

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

I need music. How about you? Last night, Nance and I watched “A Capitol Fourth” on PBS. It was the 40th anniversary of this annual July 4th musical celebration from Washington, D.C. on public TV. I grew up in the Maryland suburbs of Washington, and have been to the national memorials there many times – the Washington Monument, the Lincoln Memorial, the Jefferson Memorial, the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier at Arlington, and others.... I needed to see the great landmarks of our nation’s capitol last night. I needed the music last night. I needed to see performers, some whom I knew and some whom I didn’t, sing of the greatness of our country, our musical traditions, our lives.... I needed to see and hear something positive coming from the national stage of our country. I can go on a little more hopeful this morning for having watched “A Capitol Fourth” last night....

There is a statement on the opening page of the hymnal (*Hymns for the Family of God*) used at United Christian Church in Lincolnville which stays with me continually, and especially now:

“I wish to see all arts, principally music, in the service of Him who gave and created them. Music is a fair and glorious gift of God. I would not for the world forego my humble share of music. Singers are never sorrowful, but are merry, and smile through their troubles in song. Music makes people kinder, gentler, more staid and reasonable. I am strongly persuaded that after theology there is no art than can be placed on a level with music; for besides theology, music is the only art capable of affording peace and joy of the heart . . . the devil flees before the sound of music almost as much as before the Word of God.”

~ Martin Luther, German professor of theology, composer, priest, Augustinian monk, and a seminal figure in the Protestant Reformation. He was ordained to priesthood in 1507. He died in 1546.

I am thankful for music, for Alice our organist and music director and her able assistant Dave, for the hymns we have sung and will one day sing together again. I am thankful to be an American, even in these challenging and gut wrenching times....

And a reminder about our upcoming “ice cream sandwich social”! When was the last time you had an ice cream sandwich? How about Sunday, July 19th at 3 p.m. in the church parking lot.... with a rain date of Sunday, July 26th. Bring your lawn chair.... Wear your mask (except when you’re eating your ice cream!).... Stay six feet apart from one another.... and we’ll have some ice cream together, in person, but not too close to one another. If you’re up for it, send me an e-mail at susanstst@aol.com to let us know you’ll be there so we will be sure to have enough ice cream sandwiches to go around.

Blessings to all this cloudy Sunday morning of Summer..... Susan

p.s. I will download this morning's scripture reading and sermon to my Facebook page shortly: 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. 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, July 5, 2020
as prepared by Rev. Dr. Susan Stonestreet
Pastor of the Federated Church of Thomaston**

Opening Prayer

People of God, we are welcomed here to worship,
even when we cannot be together in person,
by our loving Creator, our Redeemer, and our sustaining Friend.
God's word of grace is offered to us in these troubling times
like a cool cup of water offered to parched people
or like music to our ears.

It is available whenever and wherever we are.

How blessed are we?

Come, let us worship God.

A Prayer of Confession & Words of Affirmation

God of gracious kindness, we choose to examine honestly
what it is that stops us from being the best we can be.
We look at what holds us back from generous hospitality and welcome.
We accept that we fail to include everyone in our midst,
and that there are others that we turn away.

We are sorry.

For this we ask your mercy.

God is saving us by divine mercy, no exceptions,
whether we believe it or not.

We are all saved in spite of ourselves, good and bad alike.
As a cup of water can wash away dirt and grime from our hands,
and a cool cup of water can quench our thirst,

so the grace of God cleanses us, restores,
and revives us to continue on our journeys
in these perilous and challenging times.
Amen.

A Reading of Scripture – Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30

[Jesus, speaking to the crowds] “But to what will I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the market-places and calling to one another, ‘We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not mourn.’ For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, ‘He has a demon.’ The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, ‘Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax-collectors and sinners!’ Yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds.”
Matthew 11:16-19

At that time Jesus said, “I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. All things have been handed over to me by my Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.

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.”

Matthew 11:25-30

A sermon based on Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30

“Take my yoke upon you . . .”

Pray with me. Loving God and compassionate Jesus, you invite us into your comforting arms and too often we turn down your invitation. Help us to accept your call upon us this day, as we face so many unexpected challenges now. Help us to find rest for body and soul in your divine presence among us. Amen.

Our reading from the Gospel of Matthew today contains one of the most well known passages in the New Testament. “Come to me, all who labor and are heavy

laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.” (Matt 11:28-30)

I’ve recited these words at funerals and memorial services, at services of healing, and to individuals going through difficult times in their lives for the past twenty years. Jesus says, in today’s vernacular, “Come to me. Lay down your burdens. Take a break. Learn from me. And go forward with rest for your souls.” I don’t know of any more comforting, reassuring words of scripture than these, except perhaps for the words of the 23rd Psalm.

In the Bible, “a yoke is a common metaphor for the Law, that’s Torah [the first five books of the Hebrew Scriptures, the Old Testament to us as Christians.] The scribes and Pharisees had used the Law as a means to weigh down and browbeat people, but Jesus corrects their interpretation of how life should be lived in God’s reign.”^[1] “Come to me, all you who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest, not the Law, not the religious officials of the day, but I, Jesus, will give you rest.”

This reminds me of theologian Frederick Buechner’s interpretation of John 14:6 in which Jesus says, “I am the way, the truth and the life.” Many Christians take this verse to mean you have to be a Christian in order to be saved and to reach eternal life. But Buechner looks at these words with an entirely different lens – one which focuses on Jesus’ suggesting that HE, not any religious tradition, not any words written in a book, not any priest or scribe, but HE, in his living, in his way of treating people, in his love for God and humanity, is the way, the truth and the life. Buechner suggests this is a “preposterous” claim, but one which Jesus invites us to accept. (from the dvd, “Buechner”)

In the same way, it seems to me, Jesus says in our passage for this morning, “MY yoke is easy, MY burden is light, and I invite you to take them up with me. And I, JESUS, will give you rest in the midst of all your anguish, all your personal burdens, all your difficulties.” That’s a pretty amazing invitation, don’t you think?

