



## **“I Wonder As I Wander” Summer 2009 Preaching Series**

We asked – and you came through! We received over 80 questions that you are asking about the life of faith, scripture and theology. Over the summer 2009, we engaged with these rich topics. While many were “wandering” on summer travels, Peter Ilgenfritz, Catherine Foote, Lisa Domke, and David Anderson reflected on these topics.

We’ve also included the Seabeck week information as many of us wonder and wander (to Seabeck on the Kitsap Peninsula) during that week in the life of our church community.

We hope you will join in the dialogue!



**4515 16<sup>th</sup> Ave. NE, SEATTLE, WA 98105-4201**  
Phone 206-524-2322 Fax 206-524-0602

[www.universityucc.org](http://www.universityucc.org)

[office@universityucc.org](mailto:office@universityucc.org)

# I Wonder as I Wander

## Summer 2009 Preaching Series

<u>Page</u>			<u>Suggested Banner*</u>
3	June 28	<b>“God is still speaking” Saying what? To whom? How?</b> Catherine Foote	<i>God’s Supper</i> Psalm 19:1-4a John 1:1-5, 14, 16-18
7	July 5	<b>“A Beautiful Day”</b> (Seabeck Sunday) David Domke & Corey	<i>God’s Covenant</i> Genesis 9:8-17
8	July 12	<b>“Are we just picking what we believe out of the Bible?”</b> Lisa Domke	<i>Witnessing Anywhere</i> Psalm 119:1-3, 33-37, 105, 111-112
12	July 19	<b>“Which Jesus are we talking about?”</b> Lisa Domke	<i>Serving Others</i> Matthew 16:13-17, 20-26
16	July 26	<b>“What was Jesus up to?”</b> Catherine Foote	<i>Filling the Empty</i> Psalm 51 John 3: 16-21
20	August 2	<b>“What do I need to believe to call myself a Christian?”</b> Peter Ilgenfritz	<i>Gathering Together</i> John 3:16 John 14:6 Romans 8:38-39
24	August 9	<b>“What use is prayer?”</b> Peter Ilgenfritz	<i>God’s Gift</i> Matthew 26:36-39 Matthew 6:5-6
26	August 16	<b>“How can I become a better person?”</b> Lisa Domke	<i>God’s Commandments</i> Romans 12:1-21
29	August 23	<b>“How do you decide what’s right to do?”</b> Catherine Foote	<i>God’s Promise</i> Micah 6:6-8 Matthew 7:12
33	August 30	<b>”Why do bad things happen?”</b> Peter Ilgenfritz	<i>Sowing Peace</i> Psalm 23 Psalm 46:1-3, 10-11
36	September 6	<b>“What happens when we die?”</b> Peter Ilgenfritz	<i>Breaking Bonds</i> John 21:1-14
39	September 13	<b>“Why bother with church?”</b> Catherine Foote Lisa Domke David Anderson Peter Ilgenfritz	<i>God’s World</i> 1 Peter 2:9-10, NRSV Luke 17:20-21, NRSV Romans 8:38-39, NRSV Mark 1:16-17

### 43 \*Sanctuary Banners

During Ordinary Time - from Pentecost to Advent – these banners hang in the Sanctuary.

A suggested banner is listed beside each of the sermons. Please use these images and scriptural references to enhance your reading of these sermons. You may find that other banners also enrich the sermons.

---

## **“God is still speaking” Saying what? To whom? How?**

A Sermon Preached by Catherine Foote,  
University Congregational United Church of Christ  
Seattle, Washington June 28, 2009

---

**Psalm 19:1-4a;**

### **God’s Glory in Creation and the Law**

To the leader. A Psalm of David.

The heavens are telling the glory of God;  
and the firmament proclaims his handiwork.

Day to day pours forth speech,  
and night to night declares knowledge.

There is no speech, nor are there words;  
their voice is not heard;  
yet their voice goes out through all the earth,  
and their words to the end of the world.

**John 1:1-5, 14, 16-18**

### **The Word Became Flesh**

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth. From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father’s heart, who has made him known.

---

“God is still speaking,”

I fell in love with this United Church of Christ identity campaign statement as soon as I heard it. In just a

few words, Ron Buford has captured much about my sense of God’s presence and about my own relationship with God. I want to tell you more about that, but first let me put what I am going to say in a broader context.

This morning we are beginning our summer preaching series which started about six weeks ago with an invitation. Peter Ilgenfritz asked this congregation, “What would you like to hear your preachers talk about?” “What questions do you have about your life and about your faith?”

And what a rich selection of topics you offered. Part of what I loved about your responses was that they are the same things I might have asked for sermons about. Tell me what you know about God, and tell me how you know it. Tell me what you know about being a human being, and how you know that too. Tell me about the connection between God and human beings, or all creation for that matter. How do we make that connection, and what are its limits? Tell me what you know of living a full and good life. Tell me what you know about community. How do we make the connection with each other and what are its limits? What a richness of topics you offered.

And knowing that in the summer we become a community of pilgrims, coming and going, traveling to all kinds of wonderful places, we decided to title the series, “I wonder as I wander.” It is a way of recognizing that we will not all be together for awhile, and that’s ok. Today my three colleagues on the leadership team are far flung. Peter with his family somewhere in New England. David Anderson in Grand Rapids at the UCC’s biennial gathering known as General Synod. And Lisa Domke, our newest colleague, is not far from here at a “Horse Camp” with her two young children, and without her husband, who has a speaking engagement somewhere else. This trip had been arranged long before we invited her to join us this summer so we knew that Lisa’s second Sunday with us would be a day off. When I last heard from her she had finished packing the kid’s stuff and was trying to get to packing her own. She was sure the kids would get to ride horses, but given the demands put on one parent by two children, she wasn’t sure she would.

Yes, in the summer we wander. And always, we wonder. So we took the questions you asked, and we grouped them by focus or topic, and we put them in a more or less systematic order, and our summer sermon series was thus set. This morning we begin at

---

## “God is still speaking” Saying what? To whom? How?

the beginning. And as we heard read this morning, in the beginning was the Word. “God is still speaking, . . .” The wonderer who submitted this question put it like this: “How do we understand ‘God is still speaking’? Saying what? To whom?”

Let me start with a disclaimer. What I can offer is a fifteen minute sermon, which is part of a summer series of sermons, which is part of a lifetime journey. This will only scratch the surface of this wonderful question. And really all our sermons will be just a beginning point to address the topics we are covering this summer. But they are a beginning.

So now, we go back to the beginning of this sermon. “God is still speaking.” I have heard the theology of that statement broken down in an “add-a-word” that I find helpful:

**God. God is. God is still. God is still speaking. God is still speaking, comma.**

“God,”

God, of course, is the beginning point of any theology. But the word God is a broad one, carries much baggage as well as much richness. It is a word that can evoke images of a micro-manager who, when not busy worrying about the details of our lives, spends time setting up rules about who should talk and who should listen, (men, talk, women, listen) who should be allowed to love whom, or even what human beings should wear.

If that image is our beginning point, what we hear from a “still speaking” God will be very different from this statement and its comma ending are actually about. And if we start there, we might hear a god who sets up and then supports abusive hierarchies, who offers a blanket endorsement of the powers of the powerful and tolerates slavery and subjugation, who calls for war and encourages violence. Ann Lamott has famously said, “You can safely assume that you’ve created God in your own image when it turns out that God hates all the same people you do.” I would add, if God is reinforcing every stereotype you know, and keeping you safe in your comfort zone, then God has *stopped* speaking.

NPR news correspondent Barbara Brown Hagerty, whose new book *The Fingerprints of God*, details her own search for what she calls “the science of spirituality,” likes to tell this joke, which she attributes to the Buddhist tradition. A man is standing under a street lamp clearly searching for something. Another person comes by and asks, “What are you looking for?”

“My car keys,” the searcher replies.

So the second person joins the search. “Where did you lose them?”

“Over there” the searcher points to a dark part of the parking lot.

“Well, why are you looking for them here?”

“Because this is where the light is.”

Where we start will determine much about what we find. So let us consider carefully where we start.

“God is,”

Last fall Greg Turner led an adult education class that engaged the group of writers called, “The New Atheists.” Sam Harris, Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens have all written about the end of faith, the god delusion, or the poison of religion. I actually agree with some of what they say. But in every case, as far as I can see, ultimately what they are attacking is a straw god. They have no trouble discounting the stereotypical god that they create. So what I return to, even after reading their work, is the ongoing conviction that God is. So while I reject an interventionist, domineering, and easily manipulated God, I do believe in God. I believe in a mystery beyond myself, in a depth of reality more than I can perceive. I believe in a presence that accompanies me on my journey in ways beyond my knowing. There is transcendence to my experience that intrigues and beckons me. I believe in God.

“God is still,”

To say “God is still . . .,” places this experience and reality of which we speak beyond time. The statement recognizes that God *has* spoken, and has been experienced by human beings for millennia. There can be an arrogance in current culture that assumes that all who came before were simply slaves to superstition, and that we who live in more enlightened times know better. But the oldest story in scripture, the story of Job, describes a struggle with the human experience of suffering that is so contemporary that it will appear in this summer series. God has been experienced.

And God is *still* experienced. This freedom from the limits of time also lets us know the validity of our own experiences here and now. We can find in the experiences of the ages, in the rich religious texts of history, not just God long ago, to be acknowledged from a distance, but a sense of God in the present, bread for my own journey.

And finally,

---

## **“God is still speaking” Saying what? To whom? How?**

### **“God is still speaking,”**

This final word adds a relational dimension to our faith. This final addition says that my faith is an ongoing conversation, and my faith also makes a difference in how I live my life.

Let me note that the question which frames this sermon was asked by someone who has made a living through words. Someone who knows the power of words to shape our reality, to frame our understanding, and to motivate our actions. And someone who knows as well the limitations of words. The vulnerability of words. The ways words can be used not only to inspire but to manipulate. I find that interesting, in that this imagery of God still speaking begins with the imagery of words.

It makes me think of another member of this church who also understands the power of words. Mary Kollar is, among many other things, a poet. During the presidential election of 2000, Mary was dismayed by what she saw as the misuse of language, as it seemed to be employed even more than usual not to inform but to obscure issues. In response to that election, Mary began her “poetry” box.

You have heard me speak about this poetry box because in a recent sermon I read you one of the poems she had put in it. Once a month Mary chooses a good poem, and made copies of it, and put it in a box on the gate in front of her house. She offers her neighbors words, beautiful words, faithful words. In the beginning she expected that just a few people might walk by her gate and take a poem. And that was how it began. But now her poetry box has grown, and people come from all over to get their monthly dose of beautiful words, and others have started their own poetry boxes, and a poetry revolution is afoot.

God is still speaking. But as the psalmist says, even as speech pours out, there is no speech that can contain everything. Even as we fill ourselves with words, there are realities beyond words. And these realities are God’s speech as well. As the dancer Isadora Duncan once said when asked to tell the meaning of her dancing, “If I could explain it in words, I wouldn’t have to dance.”

In our Christian tradition we say it this way: “the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.” Beyond all that could be said, there was a life that was the Word, and that became light for us all. And what that Word become flesh intended to express, John emphasizes over and over, was God’s love. Of course, there is always more that can be said. But there is even more that cannot be said. So the Word sets up residence with us, and we live in the mystery.

And when we say “God is still speaking,” we also must acknowledge that there are all sorts of people presuming to speak *for* God, and speaking for God is very different than listening for God. We must learn to listen for the difference.

To say God is still speaking means that the Word which meant something to a community two thousand years ago can mean something to us as well.

To say God is still speaking means that we can bring our whole, 21<sup>st</sup> century selves to this relationship, and count on meeting God in the here and now.

To say God is still speaking means that we are not frozen in words that lead us in a direction that goes in the opposite direction they originally pointed. And we let go of smug self-certainty that drives out deep spirituality. And we live in a humility that looks like the opposite of what has been sold to the world as “religious”- instead of saying “I know all there is to know about this,” we say, even with a smile, “Well, I could be wrong.”

To say God is still speaking means we must keep listening. So we add,

### **“Comma,”**

We end this statement with what we jokingly call “God’s favorite punctuation mark”- a comma. Not an exclamation point, although there are certainly many of those moments.

Not a question mark, although our lives are full of those.

Not a period, as if we might know the end.

A comma. To remind us we stand in the middle of a stream of faith. Some say it this way: “Please be patient. God is not finished with me yet.” But I would also say, “Please be patient. God is not finished speaking yet.” God is speaking in Scripture and in the community that reads the Scripture. God is speaking in creation and in those who look as deeply as they can at the details of creation. God is speaking in song and in silence. Day to day pours forth speech. And yet there is more, and there will be more, and therefore we must keep listening.

I have heard of a Navaho tradition of story telling, that when recalling a spiritual story, no one narrator ever tells the whole story. The speaker always stops and lets another voice take up the tale. Whether or not the details of this tradition are accurate, I certainly like the image of it, which reminds everyone, listener and teller, that no one voice contains all the truth.

---

**“God is still speaking” Saying what? To whom? How?**

And when I listen for a still speaking God, I know I am not listening for another list of rules, or for some special promise that means I alone am beloved of God. I am listening for the God whose first words were words of creation, not destruction. “Let there be light” and there was light.

I am listening for the God who in the end spoke words of affirmation, not condemnation. “It is good, behold it is very good.”

And when my telling of the story stops, I hear the voice of my friend Ted Falcon, as I learn from the rabbi that God is one. So I find myself listening for the voice that centers rather than distracts me.

I hear the voice of my friend Jamal Rahman as I learn from the sheik that God is compassion. So I listen for the voice that adds to the sum of love in the world, rather than the sum of hate or indifference.

And I hear your voices, welcomed here as believer or seekers or doubters. God is still speaking, we proclaim. God is speaking to us. Saying “Love one another.” Saying “Pay close attention.” Saying “Imagine love and justice.” Saying, “Whoever you are and wherever you are on your journey, you are welcome here.” Which means my words today are only the beginning. Without your story, without your voice, the story cannot continue.

Comma, and Amen.

***For further reading:***

Karen Armstrong, *A History of God*  
Eric Eines, *The Phoenix Affirmations*  
John Shelby Spong, *A New Christianity for a New World*

---

## "A Beautiful Day"

A Sermon Preached by David Domke & Corey Schlosser-Hall  
University Congregational United Church of Christ  
Seattle, Washington July 5, 2009

---

Seabeck Sunday:

### Genesis 9:8-17

Taking the creation story, David and Corey dialoged about God's world and our relationship to it. They gave us an overview of the Seabeck Week's presentations.

---

#### THE SEABECK COVENANT

**Gracious God -**

**We gather together at Seabeck  
to give thanks for your beautiful creation.  
We covenant with you and one another to  
live our faith  
through the building of community,  
the sharing of conversation  
and the practice of cooperation.**

**God, let our actions reflect respect and  
love in all we do and say this week.**

**May your Spirit be with us.**

**Amen**

---

Seabeck Week:

### ***Faith, Citizenship, and the Environment: Tipping Points***

Concern about the environment has been increasing since the 1960s, but it remains a lesser issue for many Americans.

What about for people of religious faith? Do we have any particular responsibilities when it comes to caring for the planet, or more generally for all of creation?

