

A simple online worship service for Sunday, May 17, 2020
The 6th Sunday of Easter
as prepared by Rev. Dr. Susan Stonestreet
Pastor of the Federated Church of Thomaston

Opening Prayer

We gather in the Spirit of God, from a distance still...
many people with a common purpose:
to live the Way of Jesus in our lives and world.
The Spirit of Wisdom surrounds us,
filling us with knowledge of God's will
and longing to shape our hearts into the very heart of God.
Let us come and worship God, from a distance still,
and practice wisdom ways in this sacred community of faithful seekers.
Amen.

A Prayer of the People *

Help us to speak wise words
when our world erupts with a stinging blast
and no one on earth is listening.
Help us to speak wise words
when our lives explode with a vengeance
and we know we are out of line.
Help us to speak wise words
when a best friend seeks our counsel.
Help us to speak wise words
when a family member leans on us
for comfort and advice.
Help us to speak wise words
when we face a hard decision
for ourselves or someone we love.
Help us to speak wise words
in response to troubling questions
about life or love or God.
Help us to speak wise words
when we challenge our traditions
and seek to offer alternatives
to the platitudes and the rules.
Help us to speak wise words

to ourselves in our silent moments
as we shout biblical wisdom
from the top of our trusting hearts.
Help us, O God, to speak wise words.

*Adapted from a prayer by Miriam Therese Winter

A Reading of Scripture – Acts 17:22-31

Then Paul stood in front of the Aeropagus and said, "Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. For as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, 'To an unknown god.' What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives **to all mortals life and breath** and all things. From one ancestor he made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him -- though indeed he is not far from each one of us. For 'In him we live and move and have our being'; as even some of your own poets have said, 'For we too are his offspring'

Since we are God's offspring, we ought not to think that the deity is like gold, or silver, or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of mortals. While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will have the world judged in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead." Acts 17:22-31

A sermon based on Acts 17:22-31 "to all mortals life and breath and all things"

Will you pray with me. Patient God, grand parent of us all, help us once again to place your word of two thousand years ago into our current context. Help us to remember that you bring "to all mortals life and breath and all things." Amen.

Several Sundays ago we heard about the stoning of Steven, the first Christian martyr. Those who committed the stoning left Steven at the foot of Saul, the Jewish leader who sought to rid the countryside of those ragged followers of that guy named Jesus. Today, we fast forward in the story of the young Christian church, as it is told in the Book of Acts, to Paul's visit to Athens, a city of refinement and intellectual loftiness, and a city where the worshiping of many gods had become commonplace.

Saul, the Jewish leader out to squash Jesus' followers, became Paul, the apostle, one of the greatest champions of the Christian faith. The story of the conversion of Saul, the Jew to Paul, the Christian is the subject for another day in the life of this church as we move forward in this strange and unexpected time of covid-19 chaos. We will need to consider and make changes in how we worship together, for the safety and well being of all of us.

And so it is appropriate today that we think about changing faces of faith -- not of Saul's change or conversion to become Paul, but of church gone by to church to come. The Christian church gone by has experienced a number of changes over the centuries. In our country many Christian churches have become more open and accepting to a broader and more hospitable understanding of what it means to be welcoming followers of Jesus. The United Church of Christ, of which we are a federated member church, ordained the first gay person to ministry in the mid 1970's. And yet, there are still a few Christian denominations and other faith traditions that won't ordain a gay person or a woman to ordained ministry.

Styles of church services have changed. Megachurches seat thousands of people on a Sunday morning (even though some of them are not holding in person worship services right now), and flash hymns and prayers on big screens for worshipers to sing and read from. Yet from what I've learned of this church, worship on Sunday mornings really hasn't changed that much over the years. We still have bulletins, and no screens. We still have roughly the same number of parishioners as sat in our pews in the mid 1960's and earlier, with just a few ups and downs along the way.

In each denomination, in each church, some things stay the same and some things change. In all churches, transitions happen. They've been happening for two thousand years. Pastors come and go, parishioners come and go, and yet, hopefully the church remains....

a place of hospitality for all who choose to come through the doors,
a place of refuge for those hurting from the challenges of life,

a place of safety and comfort for all seeking the wisdom, compassion and forgiveness of God.

Paul, in our text for today from the Book of Acts, says to his erudite listeners, "Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way...." (Acts 17:22) and then he proceeds to politely discredit their ways of worship and talk with them about a new way, a different way to approach God, with a capital G, not their gods, with small g's. He slips Jesus, not by name of course, into his sermon and offers an invitation, again not directly, to explore faith in a brand new form.

Verse 32 of the text, which is not part of the reading for today, says, "When they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some scoffed; but others said, 'We will hear you again about this.' At that point Paul left them. But some of them joined him and became believers, including Dionysius the Aeropagite and a woman named Damaris, and others with them." (Acts 17:32-34)

Some scoffed, others expressed a willingness to learn more, and some signed on and moved forward with Paul into new religious territory. From one community to another, Paul spread his passionate words about this new savior, Jesus. Transitions from old ways of worshiping to new ways happened everywhere!

