

Good Sunday morning from a very chilly, yet sunny hill in Rockport.....

Whenever you read this... at the beginning of this week of Thanksgiving dinners spent with fewer people around your table this year, and at the beginning of the holiday season which will be entirely different this year.... I give thanks for all of you who choose to read these "Sunday words".... members of our local and our long distance cyberspace congregation! What would I do without you? I'd be lost in a daily life without a sense of community, and a longing to share each day with those of like mind, and yes, questioning minds and those minds who might not agree with me at all.... *all* at the same time.

We are in difficult times, to say the least, more so than most any of us could have ever imagined. And this morning I am drawn to the words of Augustine, 5th century Bishop and Church Father – one who knew both difficulties and despairs and the joys of faith and finding God in the midst of turmoil and misdeeds, personal and otherwise. Augustine is said to have said:

“To err is human, to persist in error is devilish.”

“Faith is to believe what you do not yet see; the reward for this faith is to see what you believe.”

“Two works of mercy set a [person] free: forgive and you will be forgiven, and give and you will receive.”

“We make a ladder of our vices, if we trample those same vices under foot.”

“We do the works, but God works in us the doing of them.”

“He that saves you, the same saves your horse and your sheep; to come to the very least, your hen too.”

“If you plan to build a high house of virtues, you must first lay deep foundations of humility.”

Read all below, if you wish, and then come back and read these wise words again....

Blessings and love to all on this Reign of Christ Sunday in the Christian tradition and the Sunday before Thanksgiving in our country. Susan

p.s. I will download this morning's scripture reading and sermon to my Facebook page later today: freerangepastor for anyone who wants to tune in.... and I believe Margie is also downloading my sermon to Federated's Facebook page....

p.p.s. *AGAIN, thanks so much to those of you who send me your e-mail responses to my writings. I don't always get a chance to write back to each one of you, but I appreciate all your responses! They keep me motivated to continue writing.....*

**A simple online worship service for Sunday, November 22, 2020
as prepared by Rev. Dr. Susan Stonestreet
Pastor of the Federated Church of Thomaston**

A Call to Worship

Even as we worship together from afar,
reign in our hearts this day, O God,
and shape us as your people.
Help us celebrate all the ways you reveal Christ to us –
through our giving, our receiving, our serving,
our witness, and our worship.
We begin again this morning,
far apart in physical space,
but as close as our next breaths
in our spiritual journeying together.
Let us worship God.

“A Certain Uncertain Future”

Wisely enough,
God does not let me skip ahead
in the story of my life,
but rather leads me page by page
to its understandable conclusion in God.
And so, as I face an uncertain future,
I can trust in God's promise
as expressed by Jeremiah:
“For I know the plans I have for you,”
saith the Lord,
“They are plans for good and not for evil,
to give a future and a hope.”

~ Adapted from a reading by Pann Baltz
in *Hymns for the Family of God*

A Reading of Scripture – Matthew 25:31-46

[Jesus said,] “When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. Then the king will say to those at his right hand, ‘Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.’ Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, **when was it** that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And **when was it** that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And **when was it** that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?’ And the king will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.’ Then he will say to those at his left hand, ‘You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.’ Then they also will answer, ‘Lord, **when was it** that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?’ Then he will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.’ And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.”

A sermon based on Matthew 25:14-30

“... when was it ...”

Will you pray with me. Comforting, but challenging God, wake us up! Point us in the right direction – the direction that leads to those in need of our home cooking, our deep wells, our open doors, our closets bursting with clothes, our healing hands, and our willingness to enter their prisons of mind and heart and body. Remind us that there but for your grace, we might go, O God. Affirm for us

that doing good without notice might not get us into heaven, but it will get us into better relation with you and with our neighbors. Amen.

One of my favorite places to walk in past years was in Mt. Hope Cemetery in Bangor. Mt. Hope was established in 1834 as America's second garden cemetery. It covers over 300 acres of wooded and open areas. Over 30,000 people are buried in Mt. Hope... In the far northeast corner of the cemetery, on the outer loop which is about 1.2 miles if you're wondering how far you've walked, there is a headstone for Frederic C. Baldy who was born in 1873 and died in 1959.

