

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

It's Father's Day! From *The Old Farmer's Almanac* for today: "Father's Day 2020 is celebrated this Sunday, June 21. It's more than a Hallmark holiday. The first Father's Day service occurred in Fairmont, West Virginia, on July 5, 1908. The Sunday service happened because of the efforts of Grace Golden Clayton, the daughter of a dedicated reverend. While missing her own dad, who had died in 1896, Mrs. Clayton wanted to honor the many fathers who had died in the mining explosion, which killed more than 360 men and boys, and left about 1,000 children fatherless..... Father's Day celebrates and honors the men who have embraced the essential role of fatherhood. On this day, we also thank fathers and father figures for the sacrifices they make, for embracing the responsibility of nurturing and raising children, and for devotion to their family."

Who has filled the father's shoes in your life? Perhaps it was, or is now, your own father.... or an uncle or older brother.... or a dear male friend and role model who showed up in your life totally unexpectedly.... or even a woman – your own mother perhaps, or an aunt or older sister, or a dear female friend and role model.... when no men appeared in your life to teach you about strength, courage, true wisdom and integrity. On this Father's Day, think about whoever has filled the father role in your life. Thank them for all they have done for you to this day....

.... and remember these words of Abraham Lincoln: "No man stands taller than when he stoops to help a child."

Blessings to all this Father's Day and the first Sunday morning of Summer..... Susan
p.s. I have download this morning's scripture reading and sermon to my facebook page: [freerangepastor](#) for anyone who wants to tune in..... and I believe Margie is also downloading my sermon to Federated's Facebook page.... You have to scroll down the page to get to the current sermon on my facebook page.

p.p.s. A few of you have taken me up on my offer to come chat with you in your yard or open garage, on your porch or deck, etc..... wearing one of my many masks, bringing my own libation, and carrying my own lawn chair.... and maybe bug net, too! Be in touch if you're interested – call me at 207-322-1948 or send me an e-mail to freerangepastor@gmail.com.....

**A simple online worship service for Sunday, June 21, 2020
as prepared by Rev. Dr. Susan Stonestreet
Pastor of the Federated Church of Thomaston**

Opening Prayer

Our many-storied God, you give name to the prayers sung through our living.

You created a world with so much potential for beauty.

It is through this world that we experience the many stories that make us who we are.

Help us to encounter you today, during this time of beholding and wonder.

Let us worship God, far apart in body this day, but all together in spirit!

A Meditation....

“Understandings of the Cross” *

The cross is a symbol of resurrection and new life. For Jesus, death on the cross was not the final answer. Instead, Christ is risen, signifying hope and new life.

The cross is a symbol of liberation for oppressed peoples. Jesus was killed, in part, because of his ministry with people who were oppressed. He was working for the liberation of people who were poor and marginalized; and he was killed to be silenced, since he was causing disruption.

The cross is a symbol of suffering. Jesus’ death on the cross was a long and painful one. His death involved suffering, and the cross can remind us that Christ knows our sufferings because he has suffered, too.

The cross is a symbol of violence. In its time, the cross was used as an instrument of torture; it was a barbaric way of killing traitors, or those ostracized by society, in a very public way.

The cross is a symbol of transformation. Christ took this symbol of violence and death, and transformed it into life. God took a common violent symbol in its day and transformed it something completely new through the Resurrection. What do we think? What is the significance of the cross for each of us?

* Adapted from a reflection on the Cross in *Seasons of the Spirit*,
for Sunday, June 22, 2014

A Reading of Scripture – Matthew 10:24-39

A disciple is not above the teacher, nor a slave above the master; it is enough for the disciple to be like the teacher, and the slave like the master. If they have called the master of the house Beelzebul, how much more will they malign those of his household!

So have no fear of them; **for nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered, and nothing secret that will not become known.** What I say to you in the dark, tell in the light; and what you hear whispered, proclaim from the housetops.

Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell. Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. And even the hairs of your head are all counted. So do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows.

