

Good morning from a still almost dark hill in Rockport!

I'm thinking about relief this morning.... relief of many forms – relief from physical pain, distress or anxiety (sometimes with the help of drugs); relief after a difficult period or situation has ended (sometimes all you can do is wait for the hard time to be over); relief in the form of aid to those in dire need of physical and/or financial help, as in the current situation of Afghan refugees (see my sermon below). How do you spell relief? I've written about this before – Alka-Seltzer! Would that in all situations in which relief is needed, we could pop a few tablets in a glass of water and relief would be at hand!

If we live long enough, we learn that in some situations genuine relief never comes... until the very end. Can we accept the fact that in life relief is relative, relief is sometimes fleeting, relief is a dream, relief is hope because there is nothing else left but hope....?

“Love is the first ingredient in the relief of suffering.” ~ Pio of Pietrelcina, 1887 – 1968, Italian priest

Blessings and love to each one this last Sunday of August..... Susan

“If any think they are religious...”

A Sermon for the Federated Church of Thomaston

Thomaston, Maine

Rev. Dr. Susan Stonestreet

Sunday, August 29, 2021

Scripture: James 1:17-27

Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. In fulfillment of his own purpose he gave us birth by the word of truth, so that we would become a kind of first fruits of his creatures.

You must understand this, my beloved: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; for your anger does not produce God's righteousness. Therefore rid yourselves of all sordidness and rank growth of wickedness, and welcome with meekness the implanted word that has the power to save your souls.

But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves. For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror; for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like. But those who look into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and persevere, being not hearers who forget but doers who act – they will be blessed in their doing.

If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless. Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world. James 1:17-27

Will you pray with me. Commanding God, we long to be doers of your word, not just receivers of it. But sometimes we spend more time looking in the mirror at ourselves, wanting to make sure we look presentable, than looking into the eyes of one another that we might see you looking back at us. Help us to put down our mirrors, O God, and think about what it means to be truly religious this day. Amen.

Today our theme is religion. What does it mean to be religious? There's one answer in our reading from James for today, and we'll get to that in a minute, but tell me what you believe. What does it mean to be religious? (get responses)

One of my favorite writers about matters of faith, Fred Buechner, writes this about religion: "The word *religion* points to that area of human experience where one way or another we come upon Mystery as a summons to pilgrimage; where we sense beyond and beneath the realities of every day a Reality no less real because it can only be hinted at in myths and rituals; where we glimpse a destination that we can never fully know until we reach it."¹ Mystery, with a capital M, is a summons to pilgrimage. To be religious, as Buechner understands the action, is to be on a pilgrimage toward the Mystery beyond the realities of every day.

I wish I had a nickel for every person who has said to me since 1995 when I began seminary, "I'm not religious, but I'm very spiritual." I'm always in a quandary as to what that really means for them. Sometimes I think it means they don't want to come to church on Sunday and be part of an active worshipping community. That's fair enough, I guess. That's where I was for the first half of my life. I truly didn't understand the power and worth of being part of an active worshipping community.

Other times I think it means they reject organized religion altogether and want nothing to do with it. That's fair enough, too, I guess. I'm not real positive about a lot of "organized religion" either. I always had a standard answer, when I was the pastor of United Christian Church in Lincolnville, for people who would say to me if they were going to come to church, they'd come to ours, but they didn't do "organized religion." I would always say, "Well then, you ought to come to our church, because sometimes we're about as unorganized as you can get." They would often smile or laugh, but they still didn't come.

And still other times I think people who tell me they're "spiritual" but not "religious" are just lazy. One person has said to me, "To be religious comes with

requirements.” And I do believe there are people who simply feel they don’t have time for, or are interested in, the “requirements” that come with being religious.

But there are still others, I believe, who truly do live out their spiritual beliefs in holy ways – in their appreciation of nature, in their compassion for others, in their respect for all living things.

To be religious, or not, can take one in many different directions of action, or inaction.

To be religious, according to James in our reading for this morning, means “to bridle one’s tongue,” and “to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.” (James 1:26, 27) To be religious means to *listen* more than talk, to *do more* than just hear the word of God. To be religious, according to James, means to *pay attention* to those most in need and to help them. To be religious means to keep one’s eye on the *holy ball of life*, not the *power balls of life*.