The only other words on Mr. Baldy's headstone besides his name and his birth and death dates are these, in capital letters: **CHARACTER IS WHAT YOU ARE IN THE DARK.** When I first read those words some years ago, I wondered if Mr. Baldy had said them – because I'd never read them before. Since then I've learned that they are the words of Dwight L. Moody, the well known North American evangelist of the 19th century. **CHARACTER IS WHAT YOU ARE IN THE DARK...**

I don't often have those words come to mind, but they did this week – for two reasons – first, because of their direct relation, it seems to me, with our Scripture passage from the Gospel of Matthew today, and second, because of the challenging and unsettling words and actions of many people in our country right now.

Jesus' words to his disciples in Chapter 25 of Matthew come at the end of his final discourse, his farewell discourse, in which he is trying to tell them something about the end... the end of his life, the end of their lives, and it seems to me, the end of all of our lives. When the final drum roll is sounded, when our lives are all said and done, what's the path we're going to be offered next? Will we be in God's good favor, or outside of it? Will we be... the good sheep... those who are at Jesus' right hand, committing acts of charity and hospitality in unexpected places and circumstances and thus suited for entrance into that final kingdom of God? Or will we be... the bad goats... those to be cast into outer darkness because we don't get with the program of compassion and mercy and healing which Jesus demonstrated again and again and again in his ministry... Which will it be, Jesus asks? **CHARACTER IS WHAT YOU ARE IN THE DARK.**

One of the most revealing aspects of this passage detailing some of Jesus' last instructions to his disciples is that it is so different from what some Christians believe we have to do to achieve salvation. They say that if we have not accepted Jesus Christ as our personal savior – today, if not sooner – we are not going to

heaven and we will not be saved. We will be cast into outer darkness, away from the glory of God forever. So we'd better get right with God before we take our last breaths... and accept Jesus as our savior... or its curtains for us, with no holy encore to follow.

But there's a curious thing about this crucial passage at the end of the Gospel of Matthew. Jesus doesn't say anything at all about accepting him as personal savior as a requirement for salvation. Keep in mind this is at the end of Jesus' ministry – don't you think if there was ever a time to say "Follow me, or else..." it would be then? But he doesn't. He says, "Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me." (Matt 25:34-36)

When Jesus' followers say to him, "Lord, **when was it** that we" (Matthew 25:37, 38, 39) [did all those good deeds], he responds, "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me." (Matt 25:40)

No mention of needing to *accept Jesus* as savior.

No mention of being *left out* because they didn't recognize who Jesus was... but being *invited in* because they followed Jesus' teachings and lived them out, unannounced, without looking for reward, with no thought to what might be in it for them if they did follow his teachings.

CHARACTER IS WHAT YOU ARE IN THE DARK... not when someone is watching, not in front of adoring crowds or congregations, not for reward now or later, not even to impress Jesus.

John Buchanan, a minister I've heard preach in Chicago and whose words appear every two weeks in the journal *Christian Century*, has this to say about this passage: "In these familiar words of Jesus, [he makes a] radical statement about the practice of religion. You cannot read the paper and not be concerned about the role religion plays in the world. Terrible atrocities are committed by people shouting, 'God is great.' Religious officials hide clergy abuse, [and] deny sacraments to those with whom they disagree. Religious leaders condemn each other, excommunicate each other, invest inordinate amounts of energy and resources fighting one another over who gets in and who is kept out, over whose

doctrinal formulas are true and whose are false – over a whole laundry list of issues about which Jesus had absolutely nothing to say.

He did, however, say this: ‘When you did it to one of the least of these, you did it to me.’

[Buchanan goes on to say] students of the New Testament know that the only description of the last judgment is in Matthew 25. There is nothing in it about ecclesiastical [meaning church] connections or religious practices. There is not a word in this passage about theology, creeds, [or] orthodoxies. There is only one criterion here, and that is whether or not you saw Jesus Christ in the face of the needy and whether or not you gave yourself away in love in his name.”^[1]

CHARACTER IS WHAT YOU ARE IN THE DARK. The kicker is, though, sometimes the character we are in the dark is not the good kind. We are in the midst of a very hard time in our country. There is animosity around how to deal with the pandemic. There is angry, meanspiritedness engulfing our political landscape. We are a people at odds with one another on too many fronts.

The parable we hear of Jesus today is the last parable he tells in Matthew before heading toward Jerusalem for the last time. Another commentator on the passage says, “We could call this parable of the sheep and the goats Jesus’ last will and testament to the church. What a legacy he left to his followers. To feed the hungry and give drink to the thirsty, to welcome the stranger and clothe the naked, and to care for the sick and reach out to the prisoner was Christ’s challenge to his followers. He reminds us that those in need are members of his family.