At Seabeck this summer we considered how notions of what it means to be a citizen are changing among Americans, and how these changes relate to concern about the environment. We thought about, listened to new and old information, and discussed – morning and afternoon - these developments in terms of religious faith, politics, culture, and the economy.

The presentations and discussions were led by...

#### David Domke

David Domke worked as a journalist for several newspapers in the 1980s and early 1990s. He is now a Professor and Head of Journalism in the Department of Communication at the University of Washington. He is the author of several books, including

- *God Willing?: Political Fundamentalism in the White House,*
- *The "War on Terror,"* and
- *The God Strategy: How Religion Became A Political Weapon in America.*
- 

He has spoken about politics and communication with academic, political, religious, media, and public audiences around the country.

#### Corey Schlosser-Hall

Corey Schlosser-Hall now serves as Executive Presbyter (similar to UCC Conference Minister) for the Presbytery of North Puget Sound, Presbyterian Church U.S.A, a denomination in full communion with the United Church of Christ.

Prior to serving as Executive Presbyter, he served as Communications Director for the Presbytery of Seattle, taught at the University of Minnesota and Seattle University, led wilderness adventures, and helped start a technology training and consultancy firm in the early 90's.

---

**“Are we just picking what we believe out of the Bible?”**

A Sermon preached by Lisa Domke  
University Congregational United Church of Christ  
Seattle, Washington July 12, 2009

---

**Psalm 119:1-3, 33-37, 105, 111-112**

**The Glories of God’s Law**

Happy are those whose way is blameless,  
who walk in the law of the LORD.  
Happy are those who keep his decrees,  
who seek him with their whole heart,  
who also do no wrong,  
but walk in his ways.  
Teach me, O LORD, the way of your statutes,  
and I will observe it to the end.  
Give me understanding, that I may keep your law  
and observe it with my whole heart.  
Lead me in the path of your commandments,  
for I delight in it.  
Turn my heart to your decrees,  
and not to selfish gain.  
Turn my eyes from looking at vanities;  
give me life in your ways.  
Your word is a lamp to my feet  
and a light to my path.  
Your decrees are my heritage for ever;  
they are the joy of my heart.  
I incline my heart to perform your statutes  
for ever, to the end.

---

We are continuing our “I Wonder As I Wander” sermon series today by looking at the Bible. Buckle up.

In the reading today from Psalm 119, we heard strikingly emotional words used to describe the writer’s relationship with God’s law:

--“I will keep your law...observe it with my whole heart...delight in the path of your commandments.”  
--“Turn my heart to your decrees, not to selfish gain.”  
--“Turn my eyes from looking at vanities; give me life in your ways.”

--“Your Word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.”  
--“Your decrees are my heritage forever, the joy of my heart.”

What is going on here?  
Well, this is a post-exilic poem where the writer expresses the belief and hope that a close relationship with God’s law approximates the closeness to God that was formerly experienced in the Temple.

Closeness to God (via God’s law) = joy and life.  
God’s law is understood to be the primary revealer of God.  
And walking in the “way” of God is the key to a happy and fulfilled life.

I am going to go out on a limb and guess that for most of us here today, repeating the psalmist’s words of love and devotion to God’s law, or the Bible in general, would feel pretty strange and uncomfortable.

Some of us might be a little wary...a bit skeptical about the Bible.  
As progressive Christians, we have quite a few ideas about what we think the Bible is NOT.  
But often we don’t have many concrete ideas about what the Bible in fact IS.

The UCC motto, “God is still speaking,” rings true to us.  
But do we believe that God is still speaking IN Scripture?!

I can hear you whispering: “I don’t know, Lisa. That sounds a little...fundamentalist.  
God is still speaking in the Bible?”

Call me crazy, but I am getting a little tired of giving all the best parts of my faith tradition away because somebody (or a whole lot of somebodies) misunderstood or misinterpreted the Mystery of the Holy One.

We do not need to give up God or Jesus or the Bible just because somebody decided to use that which is good and holy and life-giving as a weapon of division and death.

Just so you know going in....I am not giving literalists my Bible.

I think we need to reclaim the Bible.

Is anybody with me?!!

(Seabeck people, you had a LOT of practice on this. Can I get an Amen?!)

OK then.....

---

## “Are we just picking what we believe out of the Bible?”

Are we just picking and choosing what to believe from the Bible?

My short answer to this is: Yes, of course we do! There is no such thing as an objective reading of the texts of Scripture. Anyone who claims to be objective is simply indulging in delusions.

With good reason we carefully study and sift through the writings of these ancient communities to discern which texts still speak a life-giving word into our lives.

And my answer is also: No, of course we don't! We are in a dialogue with all of the texts of our Scriptures, and in this dialogue we struggle and argue and.... listen.

Yes, we interpret the Scriptures. But they also interpret us. And sometimes, mysteriously, in and through this text we encounter the voice of the Living God speaking anew. And we are changed.

Let's unpack this a little bit. There are some assumptions that might be in play behind this question about picking and choosing from the Bible.

One such assumption is that taking the Bible “seriously” means taking everything in it literally, reading all of it with the same importance and relevance. From this perspective, to allow non-literal interpretations sends us down a slippery slope where we evade the authority of Scripture by making it say whatever we want it to say.

Another assumption is that the words containing in the Bible are literally God's words, directly from God, dictated to human authors. You can't reject any of the words or teachings because...they are from God.

How did these ideas about the Bible come from?

--Well, the earliest Reformers rejected church hierarchy and tradition and replaced them with Scripture as the sole authority in the life of faith.

--Then the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> generation Reformers claimed divine plenary inspiration—meaning that the words of Bible were dictated by God, without error and therefore “infallible.”

--Higher literacy and greater access to printed materials complicated things. Whereas earlier faith communities engaged with separate manuscripts and understood them to be written by different authors, the printing press made one volume collection of Scriptural manuscripts available to the masses.

People began talking about “Scripture” (singular) rather than plural. This made it much easier to imagine ONE book with ONE author (God).  
(Borg, *Reading the Bible Again for the First Time*, 7-8.)

Not everyone, however, shares these beliefs about the Bible.

Many Christians today (myself included) are operating under the assumption that the Bible is a collection of the writings of ancient communities (Hebrew people and the early Christian church) which record their responses to experiences of divine encounter.

In other words, real people, situated in particular historical/cultural contexts, experienced the Mystery of the Holy One and tried to write about it using words and concepts which were familiar to them.

Karl Barth said that reading the words of the Bible was like standing in a basement room looking out through a high window in which you can see people on the ground walking around, but nothing of the sky. Suddenly the people start gathering and pointing to the sky and talking excitedly about what they are seeing, each describing this strange new sight with words and images from their own cultural context. You can hear their conversations, but cannot see what they are describing.

As modern readers of an ancient text, we are like that person gazing through the basement window. We must sift through the descriptions of the Bible's authors to try to hear their testimonies in our own context.  
(Thanks to Eric Elnes via the Asphalt Jesus blog for pointing me to this Barth example.)

Sound like a lot of work? It is!  
But the alternative—to take everything literally—is simply not an option.

Literalism would require us to kill disobedient children, force slaves to be in submission to their owners, condemn loving same-sex couples, and keep women silent.

I believe we cannot do those things and claim to be following God in the inclusive, life-affirming way of Jesus.

The (capitol W) *Word* of God is a living word. To make the (lowercase w) *words* of Scripture to stand in as a substitute and “last word” for the Living Word of the Living God is blasphemous idolatry. It is “Bibliolatry.”

Brian Blount (Union Seminary President and NT Professor) says:  
“Making the biblical words the ‘last word’ turns them into literary artifacts.”

---

## “Are we just picking what we believe out of the Bible?”

“A last word can’t breathe; it can’t endure this marathon of living with the people of God who run in the presence of God’s ever-living, ever-sustaining Holy Spirit.”

“A living word is always a beginning word.”

(Blount, *Struggling With Scripture*, “The Last Word on Biblical Authority, 56-57.)

In the book *Struggling With Scripture*, Blount shares some incredible stories about how African American slaves resisted not just their owners, but the words of Scripture which seemed to condemn them to a life of slavery.

They held onto faith in God and in Jesus.

They just rejected that God could possibly condone the evil of slavery.

Blount says:

“If the biblical words on slavery were the last word on slavery, they were too dead a word to keep on living for them.

This doesn’t mean that the NT text lost its sense of authority for the slaves.

But it does mean that *their perception of God in their midst was more authoritative.*

The text must be in line with God’s being and God’s agenda of liberation.

Where it is not, the text...must be challenged and, if need be, resisted as much as the system of slavery it was purported to support.”

(Blount, *SWS*, 59.)

If the Bible is indeed a human (and therefore flawed) text, then what IS the purpose and place of the Bible in our lives? Why should it have any authority or place in our hearts and minds?

Marcus Borg, God bless him, takes this question on in his book *Reading the Bible Again for the First Time*. He says the Bible is sacred scripture, not because the words originated from God, but because of its role and status in our religious community. The Scriptures are sacred because they define “who we are in relation to God and who we are as a community and as individuals.” They contain our shared story.

(Borg, *Reading the Bible Again*, 29.)

Borg states that “The authority of the Bible is its status as our primary ancient conversation partner.” Rather than the Bible standing over us telling us what to do, we understand our selves to be in dialogue with the texts.

(Borg, 30.)

However, the Bible is a human product, so the dialogue is a critical one.

“There are parts of the Bible that we will decide need not or should not be honored, either because we discern that

they were relevant to ancient times but not to our own, or because we discern that they were never the will of God.”

(Borg, 30.)

However, Borg reminds us that a critical dialogue *also allows the text to shape and judge us.*

We must listen to the text. *We must be willing to let the text interpret us.*

It is this continual, deep dialogue, engaged within our community, that must shape us and guide us in the Christian life.

Eric Elnes, author of *Asphalt Jesus* and founder of Crosswalk America says:

“My belief that the scriptures are NOT inerrant radically increases my joy in studying the scriptures, and with it, my ability to learn from our ancient sisters and brothers of faith. Since I do not feel compelled to blindly accept that which runs contrary to love of God, neighbor, and self in scripture, I can enter into a deeper, more honest relationship with the texts before me.”

(Asphalt Jesus blog)

I love that.

Finally, Borg speaks of how Scripture functions as a “Sacrament of the Sacred.”

This really resonates with me.

A sacrament is “a mediator of the sacred, a vehicle by which God becomes present, a means through which the Spirit is experienced.” Most anything can become sacramental if it is a time and place where the Holy becomes present and real in our experience. Which means that this human record of divine encounter can certainly be sacramental.

(Borg, 35.)

We talk a lot about God Still Speaking, but can be a bit resistant to the idea that God is still speaking through our Scriptures! We have good reasons for this. Too many people have claimed to speak for God and then used Biblical texts for evil purposes.

Even so, let’s be courageous and listen together for the Spirit of God to speak anew in and through the Bible.

It is a tradition in many churches to say, after a Biblical text is read, “The Word of the Lord.” Today we used an expanded version of that response, which opens us to the reality of God speaking in many ways and places.

My favorite is the language from the New Zealand Anglican book of common prayer that we heard before the text was read today: “Hear what the Spirit is saying to the Church.”

---

## **“Are we just picking what we believe out of the Bible?”**

And the amazing thing is, we CAN hear the Spirit speaking through our Scriptures! Amidst the myriad voices found in the Bible, scholars and mystics and everyday Christians like you and me have discerned that the Spirit is showing us clear and recurring themes.

The scriptures tell us that God is real and knowable AND that God is Mystery—transcending all our attempts to describe or fully understand.

The Bible tells us that “our lives are made ‘whole’ and ‘right’ by living in conscious relationship with the Mystery who is alone Lord. Life with God is not about believing certain teachings about God. It is about a covenant—a relationship. More specifically, it is about becoming conscious of a relationship that already exists... whether we know it or not, believe it or not.”

The Scriptures tell us that the deepening of this relationship is our essential task. “Christian faith is not about believing, but about faithfulness to the relationship...centering one’s life in God rather than in the rival lords of culture and convention.”

The Scriptures tell us to love God and love our neighbor. They tell us that God is a God of justice and compassion, that God dreams of life on earth where these things are daily reality. And further, we are told that our role is to participate with God in this dream of lived justice and compassion for all creatures on earth.

(Borg, 299-301.)

These clear and repeated themes provide for us a way of living out our faith.

A way of seeking to live more deeply into the sacred relationship between us and God and all of creation.

In this way we too can affirm with the Psalmist: “Your word is a lamp to my feet, and a light to my path.”

May we hear what the Spirit is saying to the Church. Amen.

### ***Resources for further study***

Marcus Borg, *Reading the Bible Again for the First Time: Taking the Bible Seriously But Not Literally* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001).

Walter Brueggemann, William C. Placher & Brian K. Blount, *Struggling With Scripture* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002).

Peter J. Gomes, *Reading the Bible With Mind and Heart* (New York: Harper One, 2002).

Sandra M. Scheiders, *The Revelatory Text: Interpreting the New Testament as Sacred Scripture* (Michael Glazier Books, 1999).

John Shelby Spong, *Rescuing the Bible From Fundamentalism: A Bishop Rethinks the Meaning of Scripture* (New York: Harper One, 1992).

---

## “Which Jesus are we talking about?”

A Sermon Preached by Lisa Domke,  
University Congregational United Church of Christ  
Seattle, Washington July 19, 2009

---

### **Matthew 16:13-17; 20-26**

#### **Text Introduction:**

In our reading today from Matthew’s Gospel, we find Jesus and the disciples at Caesarea Philippi, a city located near the modern border of Israel and Syria and built by Herod the Great. In the city were temples to Pan and the Roman emperor, Augustus (whose favorite title was also “Son of God.”)

This text is about the disciples making sense of who Jesus was (using ideas and terms familiar to them) and is also about the cost of discipleship. Here we learn of the future path Jesus will take and the disciples’ resistance to this way of suffering that is so very different from what they had hoped for in the One who would deliver them from Roman rule.

### **Matthew 16:13-17; 20-26 (NRSV)**

13 Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, ‘Who do people say that the Son of Man is?’ <sup>14</sup>And they said, ‘Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.’ <sup>15</sup>He said to them, ‘But who do you say that I am?’ <sup>16</sup>Simon Peter answered, ‘You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.’ <sup>17</sup>And Jesus answered him, ‘Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven.

21 From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. <sup>22</sup>And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, ‘God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you.’ <sup>23</sup>But he turned and said to Peter, ‘Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling-block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.’

24 Then Jesus told his disciples, ‘If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. <sup>25</sup>For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. <sup>26</sup>For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life?’

---

As you know, this summer you all were asked to submit your most pressing faith questions so that we, your hard-

working pastoral staff, could attempt to engage with those questions in our sermons.

This week’s question: “Which Jesus are we talking about?” is a doozy. Next week, Catherine is tackling “What was Jesus up to?” Also a great question.

There are SO many different ideas out there about who Jesus was and what he was up to. For Christians, how we answer these questions profoundly shapes how we live in the world.

I think I have the perfect movie scene to illustrate our struggle.