To be religious, it seems to me, is to live a life that honors the Mystery that is greater than us all and to do whatever we can to pass on our reverence for that Mystery to everyone we meet. That Mystery is widened with the first cry of every newborn child, every new slice of life that begins each day. It is honored with every final breath of every living being at the end of their lives. I often say in memorial services, “Life is sacred. It is sacred in its being born. It is sacred in its living. It is sacred in its dying.” I work hard to remind myself of that every day, do you? *To be religious is to honor and uphold what is sacred in life and in death.*

I would imagine each of us here this morning can call to mind those we’ve known, and those we’ve known of, who fulfill that definition of what it means to be religious – to honor and uphold what is sacred in life and in death.

As Buechner describes – it is moving towards and into that realm of the Mystery, the “destination that we can never fully know until we reach it.”

To be religious is to live and to die with a conscious and active awareness of the Mystery with a capital M that summons us to pilgrimage towards the Reality with a capital R that is greater than us all. And according to James and many other writers of the Bible, we are to care for the widows and orphans in our midst and all along the journey.

With each generation there may be different groups who fall into the symbolic category of widows and orphans, but always they are those who are most in need of our understanding, our compassion, and our care. In our context today,

in this year, in this month, it is the “widows and orphans” of Afghanistan who are being forced to flee their homeland in search of safety and new life.

Our denominations, as well as many others, are taking up the sacred mandate, as it is given to us by James and other Biblical writers in both the Old and New Testaments, to remember the widows and orphans among us and around the world – to not leave them uncared for. And yet, there are some in our country who would have us do just that. For they apparently believe we are not our brothers’ and sisters’ keepers – whether it relates to wearing a mask to help keep ourselves and others healthy, or welcoming the strangers coming into our country as they flee to safety from their homeland that has become a wasteland of terror.

From this point of view, it’s every man and woman for themselves. That point of view, my friends, puts us in a sorry and sad state of affairs. That puts us not only into a sacrilegious realm, but into an inhumane situation.

I’ve been thinking about this a lot in recent weeks, and all I can figure is those who do not believe there can be a way to provide safety and security for all have never had any need of it for themselves or for those they care about. Or else, they just don’t give a damn about anyone beside themselves.

What have we come to in our country when the protection of our individual liberties and pursuit of happiness, granted to us through our Constitution, have become the rights and privileges for only those who have little or no regard for those who are different from them, politically, socially or ethnically? My friends, as people of faith, or of no faith, it seems we have gone awry.

But yesterday, in our driveway and garage, I had a glimpse of what is good in the midst of all that appears to be so bad right now. We had a garage sale in which I put up signs that said, “All proceeds from this sale will go to Afghan relief.” I didn’t count the number of people who came to our sale, but I witnessed only one person who didn’t express any concern about that. She walked through and walked away empty handed, leaving no donation to the cause. Every other person who came to our sale said, “Thank you for doing this.” Several people gave us donations of cash or checks who bought nothing. At the end of the day, we had received \$900 in donations. I’ll be sending these donations to three different charitable organizations to be dispersed for Afghan relief. One is the “Refugee Emergency Fund” of the United Church of Christ. Another is the Global Ministries/UMCOR arm of the United Methodist Church. And the third is the International Rescue Committee (IRC). If you don’t know what to do to help Afghans who are having to leave their homeland with nothing but what they’re

wearing and can carry with them, have a garage or yard sale and put up a sign that says “All proceeds from this sale will go to Afghan relief.”

“If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless. Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.” (James 1:26-27) Let us not drop the ball the writer of James has thrown into our court, lest we become admirers of only our own image and not the image of our Afghan brothers and sisters and of God.

Let the people say, “Amen.”

Federated Church in Thomaston
United Church of Christ United Methodist Church
All Are Welcome
Sunday, August 29, 2021

Rev. Dr. Susan Stonestreet, Pastor Alice Billheimer, Organist/ Choir Director
Lector: Janet Dwelley

Please be respectfully silent once our worship service has begun.

