

Good beautiful day in Maine!

We celebrated the lives of Roger Sandler, Ann McFarland and Abigail Hood who celebrated birthdays last week!

I visited with Geri Kelsey and Janet Claar at Coves Edge. Janet is going home tomorrow!

The Lent Study Group continues to meet reflecting on ourselves and our church. The hope is that through learning who we are as a church, a natural mission will evolve. And that was the aim of Sunday morning's message.

Committees involved with the topics of the Survey are meeting this week and next. The goal is for reports to be ready to present March 15.

The new Conference Minister, Deborah Blood, is holding meetings around the state to get to know clergy. I was able to attend last week's meeting in Wiscasset. She is a dynamic new leader working hard to 'make us all one' focused on the future of the Church.

GOSPEL READING Luke 13:1-9-

MESSAGE

Pastor Beth Hood

This has been a tough week for many communities in our country. TORNADOS struck across our Midwest causing incredible damage, injury, and death.

The town of Hesston, Kansas, suffered another senseless shooting spree, killing 6 people and wounding many others.

As we compile the results of the survey, we are working on defining our mission, something that churches wrestle with throughout their life.

If we were waking up in Waverly, Virginia, or Hesston, Kansas our marching orders would be crystal clear.

Is the message less clear in the Bible?

The political violence of Pilate resulting in the blood of Galileans and a natural disaster that destroys buildings and the people beneath them seem distant.

Yet, the symbolic nature of these events becomes real in our news every day!

Listen to the passage from Luke again. *At that very time there were some present who told us about the Christians whose blood ISIS had mingled with their sacrifices. I ask you, 'Do you think that because these Christians suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Christians? Or those people of Nepal who nearly a year ago were killed when the tectonic plates shifted beneath their feet-do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Nepal?'*

'No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did.'

Jesus' words, as timely today as they were 2000 years ago.

Why do the innocent suffer? Why did this tragedy happen to these people? Is it just random death and destruction?

Jesus moves those 'why' questions from a focus on those individual victims to a focus on society and how it works.

Here's the difficulty: Life is going on as expected one moment and in the next everything is thoroughly disrupted.

Recovery from disaster includes a search for answers and 'who' is to blame.

In a 'blame-the-victim society, Jesus reverses the responsibility to social systems that have failed on a Christian level. "Unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did," Jesus tells the disciples and us.

In Jesus' world, repentance requires turning and change into a path of right relationship with God and with one another.

Repentance is Jesus' response because although the cause of the suffering is not the main point for God, the reality of those without power are already the most vulnerable to political violence or natural disaster. People who live on the margins of society already struggle with multiple layers of hardship to which the crisis at hand is added.

In this morning's reading Jesus switches from historian to story-teller to communicate the grace in repentance. He refers to the consultation between the master and the gardener regarding the fig tree. In Matthew's and Mark's accounts, this story is referred to as the 'cursing of the fig tree.'

Luke uses it to reinforce the grace in repentance. In all accounts, the fig tree is held accountable for not producing good fruit as is its purpose.

In Luke, the master is ready to cut it down and start over until the gardener pleads for another chance. The request is not just one more year to let things ride, but one in which the gardener will fertilize and work with the soil so the tree will produce the abundance intended for itself and for the vineyard.

Dear friends, our vineyard might be this church. It might be the community of South Bristol or the Pemaquid Peninsula. It might be the nation or the world.

We, you and I, are meant to be the fertilizer, to work the soil.

What does that look like?

Simply helping those who already live on the margins of our society. It is what Jesus calls us to do.

How do we, at Union Church, live up to that charge?

We live in a culture of self-determination and find it difficult to admit our powerlessness in the face of the relentless seductions and messages of our culture. Maybe the point of Lent is for us to adjust our sights, and understand in our community the need for justice, mercy, peace, healing, acceptance, love. For ourselves, and for all of God's children in South Bristol.

The heroin epidemic is not just a story on the news, it is in our neighborhoods. There are neighbors living in deplorable conditions-no heat, frozen pipes. The number of snack packs has risen from five to twelve in our small South Bristol School. I am sure each one of you could tell me a story of someone on the margins. Many of you would not tell me how you have helped. How much more can we do together?

If this church prominently set at the top of the hill does not step up to the challenges, who will? It is, after all, a part of our proud heritage of helping our neighbors in good times and bad times.

As we continue to discuss our mission going forward, let's redouble our efforts once more to seek out those who need our help most. Their needs, unfortunately, are so very real!