

Good Sunday morning from a cool, sunny hill in Rockport.....

I'm thinking about icons and legends this morning, but not religious icons or ancient legends with no factual truth to them. I'm thinking about a little Jewish lady who was bigger than life to many of us who died on Friday.... Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsberg. She was an icon of justice, fairness, composure and compassion. She was a legend showing us just how much one person can accomplish in their lifetime when their commitment to good will and equality for all people is ingrained in their actions, their words, their life. At the moment it seems there are few, if any, in public life who come close to her in stature or accomplishments. We will honor her as we go forward if we do everything we can to live our best lives, not focused on our own little needs and wants, but on the greater good for all people, not just those of our color or ethnic origin, our station in life or our political leanings. Rest in peace, Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsberg, as you lived a life that mattered beyond all our comprehension....

That's all I have to offer for this morning's "Sunday words"..... let silence among us sound louder than all our ranting and raving at one another in these challenging times.....

Blessings to each one this Sunday morn..... Susan

As I noted in several of my meditations this week, we will attempt to have church IN PERSON beginning next Sunday, September 27th at 9:30 in Leach Hall in our church.

We will follow all the appropriate protocols to keep us safe and healthy – wearing masks, using hand sanitizer, sitting well spaced apart, NOT singing, but HUMMING, no coffee hour, no paper bulletins and only meeting for 30 to 40 minutes.

All of this will be based on the situation with the virus in Maine as it presents itself towards the end of September. I know we all want to be back together in church on

Sunday mornings. *We must do this safely and wisely as we go forward!*

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.....

p.p.p.s *Thank you 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 keep writing.....*

**A simple online worship service for Sunday, September 20, 2020
as prepared by Rev. Dr. Susan Stonestreet
Pastor of the Federated Church of Thomaston**

A Call to Worship

Gracious God, Gentle Spirit, Christ Jesus:
we have come to worship today in cyberspace with all of who we are.
Some of us come feeling uncertain about the relationships
and friendships we have with one another.
Some of us come thinking of past hurts, betrayals,
and broken promises in our lives.
Some of us come reflecting on struggles, sorrows, and dreams.
We give thanks that we can trust in our relationship with you, O God,
as we struggle with our oh so human frailties
in our relationships with one another.
Let us worship God in spirit if not in person this day.

A Prayer of Confession & Assurance of Pardon*

When all seems lost and circumstances leave us feeling empty and afraid;
God of unwavering hope,
may your words of life burn within our hearts.
When trust seems impossible and our eyes remain tightly closed
to the constant breaking in of Spirit;
God of unwavering faith,
may your words of life burn within our hearts.
When our spirits feel dry and listless and where hurt or resentment
creates barriers to human care and friendship;

God of unwavering love,
may your words of life burn within our hearts.
We are fellow travelers,
alive to God's constant word of faith, hope, and love.
We journey into life in new ways.
May we take to heart God's gift of presence, peace, and forgiveness.
Let us receive it gladly and live it with passion and boldness.
Amen.

* Adapted from a Prayer of Confession & Assurance of Pardon
in *Seasons of the Spirit* for Sunday, May 8, 2011.

A Reading of Scripture – Matthew 20:1-16

Now the kingdom of Heaven is like a landowner going out at daybreak to hire workers for his vineyard. He made an agreement with the workers for one denarius a day and sent them to his vineyard. Going out at about the third hour he saw others standing idle in the market place and said to them, "You go to my vineyard too and I will give you a fair wage." So they went. At about the sixth hour and again at about the ninth hour, he went out and did the same. Then at about the eleventh hour he went out and found more men standing around, and he said to them, "Why have you been standing here idle all day?" "Because no one has hired us," they answered. He said to them, "You go into my vineyard, too." In the evening, the owner of the vineyard said to his bailiff, "Call the workers and pay them their wages, starting with the last arrivals and ending with the first." So those who were hired at about the eleventh hour came forward and received one denarius each. When the first came, they expected to get more, but they too received one denarius each. They took it, but grumbled at the landowner saying, "The men who came last have done only one hour, and you have treated them the same as us, though we have done a heavy day's work in all the heat." He answered one of them and said, "My friend, I am not being unjust to you; did we not agree on one denarius? Take your earnings and go. I choose to pay the lastcomer as much as I pay you. Have I no right to do what I like with my own? Why should you be envious because I am generous?" Thus the last will be first, and the first, last."