An asterisk () indicates where you are invited to stand.*

***Bold print** indicates that the people speak these responses & prayers.*

GATHERING FOR WORSHIP

Welcome and Announcements

Prelude Jesus Walked this Lonesome Valley -- Appalachian melody in a setting by Hugh S. Livingston

Call to Worship

Leader: Generous giver of life, we pause from our hurrying, we rest from our scheduling, and we hold still our anxious minds.

People: For in your calming presence, and open to your Spirit, we seek another way of being, another way of doing.

All: May we simply be people who in our stumbling humanity do our best to mirror your love and goodness with joy, purpose and passion. Let us worship God!

***Opening Hymn** “This Is My Father’s World” 33 Red Hymnal

An Invocation....

A Responsive Reading – The Statement of Faith of the United Church of Christ (see insert)

A Moment of Silence

SERVICE OF THE WORD

Scripture Reading James 1:17-27

***Gloria Patri**

Message "If any think they are religious..." Rev. Dr. Susan Stonestreet

***Hymn of Meditation** "Lord, I Want to Be a Christian" 402 blue hymnal

RESPONDING IN FAITH

Sharing Our Joys and Concerns with God and Each Other

Pastoral Prayer & The Lord's Prayer.....

Our Father who art in Heaven, hallowed be Thy name. Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, on Earth as it is in Heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors, and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil for thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever, Amen.

Offertory "Thy Gates of Beauty" using the tune "Unser Herrscher" by Joachim Neander, "the wild hymn writer of the Reformation" 1650 - 1680

***Doxology No. 95 Blue**

***Prayer of Dedication**

***Closing Hymn** "Blest Be the Tie That Binds" 557 blue hymnal

Benediction

Postlude God of our Fathers -- based on the hymn tune "National Hymn"

Revised Common Lectionary Readings for Sunday, September 5, 2021

Proverbs 22:1-2, 8-9, 22-23; Psalm 125; James 2:1-10, (11-13), 14-17; Mark 7:24-37

Prayer List -- Hold in your prayers all those affected by the corona virus 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 dealing with the ravages of cancer near and far.... And add a prayer for Frances Hernandez, recovering from brain surgery, Tammy Whirty, a friend of Margie's, dealing with cancer challenges, and, from Blair, prayers for her friend Judith on the passing of her daughter, Lani, 42, from brain cancer, from Jackie a request for prayers for Kyle Cloudier, **and** continued deep prayers for Hank and Lucy as Hank endures his cancer journey with the help of Hospice, **and** continued prayers for Ursula recovering...and for "Cody," who doesn't live locally but needs prayers for guidance; **Kristin Parker O'Neal, Jo Ann Parker's daughter, who has had brain**

surgery; Enid, Ann Foster, Carol Moss, Fred Bagnall, Harriet Williams, Julie Pollitt, Zeke Bryant, Sally Harjula Elliot, Helmut Steger, John Flaherty, Doug and BJ Thomson, Heather Van Buskirk, **Tiffany, Lucy's granddaughter**

Please feel free to contact Susan by phone (207)322-1948 or by email freerangepastor@gmail.com to add or drop the names from the prayer list AND to let her know if you would like for her to stop by for a visit sometime. She's always glad to have a chat with you!

ANNOUNCEMENTS

Thursday-9/2/21.....10:30 - 2:00 pm: Quilters

Sunday-9/5/21.....9:30 am: Communion Service

Suggested Food Pantry Donation..... Baked Beans

The flowers this week are given by Jackie Harjula in memory of loved ones.

Deacon for September: Corinne Ervin

Reminders for next Sunday,
9/5/21

Greeter/Usher: Kay
Sylvester

Lector:
Flowers: Nance Brown

Collection Total for Sunday, August 15, 2021: August 22, 2021

Pledges -	\$400.00	\$200.00	
Loose -	\$ 63.00	\$117.00	
Total -	\$463.00	\$317.00	Total Deposit - \$780.00

The 2021 weekly budgeted operating cost for the Church and parsonage is \$1623.00 per week.

**Federated Church of Thomaston
United Church of Christ
&
United Methodist Church
Together Since 1929**

Sunday, August 29, 2021

8 Hyler Street, Thomaston, Maine 04861 (207) 354-6105

FCT email is thomfedchurch@gmail.com

WiFi password is #1Church

^[1]Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking, A Seeker's ABC*, New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1973, 1993, p. 95.