

Homecoming

June 13, 2021

Homecoming

Friends, it is SO GOOD to be in person with so many of you, and truly marvelous that we can be present with those of you who are online as well. I'll admit, I wept as I prepared for worship today! A lot of folks talked about getting teary when they were vaccinated. For me, this is the moment when the weight of all of the emotion, all of the struggle and loss and grief, as well as the joy and hope and relief are hitting me.

Welcome home, friends! Most of us have made it, though we've lost some bright lights and twinkling stars in our 15 months apart, some of us have lost our rocks, and we've all felt the earth move under our feet and have had the experience of fear and disorientation of not knowing how the world works or what is coming next.

No one of us is the same person as we were in March of 2020. For me, one of the silver linings of pandemic has been to see how you have lived your faith throughout this time. It has been such an honor to be your pastor, and to see the fruits of your faith. You've turned my pipe dream of creating a Blessing Box which provides free, anonymous food and hygiene products to those in need into a thriving ministry that serves hundreds of people a month. You've written thousands of cards and made even more phone calls, checking in on one another, reaching out, working to see that no one falls through the cracks.

You've maintained your generosity to the working of this church so that we can continue being a force of God's love and inclusion and action, some of you stepping up your giving because you understood that others were struggling and wouldn't be able to be as generous as they had hoped. And don't forget that the fact that we weren't meeting here in the sanctuary was an act of faith in itself, as we sacrificed our experience of community for the health and wellbeing of the most vulnerable among us. These are just a few of the ways that you have lived what you believe while we haven't been physically together in this room.

The Scriptures

Our Gospel lesson today from Mark is familiar to many of you, as is the Hebrew Scripture passage that Betty read for us. In 1 Samuel, we heard the story of the LORD instructing Samuel to discern the new king after Saul dies. Samuel is told to look for the king from among the sons of Jesse. The seven older brothers are trotted out, but God doesn't choose any of them. Samuel then asks if Jesse has any other sons, David, who is so young they didn't even think to include him is brought forth, and the rest, as they say, is history.

In our passage from the Gospel of Mark, Jesus offers some similes to the kingdom of God, first, telling us that it is like grain scattered on the ground that bears abundant fruit, and also that it is like a mustard seed that grows into a great sheltering bush. Most often when we hear this passage preached, we hear a focus on the size of the mustard seed,

but what strikes me this year is the result. We're told in this passage that the reign of God, God's ways of being, is exemplified in nourishment and shelter: and not just nourishment, but being fed by something that is mysterious and maybe even a bit strange, something that you haven't had a hand in. And not just shelter, but an improbable source of shelter and safety and belonging.

Casey Overton, a renowned spiritual writer and activist with Tikkun Magazine, points out that part of the function of these two similes is the "destabilizing of imperial notions of strength and triumph." Indeed, Jesus is telling us that the reign of God isn't the triumphant culture warrior lording power over all who stand in their way, but rather, the flourishing of the kingdom of God can be seen when people are fed even though they don't know how, when we plant an unassuming little seed that provides shelter and safety and home. This is the beautiful connection between our two scripture readings today.

God works in profound yet mysterious ways. God is not ageist or classist. God is not about domination and empire building. God IS about nourishment and shelter, and God works through even those we don't expect, especially through those we don't expect.

In coming back to our beloved church building, and realizing that I haven't had a chance to clean the massive piles off of my desk in the 15 months we've been apart, and that 95% of what is on my desk therefore probably belongs in a recycle bin, I also realized that I've had a framed quote on every desk I've served from in the last 20 years. It was given to me by an amazing young woman who I had the privilege to serve as Confirmation sponsor for in 2001, a full twenty years ago.

The quote from Mother Teresa reads:

At the end of our lives
we will not be judged
by how many diplomas we have received,
how much money we have made
or how many great things we have done.
We will be judged by:
I was hungry and you gave me to eat.
I was naked and you clothed me.
I was homeless and you took me in.

Hungry not only for bread—but hungry for love.
Naked not only for clothing—but naked of human dignity and respect.
Homeless not only for want of a home of bricks—but homeless because of rejection.

Conclusion

Mother Teresa's quote, like Jesus' similes, invite us to rethink how we interact with the world. They call us into creating a society that is about caring for one another and mutual flourishing. There's a cartoon I've seen a few times recently that shows two people with pizza in their hands, one person has more than they can hold, the other has a tiny slice. There's a talk bubble coming out of both of their mouths that says, "I understood that

there would not be enough for everyone, so I took this much.” Living our faith, living as a follower of Jesus, means thinking of the flourishing of others as well as our own.

Friends, while it is magnificent to be leading worship from within these walls with some of Jesus’ followers in the pews again, you’ve undoubtedly noticed that we haven’t used “returning to normal” language. This goes beyond the fact that we don’t have our nursery open yet, that our hymns are being led by a cantor, and that the whole congregation is wearing masks. We need to be different. We need to be even more inclusive, more nourishing, more sheltering than we ever were before.

In the second book in the Chronicles of Narnia, the Pevensie children have this dialogue upon their second encounter with Aslan, the lion which functions as a God character throughout the series:

“Aslan . . . you’re bigger.”

“That is because you are older, little one,” answered he.

“Not because you are?”

“I am not. But every year you grow, you will find me bigger.”

The children see Aslan differently as they get older, as if they saw what they could see when they were young, but as they are able to see more, there is more to see.

Friends, I’d like to suggest today that where our experience of pandemic intersects with Jesus’ comparison of the kingdom of God to a mustard seed is that our previous – dare I say, smaller images of God (and being the church) – must grow and change as we do.

Tara Owens of Anam Cara Ministries writes:

If we keep the same thoughts about who God is – and how God is with-us – our whole life through, we will have kept “God in a box” and be missing so much. One of the ways our faith grows is that we step into bigger and bigger pictures of who God is...what Life is...how Love is...

In our Friday email, I wrote to you about two ways that we’re inviting you to commemorate and process your experiences of pandemic and reemerging. The first is the creation of a rainbow of prayer flags. Not only is the rainbow God’s sign that God will not allow total destruction and annihilation, that the sun will rise even after all seems lost, we also know it as a symbol of inclusion.

We’re inviting you to take the cardstock in your bulletins (and if you need more you can get as much as you would like from the church office) to write your prayers and reflections. Some of you may have a lot to write: your grief, your fear, your disbelief. Others may choose to write about the silver linings you experienced amidst pandemic.

You may write prose or poetry, maybe use the idea of an acrostic and use the letters of a word to focus your prayers, perhaps hope or joy or love or faith. Whatever you choose to write, we invite you to place your prayer card in the offering basket or return it to the

church office throughout the month of June, and we will string these prayers up in the sanctuary as they come in, visually showing the slow building of God's rainbow.

The second project is an invitation to take one of the blank canvases that are in the basket here at the foot of the chancel steps to create something to commemorate our time apart. You may choose paint or colored pencil or decoupage or any number of other ways to create your piece. We're calling this project "Reemerging." There are further instructions on the insert in your bulletin, and we ask that you return these by September 12, to be compiled into a larger whole.

Friends, when I say that it is "good to be home," it is because this place, and this community, has provided so much nourishment and shelter over the years. It is because this church has given so many a taste of the kingdom of God.

My prayer this week is that the grace of God will continue to work through us in ever more powerful and profound ways.

Rev. Bridget Flad Daniels
Union Congregational United Church of Christ
Green Bay, Wisconsin
1 Samuel 16:3-13, Mark 4:26-34
June 13, 2021