you this morning, O God, with a longing for your steadfast love.

Many: We come to you this morning, O God, hoping to uphold our end of the relationship we long to have with you.

All: We come, longing, hoping and praying for our presence in our lives. Let us worship God!

***Opening hymn** "Morning Has Broken" #145 Blue Hymnal

A time of silence....

SERVICE OF THE WORD

Scripture Reading Psalm 107:1-3

Responsive Reading Psalm 107:17-22

Some were sick through their sinful ways, and because of their iniquities endured affliction; they loathed any kind of food, and they drew near to the gates of death. Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble, and he saved them from their distress; he sent out his word and healed them, and delivered them from destruction. Let them thank the Lord for his steadfast love, for his wonderful works to humankind. And let them offer thanksgiving sacrifices, and tell of his deeds with songs of joy.

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

Message "...steadfast love..."

***Hymn of Meditation** "Be Thou My Vision" #451 Blue Hymnal

RESPONDING IN FAITH

Sharing Our Joys and Concerns with God and Each Other

Pastoral Prayer & The Lord's Prayer.....

Offertory Contemplation -- W. Belland

***Prayer of
Dedication**

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

***Closing Hymn** "God of Grace and God of Glory" #577 Blue
Hymnal

***Benediction**

Postlude Fantasy, using the hymn tune "Diademata" (Crown Him with Many Crowns)

**Revised Common Lectionary Readings for Sunday, October 2, 2022
Lamentations 1:1-6; Psalm 137; 2 Timothy 1:1-14; Luke 17:5-10**

Especially we continue to hold in prayer our Ukrainian brothers and sisters.... & those who have lost loved ones in Buffalo, NY and Uvalde, Texas and beyond..... due to gun violence....

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..and for Parker’s daughter, who has had brain surgery and is home now!; Enid, Ann Foster, Carol Moss, Julie Pollitt, Zeke Bryant, John Flaherty, Heather Van Buskirk, and for Tiffany, Lucy’s granddaughter... And for Arlene from NH..And for Rev. Wayne Sawyer, And for Amber Thomas.... And for James Armstrong and family...And Dale O’Neal (Kristen O’Neal’s husband who has tonsil cancer).

ANNOUNCEMENTS

Saturday-10/1/22.....9:00 am: Feed the Hungry Walk
Sunday-10/2/22.....9:30 am: Communion Service
.....10:30 am: Coffee Time
Thursday-10/6/22.....10:00 am – 1:00 pm: Quilters

Suggested Food Pantry Donation.....Toilet Paper

The flowers for the Alter this week are given by Pastor Susan and Nance Brown to honor the changing seasons of nature and of our lives.

Deacons for October, 2022: Galo J. Hernandez III

Reminders for next Sunday, October 2, 2022:

Greeter/Usher: Kathleen

Anderson

Coffee

Host: Arlene Woodman and Margie

Kinney

Lector:

Coretta

Cooper

Flowers:

Arlene

Woodman

Collection Total for Sunday, 9/18/22:

Pledges - \$291.00

Loose

- \$ 35.00

Investment Income -

Putnam \$ 5.33

Total

- \$331.33

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**

Sunday, September 25, 2022

Love all that has been created by God, both the whole and every grain of sand.

Love every leaf and every ray of light.

Love the beasts and the birds, love the plants, love every separate fragment.

If you love each separate fragment,
you will understand the mystery of the whole resting in God.

Fyodor Dostoevsky

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

WiFi password is #1Church