Matthew 20:1-16,

New Jerusalem Bible

A sermon based on Matthew 20:1-16
"From Resentment to Gratitude"

Will you pray with me. Generous-beyond-reason God, help us to move beyond our resentments of others this day and into gratitude for their very existence. Help us to remember that no matter whether we come to you early in life, or later in life, or as we take our last breaths, you welcome us into your benevolent holy fold with all our resentments, frailties, and misgivings. Amen.

Hear this story: “A man rowed a small boat upstream, heading toward home, when he felt another small boat, heading downstream, collide with his boat. Since he had the right of way, he felt angry. Turning, he yelled at the other boatman, “Watch where you’re going! Be more careful!” The other man apologized, and passed by without further incident. But an hour later, as the man continued upstream, he felt another boat collide with his. Furious, he turned to yell at the reckless person. His anger vanished when he saw that the boat was empty – it must have come loose from its moorings. Calmly, he pushed it aside and continued on his journey. He never lost his temper again, because from then on, he treated everyone like an empty boat.”^[1]

Sometimes, stories, parables.... like this one about a man and an empty boat.... teach us what we seem not to be able to learn in any other way. Author W. H. Auden wrote, “You cannot tell people what to do, you can only tell them parables, and that is what art really is, particular stories of particular people and experiences.”^[2]

“Storyteller Megan McKenna calls parables ‘arrows of God.’ They pierce us and make us uncomfortable because they get at the heart of what it means to live faithfully.”^[3]

The parable for today from the Gospel of Matthew of the landowner with workers arriving to work in his vineyard at various times, but all receiving the same pay, is very sticky. It tells us how we should act about life boats, empty, or with annoying people on board. It tells us about one of God’s most annoying and piercing arrows – of benevolence and generosity for all.

Monk and writer Henri Nouwen writes of this parable of Matthew’s, “I don’t know about you, but the parable of the late arrivers angers me greatly! Why would the landowner pay those who came for the last hour the same as those who worked the whole day in the vineyard? It’s not fair; it’s not right.... Right in the face of those early comers who worked the whole day, the landowner pays a day’s wage to the latecomers, too, thus creating an occasion for resentment.

[Nouwen goes on to say,] reflecting on this parable, over a long period of time, I have come to realize how self-righteous I am, and how resentful I feel about latecomers receiving the same wage as someone like *me*, an early comer to the vineyard of faith. How easily I forget how great a privilege it is to spend a full day with my brothers and sisters doing what I was asked to do by the One who loves me the most. What prevents me from rejoicing in the landowner's generosity to others? Why am I not grateful for what I received? And for what they received? The movement to be grateful rather than judgmental of others constitutes a profound conversion....

Resentment is one of the most vicious qualities of life because it makes human relationships and community life so difficult. It prevents us from seeking forgiveness and robs us of our joy. It takes away our inner freedom to act creatively and makes us cling to negative feelings as our only way to find an identity. We then become what we are against and regress to the small satisfactions of unexpressed anger....

[And here's the major point Nouwen makes, it seems to me,] resentment is the curse of the faithful, the virtuous, the obedient, and the hardworking.... That is why resentment has been called the most destructive passion in the Christian church."^[4]

And I believe it must have been one of the reasons the apostle Paul wrote such strong letters of concern to the first Christians in Corinth. You know 1 Corinthians 13, known as the "love chapter," was not written as a nice poem to be read at wedding ceremonies. It was written because those early church folks in Corinth were not getting along with one another. They were being envious, boastful, arrogant and rude, insisting on their own ways, irritable and resentful. (1 Cor 13:4-5)

Things haven't changed much, have they? In our relationships – whether they be in our families, our church or community, or the wider world – resentment and its twin, jealousy, have wrecked more havoc among us than most any other emotion.

