

Live with the dents...
A Sermon for Vespers at Windsor Chairmakers
Lincolntonville, Maine
Sunday, July 29, 2018
Rev. Dr. Susan Stonestreet

"The Lord God has given me the tongue of a teacher, that I may know how to sustain the weary with a word. Morning by morning, God wakens, wakens my ear to listen as those who are taught."

Isaiah 50:4

"Think to wish for what is yours at this very moment. To love. To serve. To touch. To know. Think to wish for all that is yours to have. Think to wish for all that is yours to do. And think to wish that you might be who it is that you might most fully be. Avoid wishful thinking. Avoid the traps and pitfalls of nostalgia for the past. Savor every moment as it passes. And enlist yourself in saving that which can be saved this very moment, in order that it, too, may endure for others to enjoy."

Forrest Church quote from *The Cathedral of the World: A Universalist Theology*

"Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was made from things not visible."

Hebrews 11:1-3

Will you be in the spirit of prayer with me. Creator of us all, God of many names, and beyond all names, be among us as we think about the dents in our lives. Help us to discern the way forward in the midst of the chaos of our times. Remind us that for everything in life there is a season. Amen.

According to my trusty smart phone dictionary, a dent is "a hollow or depression in a surface, as from a blow," as in the dent left in my rear bumper from the unknown jerk who must have run into my car in the Hannaford's parking lot! Or a dent can be "a noticeable effect, especially of reduction: to leave a dent in one's savings or a dent in one's pride." "Those hurtful words you said to me ten years ago left a dent in my mind that just can't be repaired or forgotten." Dents come in all shapes, sizes and forms, don't they?

Maybe the first dent in your life came when you did something not so nice to a playmate -- like pushing him down a flight of stairs in your house. I'm guilty of that one. My mother said, "Susie, why did you do that?" And I responded, "because I was tired of playing with him!" And I've never forgotten what I did. Fortunately my little three-year-old playmate wasn't permanently injured or killed from my action. But the dent in my mind and conscience has always been there for me. I don't know how it affected him....

Perhaps your first dent came in high school when you weren't picked for the debate team, or the football team, or the field hockey team, or after you mustered up the courage to ask out someone you really liked and they turned you down. Ouch! "What's wrong with me? Why wasn't I picked?" Dent!

Or perhaps you remember the dent from your college years or your first job when you fudged a little on a paper, or skipped out early from work and were caught. Maybe the dent came in the form of a failed class, or a demotion or firing from your first job. "Has that dent left on my life resume from my poor behavior taught me anything?"

Maybe there have been dents left in your heart and psyche from relationship upheavals, from words spoken in anger and meant to hurt the other person in the heat of the moment. Those dents sometimes grow deeper and deeper, don't they.... even after years have passed and you just

can't forget your partner's or your child's or your parents hateful words to you..... or, perhaps, the hateful words you spoke to them.... Those dents run long and deep, yes?

So what are we to do with all these dents of life? It's hard to just wish them away, isn't it? As much as I try to forget watching that fellow three-year-old tumbling down that long staircase, I can't get that image out of my head. As much as I am sorry for nasty interactions I've had with partners, I can't get out of my head the hurtful things that were said to me and the hurtful things I said back to them.

That old adage, "stick and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me," really isn't true, is it? Stick and stones *might* break my bones, but words *stab me in the heart* and to my very core. BIG TIME DENTS!

Dents hurt. Dents become ingrained in our minds and bodies and linger forever in our lives. I don't believe we ever get away from them. So what do we do about the dents? Any ideas? "It's response time!" Any ideas anyone would like to share about how we deal with the dents in our lives?

See a good therapist?! Talk with a trusted friend who can keep confidences, and who is such a good friend they never judge you, and who knows how to listen? Go to a workshop on improving communication skills? If you're of a religious bent, pray, talk to your pastor?