Everyone therefore who acknowledges me before others, I also will acknowledge before my Father in heaven; but whoever denies me before others, I also will deny before my Father in heaven.

Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.

For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and one's foes will be members of one's own household.

Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.

A sermon based on Matthew 10:24-39 "From Opaqueness to Transparency"

Will you pray with me. Elusive God, help us to move from our black and white opaqueness to your rainbow transparency this day. Open our eyes that we might see *clearly* through your holy veil of welcome, while *pulling back* our own heavy curtains of doubt. Amen.

What is "opaqueness"? My trusty computer Thesaurus reveals that opaqueness is "imperviousness, impenetrability, denseness, cloudiness, muddiness, dullness, mistiness, or smokiness." Lots of "ness's" there!

What is "transparency"? Again, my trusty computer Thesaurus reveals that transparency is a "slide, photograph, a shot, clearness, or clarity."

What is opaque is hidden from sight.... What is transparent is revealed for all to see.... Sounds simple enough, doesn't it? I could say, "End of sermon for today!" But you know I won't....

Our text for today from the Gospel of Matthew reveals Jesus saying to his disciples, "Nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered, and nothing secret that

will not become known.” (Matt 10:26) There’s a catch, though.... Actually there are lots of “catches” in this passage from Matthew! Slaves, masters, sparrows, Jesus coming not to bring peace but a sword, family dysfunction – ordered by Jesus, it seems.... dropping everything – even your blood kin – and following Jesus, and if you don’t, you’re out of favor with Jesus and with the Father, God. I don’t know about you, but none of this sits well with me!

Where’s the Jesus I like to say *I* follow?

Where’s the holy one who promises the criminal hanging at his side on a cross, “*Today, you will be with me in Paradise!*” (Luke 23:43)

Where’s the healer who says to one just regaining his sight, the one whose life has been a mess, the one who has been bleeding continually.... “Your faith has made you well!” (Matthew 9:22; Mark 5:34, 10:52; Luke 8:48, 17:19)

Where’s the one who says, “Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For *my* yoke is easy, and *my* burden is light.” (Matt 11:28-30) Oh.... Those words are in Chapter 11 of Matthew and this is only Chapter 10! Yes, *those* are the words of the Jesus *I* want to follow and emulate, not “take up a sword, desert your family, get on my bandwagon or the Father won’t let you in the house!”

It’s so stark, isn’t it? The words sound so mean-spirited and negative.... So black and white, with no soft edges or other ways to arrive at God’s door.... It makes being a Christian, a person of faith, so impenetrable, muddy, opaque.... “I just don’t know sometimes. Am I up for this kind of discipleship? Are you?”

But wait.... there’s more of an explanation here.... It’s hard for us to imagine, at least in this country – where we do have freedom of religious expression for the most part – to appreciate the kind of persecution those first followers of Jesus must have endured. For some of them, following Jesus DID mean they had to forsake home and hearth, family and all blood kin. For some of them the possibility of martyrdom was not something that might come to others. It might come to them. The peace of God, which passes all understanding according to the apostle Paul, does come with a price.... being willing to *stand up* for Jesus, for justice, for equality, for the widows and orphans, those persecuted for righteousness sake, those who are different in any way. I don’t know about you, but some days, I don’t wanna stand up for Jesus. I wanna sit down and take a break for Jesus. I hope I’m not the only one experiencing this holy laziness some days.

But in the midst of it all... there are lessons waiting to be learned, dark corners of despair to be turned from, difficulties to be dodged if not overcome, fears to be faced, and clarity – the transparency of holy wisdom – to be gained in the midst of our muddy, opaque world.