Has anybody seen Talladega Nights? I am NOT endorsing the movie, OK? But there is this one scene in Talladega Nights -- the story of #1 NASCAR driver Ricky Bobby—where family and friends are gathered around the dinner table and Ricky Bobby is saying grace.

He starts out:  
“Dear 6 pound 4 ounce Baby Jesus, or as our brothers to the south call you Jésus...we thank you so much for this bountiful harvest of Domino’s, KFC, and the always delicious Taco Bell. Dear Tiny, Infant, Jesus...”

Then Ricky Bobby’s wife interrupts him:  
“Hey, um... you know sweetie, Jesus did grow up. You don’t always have to call him baby. It’s a bit odd and off puttin’ to pray to a baby.”

Ricky Bobby:  
“Well look, I like the Christmas Jesus best, and I’m sayin’ grace. When you say grace, you can say it to grown up Jesus, or teenage Jesus, or bearded Jesus, or whoever you want.”  
(he continues) “Dear little baby Jesus, who’s sittin’ in his crib watchin’ the Baby Einstein videos, learnin’ ‘bout shapes and colors. “

His friend Cal Naughton, Jr. jumps in:  
“I like to think of Jesus as a mischievous badger.”

Ricky Bobby goes on: “Dear Tiny Jesus, in your golden fleece diapers with your tiny, little fat balled up fists ...”

Cal Naughton, Jr. (with further religious reflections): “I like to picture Jesus in a tuxedo T-Shirt because it says: ‘I want to be formal, but I’m here to party.’”

Ricky Bobby undeterred, continues:

---

## “Which Jesus are we talking about?”

“Dear Eight Pound, Six Ounce, Newborn Baby Jesus, don’t even know a word yet, just a little infant, so cuddly, but still omnipotent.”

Then one of the Kids adds: “I like to pray to the Ninja Jesus!” And it goes on from there...

I will leave you all to unpack the deep theology contained in the film.

I spent most of my life in conservative Christian churches that held to the view of Jesus as Lord and Savior, human and divine, sacrifice for our sins, the one who saves us from hell, the only way to God.

Over a long, terrifying, difficult and ongoing process, I have come to understand Jesus differently. As much, much more than that.

But as limited and misguided as I now believe that old version of the story to be, the fact remains that it was the means through which I met, experienced, and came to love Jesus.

It was a different version of Jesus, yes.

But through all phases and forms of clarity and confusion, I would say that I have genuinely encountered God in Jesus throughout my lifetime.

Today I read the Scriptures differently than I used to. I hear God speaking in all kinds of surprising places. I am less sure about how to define Jesus or God.

But I think I am OK with that.

Catherine said to me just this morning: “Saying we don’t know is a radical stepping into grace.” YES! Perhaps defining someone is not as important as seeking deep connection and relationship with them. As a wise person once said, “If you think you have completely understood God, it probably isn’t God.”

We search and stretch to understand, but ultimately, a lot is just mystery.

Which might be why it is called “faith” and not “absolutely definite empirically verifiable knowledge.”

Even Jesus’ disciples seemed confused about who he was and what he was up to.

One moment Peter is proclaiming that Jesus is “the Messiah, the Son of the Living God” and being praised by Jesus for understanding. The next moment Peter is being called “Satan” and a “stumbling block” because he has shown that he really doesn’t understand at all who Jesus is and what it means to follow him.

Peter was expecting a Messiah (an “anointed one”) who would deliver his people from oppression and occupation. What he got was a Messiah who talked about loving enemies, being peacemakers, giving to the

poor, and living with humility...who then ended up on a cross.

I used to look down my nose at poor clueless Peter. Now I just identify with him.

What are some of the images we have held about Jesus?

Most of us don’t pray to the baby Jesus.

We may not believe it is appropriate to pray to Jesus at all.

What DO we think and/or believe about Jesus?

Author, pastor, and emerging church leader Brian McLaren was in town a year or two ago talking about his book “Everything Must Change.”

In one talk, he ran through a list of the various Jesuses he has encountered. I have taken his list titles and elaborated a bit. Listen and see if any of these sound familiar to you:

We have The Baby Jesus

– no crying he makes. Not too demanding. Makes for nice holiday celebrations.

The Prize-Fighter Warrior Jesus

– This Jesus says, “That first time I came--meek, mild, dying? That was totally a fake out. I’m a manly man and next time I show up I am going to kick some rears and RULE!!”

The Second-Coming Killer Jesus

– This one is closely related to warrior Jesus, but more violent. You can find this Jesus starring in a popular book series where he revels in the bloody death of his enemies.

The Private Personal Make Me Feel Good Jesus

– “Draw me close. Let the world around me fade away.... I’m OK, You’re OK. Well, I don’t know about you, but at least I’m OK.”

The Prosperity Help Me Get Rich Jesus

– “All that money just shows that God likes ya! God is blessin’ ya! That stuff I said about giving to the poor and camels and needles...just caught me on a bad day.”

The Fire Escape Get Me Out of Hell Jesus –

I have to quote McLaren here because he says it so beautifully: This Jesus says, “If you want to be among those specifically qualified to escape being forever punished for your sins in hell, you must repent of your individual sins and believe that my Father punished me on the cross so he won’t have to punish you in hell. Only if you believe this will you go to heaven when the earth is destroyed and everyone else is banished to hell. This is the good news.”

---

## “Which Jesus are we talking about?”

(Brian McLaren, *Everything Must Change*.)

The Evacuation Leave This World Behind Jesus –  
“Who cares about the poor or the environment? You’re going to heaven!”

The Institutional Organ and Stained Glass Jesus  
Ah...this is a nice safe Jesus. He says, “Within these walls, for one hour each week, your traditions, confessions, buildings, programs, music, and meetings provide all that is needed to keep God happy with you and make you a good person.”

I came up with a few more...

How about the Made-up-story Fairy-tale Jesus?  
He says, “Listen, I didn’t actually do any of that stuff you read about in the Gospels. No need to bother reading about me. It was just a superstitious time.”

Or maybe Back-Burner Jesus?  
He says, “Hey, you have other things to do that are more important than seeking the Kingdom of God? No worries. Go ahead...have fun! I’ll be here!”

Or maybe you know Crazy Uncle Jesus?  
We don’t talk about him too much or too loudly because...you know...he can be a little extreme. It’s kind of embarrassing.

We wonder, are we dealing with a resurrected, body out of the grave, ascended to heaven Jesus?

If we follow the Jesus Seminar Crowd, we might ask about  
“The Jesus of History” vs. “The Christ of Faith.”  
What Marcus Borg calls the “Pre-Easter Jesus” and the “Post-Easter Jesus.”

This is kind of a big question among progressive Christians:  
“Are we talking about the Jesus of history, or the Christ of our present experience?”

And my answer to that is: YES! I’m that generation that likes the “both/and.”

In both the historical Jesus that has been studied and sought after by so many scholars in recent years AND in the evolving reflections of the early Christian community upon the meaning and life of Jesus contained in Scripture we find things that are “real” and important.

Whether or not you believe that Jesus actually was resurrected from the dead, it seems clear that his followers had life-altering encounters with the post-Easter Jesus. Somehow after Jesus’ death they experienced the Spirit of Jesus even MORE than they had before the crucifixion.

The enduring testimony of the Christian community is of transformative encounter with this living Christ...encounters that are like coming into direct communion with God. So eventually we ended up with the doctrine of the Trinity: Three in one. Creator, Christ, Holy Spirit.

Is that actually the way God is? I don’t know. Maybe if we had a God-meter, we could check it and get a scientific reading. Or maybe that isn’t the way to go at all. Perhaps we are asking the wrong questions in trying to figure out Jesus.

Eric Elnes, Author of *Asphalt Jesus*, posted a blog last week (just in time for this sermon!!) where he says that the Historical Jesus/Living Christ question for him is not so much, “Was Jesus God?” but rather, “Is God like Jesus?”  
To which he says, Yes!

Eric says, “If the word ‘Christ’ refers to an aspect of Jesus that continues to live on beyond his mortal death, I can wholeheartedly affirm that Jesus is Christ...his story has become central in my story. Why has Jesus become central? Because I meet God in Jesus...(and) these experiences look like the Jesus I regularly encounter in the gospels. This fact has led me to conclude that Jesus is one who was “full of God.” Or in the Apostle Paul’s words, “God was in Christ.”  
([asphaltjesus.wordpress.com](http://asphaltjesus.wordpress.com))

Jesus was a God-filled, Spirit-filled person. And there are as many ways to understand him as there are people on this earth.

Are all of those ways equally accurate or even helpful?  
I don’t think so.

I think there were certain things that were key to the message and work of Jesus:  
Love God, love your neighbor.  
The Kingdom of God is here, now, among you, within you.  
Be compassionate as God is compassionate.  
Follow me.

But I also know that I am limited in my understanding. I am constrained by my own cultural biases and presuppositions.

I bought a shirt at an “Off the Map” conference last year that says “Save Jesus.” To me, this speaks of setting Jesus free from the boxes made for him by the Church and letting Jesus go public again. Maybe Jesus needs to be saved from *us* as well.

---

**“Which Jesus are we talking about?”**

Ultimately, we all need to hold our views about Jesus with humility and generosity towards those who see things differently. This does not mean we have to agree, or be silent about what we believe. It does mean that we don't get to look down our noses at people who don't "Get it" the way we "Get it." That just isn't what a follower of Jesus does.

I wonder: what if all the domesticated Jesuses we have held onto are just silly personal puppets we use to amuse ourselves. But the Real Jesus, the Enduring Christ, was and is something much more.

I invite you to continue to look for and really engage with Jesus.

On your own, in community, in the Scriptures, in everyday life.  
I bet we will all find more than we thought was possible.

Amen.

Further Reading:

Brian McLaren, *Everything Must Change: Jesus, Global Crisis, and a Revolution of Hope.*

Marcus Borg, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time: The Historical Jesus and the Heart of Contemporary Faith.*

---

## “What Was Jesus Up To?”

A Sermon Preached by Catherine Foote,  
University Congregational United Church of Christ  
Seattle, Washington July 26, 2009

---

### **Psalm 51**

#### *Prayer for Cleansing and Pardon*

To the leader. A Psalm of David, when the prophet Nathan came to him, after he had gone in to Bathsheba.

Have mercy on me, O God,  
according to your steadfast love;  
according to your abundant mercy  
blot out my transgressions.  
Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity,  
and cleanse me from my sin.  
For I know my transgressions,  
and my sin is ever before me.  
Against you, you alone, have I sinned,  
and done what is evil in your sight,  
so that you are justified in your sentence  
and blameless when you pass judgement.  
Indeed, I was born guilty,  
a sinner when my mother conceived me.

You desire truth in the inward being;  
therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart.  
Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean;  
wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.  
Let me hear joy and gladness;  
let the bones that you have crushed rejoice.  
Hide your face from my sins,  
and blot out all my iniquities.

Create in me a clean heart, O God,  
and put a new and right spirit within me.  
Do not cast me away from your presence,  
and do not take your holy spirit from me.  
Restore to me the joy of your salvation,  
and sustain in me a willing spirit.

Then I will teach transgressors your ways,  
and sinners will return to you.

Deliver me from bloodshed, O God,  
O God of my salvation,  
and my tongue will sing aloud of your deliverance.

O Lord, open my lips,  
and my mouth will declare your praise.  
For you have no delight in sacrifice;  
if I were to give a burnt-offering, you would not be pleased.

The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit;  
a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.

Do good to Zion in your good pleasure;  
rebuild the walls of Jerusalem,  
then you will delight in right sacrifices,  
in burnt-offerings and whole burnt-offerings;  
then bulls will be offered on your altar.

### **John 3:16-21**

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

‘Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. And this is the judgement, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.’

---

Diane Butler Bass, who is, among many other things, an historian, a religion writer for the New York Times, and the author of several books exploring the future of mainline churches, has written about her own spiritual journey in a book she calls, *Strength for the Journey*. I find myself deeply drawn to this book, and not simply because she celebrates the pilgrimage of the progressive church as much as she celebrates her own journey. I

---

## “What Was Jesus Up To?”

also hear in her story my own story. Although Bass was raised in a United Methodist Church, as a teenager she found a home in a very conservative, evangelical community. Upon graduation from college in the early 80's, she asked for a recommendation of a church in Pasadena, where she was moving. She was told about All Saints, a very liberal Episcopalian church. And although she was pretty sure she would not like it, she gave it a try.

She was very uncomfortable when the sermon turned out to be “political,” as the pastor railed against U.S. involvement in Central America. But she hung in there, waiting for the liturgy of the Eucharist, which, with the prescribed words from the Book of Common Prayer, she felt “couldn't be ruined.” She went forward and received the bread, “the Body of Christ.” But when the chalice bearer offered her the cup, his words caught her off guard. “Strength for the journey,” he said, as he tipped the cup toward her.

“Strength for the journey? What? No cup of salvation? . . . No bloody sacrifice? . . . What kind of heresy was this?”

“Nothing could have shocked or hurt me more,” Bass reports.

Then she tells of a fifteen year journey, in which her faith grew and changed, even as the mainline church also faced its own challenges and changes. And fifteen years later, in spite of a vow to never return to All Saints, she found herself there again. It wasn't until she once again went forward for the celebration of the Eucharist that she remembered her earlier experience, and her vow. But she had changed. She was now much more comfortable in this liberal church. As she moved forward she heard the chalice bearer say to those ahead of her, “The blood of Christ, the cup of salvation.” But when the cup came to her, the word spoken were “Strength for the journey.” Her conclusion: God has a sense of humor!

My own journey was so very similar, but it was focused more on a different piece of traditional theology. When I went to seminary in the early 70's, at a Baptist seminary no less- I became friends with a man who told me he did not believe in hell. “How could someone be a Christian and not believe in hell?” I thought. But this man, who had been born with one arm badly deformed, told me, “I think we make hell here on earth. I've lived it.”

In the following fifteen years, I went on my own spiritual journey. And as I grew in faith, I too found that my faith home changed, from a conservative congregation, and a teaching position at a very conservative Christian college, to the United Church of Christ. When I realized that my faith no longer fit the tradition of the school where I was teaching, I knew I had to resign. I went into the president's office and told him so.

“Why?” he asked.

“Because my theology has changed too much for me to stay,” I told him.

“Oh, it can't have changed that much,” he said reassuringly. “Give me an example.”

And of all the things I could have said, what I did say was, “I don't believe in hell any more.”

“You're right,” the president said. “You can't teach here any more.”

God *does* have a sense of humor.

The issue in both of these journeys, of course, is that blood and hell, which Diane Butler Bass and I struggled with, seem to be at the center of what might be called “orthodox Christianity.” If we give up those two images, how do we understand the work of Jesus?

Another way of asking this question is to recognize that we are talking about is the issue of “salvation.” So let me say right now that I *do* believe that Jesus saves. And to put that statement into the context of “saves from what?” and “saves for what?” let me recall Peter's question to this congregation a year ago- do you remember it?- “If Jesus is not your lord and savior, then who or what is?”

That question gives us the beginning point of today's question, “What was Jesus up to?”