Here's something I do that often helps -- I read some words that offers a glimpse of a different way to consider the dents of life in a new way. The texts I picked for this morning are three readings I've found helpful in dealing with the dents in life.

The first reading from the prophet Isaiah in the Hebrew Scriptures has been meaningful to me since my first year in seminary in 1995 -- "The Lord God has given me the tongue of a teacher that I might know how to sustain the weary with a word. Morning by morning God wakens, wakens my ear to listen as those who are taught." (Isaiah 50:4) We're all teachers, whether we know it or not.

With every word we say to another person, with every action we make in our day-to-day lives, we're teaching those around us about who *we* are. Do our words "sustain the weary" or do they dent others deeply?

What do our tongues reveal about us? And can we be quiet? Can we "listen as those who are taught?"

Can we work harder to *receive* the words of others without judging them or rushing to the conclusion that *they* are judging us? Do our words reveal too many "ouchs" and not enough "thank you's" and "I'm sorry's"?

Isaiah 50:4 is never far from my thoughts as I navigate my days, as much now that I am retired from pastoring a church as when my time was consumed with interactions -- positive and negative -- in church affairs for eighteen years.

And the quote from Forrest Church -- I heard him speak at Bangor Theological Seminary's annual Convocation several years before he died. What a brilliant mind and compassionate speaker. He wrote, "Think to wish for what is yours at this very moment. To love. To serve. To touch. To know.

Think to wish for all that is yours to have.

Think to wish for all that is yours to do.

Think to wish that you might be who it is that you might most fully be.

Avoid wishful thinking.

Avoid the traps and pitfalls of nostalgia for the past.

Savor every moment as it passes. And enlist yourself in saving that which can be saved this very moment, in order that it, too, may endure for others to enjoy.” (quote from *The Cathedral of the World: A Universalist Theology*)

"Think to wish [Church suggests]...." What do you "think to wish for"? "To love. To serve. To touch. To know." We can't delete the dents of life, but can we "think to wish" they could be something more than "ouch" moments or memories, something more than lifetime regrets and grudges?

You know if you turn the word "dent" around, or upside down, it becomes the word "tend." Can we tend to our dents so they become rungs upward to better communications.... not further downward to holes of cynicism and negativity about ourselves and about one another?

The third text for this morning is one of my most important spiritual crutches. [Let me insert here one of my favorite quotes about religion. It comes from William Sloane Coffin, one of the great theologians of the 20th century in my book. He wrote, "It is often said that the Church is a crutch. Of course it's a crutch. What makes you think you don't limp?"¹]

So Hebrews 11:1-3 is an important spiritual crutch for me as well as offering a way for me to accept the dents in my life. "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was made from things not visible." (Hebrews 11:1-3) The first words of that text are crucial to me -- "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for..." These words take me to Forrest Church's words, "think to wish."

No one has the power to take away that assurance of things we hope for, unless we give them that power. No one has the power to overturn what we think to wish for, unless we give them that power. We may not be able to eliminate the dents of life, but we can sure not give them the power to overcome us.

I have a prayer of Sister Joan Chittiser's I'd like for us to read together. I'll hand it out. If you've never read anything of Chittiser's or heard her in person, you've missed a fiery Catholic nun who has much to teach us about faith and social justice and equality and living with the dents of our lives. Will you say these words with me.

May my journey through the questions of life
bring me to new moments of awareness....
May they be enlightening moments....
May I find embedded in the wisdom of the past,
like all students before me,
the answers I am seeking now....
May these answers awaken in me that which is
deeper than fact, truer than fiction, full of faith.....
May I come to know that in every human event
is a particle of the Divine to which I turn for meaning,
here to which I tend for fullness of life hereafter.

~ Adapted words of Sister Joan Chittister,
in *Welcome to the Wisdom of the World* ~

Blessed be this day. Learn as you teach. Tend to the dents in your life with thoughts to wish for good and the assurance of things hoped for. Let the people say, "Amen."

¹William Sloane Coffin, *Credo*, Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004, p. 137.