Spiritual writer and monk, Henri Nouwen, tells of moving from opaqueness to transparency. He writes, “There is a story about a university professor who came to a Zen master to ask him about Zen. Nan-in, the Zen master, served him tea. He poured his visitor’s cup full, and then kept pouring. The professor watched the overflow until he could no longer restrain himself. ‘It is over-full. No more will go in!’ ‘Like this cup,’ Nan-in said, ‘you are full of your own opinions and speculations. How can I teach you Zen unless you first empty your cup?’” (101 *Zen Stories*, a 1919 compilation of Zen koans from the Meiji era, 1868-1912, in Japan)^[1]

Nouwen’s response to this story goes like this: “Spiritual formation begins with the gradual and often painful discovery of God’s incomprehensibility in the face of life’s great mysteries and limitations. We might be competent in many subjects, but we cannot become an expert in the things of God.”^[2]

In other words, it seems to me Nouwen, and this Zen story, are suggesting this: if we are full of ourselves, we have no room left for the possibility of anything beyond ourselves entering into us. Our opaque lives of black and white facts, literal interpretations of everything from the Bible, and day-to-day overfilling of our tea cups... smother any possibility of seeing beyond them to a greater understanding of the transparency of God in our midst.

Spiritual formation is about emptying ourselves *of* our selves that we might be filled with the richness and guidance of God right here, right now. I don’t know about you, but I want that... I want to see beyond myself to something more grand. I want to experience the goodness of God right here, right now... even if it hurts, even if it’s not tidy, even if it’s not following along the path I think I would like to lay for myself.

Nouwen suggests, “The Spirit of God shows us how to move continuously from opaqueness to transparency in three central relationships: our relationship with *nature*, with *time*, and with *people*.”^[3] Nouwen writes, “The plants and animals with whom we live teach us about birth, growth, maturation, and death, about the need for gentle care, and especially about the importance of patience and hope.”^[4]

I want to tell you a true story that helped me to better understand this opaque/transparent idea. Six years ago, when Riley, our almost seven-year-old Standard Poodle, was just nine months old, she suddenly showed an intense interest in

a bluebird house in our backyard – one that she had not appeared to even notice before then.

Now this bluebird house was taken over by a family of swallows again that year. I knew there were fledglings inside because two adult swallows kept flying in and out of that little hole that only they or bluebirds could get into. I tried to get Riley to stop pestering the house, but had no idea she would actually be able to do harm to it. I went in the house, thinking she would soon lose interest and move on to new digging adventures in the backyard.

But when I went back outside, Riley had pulled the house down off the pole on which it was secured, and had opened the latch and was playing with one of the fledglings. I stooped down and could see there were five fledglings in the nest which was now somewhat torn apart. I finally got a hold of Riley's collar and dragged her into the house. She wasn't happy, but I was mad! I scooped up the nest, the torn apart bluebird house and the five fledglings and took them outside the fenced area of the yard and laid them in the field. My hope was that "momma swallow" would swoop down and see them and somehow figure out how to save them from predators sure to come in the night.

I spent the rest of the day and evening going to the window periodically to see if momma had come to her babies' rescue. Not. Then I thought.... they won't make it through the night. Something on four legs will have them as a midnight snack, dead or alive. I felt terrible but didn't know what else to do, but hope for them.

The next morning, Sunday morning, I put on my boots and went out into the wet field, fully expecting to find the nest torn further apart, and the babies gone. Not. The nest hadn't been touched. Two of fledglings had died over night, but three of them were still breathing, still trying to flutter their tiny wings, and two of them had their heads back and their mouths wide open. I lost it! And as I'm standing there with tears running down my face my first thought was this: the will to live, to survive, to be hungry is stronger than death. And being the pastor I am, my second thought went to Jesus. No really, it did! Jesus on a cross.... with the will to live that is stronger than death and that overcomes death.

Whatever your personal understandings are of the cross of Jesus, it's a life and death matter of holy, transparent meaning in the face of the opaque black and white reality of killing, of human ignorance and hubris. Those little fledglings taught me about the will to live in a way I had never considered before. The will to live.... in the midst of the greatest of odds.... It's a holy transparent thing.... in an opaque world of black and white.