And that beginning points to what I like to call the human situation. I make a distinction between that, and what is usually called “the human condition.” The human condition, some say, is a condition of sinfulness. In such a theological understanding, we humans were born “fallen,” or as the psalmist has said, “conceived in sin.” That is one way of talking about what it means to be human.

But I hear the reality of my own situation more clearly when I use different words. I know my “sin,” that is, my inability so often to choose what I know is the right thing to do, my struggle with what it means to truly, deeply, love God, love others and love myself. I can stand with the Psalmist David in that sense that, even when my heart longs to do the right thing, I stumble. But I do not translate that reality into “born in sin” words, or “stained soul” words. I translate that into “need” words. That is to say, in very simple words, I cannot live the life I long to live all by myself. I need something beyond myself in order to be, in the words of John Shelby Spong, “all that God has created me to be.”

And I think this is important to acknowledge because I believe in the mainline church we have not tipped too far

---

## “What Was Jesus Up To?”

on the “wretched, sinful me” side of the equation, but on the “I don’t need anything” side.

Traditional theology suggests that Jesus life, death and resurrection changed something fundamental in the universe. We capture the sense of that in the creeds of the early church. But if you listen to the words of any early Christian creed, you encounter this interesting reality about creeds- they tend to focus on the beginning and the end of the Jesus story and pretty much ignore what is in the middle.

I believe in God, the Father Almighty,  
the Maker of heaven and earth, *(so goes the Apostle’s Creed.)*  
and in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord:

Who was conceived by the Holy Ghost,  
born of the virgin Mary,  
suffered under Pontius Pilate,  
was crucified, dead, and buried;

He descended into hell.

The third day He arose again from the dead;

He ascended into heaven,  
and sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty;  
from thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead.

We in the progressive church have turned from that “beginning and end” imagery to focus on what isn’t said in the creeds. That in part is what Lisa was preaching about last week when she asked, “Which Jesus?” That focus on the middle, on the life and teachings of Jesus, is the gift we progressives bring to any dialogue with our more conservative brothers and sisters. Jesus’ call to radical discipleship. Jesus’ stand with the poor and with the marginalized. Jesus’ absolute refusal to be co-opted by the religious or political powers of his day, or anyone who said God’s attention and favors of God were reserved for those who already had power, and already possessed all the favors they needed in this world.

So when it comes to creeds, we are the people of unspoken middle. But we still need to deal with the beginning and the end. Most particularly, we still ask ourselves, did something about reality, about the human situation, change because of Jesus?

Well, let me say, with Peter Ilgenfritz last year, I do not believe that what changed is that we were rescued from the clutches of the devil, ransomed by a tricky God who bargained with Satan, trading Jesus’ death for ours, and then getting the better of the bargain because Jesus was the only one death could not hold.

Nor do I believe that somehow an angry God, who in Old Testament times was appeased by the blood of animals, was ultimately appeased by the spilling of Jesus’ blood.

Nor do I even believe that a just God could not have mercy on sinners until justice had been satisfied.

But I do affirm this. I can understand how each of those images spoke in their way and in their time to a community of faith that had encountered something really changed in that story of death and resurrection and tried to explain it.

“Evil is real,” they said, and I believe. And Jesus has set us free from the bondage of that reality which can enslave us. Read I Corinthians 15 and you will hear the echoes of this metaphor- but take hold this metaphor too tightly and you come up with a trickster God and a strange dualism.

“Life is not cheap,” they said, and I believe. And there is something in the death of Jesus that reminds us that life does cost something. Read the book of Hebrews and you will see shadows of this metaphor- but hold this metaphor too tightly and you come up with an abusive God and a sanctioning of violence.

“Justice makes its demands,” they said, and I believe. And there is something in the death of Jesus that helps us live up to those demands. Read the book of Romans and you sense that Paul is wondering, maybe along with David, how to live with what he, out of fear, or desire, or a lust for power, has done. In fact, this image of salvation, developed by Anselm most fully in the twelfth century, is one that has dominated salvation imagery for the past eight hundred years. In a feudal society, where the honor of the Lord was rigidly defended to maintain order, it was perhaps a helpful metaphor. But hold this image too tightly, and you come up with a God of infinite justice, and retributational justice at that, that is divorced from a God of infinite love.

What I am saying here is yes, I do believe that something has changed. As a Christian I believe that Jesus in some way conveyed the unique presence of God to those who followed him. Borg says he was a “spirit person.” And I believe the life of Jesus must be understood in the context of his death and of the resurrection. I believe the followers of Jesus experienced something real, something that is at the heart of human experience, and something that is ultimately beyond words, and something that death could not destroy.

So when those with him tried to describe the reality of their experience, the words they chose were both profound, and ultimately inadequate. They could not explain the experience; they could only take us close

---

## “What Was Jesus Up To?”

enough to it that we might touch it ourselves. That is why we must take their words seriously and hold their words loosely, letting them lead us as they can and then letting go of them when they have taken us as far as they can.

Because I also believe that any words we use to describe this reality, if we hold them too tightly, will only lead us away from whatever the reality is. What we are left with, when we press too hard for an explanation, is simply our hand touching the edge of something real, and finding that our words fail us.

If you, like me, enjoyed the movie, “Shakespeare in Love,” you will recall that whenever old William encountered such an experience- something that worked out, beyond any rational explanation,- he just shrugged and said, “It’s a mystery.” Or if you know the movie, “Defending Your Life,” which tackles the big question of “What happens when we die, and why?” you might recall that defense attorney Rip Torn, when asked to explain to newly arrived human Albert Brooks, why things are the way they are, instead explains that humans use only three to five percent of their brain, and thus are, behind their backs of course, called “small brains” by those in this after-life Judgment City where the average person is using about 50%. And then, when faced with something hard to explain, just says, “You wouldn’t understand.”

Is it ok for us to say there is something real here that is beyond our explanation? Can we, with Marcus Borg, become in some way mystics? Perhaps, when it comes down to it, acknowledging our need is one of the hardest things for us self-reliant, independent, “I can do anything if I just try hard enough,” intellectual “I can understand anything if I just think hard enough,” twenty-first century mainline Christians to do.

Perhaps this is where our solidarity with the wider Christian community, and indeed the wider community of all faiths, can help us.

You may know the story of Paul Farmer, told by Tracy Kidder in the book *Mountains Beyond Mountains*. In it he explains that when Farmer saw religion distained in the halls of Harvard University, where he received his medical degree and later taught, but embraced by the poor in Haiti, where he practiced his medicine, he decided to humble himself and admit that he might not know everything. He decided that there was something that the poor knew that he could open himself to.

What was Jesus up to? Confronting evil, in the world and in our own hearts. Comforting those who had no hope, either politically or personally. In the “both-and” world where all of us ultimately live, I think salvation *can* be both political and personal. I believe that the gospel does indeed, as the saying goes, “comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable.”

In his book, *The Non-Violent Atonement*, (and don’t you love that title?) Denny Weaver says it this way,

*Jesus was an activist, whose mission was to make the rule of God visible. And his acts demonstrated what the reign of God looked like -- defending poor people, raising the status of women, raising the status of Samaritans, performing healings and exorcisms, preaching the reign of God, and more. . .*

*And when Jesus made the reign of God visible and present in that way, it was so threatening that the assembled array of evil forces killed him.*

*These forces include imperial Rome, which carried ultimate legal authority for his death, with some assistance from the religious authorities in Jerusalem, as well as Judas, Peter, and other disciples, who could not even watch with him, and the mob that howled for his death.*

*Resurrection is the reign of God made victorious over all these forces of evil that killed Jesus.*

*. . . In one way or another, we are all part of those sinful forces that killed Jesus. Jesus died making the reign of God present for us, while we were still sinners. To acknowledge our human sinfulness is to become aware of **our** participation in the forces of evil. . . , including their present manifestations in such powers as militarism, nationalism, racism, sexism, heterosexism and poverty that still bind and oppress.*

*And because God is a loving God, God invites us to join the rule of God in spite of the fact that we participated with and are captive to the powers that killed Jesus. God invites us to join the struggle of those seeking liberation from the forces that bind and oppress. This invitation envisions both those who are oppressed and their oppressors.*

So the focus for Weaver becomes, not just the death of Jesus, but the life of Jesus, and the resurrection as well. It is the whole story that sets us free.

What was Jesus up to? Loving us and loving the world, the whole world, and somehow, setting us free from whatever binds us, so that we can love it too. For further reading:

Denny Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement*

(or see his very good article, “Violence in Christian Theology,” at [Crosscurrents.org](http://Crosscurrents.org))

Marcus Borg, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*  
Diane Butler Bass, *Strength for the Journey*

---

## **“What Do I Need to Believe to Call Myself a Christian?”**

A Sermon Preached by Peter Ilgenfritz  
*Dedicated in Thanksgiving and Gratitude for our youth  
and all they have taught me about walking in the Way of Jesus.*  
University Congregational United Church of Christ  
Seattle, Washington August 2, 2009

---

### **John 3:16**

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

‘Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. And this is the judgement, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.’

### **John 14:6**

Jesus said to him, ‘I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.’

### **Romans 8:38-39**

For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

---

The question I drew for our summer preaching series was, “What Do I Need to Believe to Call Myself a Christian?”

It’s a really good question that several of you asked us to preach about this summer.

Today, there are lots of Christians in our country who will tell you exactly WHAT you need to believe in order to call yourself a “Christian”.

And because of that, I know many of you here have struggled sometimes with calling yourself a “Christian” because of what other people may assume about your faith and beliefs.

**I want to be very clear from the start: Being a Christian has nothing to do with believing certain things about the virgin birth, a physical resurrection, or what happens when we die.**

**Being a Christian means giving your heart to walking in the Way of Jesus. A Way that you find life-giving, hope-filling, a Way that some of us say connects us to the God of Jesus and the God of Jesus to us.**

Let us pray:

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts, always be acceptable in your sight, for you O God, are our rock, our strength, our redeemer. Amen.

When I hear the word “Christian” I think of that guy lurking somewhere in the football end zone holding up a big placard, “JOHN 3:16”.

**“For God so Loved the World that He gave his only begotten son, that whosoever believeth in him shall not perish but have eternal life.”  
(King James Version)**

Or I think of the signboard outside the conservative church:

**“I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” (New Revised Standard Version)**

Because of HOW scripture is used in these two contexts, I hear some assumptions implied as well:

Jesus is the one and only way to God.

Belief in Jesus gets you into heaven. Getting into heaven is a subject that Christians spend most of our time thinking about.

All who don’t believe in Jesus are going to hell.

I don’t believe any of those things.

I don’t believe it is faithful to use scripture in a way to hurt people who think differently or hold different beliefs.

That way has nothing to do with the Jesus I meet in the Gospels. I meet there a Jesus who goes out of his way to keep company with his opponents, all outcasts, and the array of believers, seekers and doubters of his day.

I want to take back these scriptures back because I want to take back the name of “Christian”. To be proud of saying that and knowing what it means.

---

## “What Do I Need to Believe to Call Myself a Christian?”

These scripture texts which are used as a litmus test for what “true” Christians believe did not first appear on placards at football games or on church signboards. They appeared in the Gospel of John.

The Gospel of John can be read as one long love song written in and for a community whose lives and hearts were broken open by this way of life they had found in Jesus.

In our street level apartment on Capitol Hill I hear a lot of this kind of language at 3 a.m.:

“I love you more than anyone!”

“I can’t live without you!”

“You are the most beautiful person in the world to me!”

Some of you have used this language yourselves. Hopefully not at 3 a.m. outside my apartment!

It’s the language of love. And it is a particular KIND of language.

“I love you more than anyone else?”

“Really? More than your Mom? More than your favorite uncle? You love them too. What do you mean – you don’t love them as much anymore?”

“No, No. I don’t mean that... it’s just that this person has broken open my heart in a particular way that no one else has done before. It doesn’t mean I don’t love you too - of course it does.....”

“I can’t live without you.”

“Really?”

“Well, I mean, if I really had to I would – but it wouldn’t be the same. You bring something to my life that no one else ever has before.”

“You are the most beautiful person in the world to me.”

“Really?”

“Well, I know that might not be objectively true – but in my eyes, yes, you are truly beautiful.”

It’s the particular language of love. Not the kind of language to be taken literally, the kind of language of which dogmas should be made. But it is “true” nonetheless – it is the language of a broken open heart.

And so we need to read these texts for what they are – love songs.

John 3:16: “For God so LOVED the world that God gave his only begotten son....” It’s because of LOVE – Love for the world, love for us, that God gives Jesus and in this Jesus way of life we have found a way of LIFE, of HOPE that we have never experienced before.

And note what it does NOT say: “For God so LOVED the world that God gave his only begotten Son that whosoever does NOT believe in him will be eternally damned.” That is NOT what the scripture says. It’s a love song about what a difference Jesus has made to this community’s life.

John 14:6: “I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except by me.” Today we are very interested in getting at the TRUTH that we Christians have oftentimes jumped right over the Jesus WAY. But you can’t get the Jesus TRUTH and have a prayer of living the Jesus LIFE without walking in the Jesus WAY. The Jesus WAY is where it always must begin.

And note what it does NOT say: It does not say, “No one comes to GOD but by me.”

This text was not written to speak to the relative merits of other religions or concerned about the fate of Muslims, Hindus and Buddhists and the superiority or inferiority of Christianity or Judaism.

No, that is not John’s concern.

Jesus says, “No one comes to the Father except by me.” There are many ways to meet God and many aspects of God.

But if you want to meet this particular aspect of God, this particular God of Jesus, this one Jesus calls, “Abba”, “Daddy” - you need to walk in this Jesus way.

There is no other way to meet this intimate God than in walking the Way of this intimate Jesus path – and no better way for this intimate God to meet you.

I spent last week with our middle school youth at the Ground Zero Center for Nonviolence outside the Bangor Naval Station, home base for the Pacific fleet of the Trident Nuclear Subs.

Tomorrow I’ll go spend a couple of days with our high school youth working on a Habitat house in Leavenworth.

On these trips, we work hard, make our own food, play hard, pray, and get wet often, go to bed early and get up early.

It’s dirty, sweaty, smelly, intense. We laugh a lot. Lots of stuff comes up.

And because we live intimately in community we do what human beings do: we run into each other. Sometimes we get mad, frustrated, fed up with each other.

---

## “What Do I Need to Believe to Call Myself a Christian?”

Last Saturday, I sat with our group of hot, sweaty middle school youth at the end of our trip and I told them,

“You know to learn about what it means to be a Christian we don’t sit you down in class for a week to learn a bunch of stuff about Jesus. That’s not to say some of that stuff about Jesus is not important and stuff that we don’t want you to know.

But to learn what it means to be a Christian we take you on trips like this – where we get to learn about building community and what it means to walk in this Way of Jesus. It’s what we have been learning about all week:

We go to hard places to be a presence of hope and healing because that is where Jesus goes. Places out here in the world – and places right here in us and in the places we live. We go not alone but together because that is how we walk on this Jesus Way. We practice how to walk on this Way with each other: When we run into each other, we practice saying “I’m sorry” and beginning the work of forgiveness. When we feel discouraged, we listen; offer each other our care and support.

When some people make us really mad we practice speaking the truth in love and we never stop loving them (though we might not like what they did) and we pray for us and for them and our relationship.

