

Another hot, but gorgeous day in Maine!

ANNUAL MEETING is this Sunday. Reports are available in the church narthex. In addition to all the other business, we will be voting on the Open and Affirming Covenant statement offered by the ONA Committee:

"Because we affirm the face of God equally in all creation, and embrace the inclusive, unconditional love of Jesus Christ, we, therefore, welcome persons of every gender; sexual orientation; gender identity and expression; age; race; nationality; economic and social standing; religion and faith; marital status and family structure. We invite them to join and participate in the life, leadership, sacraments, ministry and mission of the Union Congregational Church of South Bristol UCC."

I understand that in the past, the Annual Meeting has taken place at a 'working lunch' in the Parish Hall. It has been suggested that we return to that and I like the idea. We will provide coffee and lemonade. If you are able, please bring something to share.

Please hold Helene Sorenson in your prayers.

The last three weeks sermons fit neatly together. The story of Mary and Martha placed in the middle shows the tension between action/good works, loving God and neighbor demonstrated in the story of the Good Samaritan and a life of prayer and being open to God's will in Luke's accounting of Jesus teaching the disciples to pray.

July 10:

Amos 7:7-17

Colossians 1:1-14

Luke 10:25-37

MESSAGE                      The Circle of Concern      Pastor Beth Hood

The road to Jericho doesn't run through comfortable, familiar territory. Instead, travelers there find themselves on dangerous ground, uncertain and often, alone. Much better to stay home in Jerusalem, with one's own kind, surrounded by the temple and the walls of the city and the institutions and community that provide what's needed, including a safety net if anything goes wrong. At home, we know who we are: we are 'somebody' in the web of relationships that we've wrapped around ourselves, and that identity gives us a lot of comfort and assurance.

In the reading from LUKE, we hear again the familiar story of the Good Samaritan, which has lost the "shock value" as it would have in Jesus' time. A "good Samaritan"? For Jews of Jesus' time, this was an appalling conflict in terms. Samaritans were a despised people. While they shared a common heritage with the Jews, a number of legal and religious disputes over ritual purity laws and the appropriate location of the Temple rendered them bitter enemies. To make such a person the hero of a story (instead of the priest or Levite) would have been difficult to hear.

When Jesus began his, "A priest, a Levite and a.... walked into a bar", you can bet his audience thought surely the third person, the hero of the story would be one of 'them', an Israelite.

The familiar story of the good Samaritan sounds a wake-up call to a culture characterized by selfishness, materialism and the survival of the fittest.

Jesus reminds would-be disciples that Christ-centered compassion extends beyond one's comfort zone and requires a degree of risk. For Christians, the circle of concern should include all people.

The legal expert knew the answer to the question he asked of Jesus, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" He knew the law. He knew that he had to love God with his entire being, and love his neighbor as himself.

But like a child who only wants to fulfill the minimal requirement of his chore, he sought to validate his interpretation. He wanted to justify the number of people he was comfortable with in his circle of concern.

But Jesus shattered that sense of restricted love by telling of the Samaritan's inclusive compassion.

The Samaritan did not know the victim: his nationality, his occupation, his income, his religion, his education or his diseases. He merely saw someone in need, took pity on him, and provided for his restoration.

The first step in broadening your circle of concern is to view people, all people with the eyes of Christ; to see them as human beings in need. Not only when someone is brutally victimized, but also when they are lonely, alienated, or hurting on the inside.

Recognizing a person in need is not enough. One must do something about it.

How many of you remember the story of Kitty Genovese? In 1964, a 28-year-old woman named Kitty Genovese was raped and killed in two separate late-night attacks near her home in Kew Gardens, Queens. At least 38 people had seen the attacks or heard Kitty scream, but no one intervened. And only one woman called the police. How many of those people do you suppose considered themselves Christians?

In April 2010, a homeless man named Hugo Alfredo Tale-Yax died on a street after being stabbed while intervening in an argument. A number of people walked by him as he lay dying on the street. One even took a picture. How many of them went to church Sunday?

Unfortunately, many Christians pattern their behavior after the priest and the Levite. They 'practice' religion when it is convenient, sitting in their pew on a Sunday morning. But when Monday comes they neglect obvious needs and pass by on the other side.

Jesus included the cost of compassion in his answer. The Samaritan relinquished his time, medicine, transportation, and money as well as the promised follow-up visit to reimburse the innkeeper.

In addition, the Samaritan risked his reputation (religious defilement) by touching a bloody body; his safety, because it could have been a trap or the robbers might still have been in the area; and his health, because the man might have had a contagious disease. Despite the price, the Samaritan used his personal resources to provide total restoration without expecting anything in return.

The Samaritan, unencumbered by shoulds and oughts and rational arguments, sees only a human being in need and responds to that need. This is the real message – the simple message (although not an easy message) of the gospel.