To bring this true story to a close, I did transport the five little birds to Avian Haven that Sunday afternoon. I got myself lost along the way – trying to take a short cut so I could get there faster. As I drove, I could hear one of the little birds in the back of my car, cheeping, less and less. I kept saying out loud, “Hang on little guys, hang on!”

Diane, one of the two key leaders at Avian Haven, took the three little ones still breathing and put them in an incubator with other struggling little birds. I wanted to bring the other two home to bury them in our little memory garden out back, but Diane said that swallows are flying birds, not meant to be in the ground, and that she had a special place for them. Several weeks later Diane sent me an e-mail to let me know that two of the babies died. But the third one survived and they were able to release him into the wild that day. These little birds taught me this lesson – the will to live is never-ending, if we believe it to be so.

The Gospel of Matthew records Jesus saying to his disciples, “Nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered, and nothing secret that will not become known.” (Matt 10:26) Can we wait expectantly and hopefully for the transparency of God to become known to us?

Nouwen says nature can teach us much about spiritual formation, about the Spirit of God showing us how to move continuously from opaqueness to transparency. Five little birds, and finally one that survived, affirmed that teaching for me some years ago, and I’ve never forgotten the lesson.

Let the people say, “Amen.”

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

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 affected, which should be every one of us, by the cruel condition of racism.... and all our fathers, both living and those alive only in our hearts....

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, Doug and BJ Thomson, Heather Van Buskirk, Muriel’s grandson Jared and niece Pam, and Jackie’s 92 year old friend Genevieve Micali.... *Please send me the names of those you would like for me to add to this list next Sunday!*

A Benediction *

*May God bless you and keep you.
May God's face radiate upon you and flood you with grace and tender mercies.
May God smile upon you always and cover your lives with peace.
Amen.*

**Readings from the RCL (Revised Common Lectionary)
for Sunday, June 28, 2020**

Genesis 22:1-14; Psalm 13; Romans 6:12-23; Matthew 10:40-42

Words to ponder today.....

~ From Chapter One of *Spiritual Formation: The Way of the Heart* by Henri Nouwen, posthumously – “Spiritual formation begins with the gradual and often painful discovery of God’s incomprehensibility in the face of life’s great mysteries and limitation. We might be competent in many subjects, but we cannot become an expert in the things of God.”

~ Brennan Manning, *The Ragamuffin Gospel: Good News for the Bedraggled, Beat-Up, and Burnt Out, 21st century* – “[Jesus] had no romantic notion of the cost of discipleship. He knew that following Him was as unsentimental as duty, as demanding as love.”

~ Donald Miller, *Blue Like Jazz: Nonreligious Thoughts on Christian Spirituality, 21st century* – “The trouble with deep belief is that it costs something. And there is something inside me, some selfish beast of a subtle thing that doesn't like the truth at all because it carries responsibility, and if I actually believe these things I have to do something about them. It is so, so cumbersome to believe anything. And it isn't cool.”

~ John Howard Yoder, *Radical Christian Discipleship, 20th century* – “Jesus' cross was the price to pay for being the kind of person he was in the kind of world he was in; the cross that he chose was the price of his representing a new way of life in a world that did not want a new way of life. That is what he called his followers to do.”

~ Martin Luther King Jr., 20th century – “Our only hope lies in our ability to recapture the revolutionary spirit and go into a sometimes hostile world declaring eternal hostility to poverty, racism, and militarism.”

~ John Piper, *John Calvin: And His Passion for the Majesty of God, 21st century*
– “We would do our theology better if more was at stake in what we said.”

~ Nancy Pearcey, *Total Truth: Liberating Christianity from Its Cultural Captivity*, 21st century – "In every historical period, the religious groups that grow most rapidly are those that set believers at odds with the surrounding culture."^[1]_{SEP}

[1]Henri Nouwen, *Spiritual Formation, Following the Movements of the Spirit*, New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2010, p. 3.

[2]Ibid.

[3]Ibid., p. 6.

[4]Ibid., p. 7.