When we get disappointed in one another, we remind ourselves that no one here is really out to hurt us. We work on learning to trust each other.

And whatever happens, no matter how mad or upset we are, we never hit each other. We never return violence for violence as we try to walk in this Jesus Way.”

We learn about walking in this Way, this Jesus Way, every time, every place we meet together as church. It’s in walking in this Jesus Way that we learn about what it means to call ourselves “Christian”.

And the heart of this way? Why no one in my book puts it better than Paul at the end of the 8<sup>th</sup> chapter of his letter to the church at Rome:

**“For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the**

**love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”  
(Romans 8:38-39)**

When I’m a jerk to myself or to others, when I’m not all I want to be, I remember that –

“Nothing can separate me from God’s love”.

When you disappoint me or hurt me, are not all I hoped you to be, I remember that –

“Nothing can separate you from God’s love”.

When I lose myself in my own fears, past history, and hurts, I remember that –

“Nothing can separate us from the love of God”.

That, more than anything, is what I have learned from walking in this Jesus Way.

That is what I believe.

\*\*\*\*\*

### **Suggested Readings**

My latest favorite book on some new ways to think about what it means to call yourself a Christian is Christ of the Celts by John Philip Newell. I read this and said, “This is what I believe.” It may surprise you about some of your assumptions about what you thought Christians “had” to believe or always have believed.

I really appreciate Eugene Peterson’s paraphrase of the Bible called The Message. Read the love songs that are the gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John and see how they understand what it means to walk in this Jesus way. And check out Peterson’s book, The Jesus Way: A Conversation on the Ways that Jesus is the Way, which helped shape how I approached this sermon question.

Read more about taking back those old “litmus test” scriptures in new ways. I am indebted to Encountering God: A Spiritual Journey from Bozeman to Banaras, Diana Eck. See pages 93-97.

And I am grateful for this quote I found in Douglas John Hall’s, Thinking the Faith, Fortress Press, 1991. —*Ruth Wiebe, The Blue Mountains of China, 1970, pp. 215-16*  
*Jesus says in his society here is a new way for [people] to live:*

*you show wisdom, by trusting people;*

*you handle leadership, by serving;*

*you handle offenders, by forgiving;*

*you handle money, by sharing;*

*you handle enemies, by loving;*

*you handle violence, by suffering.*

*In fact, you have a new attitude toward everything, toward everybody. Toward nature, toward the state in which you happen to live, toward women, toward slaves, toward all and every single thing. Because this is a Jesus society and you repent, not by feeling bad, but by thinking different.*

---

## “What Use is Prayer?”

A Sermon Preached by Peter Ilgenfritz  
University Congregational United Church of Christ  
Seattle, Washington August 9, 2009

---

Matthew 26:36-39

### **Jesus Prays in Gethsemane**

Then Jesus went with them to a place called Gethsemane; and he said to his disciples, ‘Sit here while I go over there and pray.’ He took with him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, and began to be grieved and agitated. Then he said to them, ‘I am deeply grieved, even to death; remain here, and stay awake with me.’ And going a little farther, he threw himself on the ground and prayed, ‘My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want.’

Matthew 6:5-6

### **Concerning Prayer**

‘And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.’

---

In last week’s sermon, “What Do I Need to Believe to Call Myself a Christian?” I said that being a Christian has nothing to do with believing certain things *about* Jesus but is about following the *Way of* Jesus.

And at the center of the Way of Jesus is prayer. Jesus’ life was lived in a rhythm of taking time to connect with the one he called Abba God. When the demands were the greatest, the situations the bleakest, Jesus stepped away again and again to pray.

There is a lot of confusion about prayer. Many of us believe that there are certain people who pray naturally and well while a lot of us fumble around or just don’t get it. We have a lot of questions about how prayer works and whether it really matters.

But prayer is something very old, very simple, very natural. In fact, I believe it is the most natural thing in the world. For prayer is not about a technique to be mastered. But about making room for a presence to find us.

And does it make a difference?  
It makes all the difference in the world.

It was the night of Jesus’ arrest. And in this time of great anxiety, Jesus went away with his friends to pray:

**Then Jesus went with the disciples to a garden called Gethsemane and told them,**

**“Stay here while I go over there and pray.”**

**Taking along Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, he plunged into an agonizing sorrow. Then he said,**

**“This sorrow is crushing my life out. Stay here and keep vigil with me.”**

**Going a little ahead, he fell on his face, praying,**

**“Abba, if there is any way, get me out of this. But please, not what I want. You, what do you want?” (Matthew 26:36-39)**

Prayer often begins for us, as it did for Jesus, with talking. We say prayers for our loved ones, our world, ourselves.

And we need to get those words, those prayers out. For there is a lot that we have to say, a lot on our hearts. Sometimes we know that saying such prayers matter, that they make a difference. We might not know how. But we know that these prayers that we say aloud are a way that we care, a way that we show love. Prayer is what we do with others when we don’t know what else to say or do. We talk to God in prayer.

The prayers we say are a way we are intimate with each other and with God. And the Way of Jesus is an intimate Way.

But after all that we might have to say in prayer, comes the most basic part of prayer. Jesus’ prayer in the Garden does not end with “Get me out of this!” but goes on, “But please, not what I want. You, what do you want?”

---

## “What Use is Prayer?”

After all the words, all the need and emotions and feelings, Jesus makes room for the most essential part of prayer – making room for God to find him...

We don't often talk about prayer as letting God find us.

It might be because it takes prayer out of our words, our hands, our imagination, our control. That can be downright scary. If we let ourselves be found, where might you take us God?

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus talks about what it means to let ourselves be found by God:

**“And when you come before God, don't turn that into a theatrical production either. All these people making a regular show out of their prayers, hoping for stardom! Do you think God sits in a box seat?”**

**“Here's what I want you to do: Find a quiet, secluded place so you won't be tempted to role-play before God. Just be there as simply and honestly as you can manage. The focus will shift from you to God, and you will begin to sense God's grace.” (Matthew 6:5-6)**

Sometimes we think that prayer is all about having to DO things in a certain way. To learn this technique that will make us feel a certain way. To learn a practice that will help us be “one with God”.

But Jesus says prayer is not finally about doing anything. It is not about techniques and methods. It most certainly is not about performing. Not about impressing God or anyone else.

It is about being present so God can meet you.

You know something about this.

Think about something you love to do.

Picture yourself doing that.

How do you feel?

How are you different than you are in your day to day routine?

At times like this, some describe it as feeling really alive, at home in themselves. Sometimes all the worry and anxiety that rushes around in our heads quiets down a bit.

You are just present to the here and now.

I believe that doing this thing that you love to do is your most natural way to pray.

For prayer is about paying attention so God can find you.

We don't “choose” these practices, they choose us. If we have ways that help us pay attention, we need to practice these things not just as stuff we “like to do” but as part of our “holy work”. And we can use these practices, to take the practice of paying attention, the practice of prayer, into the rest of our day.

I love to go to the gym and lift weights. I love doing it because of how it feels. I like sweating. I like waking up my muscles. I like what happens to me in this time. No longer am I lost in thinking about this problem, this situation. I am just here. Just now. I know I have a body. I know I am a body. I breathe a little deeper. I feel at peace.

For me, going to the gym is one of the ways that I pray.

It connects me.

It connects me to my body, my heart.

I am present to the here and now.

And when that happens, I make room for God to connect to me.

When we make room for God to find us, we live differently.

When we are paying attention, we are different with ourselves.

We are more able to listen to that swirl of emotions and feelings in us that often sweep us away.

When we are paying attention, when we are praying, we are able to be with our feelings in a gentler way, to not push them aside, to listen to what they are trying to say to us.

When we are paying attention, we are different with each other.

When we are not present to the here and now we sometimes just push our way through our days.

When we are paying attention, we are present in all of our interactions.

We might hear things we didn't hear when we weren't present.

We might say things we might not have said when we were just going through the motions.

Far too often, we are not present for our own lives. Not present to what is going on within us, around us. No wonder we feel God is nowhere to be found. We are nowhere to be found – and there is nowhere for God to find us.

You can begin again anywhere, anytime.

Be present here, now.

---

## “What Use is Prayer?”

When we pay attention, we are back on the Way of Jesus. That Way where Truth and Life are found.

\*\*\*\*\*

Scripture References from The Message, a Biblical paraphrase by Eugene Peterson

Frederick Buechner once wrote, “None of us is very good at silence because it speaks too much.” Practicing being present to God in silence is hard because it is noisy. But it is also a practice that can be learned. For an excellent step-by-step guide to experiencing silent meditation, see Gunilla Norris’ short book, Inviting Silence. Just excellent.

I am indebted to Paul Coutinho, SJ, author of Just As You Are: Opening Your Life in the Infinite Love of God who put words to my own experience of prayer.

I am grateful to Donald Spoto, author of a number of popular biographies, who turned to look at Jesus and prayer in The Hidden Jesus and In Silence: Why We Pray.

Every morning, Dave and I begin our day with the morning prayers in J. Phillip Newell’s book, Celtic Benediction. His prayers help ground and center me and help me to name what I am carrying in my heart.

---

## **"How can I be a better person?"**

A sermon preached by Lisa Domke  
University Congregational United Church of Christ  
Seattle, Washington August 16, 2009

---

### **Romans 12:1-21**

#### **The New Life in Christ**

I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.

For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgement, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness.

#### **Marks of the True Christian**

Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honour. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.' No, 'if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads.' Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

---

We continue our "I Wonder As I Wander" sermon series today by addressing the question: "How can I be a better person?" This question, of course, begs another question: What does it mean to be a "better person?"

Is it about being "good?" Is a good person one who does good? Does our goodness consist of outer actions? Or is it something internal? Or is it both?

Certainly within the Jewish and Christian faith traditions there are plenty of Scriptures and teachings that have to do with becoming a better person.

As a child, I internalized these stories and exhortations to "be good," and (in combination with my own personality and the teachings of my conservative religious tradition) came up with a way of life that went something like this:

You are not good; you are a depraved sinner from birth and you are headed for hell. You can do nothing about this on your own. You cannot work your way to heaven. But you CAN repent of your sins and accept Jesus as your Lord and Savior. Then God will look at you and see, not you the sinner (God does NOT want to look at that!), but Jesus the beloved son of God. Then God will be happy. Unless you sin. Don't do that. Sin is missing the mark of God's perfection and that makes God angry with you. So be good.

Being "Good" meant:  
Keep the rules.  
Don't make mistakes.  
Make everyone happy.  
If you want to make God (or anyone else) happy, you will need to become something other than what you are.  
What you are, frankly, is a little inadequate.  
Work harder. Do more. Be better.

These are not just the messages of conservative Christianity. This is American capitalism. This is popular culture. This is, in many ways, the air we breathe and the water in which we swim.

Back to being "good" and getting "better."  
When I was in Junior High School I held a regular Bible study on campus at lunch time. Which tells you that I was an interesting kid.  
I remember at one point I decided that we should all try to live out the "Fruits of the Spirit" that are mentioned in Galations chapter 5. You know: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

I found myself to be a profound failure in this little experiment. If I managed to inadvertently be patient on

---

## "How can I be a better person?"

"Love day," then I flubbed up the love part. On "Peace day" I was neither peaceful nor self-controlled. It was a disaster.

But I persevered over the years to try to be good enough. I had energy and abilities and I became very adept at burning the candle at both ends, so to speak. I kept the rules, met or exceeded any and all expectations, worked hard, served others, volunteered all over the place, and tried with all my heart to put God first in everything. Whatever I did, though, I never felt like it was enough.

By my late twenties I was at a seminary in St. Paul, MN (how I got there is a long story) and also was working, leading worship in my church, and providing leadership in a dozen other areas both on and off campus.

This pressure-cooker pace was not new to me, but for the first time in my life, I really hit a wall. I found myself completely overwhelmed, absolutely worn out, emotionally and physically exhausted.

I remember thinking, "If I go on like this, I am simply going to die." And I meant that literally. I talked to my spiritual direction group...they said I had to stop the relentless and stressful pace of my life. I said...yes, yes, OK....

Then I met with my spiritual director. She said, "YES! Of course you have to stop. Here: I am writing you a prescription giving you explicit instructions (and permission) to STOP it!"

Stop working so hard to be good enough.  
Stop working so hard to please others.  
Stop trying to meet everyone's needs but your own.  
Stop living with this illusion that you have to be perfect. It is killing you. Stop.

So I stopped.

I called people and said, "I am not going to be able to do this thing I said I would do. I am not going to be able to keep doing this job I have been doing. I am not going to be able to lead in this retreat."

For me, this was devastating. If I wasn't The Responsible One Who Always Did Everything, then who was I? I was now, "The Flake, The Disappointment, The One Who Couldn't Take It."

See how nice I was to myself?! Isn't that beautiful?

But you see, I didn't know myself to be The Beloved of God. I had not yet begun to grasp the heights and depths and unbounded riches of God's love. I had not yet experienced this love for myself, in my weakness and not just in my strength.

So, I went out to the countryside for a silent retreat. I stayed in a one-room hermitage with a bed and a rocking chair and a big picture window and a simple altar.

I sat. I cried. I slept. I sat some more. And at some point in my sitting and just *being*, God came to me and I knew myself to be deeply, profoundly loved...not in my *doing*, but in my just *being*. Just in my inherent Lisa-ness.

This marked the beginning of a new phase in my life with God.

The transformation was not instantaneous by any means. It has taken (and continues to take) a long, long time. But it was a start. It was my own discovery of Grace. It was my own acceptance of a love that had nothing to do with my working really hard to be good enough. It was the beginning of me becoming more fully my truest and best self. It was something like what the apostle Paul alluded to: a transformation of my heart and mind.

So...when I look back on the story of my life, and then consider this question "How can I become a better person?" I find myself wondering if the question could be asked in a different and perhaps more helpful way.

Maybe the answer to this really legitimate and wonderful longing to become more, to become truly "good" lies not in endless striving to be "better," but in finding ourselves Loved and then in becoming more fully our true selves. Maybe it is not about making up for our inherent lack, but about becoming more fully human, more fully who we are intended to be.

Then the question becomes: How can I know myself as God's beloved and become more fully my true self?

In his book, *The Human Being*, Walter Wink states, "The goal of life, then, is... to become what we truly are – human. We are not required to become divine: flawless, perfect, without blemish. We are invited simply to become human, which means growing through our sins and mistakes, learning by trial and error, being redeemed over and over... It means giving up pretending to be good and, instead, becoming real." (p. 29)

How do we do that? How do we become real? How do we become fully human?

Well, both Jesus and the Apostle Paul tell us that we are changed from the inside out. Just keeping rules and going to church isn't going to do it. There is a way in which we cooperate with the Spirit of God and submit ourselves to this process of becoming, of living into our truest and best selves.

---

## "How can I be a better person?"

Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount and through the rest of the book of Matthew says, "Don't just keep the rules. Be changed. Be transformed in your heart. When your heart is changed then you *will* live in ways that are pleasing to God."

First inner transformation, then external actions.

Likewise, Paul in the letter to the church in Rome encourages them:

"Present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect."

When our whole lives are given to God, when our hearts and minds are renewed and changed, when we become our truest and best selves...this way of life IS spiritual worship.