There is a part of the story that is not often examined. Last week I ended with a quote from C.S. Lewis in his last book of the Narnia story. "Love England as God loves England." Love America as God loves America.

The law that the lawyer knew was "love your neighbor as yourself." Love your neighbor as God loves you. That opens the portal to all that is good and beautiful.

So, the part of the story not often told is that the Samaritan loved himself. The Samaritan represents love of self and neighbor, with love of God understood in the parable.

The Samaritan did not submerge himself in caring for the beaten man. The Samaritan finished his journey while meeting the need of a wounded and marginal person. The Samaritan did not give everything away; he did not injure, hurt or neglect himself. He loved himself and he loved his neighbor. He relied on community in the inn and the innkeeper.

And this is the part I hope many of you will take away this morning. In genuine caretaking the caretaker is not submerged. You cannot slake another's thirst from an empty cup.

The loved self is a self in relation. We have absolute value because we have been created to receive God's presence. Only then can we truly be open to others.

July 17

Amos 8:1-12

Colossians 1:15-28

Luke 10:38-42

MESSAGE

Take Time Pastor Beth Hood

This morning's reading from Luke could not have been more timely. Last Sunday Jack heard for the first time with all of you my invitation to come to our house for coffee this morning. When we got home, he looked around, looked at me and pretty much asked me if I was out of my mind. Ever the optimist, and knowing that I need a deadline to accomplish things, I assured him that all would be well.

But as I moved from room to room through the week and through boxes that kept multiplying, there were several times I thought he was right and that I should send out an email postponing coffee hour at our new home.

On the surface, the story of Mary and Martha tells us that the preparation, the busyness is not what's important. It is the fellowship and that became my mantra through the week.

But there is much more to this morning's readings. The theme of hospitality binds all our readings together.

Speaking to the social elite, who believe their own live and welfare are the sole focus of life, Amos describes a community

where the wealthy and powerful make life unlivable for the powerless. Amos warns of a time when the Guest will also find life in their midst unlivable.

In Colossians, Jesus Christ is described as the 'firstborn' of all creation-the one who establishes in the faith and in his body those who are estranged from God.

Luke tells the story of Martha, who welcomes Jesus into her home, but then does not find time to join the Guest.

As happens so often in life, the most important part of the story of Mary and Martha may not be the story as much as its placement.

This morning's Gospel reading follows last week's story of the Good Samaritan which ends with Jesus' words, "Go and do likewise." Next week the reading will be about Jesus teaching the disciples to pray.

Martha, the host, has busied herself with caring for her guest, and she exemplifies ideal hospitality. She represent the vita active, the active life.

Mary, on the other hand, represents vita contemplative, the contemplative life. She sits at the feet of Jesus as a student and listens to him teach.

The language and setting of the story of Mary and Martha are reminiscent of the social custom of ancient hospitality, generally understood, in the ancient world, to refer to kindness shown to strangers.

The constant social contest in ancient hospitality scenes appears to be travel. Hospitality was a highly valued and presumable widely practiced custom among pagans, Jews and Christians. Hosts were expected to provide food, shelter, amenities, and protection to these traveling strangers, who sometimes turned out to be gods incognito.

Luke's stories provide a solid foundation for Christian habits and practices both within the community (we have unlimited responsibilities to fellow believers) and with the world (we are called to provide Christian hospitality to those unlike us in nationality, faith, or ethnicity and assistance to those in immediate crisis.)

Christians are called to extend hospitality both as hosts and guests, and to fellow believers and non-believers alike. Such hospitality calls for personal and intimate engagement in a way that an insipid value such as 'tolerance' does not.

We are not called simply to 'tolerate' or 'endure' those not like us. The ancient 'Christian virtue' of hospitality demands that we engage and interact with the Other, whether we are guest or host.

I can personally and wholeheartedly attest to the warmth of welcome here in Union Church and South Bristol. And I saw it on display again yesterday at Dirk and Linda's annual lobster bake. It was a diverse crowd all together savoring the glory of God's creation, food and fellowship. I daresay many new friendships are made every year at that gathering.

In two weeks at our Annual Meeting, we will vote on the authenticity of that welcome. I have heard the sentiments that 'we

are welcoming', 'we don't need to put it to a vote', 'we don't need to have a special welcome'. I heard those same thoughts in Phippsburg and I am hard put to argue with them.

But for some, that welcome does have to be explicit. I have also heard from families looking for a new church who chose their church home because of a statement of inclusion. I became very close to a man, a Franco American, Catholic all his life. He has two children who are gay. In a gutwrenching decision he left the Church that had been his home his whole life. But he could not stay in a church that did not also welcome his children as God's children.

In the same class, I became good friends with a man who was a minister. When he could no longer deny who he was, he was not only kicked out of his pulpit, but his church and his family.

