

Good Sunday afternoon from a cloudy chilly hill in Rockport....

I indicated in my “Sunday Words” this morning that I would send out my sermon from this morning this afternoon. I will post it on my Facebook page in an hour or two..... but first....

We had a hearty 27 souls in church this morning in Leach Hall! It was good to be together.... **That being said, for several reasons we will not meet again for worship in person until at the earliest, October 25th, the last Sunday of the month.** First, after reading the news report of Maine CDC Director, Dr. Nirav Shah, this morning, and in consultation with Mimi, our fearless lay leader, we decided it would be safest and best at the moment to hold off until at least the 26th to try to have worship together in person again.

Dr. Shah reported that the number of Covid-19 cases diagnosed in Knox County have risen by 11 in the last 2 ½ weeks, that is since September 15th. While this number may not seem high in the greater scope of cases in Maine and around the country, we are learning the raw and challenging facts of Covid-19 transmission each day and each week. From the news of this past week in our nation’s capital, to the presidential debate stage, to the highways and byways of Knox County, we have learned that this virus doesn’t have any respect or regard for anything that divides us – from religious or political preferences, economic circumstances, or racial differences. It is lurking *everywhere*. And, it is touching people not only by direct contact with someone who has the virus, but by what we now know as a new term in our vocabulary, “community spread.” That is the simple fact of life for all of us right now. We do not want to add to those numbers of individuals in Knox County who have contracted the virus.

The second reason we will hold off on considering worship until October 25th, again in consultation with Mimi, she and I have decided I need a break.... a break from thinking, writing, and pastoring for these next two weeks beginning tomorrow. My number one priority in serving as the pastor at Federated is offering each person the most helpful and supportive pastoral care that I can give. At the moment, my mental and emotional energy train is in need of a brief stop at the station of rest and rejuvenation. Thank you for understanding this need for a brief step away from the pulpit, in person and on line. By all means, if some emergency arises in these next two weeks, let Mimi know and she will be in touch with me.

As we were waiting to begin worship this morning in Leach Hall, I had a moment to look at the painting in the Sunday School room by Margaret W. Tarrant. I “googled” her and learned that she was born in 1888 and died in 1959. She was an English

illustrator, and children's author, specializing in depictions of fairy-like children and religious subjects. Her painting that hangs in our Sunday School room is of a little boy praying on his knees in a field by a mountain with three lambs, two rabbits, and a squirrel all around him, with the sun just rising over the mountain in the distance. In this print of her painting, there is a quote by S. T. Coleridge at the bottom of the print that reads, "He prayeth best who loveth best All things both great and small; For the dear God who loveth us, He made and loveth all."

I will be thinking hard about those words and the image of this little boy on his knees praying with the little animals all around him in these coming two weeks of respite.... No one of us, or any group of us, has the "correct" answers to all that is facing us right now. I believe each one of us could benefit from a healthy dose of humility, new respect for one another regardless of our religious or political leanings, and the renewal of our belief that the "God who loveth us, He made and loveth all."

I will be back on line on Monday, October 19th. I'll copy this morning's scripture reading and sermon below..... Blessings and thanks so much for your understanding and care for me and for one another as we go forward..... Susan

"producing the fruits of the kingdom"
A Sermon for United Christian Church
Lincolnton, Maine
Sunday, October 5, 2008
Rev. Dr. Susan Stonestreet
Scripture: Matthew 21:33-46

"Listen to another parable. There was a landowner who planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a wine press in it, and built a watchtower. Then he leased it to tenants and went to another country. When the harvest time had come, he sent his slaves to the tenants to collect his produce. But the tenants seized his slaves and beat one, killed another, and stoned another. Again he sent other slaves, more than the first; and they treated them in the same way. Finally he sent his son to them, saying, 'They will respect my son.' But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, 'This is the heir; come, let us kill him and get his inheritance.' So they seized him, threw him out of the vineyard, and killed him. Now when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?" They said to him, 'He will put those wretches to a miserable death, and lease the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the produce at the harvest time.'

Jesus said to them, "Have you never read the scriptures:

'The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone;

this was the Lord's doing, and it is amazing in our eyes'?
"Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a
a
people that **produces the fruits of the kingdom**. The one who falls on this stone will
be broken to pieces; and it will crush anyone on whom it falls."

When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they realized that
he was speaking about them. They wanted to arrest him, but they feared the crowds,
because they regarded him as a
prophet.

Matthew 21:33-46

Will you pray with me. Patient God, teach us about the fruits of your
kingdom. Show us how to produce them, tend them, harvest them and turn them
over to you. Make us good tenants of your amazing vineyard, O God, for without
your direction we produce nothing good. Amen.