We’ve drawn the lines differently today. We talk about doctrine, and liberals and conservatives, and right and left wing, and rules and worship and culture wars, [and pandemics and political upheaval.] How foreign [and I might add how petty] it all seems compared to that last parable. Jesus minced no words: reach out to those in need and you will see the face of Jesus. No more. No less.”^[2]

It is as if Jesus says to all who would follow in his footsteps after he died, “If you remember nothing else of what I’ve done or said, remember this, ‘What you do unto the least of these who are members of my family, you do unto me.’” We’d best not forget that in the midst of all our rituals and traditions and struggles of all kinds with one another.

Jesus’ words to his disciples in his farewell message are a comfort to me this week. He says we don’t have to believe in him as savior to be on God’s good side, we just have to do what he does and all will be well. When will it be that we do all

this good? When it's dark and nobody is watching. CHARACTER IS WHAT YOU ARE IN THE DARK.

May God forgive each of us for our wrong doings, our terrible missteps in this life, and our worst mistakes. May God remind each of us each day that final judgment of the living and the dead, including those 30,000 buried in Mt. Hope Cemetery, is not our task. Following the way of Jesus is.

Let the people say, "Amen."

To hold in our prayers this day.....

And 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 and alcohol among their members....

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 pray for our President that he might do the right things in coming weeks and months for the betterment and future of all of us.....

From our most recent bulletin and more....

From a Thomaston resident, please pray for Sean for healing, and for James fighting Covid-19,

Also continued prayers for Ed Lee, Ann Foster, Carol Moss, Fred Bagnall, Harriet Williams, Julie Pollitt, Zeke Bryant, Sally Harjula, Elliot, Trish Perry, April DeVarney, Helmut Steger, John Flaherty, George Ng, Doug and BJ Thomson, Heather Van Buskirk, and Michael and Gail in southern Maine, ***Please send me the names of those you would like for me to add to this list next Sunday AND those you would like for me to remove from this list.***

A Benediction

Life is short, no matter the length of our days.

We do not have much time to gladden the hearts of those who make the way with us.

So, be swift to love. Make haste to be kind.

And may the Creator of us all, the Sustainer of us all,

and the Holy Spirit surrounding us all,

be with each of you this day and forever.

Amen.

Readings from the RCL (Revised Common Lectionary)

for Sunday, November 29, 2020 – the first Sunday of Advent

Isaiah 64:1-9; Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19; 1 Corinthians 1:3-9; Mark 13:24-37

Words to ponder today about “character”..... it’s a big subject!

“Character cannot be developed in ease and quiet. Only through experience of trial and suffering can the soul be strengthened, ambition inspired, and success achieved. ~ Helen Keller

“Character is not something that you buy; it is not a commodity that can be bartered for; it is not a quality suited for only the rich and famous, rather, character is built upon the foundational commitment of love, honesty, and compassion for others.” ~ Byron R. Pulsifer

“Your character defines who you are by the actions you take.” ~ Catherine Pulsifer

“The best index to a person’s character is how he treats people who can’t do him any good, and how he treats people who can’t fight back.” ~ Abigail Van Buren

“Better to be a man of character than a man of means.” Irish proverb

“Any fool can criticize, condemn and complain – and most fools do. But it takes character and self-control to be understanding and forgiving.” ~ Dale Carnegie

“We live in a culture that teaches us to promote and advertise ourselves and to master the skills required for success, but that gives little encouragement to humility, sympathy, and honest self-confrontation, which are necessary for building character.” ~ David Brooks

“A man is known by the books he reads, by the company he keeps, by the praise he gives, by his dress, by his tastes, by his distastes, by the stories he tells, by his gait, by the notion of his eye, by the look of his house, of his chamber; for nothing on earth is solitary but every thing hath affinities infinite.” ~ Ralph Waldo Emerson

“One test of a person’s character is this: Will you lie?” ~ E. Stanley Jones

“Power really is a test of character. In the hands of a person of integrity, it is of tremendous benefit; in the hands of a tyrant, it causes terrible destruction.” ~ John Maxwell

“I like to see a man proud of the place in which he lives. I like to see a man live so that his place will be proud of him.” ~ Abraham Lincoln

[1]John M. Buchanan, *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Volume 4, Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011, p. 334, 336.

[2]Roger Lovette, “Where’s Jesus?” in *Pulpit Resource*, Vol. 36, No. 4, p. 34, 2008.