

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

On my walk this morning I stopped to take a photo of a little rock neatly painted with the word "LOVE" on it, with a simple rainbow painted above the words. It lies nestled in grass at the base of a very large, very old tree in front of a simple white cape. There's a simple little "fence" of sorts about a foot in front of the rock, standing guard, as if it could prevent someone from picking up the rock. It couldn't, really..... a person could reach right over the little fence and pick up "Love." Hopefully no one will pick up the rock, but will, at the very least, think about love when they walk by it. I think about it each time I walk by it. We need these little reminders each day to think about love, to do love, to hope others do love. Wouldn't it be nice if the thing invading all of our lives right now wasn't the corona virus, or hateful political wrangling, but love. It will spread, you know. It will stick, if you offer it over and over. It will save us all, if we can get out of our own ways and into the ways of the One and the many who have shown us the way into new life and continue to offer us a way forward. If only we could pay attention and hold ourselves and one another accountable for all our words and deeds.... what a difference it would make as we go forward..... (I'll attempt to post the photo of "LOVE" on my Facebook page, freerangepastor.)

As I noted in several of my meditations this week, we will attempt to have church IN PERSON beginning on 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!*

Blessings to all this cool Sunday morning of late 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.....

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 6, 2020
as prepared by Rev. Dr. Susan Stonestreet
Pastor of the Federated Church of Thomaston**

A Call to Worship

This is a gathering time –
a time to come together, settle in, and remember who we are.
We are the church, whether in person or in cyberspace,
but always in spirit, yesterday, today, and tomorrow.
We are greeted by the Spirit of Jesus
who welcomed all to the table of life.
Abiding in mutual love we stretch out our hands in friendship
and discover the presence of God.
We remain in God's love,
Yesterday, today, and tomorrow....

A Reflection on “the Spiritual Life”*

The spiritual life is about more than the repetition of spiritual exercises.
It demands commitment to discovering the essence of life.
It requires the perseverance it takes to try and try again
to find the way that is most life-giving for us –
one community, one guide after another, if necessary,
until we find ourselves truly alive spiritually, truly at home.
It is about being open to every moment, however incomplete,
because every moment in life has something to teach us
about what it means to live well.
It is about realizing that sometimes the perfection of the moment
lies in accepting its imperfections.

by Joan Chittister in *Welcome to the Wisdom of the World

A Reading of Scripture – Matthew 18:15-20 & Romans 13:8-14

“If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax-collector. Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.”

Matthew 18:15-20

Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. The commandments, “You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not covet”; and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, “Love your neighbor as yourself.” Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.

Besides this, you know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; the night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the words of darkness and put on the armour of light; let us live honourably as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy. Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.

Romans 13:8-14

A sermon based on Matthew 18:15-20 & Romans 13:8-14

“...where two or three are gathered....”

Will you pray with me. Loving God, have compassion upon us this day. Help us to understand your meaning in the word “community.” Help us to learn that where two or three are gathered, you are, indeed, among us, bidden or not. Amen.

There’s a sign that used to hang just inside the front door of United Christian Church in Lincolnville where I served as pastor for over eighteen years. I don’t know if it’s still there. It read “Bidden or Not Bidden, God Is Present.” That statement isn’t from the Bible, although I thought it was before I looked it up. It

was carved in the original Latin on a plaque that hung over the door of the great Swiss psychotherapist, Carl Jung, to remind those who entered of the presence of the spiritual in the everyday.^[1] It does have a scriptural reference point in Psalm 111:10, “Awe of the Lord is the beginning of Wisdom.” Rev. Tacy French, who some of you knew, gave the plaque to the church. Tacy was the pastor of United Christian Church for twelve years before I took to the pulpit there.

I bring this up this morning because I think there is a link between our texts for this morning, the sentiment on this plaque and the situation in which we are all living through right now. I don’t know about you, but I have to believe “bidden or not bidden, God is present” every day in all of our lives, no matter the news, no matter the stress, no matter the pandemic, no matter what....

In reading this week’s scripture passage from the Gospel of Matthew, I found myself with a new appreciation of the words attributed to Jesus, “Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.” (Matthew 18:20) Any time I’ve spoken those words – referencing Jesus, of course – I’ve meant the *positive* side of them. We come together, two or three or four or more, to show our love for one another, to do good works in the community, and to worship together in community on Sunday mornings, whether in person or through cyberspace at the moment....

But in understanding the words only that way, I’ve done what I say on many occasions is what we need to be careful NOT to do – I’ve taken the words out of their biblical context. This text is not one of joyful community coming together to celebrate in love for one another, but one of *conflict* in the community – specifically because of one person’s sin or wrongdoing.

“Where two or three are gather in my name, I am there among them,” Jesus says. And he’s talking about the occasions when the faith community comes together to bring members of that community into accountability to one another and to God. Now the text doesn’t suggest Jesus says they should come together and judge one another. And we don’t know the “sin” of the person referenced in this passage. The focus of Jesus’ direction is upon the *actions of the rest of the community* in response to the person who has sinned. It’s not the sin that is the concern, or even the person who has sinned, it’s how we in the community respond to the person who has committed the sin, whatever it is.