I want to let you know that I didn't write this sermon this past week. I wrote
it the week before Sunday, October 6th, 2008 and delivered it to the congregation
of United Christian Church in Lincolnville that Sunday. I'll begin....

Listen to another parable. There was a land where people could not get
along. They fought over everything – from life styles to economics, from politics
to religion. They chastised one another, called one another liars, shook their heads
over how stupid were those who didn't agree with them, and generally mistrusted
one another about everything – from lifestyles to economics to politics to religion.

The people of this land were in a sorry state. Their government seemed not
to know what to do to reduce their frenzy. Their elected officials, and those who
would long to become their elected officials, looked more often to public opinion
polls than to think tanks for their advisors. Their religious leaders were no better
than their followers in making any good sense out of God's Word.

Their business leaders, their bankers and their investment advisors, their
insurance agents and their mortgage brokers were shaking their heads while
repeating over and over, "It's not my fault. It's not my fault. It's not my fault. It's
their fault. It's their fault. It's their fault."

The private and public lives of this people seemed to be crumbling and
falling apart. Yet not one, no not one, said, "God help us."

"What bad thing is going to happen next?" the people said to themselves
and to one another, all the while wringing their hands, trying to make monthly
payments on ridiculously high mortgages and credit cards that should never have
been issued in the first place.

"What bad thing is going to happen next?" said the oldest ones among them
who could hardly make ends meet on their retirement nest eggs while remembering
a bad economic time from many decades before.

“What bad thing is going to happen next?” said the people who had lost their homes and filed bankruptcy and were living in tents next to gambling casinos and fancy resorts and down the road from private communities enclosed by high walls and automatic gates to keep out the undesirables.

“What bad thing is going to happen next?” said those who had nothing to begin with and who had no hopes of ever having anything they could call their own.

“What bad thing is going to happen next?” said those who had believed the often-repeated dream of the land that all were free and welcome and respected in the land.

It was a sorry, bad time for most everyone in this land – if not in physical and tangible ways then in ethical and mental and spiritual ways. All longed for the days when everyone worth their salt had a job, and only those who were truly disabled didn't. They longed for moral leaders who said and did what was right by the people and for the people. Some longed to see The Ten Commandments of the Old Testament posted in every public square, while others longed to see the Beatitudes of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount taught and demonstrated to every school child in the land.

This people longed for communion with one another, some with only those who were just like them, but others longed for all kinds to come together. In short, this people longed for... the good old days that never were –

when men and women were honest and honorable,

when religious leaders preached the “Golden Rule” rather than “economic prosperity” for those who came to church,

when people went into politics to improve the land and help its people, not wreck havoc with the land's constitution and patriotic heritage,

when business leaders could be counted on for equitable pay for a day's labor for their workers and for themselves,

when all God's children went to school with full bellies and eager minds and generous spirits.

God finally had enough of watching this people who could not seem to get out of their own way to see a light at the end of their wretched, self-imposed tunnel. God shook God's head and said to God's self, “What shall I do?

Shall I destroy them all and start over with just two and name them Adam, Jr. and Evelyn?

Shall I wipe them off the face of the earth because they have become so short-sighted and miserable in their own sight as well as mine?

Shall I just give up, leave them to their own devices and let them destroy themselves?”

“No,” God said. “I cannot let any of that happen. I will try again to work with them. I will give them some encouragement. I will tell them they are forgiven for their sins of arrogance and greed, their self-importance and lack of self-control. I will tell them stories and parables to help them learn to step into the shoes of those they hate or fear because they don’t understand their ways.

I will give them another chance. I will send down different people to help them travel an untried path to peace and prosperity and pride in their land and in all its peoples. I will put a new and righteous heart in those who have gone astray and lead them back to honorable ways. I will encourage them to join with the new people to help form a more perfect union, a land where all are of one heart but need not be of one mind. I will make a new land of diversity and color and optimism and creativity where this land has become narrow and gray and pessimistic and fearful.”

God said, “I will do all of this for one reason, the only reason worth everything – I will do it because I love them all, in spite of themselves, in spite of their fighting with one another, in spite of their ignorance, in spite of their finger-pointing.

And, if they do not respond in good and loving and kind ways to me and to one another, I will give their land to another people, in hopes that **they** will produce the fruits of my kingdom where **this** people could not.”

When the people of the land heard this parable, they realized that the teller was speaking about them. They wanted to arrest the teller, but they feared the crowds, because the crowds regarded the teller as a prophet.

Let the people say, “Amen.”