I know that both of those churches and too many more like them describe themselves as 'welcoming'. LGBT Christians have learned from painful experience that a vague welcome often doesn't include them and their families.

If our Open and Affirming covenant is affirmed in the vote at our Annual Meeting, it is more than a statement, policy, declaration or amendment to our by-laws. A covenant is an act of faith, a solemn promise to God in response to God's holy Word. "I will make my covenant between me and you."

In the story of Martha and Mary, Jesus reminds us that actions—even acts of Christian hospitality and charity—in order to be sustained, always follow being; what we do flows naturally from who we are as his disciples.

July 24:

Hosea 1:2-10

Colossians 1:15-28

Luke 11:1-13

MESSAGE

Trust God Pastor Beth Hood

Jesus and his disciples are on the road to Jerusalem, where we know Jesus will face suffering and death. He has been teaching them and us along the way. The lessons of discipleship have been coming one after another. We've learned the importance of love for God and neighbor, even those we'd rather not call our neighbor and, in the story of Mary and Martha, we learned the importance of not just listening to, but doing, the Word of God.

What is this week's passage teaching the disciples, that means us too, about what it means to follow Jesus?

The disciples were men and women of faith who had certainly been taught to pray. But did you ever think you knew how to do something, until you saw someone do it so much better?

I have certainly found myself in that situation in various classes and meetings. Someone will open with a prayer and I'll think, "Gosh, I've got to remember that!"

In the days of Jesus journey, you would be known by the prayer that was distinctive to your group, gathered around the

teacher you followed.

Throughout the centuries, in many different places and cultures and many different faiths, spiritual teachers mostly teach 'how', and many people come to them not so much for answers but for ways to practice their faith so that they can have the same peace, strength, and wisdom as their teacher.

Those disciples saw the strength, the power, the wisdom of God in Jesus, and they wanted to be strong, and full of power, and wise. When they watched Jesus at prayer, and saw that everything he did and said reflected his prayer life, they longed to go deeper into the life of the Spirit that filled him.

And Jesus responded with a short prayer that has indeed become the prayer that marks us, identifies and unifies us as Christians.

Savhana called me earlier this week feeling kind of lost and said, "Nana, I said prayers. I even said the 'hallowed be thy name.' I can't believe I know that by heart!"

There are people from many faith backgrounds, some with no religious tradition at all, in the UCC. To most, if not all of us, the prayer that Jesus taught his disciples is something familiar, something we share in common. It's amazing and very touching how many people suffering from strokes or memory loss are able to join in when the Lord's Prayer is begun, however slowly, and recite each word.

Jesus models prayer as an intimate conversation with God. There are many references in Luke's Gospel to Jesus at prayer. We have the impression that he listened just as much as he spoke. He tells his disciples-and that includes us-that we should talk with God as we would to a loving parent, a parent who listens to us, cares for us, forgives us, provides for us, protects us.

Jesus brings the reality of God's love home to us in terms we can understand, the language of everyday relationships.

And unlike Matthew who promises good things today (semra), Luke's account promises the Holy Spirit hemera or day by day, giving an ongoing feel to this particular request. Luke's way of making the request for bread go on and on and on adds to the sense that the disciples in asking Jesus teach them how to pray, were doing more than seeking a litany of requests of a catalogue of key phrases. They were asking him to teach them how to turn the entirety of their lives into an extended form of praying as they saw his to be.

Luke's promise of the Holy Spirit is key to understanding the passage as a whole. The Holy Spirit and a sense of call always seem to go together.

This prayer Jesus gave us is not just a comforting, private little prayer to get us through tough times and personal crises. This is the prayer of the community, a community that was promised the Holy Spirit. Indeed, they did not become the church until the Holy Spirit came upon them.

And with the Holy Spirit, we are called. We are called by the God who loves us and calls us by name, who listens to our

prayers, as in community we pray, "Give us this day our daily bread." Not just me, but all of us. Not today, but day by day by day. This God gives us the Holy Spirit to depend on and draw strength from.

Spending time with God in prayer, in regular intimate conversation, and opening ourselves to the Holy Spirit, will lead us on the way of compassion, and it will lead us to transformation as a community. Because this prayer is the prayer of community, it reminds us, challenges us, urges and inspires us as a community not only to form this prayer with our lips but to be formed ourselves by this prayer, formed and shaped into a community of compassion and justice that makes sure that all of God's children have 'their daily bread.' The prayer calls us to join in the building of God's kingdom not up in heaven, but here, on earth, a reign of justice, healing, mercy, and love.

Even when we pray the Lord's Prayer, alone in our room, there are other Christians in other places, praying the same prayer, forming the same prayer in their hearts and on their lips, in many different languages, and all of us being formed and transformed by it. In those moments, we are one.