“At a first reading, it appears that Jesus’ talk about an easy yoke and light burden is out of place with the beginning of our passage for today in which he compares “this generation” with children who would neither dance to the music of a flute nor mourn along with those who wailed. Jesus has been talking about the inability of his generation to respond to the messengers of the reign of God, the chief of which we know, as Christians, to be Jesus himself. Then he shifts gears into easy yokes and light burdens.

But the thread that connects these seemingly unrelated verses with the rest of the chapter is Jesus' authority and ability to reveal God perfectly. Jesus, as Messiah and Son of God, [Matthew tells us] is uniquely qualified to reveal God's nature and will, since Jesus knows God perfectly. This revelation will not add to, but only ease the burden followers are asked to carry."²¹ And, in the end, in the final reckoning, "Wisdom [God acting through Jesus] will be vindicated [or justified] by her deeds." (Matt 11:19)

"Jesus' promise of an 'easy' or well-fitting yoke – a device that makes it less tiring for animals or people to carry a heavy load – is best heard in the context of the controversies about the Sabbath that immediately follow in Matthew 12. The Sabbath, a day for rest and renewal, had become burdened with traditions for its keeping. The yoke of Jesus, which may be imagined as living the way of God, is 'easy,' a word whose meaning runs close to 'kindness.' Jesus offers himself as the source of strength for his disciples and the source of rest from their burdens."³¹ Not any religious temple, or any religious official telling people what to do, or any religious law, but Jesus himself is the source of strength in which people can find rest for their souls.

Let me ask you a question – Are there places you go, or people you have known or know now, or pieces of music, or books which somehow, magically almost, seem to transport you to a place of rest and internal peace? Perhaps it's a mountaintop, like Mt. Battie here on the coast of Maine, or a person who always seems to be at peace no matter the circumstance of their lives, or a musical score – for me that's the ballet "Sparticus," or a book – again for me, Frederick Buechner's books bring me to a place of peace and understanding of God I have not found elsewhere, or Robert Weston's poetry, or Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings memoir, *Cross Creek*.

The light yoke and comfort of the *way* of Jesus are visible all around us, if only we open our eyes to see them and our ears to hear them. We can experience them through people we know, places we go, music we listen to or books we read. When you're buried under the weight of the world, or your personal troubles, *where* do you turn to, *whom* do you turn to for sustenance? Matthew tells us that Jesus says, "Turn to ME, and *I* will give you rest."

Right now, we may not be burdened down by the weight of religious traditions, but we are burdened down by the fallout from a horrific pandemic and political strife in our country like none of us have seen in our lifetimes. We're in a mess. I can't speak for you, but I'd like a new, better fitting yoke to take up than the one that is weighing me down. How about you?

Sometimes we hesitate to take on new yokes, though. Sometimes we prefer our old, familiar yokes rather than new ones, new ways of dealing with our burdens. There is a story which I find helpful to keep in mind when I think of the easy yoke of Jesus. As the legend goes, “birds at first had no wings, and they rebelled when wings were given because the wings seemed to be a burden; but when they accepted, the burden of wings lifted them to the sky. The weight of Christ’s yoke is wings to the soul. Christ himself wore a yoke. The words that might have been inscribed on it could have been these, ‘God lives and God loves.’”^[4]

The challenge facing all of us in these hard times is to remember, no matter what happens in the weeks and months to come, we are always invited into a relationship with God. Even with all our frailties, in the midst of all our difficulties and burdens, and in the midst of all our fears and doubts, Jesus invites us to take up his kindly and easy fitting yoke and move into this day and all the days to come.

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 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.....

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, 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!*

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 journey with us.
So be swift to love. Make haste to be kind.
And may the Creator of us all,
the redeemer of us all, and
the sustainer of us all*

be with you now and forever.

Amen.

(adapted from the words of French philosopher, Henri Auriel)

Readings from the RCL (Revised Common Lectionary)

for Sunday, July 12, 2020

Genesis 25:19-34; Psalm 119:105-112; Romans 8:1-11; Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

Words to ponder today, the day after the July 4th holiday.....

“One flag, one land, one heart, one hand, one nation evermore!” ~ Oliver Wendell Holmes

“America is a tune. It must be sung together.” ~ Gerald Stanley Lee

*“In a chariot of light from the region of the day, the Goddess of Liberty came,
She brought in her hand as a pledge of her love,
the plant she named Liberty Tree....*

*He that would make his own liberty secure, must guard even his enemy from
opposition;*

*for if he violates this duty he establishes a precedent that will reach himself.” ~
Thomas Paine*

*“Then join hand in hand, brave Americans all! By uniting we stand, by dividing we
fall.”*

~ John Dickinson

*“You have to love a nation that celebrates its independence every July 4, not with a
parade of guns, tanks, and soldiers who file by the White House in a show of strength
and muscle, but with family picnics where kids throw Frisbees, the potato salad gets
iffy, and the flies die from happiness. You may think you have overeaten, but it is
patriotism.” ~ Erma Bombeck*

^[1]From *Pulpit Resource*, Vol. 36, No. 3, 2008, p. 6

^[2]*Pulpit Resource*, *ibid.*

^[3]*Seasons of the Spirit* for July 6, 2008, p. 76.

^[4]*The Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. VII, 1951, p. 391.