Here's the question for the day: How does a transition become a transformation? How does resistance to change become enthusiasm for new ways of doing things?

A transition, according to my trusty smart phone dictionary, is "movement, passage, or change from one position, state, stage, subject, concept, etc., to another." I can change my clothes from my "Sunday morning skirt" to my "Sunday afternoon comfy casuals" and it's still me inside my clothes. I've *transitioned* from worship to rest, but it's still me doing both. I can move one set of chairs off the stage and replace them with another. A transition has happened, but the stage doesn't change.

A *transformation* is both more illusive and more revealing. A transformation *changes the person*, not just their clothes. A transformation brings new energy and new life to a church, not just a change of chairs on the stage. A new minister may stand behind the same pulpit, but deliver a message that helps you experience the wisdom of God in new and transforming ways, different from the prior minister. Or a new minister might not stand behind a pulpit at all and preaches without any notes and with more faithful gusto than you've ever heard in church!

A *transition* is a change of clothes, a change of appearance, a change of a pastor's name on the church sign out front.

A *transformation* is an all-encompassing change of body, mind and spirit.

Which shall it be in our church in the months and years to come? Just a transition from the settled way to worship that worked fine up until the middle of March.... or a transformation of this body of Christ into an even more committed band of followers of the way of Jesus?

Paul's ministry led to the transformation of enough of his hearers that they finally formed a critical mass.... and a new religion based on the life, death and resurrection of Jesus got off the ground and still continues to thrive, albeit in new forms, this day.

Our church is on the cusp of both transition and transformation -- from experiencing a traditional way to worship to another way, taking into account new and unexpected concerns about a deadly virus that is likely to be around and a threat until a good vaccine is found to combat it. Our church is poised at the possibility of a transformation which will bring new and renewed energy to each of you and to us as a worshiping community as we come to realize we can't go "back to normal," but to a "new normal."

Commenting on this text from the Book of Acts, one commentator wrote, "It is not likely that the church will make any great advance in our day until it has translated its message into language that is understood in the twentieth [and twenty-first!] century. To do that is not to appease the intellectuals or to curtail the power of the gospel. It is to follow the example not only of Paul the apostle, but also of Jesus the Master, who, when he spoke to the people about the kingdom of God, said that it is like a farmer sowing seed, like a shepherd, like a father, like a woman who has lost a coin. He took the old vessels and filled them with new wine. "[1]

The kingdom of God is like a loving church family that weathers storms and now a deadly virus and the challenge of changing worship forms and forever is transformed with each new voice it beholds in its midst.

I doubt Paul had to concern himself with weekly bulletins and how to disburse them in good sanitary fashion or decide to do away with them all together.

I doubt he had to be concerned about wiping down everything in the temple between services and activities to make sure there was no covid-19 virus lurking to snag another body into illness.

I doubt he had to worry about those who might refuse to come to church wearing a mask for everyone's well being.

But we do have to be concerned about these things in order to keep us all safe and healthy in the coming months, and even years.

How we turn these transitions into transformation is our challenge.

Paul preached to the people of Athens, "The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives **to all mortals life and breath** and all things. From one ancestor he made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him -- though indeed he is not far from each one of us." (Acts 17:24-27)

As we search for God in these challenging weeks and months to come, let us not think only of the difficult transitions we will need to make, but also of the renewing and new transformations of faith we hope to experience.

Blessed be, may it be so! Let the people say, "Amen!"

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

From our most recent bulletin and more....

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, Eve Anderson, Doug and BJ Thomson, Heather Van Buskirk, Muriel's grandson Jared, and Jackie's 92 year old friend Genevieve Micali.... and all those affected by the coronavirus and the families of those who have died from the virus. *Please send me the names of those you would like for me to add to this list next Sunday!*

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 believe that God, the creator,
Jesus, the redeemer, and*

*the Holy Spirit, the sustainer,
will be with us no matter the length of our days.
Amen.*

*adapted from the words of Henri Auriel

Readings from the RCL (Revised Common Lectionary)

first for the “Ascension of the Lord” on Thursday, May 21, 2020

Acts 1:1-11; Psalm 47 or 93; Ephesians 1:15-23; Luke 24:44-53

then for Sunday, May 24, 2020

Acts 1:6-14; Psalm 68:1-10, 32-35; 1 Peter 4:12-14, 5:6-11; John 17:1-11

Words to ponder today..... again from Helen Keller....

“The only thing worse than being blind is having sight but no vision.”

“Unless we form the habit of going to the Bible in bright moments as well as in trouble, we cannot fully respond to its consolations because we lack equilibrium between light and darkness.”

"Everything has its wonders, even darkness and silence, and I learn, whatever state I may be in, therein to be content.”

“Love is like a beautiful flower which I may not touch, but whose fragrance makes the garden a place of delight just the same.”