So how do we go from holding onto our resentments like a dog with a bone he refuses to give up.... to living with gratitude for each and every person we meet in our day to day lives? If we were "in person" this morning I'd ask you for your answers to this very important question. But since we're only together in cyberspace, I'll tell you what Henri Nouwen suggests.... that we do this by "confessing our resentments within a safe and supportive faith community,

creating space for forgiveness and freedom. When this happens [Nouwen writes], God's liberating grace is able to make all things new. We learn how to sing a new song and develop a new spirit of thanksgiving in which all of life can be received as a gift....

Through the spiritual practice of letting go of jealousy and bitterness and forgiving and affirming others, we can make rivals into friends and competitors into companions on the way to true greatness. [Nouwen continues] servanthood might sound like a pious idea, but it really asks for the humble recognition that *our life is not our own to be defended but a gift to be shared. All we have has been given to us. Our part is to be grateful and to give thanks.*"^[5] (italics added)

I appreciate Nouwen's wisdom, but I have to confess I have a very hard time incorporating it into my everyday life. How about you?

A man in a boat begins to treat everyone he meets as an *empty* boat, not bent on getting in *his* way. I try to let go of my anger and resentment at people who don't behave and speak as I would, or wish they would, and I try to live with gratitude each day.... but I don't get it right all the time, or much of the time some days....

So here's two questions for today: What resentments are you willing to throw away this day and say to yourself, "Get over it!" And who or what do you wish to hold in gratitude this day, and say, "Thank you for helping me become a kinder, more loving person!"?

At the moment, we are in the midst of dealing effectively with a worldwide pandemic and a political firestorm in our country. We're having a hard time trusting one another and caring for one another across humanitarian and political divides, and we're spending much time wishing our enemies ill will.

We would do well to trust and believe in the benevolence and good will of God demonstrated in the piercing arrows of Jesus' parables.

Let the people say, "Amen."

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

Please hold in your prayers all those affected by the deadly wildfires burning in California, Washington, and Oregon....

And **continue to** hold in your prayers the people of Louisiana after the deadly hurricane that traveled through their state week before last.....

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 affected, which should be every one of us, by the cruel condition of racism which continues to take the lives of too many of our Black brothers and sisters

And all those families affected by the use of addictive drugs 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.....

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 Michael and Gail in southern Maine, Pricilla O'Hara on the death of her husband Wally.... *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, September 27, 2020

Exodus 17:1-7; Psalm 78:1-4, 12-16; Philippians 2:1-13; Matthew 21:23-32

Words to ponder today about “resentment” and “gratitude”.....

“Resentment is a passion, a paralyzing set of complaints that makes us feel angry and frustrated with the people and institutions on which we have made ourselves dependent..... The opposite of resentment is gratitude....” and

“Gratitude is the attitude that enables us to let go of anger, receive the hidden gifts of those we want to serve, and make these gifts visible to the community as a source of celebration.”

≡ Henri Nouwen, *Spiritual Formation, Following the Movements of the Spirit*

^[1]Dan, Millman in *No Ordinary Moments*, cited in *Spiritual Literacy, Reading the Sacred in Everyday Life* by Frederic and Mary Ann Brussat, New York: Scribner, 1996, p. 427-428.

^[2]In *Seasons of the Spirit, Behold, Arts for the Church Year, Pentecost 2* 2002, p. 12.

^[3]In *Seasons of the Spirit, This Season...at Home, Pentecost 2* 2002, p. 4.

^[4]Henri Nouwen, *Spiritual Formation, Following the Movements of the Spirit*, New York: HarperCollins, p. 58-60.

^[5]*Ibid.*, p. 64-65.