Then Paul goes on to talk about what this fully human life looks like.

"Don't think you are better than anyone else. Just be fully yourself.

Live into your gifts and help others to live into theirs.

Let love be genuine.

Honor each other.

Help those in need.

Rejoice and weep with each other.

Live in harmony.

Overcome evil with good."

This is to be the life of the Church. Life in community.

It is a cycle, really—a dance with us and God and our community.

We are transformed in our hearts and minds through encounter with the Love of God, and then we live into our best selves in community. In community we experience and are reminded of our belovedness. We continue to be transformed in our hearts and minds, and together we resist being conformed to the "world." (which is Paul's image for that which diminishes our humanity, that which is inhumane.)

The path to our best selves is a dance of Love among us and God and our community.

Some of you probably came today hoping for a to-do list, a program you could follow on your way to becoming a better person. (Maybe a nice infomercial: "Just TWO WEEKS to a Better Person!! Call now and we'll throw in this prayer treadmill!")

I'm not going to give you a program.

I will just say this: Make space to listen for the Holy. We are busy, busy people.

Make space for God to speak. Make time to find and know yourself deeply loved by God.

We each find our own way, and God leads us and calls us along this path to becoming our true selves. For some of us transformation of our heart and mind will come while listening to music, for others in therapy or at a 12-step meeting. It might be in conversation with friends, while reading the Bible, in silence, at church, on a walk, in prayer.

Does regular exercise make us stronger? Yes. Does regular attention to God, to our spirit make us stronger and more human? Yes, of course it does.

But before we start up any ambitious programs of personal betterment, we should remember that this becoming is a cooperative effort.

It starts with God calling us to relationship, rest, silence, becoming.

Then comes our response.

Back and forth, back and forth.

Loving and being loved.

Making space for transformation.

Trusting, giving ourselves to the process of becoming more fully ... ourselves.

And finding, to our surprise, that it is enough.

Amen.

For Further Reading:

*When the Heart Waits: Spiritual Direction for Life's Sacred Questions* by Sue Monk Kidd

*God's Joyful Surprise: Finding Yourself Loved* by Sue Monk Kidd

*Tired of Trying to Measure Up* by Jeff VanVonderen  
(This is something I read during my evangelical days and it really changed my life. I have not re-read it in some time, but I think the essential message of the book still has value.)

---

## “How do you decide what’s right to do?”

A Sermon Preached by Catherine Foote,  
University Congregational United Church of Christ  
Seattle, Washington August 23, 2009

---

### **Micah 6:6-8**

#### **What God Requires**

<sup>6</sup>With what shall I come before the LORD,  
and bow myself before God on high?

Shall I come before him with burnt-offerings,  
with calves a year old?

<sup>7</sup>Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams,  
with tens of thousands of rivers of oil?

Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression,  
the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?’

<sup>8</sup>He has told you, O mortal, what is good;  
and what does the LORD require of you  
but to do justice, and to love kindness,  
and to walk humbly with your God?

### **Matthew 7:12**

#### **The Golden Rule**

12 ‘In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets.

---

When I was in seminary, I read Findley Edge’s book, *The Greening of the Church*. Back then “greening” meant “finding new life.” And so the book was about how the church might find renewal. I don’t remember a lot of what Edge said, but one point he made has stayed with me for almost forty years. He said that life is not found in the negative, but in the positive. And then he gave an illustration a little like this one (updated to 2009 issues):

A parent going out the door to run some errands tells a child, “Be good while I’m gone.” Then the parent returns and asks, “Were you good?”

Now the child answers, “Absolutely. A fellow came to the door asking for a donation for hungry families and I gave him \$20. Then while I was out on the porch I noticed a cat that was stuck in the neighbor’s tree, so I climbed up and got it. From the top of the tree I could see that the litter everywhere, so I made flyers encouraging people to ‘reduce, reuse, and recycle,’ and distributed them

throughout the neighborhood. And when I got home I wrote our congressional representatives regarding our need for universal healthcare.”

Of course, the parent wasn’t really saying “Be good.” The parent was saying, “Don’t be bad.” Or maybe even more to the point, “Don’t misbehave.” “Don’t play on the furniture. Don’t get into the cookies. Don’t put gum in your sister’s hair.”

Today’s “wandering” question relates to the issue of “being good:” How do you decide what is the right thing to do?

Like all our wondering and wandering this summer, we start with a disclaimer. Volumes have been written on ethics in general, and Christian ethics in particular. There is no way to address everything in the time we have. But still, we can make a beginning. And it is a very fair question, a very good one. We long to be good people. We long to do the right thing. But choices can be difficult, and conventional morality very misleading. How *does* one decide?

Back in college I had a conversation with a dear friend who is an atheist. We were talking about how we make these very choices, and he said something I thought at the time was very wise: “I try to live in a way that if everyone in the world lived the same way, it would be a world I wanted to live in.”

That is, of course, a variation on The Golden Rule. It is found everywhere. So as I thought about this “do the right thing” question some more, I found myself wondering if indeed the Golden Rule was pretty much where everyone started. And so I figured I would ask people how they decide. I started by texting a bunch of friends and family. I deliberately reached out to a variety of folks- church-goers and non; believers, seekers, doubters, and mostly younger than me. I started with this text message: “Hey-, I’m preaching a sermon on ‘how to decide the right thing to do’ and I would love your perspective. If you are willing to be a part, send best email contact. Thanks.”

And everyone I texted said yes. Everyone was in. I found that interesting in itself, that so many were up for the question. Then I sent this email:

*Thanks for helping me out. Here’s the thing- for our summer sermon series here, people from the church submitted questions and we’ve been preaching on those questions. And the question I drew for August 23<sup>rd</sup> was “How do you decide what the right thing to do is?”*

---

## **“How do you decide what’s right to do?”**

*I’m sure this has come up because as a “libera”l church we don’t just say “read the Bible and you’ll know.” In fact, sometimes we suggest that the “right thing” might be just the opposite of something you read in the Bible (the easy examples are Old Testament war stories vs. working for peace; the Bible saying “don’t divorce,” but our church saying “sometimes divorce is a better option than staying together;”- but then, how do you decide even that? And then add the even more complicated stuff, like our church’s support of gay marriage when the Bible might seem to say homosexual relationships are wrong, and you can see why the question comes up)*

*So, I am going with the idea that the “Golden Rule” is truly the most valuable ethical statement we have in our faith community (Do unto others . . . ), and that is how you look at all the other “commandments” or ethical perspectives. And then I thought I would ask a bunch of different people how they decide. Like, is the Golden Rule just a given, no matter what a person’s background or faith, or are there other things people use, no matter their background and faith? So I am actually asking a whole lot of different people, with different backgrounds, different spiritual perspectives, or even no perspective they would consider “spiritual,” just to see what folks say. And then I thought I would ask some of the people I love the most- and that’s where you came in.*

*I’m wondering if you have a basic guideline for what makes something right. Your answer can be as short or long as you want, you do not have to defend it, the more specific you are the more I might understand what you are saying, and even if you’re not sure, that’s ok. Just give it your best shot- or even a decent shot if it’s not your best.*

Think for a moment: how you would respond if you got that message? The answers I received were fascinating. And they were remarkably similar.

One niece said, “Do you mean, besides tarot cards?” I loved that answer. I emailed her back about how I decided to go to graduate school (rather than follow up on an interesting job offer) by flipping a coin. It reminded me of the way some folks might just open the Bible and point to a text when they are making their decisions.

But that does raise the question, “Where does the Bible fit in our decision making?” Does the Bible really help? Well, yes and no. My nephew, age 24, said it this way:

*When I am actually conscious of my decision making, I try to apply the “rule of love” to my decision of what the right thing to do is. I think this is especially useful for when Biblical advice goes against what I feel in my spirit. I have faith that God’s new covenant is “written in my heart,” meaning that it is not a matter of following stagnant rules, but listening to the living leading of Love I feel within. It is sometimes difficult to follow this when*

*there seem to be conflicting feelings, so I have to use all my tools (intellect/logic, close friends/family, historical analysis, prayer) to help inform the process. Lord, help me be proactive in this! Better to walk the extra mile than to fail to love each other.*

My nephew called it the “rule of love.” Other people had other words. But virtually everyone cited some version of the Golden Rule.

This note came from a friend whom I have known since junior high school, someone who is like a brother to me:

*With regard to the golden rule . . . it’s a starting point. I actually try [sometime more successfully than others] to do better than what I would expect from others. And, I try to apply it across the board in spite of what prejudices I might have to wrestle with to follow through. I think that my overall life goal would be to leave the people that I have touched in a better state because of that contact, whether its something brief like a phone conversation with a reservation agent or something longer term . . . there are so few shots at making a difference, we need to take advantage of each one.*

The Golden Rule. “Do unto others.” But how do we know how to apply it?

These words from another niece:

*As for doing the right thing— I think with a little empathy and self reflection, the right thing to do is evident. If you are able to put yourself in someone else’s shoes and see how they will be affected then turn that around on yourself. . . .if you don’t like what you see then you are not doing the right thing. . . . I live my life this way and find that it works most of the time.*

Then she added these very personal words about a very hard decision she has recently made:

*For certain decisions I find that I end up having to be a little selfish and put myself first. . . . I realize that I only have control over my own actions and cannot control another person. With that freedom came the (hard) decision . . .which I know adversely affects (the other person) but I have done all I can and now have to be selfish in a way and do what’s right for me.*

With a little empathy and self examination. She is pointing to two important markers, ones that actually balance each other. I want to say something about each of these qualities. I’m going to tackle the last one first.

You heard my nephew who said, “I pray about it.” Whether it was prayer or something else, almost everyone said that “going deep” is part of the process. Here is the response of my neighbor, who has two boys in their teens:

---

## “How do you decide what’s right to do?”

So how do I decide what’s the right thing to do? Off the top of my head, I would say that I when I am at my best, I take the time to really listen to my heart and intuition to know what’s the right thing to do. I am a person who tends to reason and “think” things through and this can be a real impediment. I find that the best thing is for me to just be a quiet, internal listener. I have faith that I “know” what is right if I just take the time to feel it and let it become clear to me internally. When I have a dilemma, I do often ask for advice, but when it comes down to my actions, I go with what I “know” is right. I have to live with myself. It may sound selfish, but I am accountable to me. That does not mean that I don’t believe in “God,” but I trust in my ability to “know what is right.” I also need to remain open and respectful to others and other views.

I am not dogmatic in the sense that I believe the world is black and white. In fact, I am very suspicious of people who claim to know what is “right” and who stand in judgment of others. I have more of a sense that the world is evolving and we are “in process.” I am actually not sure there are ethical “rules” that hold in all situations.

I also have a responsibility to take the time to “listen” to my internal self and to practice “being with myself.” I think it also helps to have lots of experiences in the world to draw upon.

And another nephew of mine gave a particularly thoughtful answer- the longest one I got. I will just read part of it here:

I once heard a person describe their prayer and answers from God as that little voice in the back of their head that answers when they ask questions and the one that answers with advice which makes you wonder how such a true, wise, and kind thought could have come from inside such a troubled head. . . . I heard it on the radio so who knows how much I can trust that, but I tried it and in my times of darkness I have become adept at hearing faithfully that **life is a gift**. So I talk to myself and that is how I find the right thing to do in situations where I need to listen to something. It does become hard to listen to that voice when there are such other noisier things going on around me. . . . But when I do listen I am not led astray.

. . . (W)e can speak inside ourselves with many different archetypical voices that keep us functioning. Part of us will say, “you really want to stay in bed,” and another part will say, “you need to go to work.” Part will say “those people might hurt you if you talk to them,” and another part will say, “if you don’t try to befriend them, they will always be something to be afraid of.” And if you stop and name the perspectives inside you with archetypical names like “reserve” or “adventure” or “controller” or

“reveler” you can start to hear them better. (I have discovered that people can learn ) to call on voices from within ourselves which can speak with compassion, strength, right mindedness, universal love, peace, kindness, and many other of the high and common abstracts of all the major religions in the world. . . . . When talking . . . with friends from strict and conservative orthodoxy to loose but certain agnosticism, they seem to connect quickly with things that I say when I relax and let the voices of universal love speak from somewhere inside where I truly suspect we all are connected.

To know how to do the right thing we can ask the question, what is the right thing, and then not strain to listen, but calmly listen and with a settled heart and mind, know that even if it is a hard answer (and it frequently is) it is easy enough to trust that we will hear a response. It also helps to say it out loud to yourself. It makes it tangible and allows for you to pick out where the wisdom in your own soul is.

It can be dangerous, I would assume, to not be willing to check the answers we get back to make sure that we did not impose our own interests into the response. I like to use the golden rule, but I like to make certain that I am giving it a full scope. . . . God has given us a gift in our lives, and if we are thankful for that gift and are willing to treat it with wonder, reverence, revelry, love, and thankfulness, I think we will for the most part do right by it.

One last thing that helps me trust in doing the right thing is to know that I will likely slip up at some point. So if I ere in seeking the right thing to do, I am still living life to the fullest by trying and intending. I should not be afraid of doing the wrong thing, but rather eager to do the right thing. I need the right motivation. And even then it is still hard, so I just have to know that the worst thing that trying to do the right thing can do is kill me, and if I don’t try then the worst thing has already occurred.

Those are the words of a twenty-seven year old.

Over and over I heard people say they needed to check in with themselves.

And empathy. That is the other idea that came up regularly. Now in some circles, empathy is a word that has fallen on hard times. When Barack Obama announced that he wanted empathy to be a characteristic of his Supreme Court nominee, some folks howled. “The law is the law,” they said, “and empathy has no role.”

Such an outcry was astonishing to me. I think empathy is a crucial element in good ethical decisions. I believe that “fear of empathy” points out the inadequacy of any ethical system that attempts to be self-contained and

---

## “How do you decide what’s right to do?”

absolute. When we create a closed system, we will find ourselves in danger of assuming that *only we* have the answer, while everyone else, vulnerable to their own presuppositions, will make less wise choices.

Whether it is the assumption that the constitution, or the Bible, or any other text can be simply read and applied without thoughtful interpretation and a close examination of one’s own preconceived sense of “shoulds,” a closed system will ultimately fail us. That is because a closed system is trapped within its own, always limited perspective. And that is when “checking in with myself” is not enough. I need the broader perspective that others, especially others outside my own system, offers.

So empathy- that is, trying to include the perspective of the other- is a way to keep the system open. Empathy reminds us as well that many times the issue is not figuring out the right answer, but finding a way to ask the right question. As one niece wisely responded when I first asked her about doing the right thing, “The right thing about what?”

In the book *Mountains Beyond Mountains*, the incredible story of Paul Farmer and his work with the poor in Haiti and around the world, the author Tracy Kidder asks about the ethics of a decision to spend \$20,000 for the medical evacuation of a young man who within weeks after being flown from Haiti to Boston, died. “Why spend that money?” Kidder asks. “Couldn’t it be better used to save many?” And Farmer responds, “You are asking the wrong question. Why not ask instead, ‘Why should anyone have to make that choice? Why are there not enough resources in Haiti to treat this young man, whose life could have been saved?’”