The word “listen” is used four times in three sentences in this passage. Jesus first says that one person should go to the person who has sinned or who has faulted, and then he says, ‘If the member listens to you, you have regained that

one. But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax-collector.” (Matthew 18:15-17) In other words, shun them, cast them out of the community.

Now these words can be very hard for us to hear and relate to. In my wildest imagination, I can't imagine this scenario taking place in our church community. But again, as in so many times when we read scripture, we need to look for the POINT of the passage, not at the LITERAL words of the passage.

Jesus' point, it seems to me, is not to *judge* one another, but to hold one another *accountable* – for words spoken and actions taken, and to offer forgiveness.... Forgiveness is a very hot topic for all of us – in our families, in our church community, in our country. And so should accountability be a hot topic also.

We need to be accountable to one another and to God. But accountability seems in short supply right now. I have to continually remind myself, “Bidden or not bidden, God is present,” even in the midst of sinful thoughts and actions, even in the midst of our lack of accountability to ourselves and to one another.

We need to know that our words and actions DO make a difference – words of disrespect or ignorance or dislike for others makes a difference. Words of love and understanding and forgiveness DO make a difference. We need to be accountable for our words and actions, and we need to hold one another accountable. Do I sound like a “broken record” about accountability? I should, because our record is broken right now....

It seems to me that our refusal to recognize the significance of our words and actions – all of our words and actions – is one of the greatest causes of the conflicts that are surrounding us each day locally, nationally and internationally.

Where two or three are gathered, what difference do our words and actions make? Would Jesus smile and nod his head in the affirmative at what we are saying and doing, or would he have a furrowed brow and shake his head in the negative and say to us, “Go back to the drawing board, you're not getting this quite right yet.”

In our reading from the apostle Paul's letter to the Romans this morning, Paul says, “Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. [All the commandments] are summed up in this word, ‘Love your neighbour as yourself.’” (Romans 13:8-9)

These are NOT idle words. They may sound corny and too simple, but as we all know, they are not simple and they are not easy to carry out. Some days it is very hard to love our neighbors. And our words to and about our neighbors and our actions toward our neighbors make a difference. If we are not accountable for those words and actions, we wreck havoc in our church family, in our town community, and in our national and international relations.

The Reverend Forrest Church was the Senior Minister at All Souls Unitarian Church in Manhattan. That church is very close to what became known as “ground zero” since September 11th, 2001. Reverend Forrest died several years ago from cancer. But shortly before he died, he spoke at the Annual Convocation of Bangor Seminary in 2002. He was an eloquent and effective preacher. In his book *Bringing God Home, A Traveler’s Guide*, he had these words to say about religion:

“If our religious doesn’t inspire in us a humble affection for one another and a profound sense of awe at the wonder of being, one of two things has happened. It has failed us, or we have failed it. Should either be the case, we must go back to the beginning and start all over again. We must reboot our lives until the wonder we experience proves itself authentic by the quality of our response to it. [He wrote] I may not believe as Jesus did, but I should dearly hope to love as Jesus did, to forgive and embrace others as unconditionally as he.”^[2]

What difference do we make in this fragile and oh-so-fractured country in which we live.... where hatred and prejudice push people to be willing to ignore the fragility of all life and take up arms against one another?

Are we accountable for our words and actions?

Do we live as if we truly believe that where two or three of us are gathered, Jesus is among us?

Can we hold deeply in our minds and our hearts, in these deeply troubled times, “bidden or not bidden, God is here”?

Let the people say, “Amen.”

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

Please 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 Jackie's 92 year old friend Genevieve Micali, 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

Go into this day with peace and love in your hearts.

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 life with peace.

Amen.

Readings from the RCL (Revised Common Lectionary)

for Sunday, September 13, 2020

Exodus 14:19-31; Psalm 114; Romans 14:1-12; Matthew 18:21-35

Words to ponder today about "accountability".....

"Accountability is the glue that ties commitment to the result." ~ Bob Proctor

"No individual can achieve worthy goals without accepting accountability for his or her own actions." ~ Dan Miller

"You can't talk about leadership without talking about responsibility and accountability...you can't separate the two. A leader must delegate responsibility and provide the freedom to make decisions, and then be held accountable for the results." ~ Buck Rogers

“A body of men holding themselves accountable to nobody ought not to be trusted by anybody.” ~ Thomas Paine

“We must reject the idea that every time a law’s broken, society is guilty rather than the lawbreaker. It is time to restore the American precept that each individual is accountable for his actions.” ~ Ronald Reagan

“It is wrong and immoral to seek to escape the consequences of one’s acts.” ~ Mahatma Gandhi

“Having authority implies accountability. If you reject the blame for failures under your watch, people reject your leadership.” ~ Rick Warren

“Think of these things, whence you came, where you are going, and to whom you must account.” ~ Benjamin Franklin

^[1] Found at www.wildgoosestudio.com

^[2] Forrest Church in *Bringing God Home, A Traveler’s Guide*, New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2002, p. 232-233.