Empathy making sure we are asking the right question. The well-known quote “War is a failure of imagination,” is actually an incomplete quote. The original is “War is a failure of imagination *and empathy*.”

I am therefore in favor of empathy, in my judicial systems and in life. Empathy is what leads me to involve myself in a sacred conversation on race, as many in our congregation have done this summer. Empathy is what leads me, as a relatively healthy person with good insurance, to care about someone in ill health with no insurance, or someone who has been denied coverage because of some “preexisting condition.” Empathy makes my “right thing” question as broad as all of creation. It is what leads me to join with the broader

community to create structures that can offer refuge to the homeless, resources to the poor, food to the hungry, and a world at peace.

So I think one of my tasks as a person of faith is to be ever increasing my circle of empathy. What the prophet Micah has said rings true. What does God require? What does an ethical response require? Do justice. And love mercy. And walk humbly.

“Do unto others as you would have them do to you.” And keep the system open.

But also I must add that almost all the responses I got said something like: “I try to do the right thing, but I don’t always do it.” In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus frames the Golden Rule with these words: “Don’t judge. Don’t rush to take the speck out of your neighbor’s eye and ignore the log in your own”

And then Jesus says, “Forgive.” And of course there is much to say about both of these topics as well. But those are sermons for another day.

---

*For further reading:* In the area of ethics I have found the most help in reading stories, and most specifically “spiritual” biographies. I appreciate that as people relate real situations and genuine struggles with decisions they face, I can identify my own dilemmas and choices about “the right thing.” I therefore recommend the following, dated as some of them are:

Langdon Gilkey, *Shantung Compound*. This is the story of the author’s internment in China during World War II and remains as classic regarding personal choices under pressure.

Victor Frankl, *Man’s Search for Meaning*. The story of Frankl’s experiences in a World War II concentration and extermination camp, and his reflections on life based on those experiences.

Charles Sheldon, *In His Steps*. The original and classic “what would Jesus do” story.

Anne Lamott, *Grace (Eventually)*. For a funny and honest look at a Christian struggling to figure out “the right thing,” and then do it, read anything by Lamott.

---

**“Why Do Bad Things Happen?”**

A Sermon Preached by Peter Ilgenfritz  
University Congregational United Church of Christ  
Seattle, Washington August 30, 2009

---

Psalms 23, 46:1-3, 10-11

**The Divine Shepherd**

A Psalm of David.

The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want.

He makes me lie down in green pastures;

he leads me beside still waters;

he restores my soul.

He leads me in right paths

for his name's sake.

Even though I walk through the darkest valley,

I fear no evil;

for you are with me;

your rod and your staff—

they comfort me.

You prepare a table before me

in the presence of my enemies;

you anoint my head with oil;

my cup overflows.

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me

all the days of my life,

and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD

my whole life long.

**Psalm 46**

**God's Defence of His City and People**

To the leader. Of the Korahites. According to Alamo. A Song.

God is our refuge and strength,

a very present help in trouble.

Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change,

though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea;

though its waters roar and foam,

though the mountains tremble with its tumult.

*Selah*

'Be still, and know that I am God!

I am exalted among the nations,

I am exalted in the earth.'

The LORD of hosts is with us;

the God of Jacob is our refuge.

*Selah*

---

Last spring we asked for questions you wanted to hear us preach about this summer. The clergy took those questions and laid out our summer schedule. I've just got back from a marvelous, rest-filled vacation in Scotland visiting friends. It has been a beautiful summer here. And I come back needing to preach a sermon this week about suffering and next week about death! Why! This does not seem fair!

Ted Kennedy was asked in an interview several years ago, "Senator Kennedy, I am struck by your commitment to inclusion, advocacy for the poor. Where did you learn these values?" Senator Kennedy looked at the reporter and said, "Have you never read the New Testament?"

Why do we need to talk about suffering and death these next two weeks?

Because meeting suffering and death are central in what it means to walk in the Way of Jesus.

As I have said before, being a Christian doesn't mean believing certain things but about saying "Yes" again and again to following in the Way of Jesus. A Way that connects us to God, and is life-giving. A way that includes suffering and death. A way not of avoiding suffering but entering into it so that we might not be trapped but transformed into healing and new life.

I had my sermon all written on Friday.

That is truly a miracle for me. I never have my sermon written on Friday.

And then on Friday night I heard Pedro's story. And I wondered what in the world I had to say this morning.

---

## “Why Do Bad Things Happen?”

I must introduce you to Pedro: On vacation, two weeks ago, I checked my email. I never check my email on vacation. But for some reason I did and I saw a note from our Conference Minister, Mike Denton, about a Guatemalan kid who was seeking political asylum and in need of a place to live. Pedro had just turned 18 and because of that was losing his foster home. The programs that might have served him were full.

It was one of those times of making a decision where there was no decision needed. Dave and I looked at each other and said, “Yes, we’d like to do this.”

We got home late Tuesday night and on Wednesday night opened the door and welcomed Pedro into our lives.

In the past few days we have done all the important things: given Pedro a set of keys to the house, got him settled into his room, registered for 10<sup>th</sup> grade at the Bilingual School (which happens to be up the street from our house at Meany), got a library card, walked to the neighborhood park to play Frisbee and bought a soccer ball and basketball.

Much is uncertain about the future – Pedro’s political asylum hearing is set for January 7. We go one day at a time. And today we are making home and family together.

Friday night I heard Pedro’s story of how a just turned 18 year old from Guatemala has ended up in Seattle, Washington. As you might imagine, it is a painful story. And that is Pedro’s story to tell if he wants to tell it.

This is my story: After hearing what had happened to Pedro, I couldn’t get to sleep on Friday night. I tossed and turned all night thinking about such things that happened to this sweet, loving guy. Wondering in the light of his story what did I know, what did I have to say about suffering.

After a sleepless night, yesterday morning I turned back to the texts that I chose to preach on today. Texts that I have used in every memorial service.

But I turned back to Psalm 23 and Psalm 46 yesterday morning not as texts to preach “about” but as words I needed myself. Words I needed to find me in my own hurt as I struggled with taking in what has happened to this kid who I love.

In times of suffering we lose speech. We have trouble putting words together and we need to relearn how to put words and meaning together again. And so in times of suffering we turn again and again to ancient words written by people, like us, who have had bad things happen and have suffered. Texts that people have turned to again and again for countless generations as a way to find their way back to speech when there is no

speech. Texts that Jesus knew and that hold the key to what it means to follow Jesus on this Way through the valley of suffering and death so that we might, like him, overcome the grip of suffering and death and be transformed into a new creation.

I heard three simple things in these psalms that I needed to hear:

Stop.

Share.

Hope.

**The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want,  
You make me lie down in green pastures,  
You lead me beside still waters,  
You restore my soul (Psalm 23:1-3)**

**Be still and know that I am God. (Psalm 46:10)**

One of the hardest things about suffering is to let yourself admit that you are. Being still is the last thing we want to do. When we meet suffering and hurt in our lives, we often do two things:

We do everything we can to avoid it, dismiss it, walk around it, distract ourselves from it.

Or we ball it all up, pick it up, and throw it, “IT’S ALL YOUR FAULT!”

The ways too often I have dealt with suffering in my life. And it has not served me well.

It means that there is old, stuck, unmet hurt and suffering in my life that continues to cloud my heart, my seeing and being in the world.

That is true for me. That is true for all of us.

The hardest thing to do with suffering is to meet it. To let ourselves grieve. Hurt. Feel all that we feel in times like this.

To be church is to meet suffering head on. It is what it means to walk in this Way of Jesus. Only in going through the valley of suffering and death was Jesus able to overcome the grip of suffering and death. We have to sit with it, face it, feel it, get to know its name.

And while this is work that we need to do ourselves it is not work that we need to do alone. One of the ways I grieve is to isolate, cut myself off.

That has not served me well.

The 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm is a celebration of friendship and companionship:

**You lead me beside still waters...**

**You lead me in right paths...**

**You prepare a table before me...**

---

## **“Why Do Bad Things Happen?”**

The writer knows what it is to go through the valley of the shadow of suffering and death but does not do that alone.

Just the other day, I visited someone at their bedside. Someone who has just gone through a time of great suffering and pain. He asked, “Why did this have to happen? Why did it have to be this way?”

I asked him, “Where has God been?”

And he started to cry.

“Where is God? God is crying. I do not believe”, he said, “in a God who is removed and does not care. Where is God right now? I am crying. God is crying.”

Ted Kennedy’s son when he was 12 had his leg amputated. He was having to learn about walking in the world in a new way carrying this hurt. He and his dad went sledding and he couldn’t get up. He said, “I can’t do this.” And Ted helped his son up and put his arm around him and said, “We will get up the hill together.”

We are invited to share our suffering with a God who cares, suffers with us. To share our suffering with the trusted friends who can listen to the pearl that is your suffering and be and walk with you.

And why do we do all this hard work? Sit with our suffering? Share it?

Why do we do this hard, hard work?

Because finally we are a people of a great Hope.

When you are hurting, “Hope” is just a word. And we need people to hold Hope for us.

To say, “I am holding Hope for you.” And this is our Hope: What we thought was the end of the story is not the end of the story. Where we thought God is absent, God is indeed present. Even here in our suffering. There is another side to suffering but one that we only find by walking into and through it.

Pedro is doing his work of walking through his own suffering well. He is not defined by his suffering but has and is being already transformed by it.

He gives me great hope. We give each other great encouragement and hope when we do this hard and holy work of walking through our suffering and are no longer trapped in its grip. We are hope and life and faith among us. We make real the testimony that indeed there is a light that shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it. (John 1: 5)

In doing this, our work, of sitting with our suffering, sharing our suffering, hoping in our suffering, we are brought back again to speech, back to life:

**Yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow  
of death,  
I fear no evil.  
For you are with me.  
Your rod and your staff they comfort me.  
You prepare a table before me in the presence of my  
enemies;  
You anoint my head with oil,  
My cup overflows.  
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the  
days of my life,  
And I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.**

So may it be. Amen.

### **Sources**

In times of grief and suffering, I also look to the words of poets. I look to Mary Oliver (see [Thirst](#) - a book of poetry written after the death of her partner, among her other collections. Another favorite is [New and Selected Poems, Volume 1](#)) See also John O’Donohue’s book of blessings, [To Bless the Space Between Us](#) and his marvelous blessing for suffering.



---

## “What Happens When We Die?”

When we talk about death, we often first think about the death of our physical bodies. Something that will happen to us all. But we also know something about the fact that we are invited to die again and again throughout our lives.

Let me put it this way: We all know what it is to hold on. We hold on to memories, to relationships, to things we have, to our lives as we know them. We know how to do that well. We know how to hold in care, love, control, to keep things together.

What we all don't know how to do well is to let go. To let go of relationships that have ended, to let go of images of ourselves that we have outgrown, to let go of the lives we have had so that we may live into the new life that we are always being called into.

To let go is hard for all of us. As bad as things sometimes get we still cling to what we know because it is better than letting go into what we do not know.

I talked last week about Dave and me welcoming a Guatemalan teenager into our home. To welcome Pedro into our family we had to let go of, to die to what our life had been up to this point to make room for a new relationship in our lives and home. You know what that is like – and what hard work that is. To die is to open your hands – to let go of the old and make room for the new.

What happens when we let go is God's mysterious work, a work that we call Resurrection. It is that mystery that brings newness out of nothing. Life out of death. Hope out of despair. But the only way we get to experience resurrection is to let go into the possibility of Resurrection.

Which brings me to one of my favorite scripture readings. A story about what is promised when we die, let go, of the old and make room for the new. What I believe is promised to us in the dying we are invited to do again and again in this life is also what is promised when the time comes for our bodies to die.

It was some time after Jesus' death. Enough time had passed that the disciples knew that they not only felt grief, but also some relief that Jesus had died. It wasn't that they wanted him crucified, of course. But what a relief it must have been when the stone was rolled across the entrance to the tomb. Sealing everything shut so that they could go back to being fishermen, which they knew how to do, rather than fishers of men which they didn't.

*Jesus appeared again to the disciples, this time at the Tiberias Sea (the Sea of Galilee). This is how he did it: Simon Peter, Thomas (nicknamed "Twin"), Nathanael from Cana in Galilee, the brothers*

*Zebedee, and two other disciples were together. Simon Peter announced, "I'm going fishing."*

*The rest of them replied, "We're going with you." They went out and got in the boat. They caught nothing that night. When the sun came up, Jesus was standing on the beach, but they didn't recognize him. (John 21:1-4, The Message)*

This little group of disciples who have gone back to their old lives of fishing all have one thing in common: they have all expressed their doubts about Jesus and his Way. They have all shared that they haven't really understood what it is to follow him. They've all shared their doubts with him and Jesus has shared his own doubts about them and the depth of their commitment. This is the very group who needs to meet again the Jesus who calls them from their ways of death to Jesus' WAY of NEW LIFE.

So it's no wonder they didn't recognize Jesus, they didn't want to. They liked things the way they were. They knew how to fish. And they were relieved that they were no longer on this WAY of Jesus about changing them into something new that they did not know how to be. But like us, when we cling to what is old and dead, it is dark and empty. The fishermen have caught nothing that night.

*Jesus spoke to them: "Good morning! Did you catch anything for breakfast?" They answered, "No." He said, "Throw the net off the right side of the boat and see what happens." They did what he said. All of a sudden there were so many fish in it, they weren't strong enough to pull it in. (John 21:5-6)*

Jesus calls out to the disciples in this dark, empty place of death. And shows them what happens and what is promised when we die, when let go of the old.

*"Did you catch anything?", he asks.  
"No, we haven't."  
"Throw the net out on the other side."*

This is what happens when we die: When we die to our belief in scarcity, that there is not enough, we are met by an Abundance that is God that is beyond imagining.

*Then the disciple Jesus loved said to Peter, "It's the Master!"  
When Simon Peter realized that it was the Master, he threw on some clothes, for he was stripped for work, and dove into the sea. The other disciples came in by boat for they weren't far from land, a hundred yards or so, pulling along the net full of fish. When they got out of the boat, they saw a fire laid, with fish and bread cooking on it. (John 21:7-9, The Message)*

---

## “What Happens When We Die?”

Something in Peter wanted to go back to the life he had before Jesus called him to leave this lakeshore and follow him. And something in him wanted this new life and Way with Jesus. But, like us, he wondered, “Could it really be true? Could this new life really be possible for me?” Dripping wet and shivering he walked up the beach towards Jesus. And then he smelled the fire. And the smell took him right back there. To the last time he had smelled a charcoal fire. That horrible, terrible night. That night of terror when Jesus was arrested in the garden. That night he was so frightened and tried to hide himself away, keep himself away and stood around that fire and denied again and again and again that he knew this Jesus. That night of shame and guilt that has hung like an anchor around his soul ever since. But here – once more - is the smell of charcoal again - and Jesus is here.

This is what happens when we die: When we die to shame, regret, guilt, we are met by the Forgiveness that is God that is grace upon grace upon grace.

*Jesus said, "Bring some of the fish you've just caught." Simon Peter joined them and pulled the net to shore—153 big fish! And even with all those fish, the net didn't rip.*

*Jesus said, "Breakfast is ready." Not one of the disciples dared ask, "Who are you?" They knew it was the Master.*

*Jesus then took the bread and gave it to them. He did the same with the fish. (John 21:10-13)*

The sun breaks forth over the hills and the lake is filled with light.

Morning has come. The time of death has given way to the time for Life.

He invites them, “Breakfast is ready.” Despite his invitation, the disciples remain paralyzed.

And Jesus acts once more. Steps forward and comes to them, reaching out to them in their fear with outstretched hands offering fish and bread.

This is what happens when we die: when we die to the belief that we are not hungry, when we know that there are hungers and needs we cannot fill ourselves, we are fed by Jesus in community.

The story ends,

*“This was the third time Jesus had shown himself alive to the disciples, since being raised from the dead.” (John 21:14)*

Even though he had appeared to them twice before, here he is one more time, showing them, showing us, what he has always wanted us to believe: That his Way of Dying and Rising is a Way of Abundance, Forgiveness, Communion. But a way that can only open to us if we are willing to die. To let go of the lives that we have known so we that might live into the fullness of Life that is promised to us all.

\*\*\*\*\*

### **A Benediction**

May God bless you with discomfort  
at easy answers, half truths, and superficial  
relationships,  
so that you will leave deep in your heart.

May God bless you with tears to shed for those who  
suffer,  
so you will reach your hands to comfort them  
and change their pain into joy.

And may God bless you with foolishness  
to think that you can make a difference in the  
world,  
so you will do the things which others say cannot  
be done.

(Source unknown. Passed on to me from Jim White.)

\*\*\*\*\*

### **Sources**

I found the image of the disciples being relieved after Jesus' death so that they could go back to their old lives in a wonderful novel, Empire Falls, by Richard Russo.

I am thankful to these scholars as well:  
Becoming Children of God: John's Gospel of Radical Discipleship, Wes Howard-Brook, pp. 464-475

The Heart of Christianity: Rediscovering a Life of Faith, Marcus J. Borg, p. 111

---

## “Why bother with church?”

A Sermon Preached by Catherine Foote, David Anderson, Lisa Domke, and Peter Ilgenfritz  
University Congregational United Church of Christ  
Seattle, Washington                      September 13, 2009

---

This summer we have been taking a journey of faith, wondering as we have wandered, wondering about some of the most basic questions about what it means to be human and what it means to be people of faith. It has been a delightful series to preach, to listen to, and to talk about with the whole congregation. And today's theme is a fitting conclusion to the series, "Why bother with church?" The four of us have selected Bible texts and personal stories to tell as we consider this question.

---

### Catherine Foote

***But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into God's marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy. (1 Peter 2:9-10)***

Eight years ago, pretty much to the week, I met this congregation for the first time. We had begun a conversation about the possibility of me becoming one of your pastors. Since we did not know each other at all, there was much to talk about, much to learn. And that very first week, on my first trip here to Seattle as a ministerial candidate, there were some things about you that made me fall in love with you. Some of them you already know about- the wonderful search committee that was chaired by Nancy Hannah, that was the face of this congregation to me. The profound meeting I had with the leadership team that gave me a hint of what the magic of ministry here would be. But let me tell you about something not many of you may have heard about, something that completely captured me.

Because my first trip here was a neutral pulpit trip, and because the only folks I had met were folks from the search committee and the staff, after my trip up here that September, I asked for and received a tape of a worship service here. I wanted to experience the feel of worship here. I put the tape in my player and before it had played ten minutes, I knew I wanted to come here. Your opening hymn, that just built and built, your call to worship, led by a child, and the choir's response, singing alleluia in dialogue with the rest of the congregation- all of that, even on tape, filled me with the sense that God was present among you, and you recognized and rejoiced in that presence.

Why bother with church? Of course the question first of all demands a definition. What do we mean by "church"? And like every sermon in this series, the complete answer to that is way beyond what we could say in a few sentences. But I can point to a

few things. "Church" is more than something more that what we "go to" on Sunday mornings. "Church" is more than an institution, and more than another social action group. In my life, church is the community that shapes me, the community called into being by God and the community in which I encounter God. And church is the community where my worship of God becomes real, every week.

That is not to say that I don't worship God in other places, in other ways. Of course there are holy moments throughout my life where my soul cries out in praise. The birth of a lamb, a spectacular sunrise over the Cascades, reflected in the waters of Puget Sound, the view from the top of Half Dome in Yosemite. But this is the community where there is intention, every week, to encounter and to praise the Holy. I get to add my voice to all your voices, to sing God's praise. I get to listen together with all of you for God's word of forgiveness. I can sit in silence with this community, or be transported by the gift of music others share in an anthem or a response. I get fed, and blessed, and sent.

It is not irrelevant that the first Sunday I came up here, to preach in that "neutral pulpit," was also the first Sunday after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. The sanctuary where I preached that day was full, and I know this one was too. We needed the comfort of one another, yes. But at the heart of that comfort was being together in the presence of God. Singing together then, as we did this morning, "O God our help in ages past, our hope for years to come, our shelter from the stormy blast, and our eternal home."

Why bother with church? Because this community of faithful people helps me, as the Westminster Catechism puts it, to fulfill my chief aim- to worship God and enjoy God forever.

---

## “Why bother with church?”

David Anderson

***For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, not things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. Romans 8:38-39***

About 11 years ago, my partner Tim Devine and I began our life together. In our home we asked God to bless our home and our lives, and asked two friends to celebrate with us. A year later, through a process of discernment we realized that our faith called us to honor God and ask God's blessing on our lives and love in more public way and in the context of worship. We chose a minister, a UCC pastor and friend of us both, reserved a date at the church she served, and began planning for this joyful day of love, promise, faith and hope.

One of the scriptures we chose was this one from Romans. Many know it as a common one for funerals or memorial services: times of pain and loss. Yet, for us it is also an affirmation for times of joy: God is indeed always with us. It can be easy to forget that when things are going well, when life is good and prayers feel answered, but I believe God is absolutely with us, even when we think we have it all together.

Our planning for our service went well: counseling sessions, the worship planning and logistics, details and invitations. The UCC church was Open and Affirming, but had never had a same-gender commitment service. Word of our impending service leaked out, made it to a local neighborhood paper, and created a flurry in the congregation. Six weeks before our date, at the beginning of worship, a group stood up to announce that they had collected enough signatures to call a special congregational meeting with a goal of overturning their Open and Affirming policy and denying the possibility of having any commitment services, including ours.

A process of conversation and discernment began in the congregation, with a vote scheduled for two weeks before our date. It was challenging and exhausting: for our pastor and friend, for the Open and Affirming Committee at that church, for the congregation, and yes for us. Yet ... nothing can separate us from the love of God!

We moved through the process of planning and preparing for our service, and the congregation went through its process as well. Some difficult things were said. Our lives and commitment to our faith

and the church were noted. It was quite a time. We arranged for a back-up site and an implementation plan if we needed to change the setting. And we tried hard to hold on to Paul's reminder: nothing separates us from the love of God...

The day of the congregational vote came, and the Open and Affirming Covenant was overwhelmingly affirmed, commitment services specifically endorsed, and the congregation developed a fuller sense of itself and its ministry. Ultimately it wasn't about us; it was about the congregation's understanding of God's call to it. It was about being community, being vulnerable, growing, articulating doubts and fears, and together moving further into lives of grace and hope.

So why bother? Why bother with church? Because I believe that God is indeed present in the community when we are open to God's movement. I believe God calls us to community: of friends and family, and a community of faith that can challenge, strengthen, support and uphold each other, and reach out to a world that needs to know of a way of love and peace as standards for relationship and action.

The church together can show God's presence, God's power, God's grace. The church, the community of believers, seekers and doubters, can show God's amazing redemptive ways in the walk together, and then in the sending out so that we each can do likewise with those outside our walls, or outside this sanctuary.

The church where Tim and I had our commitment service ten years ago celebrated that event with us in amazing ways. We were joyful, relieved and exhausted. Nothing could separate us from the love of God, not the joy of that day, not the needed work of healing in that congregation, not the blessed ordinariness of days ahead.

The church was, and is, there –here – by the grace of God. Oh God remind us of the powerful testimony to your love, your redemptive grace, your hope. May we know of your presence in this community of faith and growth, sending us in and out with the assurance that indeed nothing can separate us from your love.

Amen.

---

**“Why bother with church?”**

**Lisa Domke**

***Once Jesus was asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God was coming, and he answered, “The kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed; nor will they say, ‘Look, here it is!’ or ‘There it is!’ for, in fact, the kingdom of God is among you. Luke 17:20-21***

Why bother with church?

Because at its best, church (not the building, but Christian community) shows us what the Kingdom of God is all about. And church is where we learn together to live into the reality of that Kingdom.

Jesus talks over and over again about “The Kingdom of God.”

Many of us no longer are comfortable with the masculine, Imperialist and Dominionist connotations of the phrase “Kingdom of God” and lots of people have been proposing alternatives.

Among them: God’s Dream for the World, The Peaceable Kingdom (or Moltmann’s Peacemaking Kingdom), the Beloved Community, the Network of God, God’s Love Revolution.

Whatever words we use, the central thrust of Jesus’ life and message was proclaiming this “Kingdom of God.” Jesus said it had come. He said it was here, within us, among us. So I’ve spent a fair amount of time over the past few years trying to figure out what the heck that means, and how I can participate in that Way of Jesus.

Here’s what I have discovered. To walk in the way of Jesus, you need community. And it is in Christian community – in the Church -- that I am learning how to walk in the Way.

I, the church I learn about internal spiritual transformation and I learn about practical acts of kindness in the world. I gain the strength I need to live in a way that is counter-cultural and strange. I find the courage to stand against injustice and love in the hard places.

I cannot do this on my own...and I don’t want to!  
We are made for community.

I find it here, in this specific church and out there in the Church writ large.

Jesus talked about the Kingdom of God in parables, so I will, too. Here are my personal stories/parables of the Kingdom:

The Kingdom of God is like the family who donated money so I could go on the young adult retreat in college, like the bag of groceries that showed up when I really needed it, like the old keyboard someone gave me that let me play and sing again.

The Kingdom of God is like the time I watched Catherine Foote go into a room full of conservative Christian men—completely ignoring their lack of support for her as a pastor and as a person—in order to out to reach out, find connections and offer them her own loving acceptance.

The Kingdom of God looks like the table in our narthex, full of home-grown produce, feeding us and the hungry in our community; like the team of people who went to march in the Pride parade; like our youth building houses, serving others.

The Kingdom of God is UCUC offering a temporary home for Nickelsville, mourning when a member of that community dies, and continuing to work with them to search for a permanent home.

This is where I learn it.

The church is where I see the Love of God enfleshed. Church is where we all begin to take risks and live into the dangerous Love Revolution of God

---

## “Why bother with church?”

Peter Ilgenfritz

***Passing along the beach of Lake Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew net-fishing. Fishing was their regular work. Jesus said to them, “Come with me. I’ll make a new kind of fishermen out of you. I’ll show you how to catch men and women instead of perch and bass. They didn’t ask questions. They dropped their nets and followed. Mark 1:16-17, The Message***

There’s a big part of me that doesn’t want to become a new kind of anything. I come by it honestly.

- My parents go to church in a town in central New Hampshire named after my great, great, great, great, great, great... grandfather.
- After 350 years, most of my relatives haven’t moved more than fifty miles away.
- Until it was stolen last year, I rode a 1980 Univega bike to church with panniers that I got in 10th grade.
- When I’m not biking, I drive a 1991 Honda Accord
- And it really is true, I don’t own a cell phone.

There is something old in me that doesn’t like change.

Several years ago, when the church was going through a lot of change, David Anderson announced at a staff meeting that we were getting new mailboxes. Suddenly, someone was banging on the table and yelling, “No more change! No more change!” I looked up. Everyone was looking at me.

It’s what has often BOTHERED me about the church - it is full of CHANGE.

The problem is Jesus – he never can leave well enough alone. He’s always calling, prodding, challenging us to change our lives. It’s this LOVE business he’s always calling us back to – to this terrifying work of LOVE that means changed relationships, changed lives.

if it wasn’t for you, Jesus, I don’t know if I would have even opened that email a couple of weeks ago about Pedro, a Guatemalan teenager in need of a home. And it was only because of you, church, that I could say “yes” to opening our lives and inviting Pedro in.

Why bother with church?

I’ll tell you why: Because when Jesus calls me into CHANGE and to where I often fear to go, it is the CHURCH that goes with me when I ask it to and allows me to say “yes” to walking into my fear.

Why church?

- Because of Graham who lent Pedro his bike.
- Hillary and Ed who help figure out how he can get on a soccer team.
- Lisa and Bob who offer suggestions for support.
- Mary and Keith who listen to the stories.
- Tina who I can call and say, “HELP!”
- Lynn who says, “I’ve been thinking about you a lot. You are in my prayers.”
- Who do that not to get their names in a sermon, but because it is what CHURCH at its best does – walks with us into the fear and new that are our lives.













If truth be told, I really don’t want to get stuck in the OLD - which is also old resentments, old regrets, old fears, old stories.

I really do want to follow you, Jesus, and this call to LOVE you have planted in my heart. But I’m scared. Terrified of this LOVING that is so intimate, so real, so vulnerable. I don’t do it perfectly. I make mistakes.

So, I need, you church, I need you Jesus. I need the LIFE FORCE of your blood, coursing through me, Jesus. Not blood shed for me because of my sin, but blood that shows me how to step into fear and say YES to where LOVE is calling my name.

## Ordinary Time Banners

Fold the page vertically to see the actual banner arrangement. Banner brochures in color are in the Narthex Kiosk.

 <p><b>God's Covenant</b> Genesis 9:8-17</p>	 <p><b>God's World</b> Acts 3:25-26 Psalm 8</p>	 <p><b>Witnessing Anywhere</b> Micah 6:8 Luke 9:2 Luke 24:45-53 Luke 8:1 Matthew 10:42-11:16</p>	 <p><b>Gathering Together</b> John 17:20-26 Acts 10:28-48 Acts 17:26-28</p>
 <p><b>God's Promise</b> Genesis 17:1-8 Genesis 22:15-19</p>	 <p><b>God's Supper</b> 1 Corinthians 10:15-16 1 Corinthians 11:23-25 John 4:1-15</p>	 <p><b>Filling the Empty</b> Matthew 14:13-21 Luke 5:22-26 Romans 15:7-13</p>	 <p><b>Sowing Peace</b> Isiah 22:4 1 Corinthians 3:5-9</p>
 <p><b>God's Commandments</b> Deuteronomy 5:1-22 Deuteronomy 6:6-17</p>	 <p><b>God's Gift</b> Luke 1:67-79 Luke 2:47, 48-52</p>	 <p><b>Serving Others</b> John 13:34-35 John 14:12-14 John 20:24-30 John 21:15-19</p>	 <p><b>Breaking Bonds</b> Luke 4:18-19 John 8:31-32 Acts 12:6-11</p>

Covenants – The Banners you see as you enter the sanctuary are the covenants that God has made, and continues to make, with us.

Holy Spirit – The Banners you see as you leave the sanctuary are examples of how the Holy Spirit (circle) acts through us.