

St. Paul's Congregational Church
Ephesians 3:14-21; John 6:1-21, Proper 12B
July 29, 2018
God's Abundant Presence
Rev. Cynthia F. Reynolds

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in Thy Sight, Oh Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Vacations are a time for rest, recharging, and recreation – a break from the routine of our daily lives – a good thing! It was good to have the time to work in my garden, trim branches, do a lot of the never ending weeding – trying hard to avoid the poison ivy in one spot – that too is thriving with all the rain we've had. My cucumber and cherry tomato plants are producing nicely – I do have competition with the squirrels for the tomatoes – but I think I've eaten more than they have this year. There are blossoms on my green beans – soon I'll be picking them and enjoying them so much.

And in the oppressive heat of early July I actually finished knitting 2 Christmas presents – afghans - and started a third – mixed in with all of this were day trips, some cleaning at home, time with friends – and believe it or not, actually sleeping late some days. But I also watched entirely too much of the news and found myself so incredibly sad, so frustrated and even angry at the vitriol, the way we talk to and about each other, the way we treat each other – the corruption, self-centeredness around us: and the feeling of despair, and even fear that would come over me. But also to be moved deeply by what so many social agencies including a sister UCC church are doing to help, especially at the border, serving children and families who are suffering so.

Then during the last week I was off I began my re-entry process by coming over here to help at the Food Distribution – I love doing that so much – it really does ground me back into the reason the church exists – to feed our neighbors, to feed ourselves – with food for the body and with food for the soul. We served nearly 60 families that day – a larger than usual number – and I must tell you, our elevator was a gift to many who came. And to talk with our guests, to hear their stories, to interact with the children, to give and receive hugs, to share tears and smiles – I went home feeling so blessed, so inspired, so humbled to be able to be a part of our radical hospitality – food for the body and for the soul. This is such a good thing we are doing here. What an incredible opportunity we have been offered!

So my time at the Food Bank capped off a great vacation – and I'm back energized – and excited about our upcoming year long celebration of 125 years of ministry! It has been a joy to work with Shelley on the design of a new banner to go outside – just wait until you see it! I printed a picture from my computer yesterday and will have it at coffee hour. And we brainstormed other publicity ideas and some special events for children and families in the early fall – we already have some dates set as you heard earlier in this service. St. Paul's light is shining! And you can all be a part of this! Our glass is half filled – not half empty! Exciting and inspiring times ahead!

Our scriptures today underscore all this - first, Paul's letter to the little struggling church in Ephesus gives us such hope. It's true that churches struggle in every age and in every place – and their issues and challenges are often very similar, even in very different times and very different circumstances. The Biblical scholars make this clear: empire, in one form or another; the surrounding culture, with its many and powerful

messages; our drive to divide and be divided; and the questioning human spirit, longing to understand our lives, both individually and communally – doesn't that sound familiar? – but Paul's beautiful words, the poetry of them, are such an uplifting message of both meaning and hope because it fixes us firmly on the sure foundation of God's own purposes and love.

I so often hear folks who describe themselves as "spiritual but not religious" speak of their deep longing to find a place and a community of worship where they feel both deeply moved and a sense of belonging. Interestingly, these are people who lead lives that have many marks of discipleship: healing the sick and broken, working for justice, sharing generously, forgiving and seeking reconciliation and peace. But they long for a spiritual community where they can sense, with others, God's presence in quiet moments in community, in ritual, in music, in worship. We just might be surprised by how many "Spiritual But Not Religious" folks are actually hungry for traditional ritual and liturgy: Barbara Brown Taylor is one of many writers who draw our attention to our worship life and to our spiritual hunger: in her sermon, "He Who Fills All in All" she wonders if we are offering the spiritually hungry "a place where they may sense the presence of God, among people who show some sign of having been changed by that presence."

Now, there's a powerful statement – how do we, how can we live that out here at St. Paul's? Have we been changed by God's presence here? What vibes are we giving off?

Anthony Robinson is one of the still speaking writers who has written powerfully about evangelism – that's a word that makes some people nervous – but it doesn't have to! He says, "People want to experience the divine, the sacred, the holy. They are dying for want of grace, wonder,

mystery, and not for want of by-laws, committees, and sign-up lists. At least they don't want those things instead of God."

Grace, wonder, mystery: how do we include that in our times of reflection and prayer? Maybe with images like the dramatic photographs of the universe returned to us by our long-distance spacecraft, which may inspire awe at times as effectively as our words and music and sanctuaries. Maybe use of the visual and the imagination might make it a bit easier to ponder God's grand plan for all things. And maybe we seem to spend far more time talking about the rules, the past, than raising the quality of our time with God together, in worship, and on our own, in prayer-time. We spend a lot of energy wondering and worrying about the future of St. Paul's, don't we – maybe this year of anniversary celebration will lead us to return to a base camp where we can renew our spirits, where we can tap into the deep roots of our tradition, the ancient songs of praise and lament, the blessings that we have received and will share with those who come after us. We have, after all, been brought together not only to work but to pray and praise, to remember and remind, to celebrate and to hope as well. We can draw on that time together and find the courage to hope, as the Letter to the Ephesians says this morning, for "far more than all we can ask or imagine".

Inspiring words, aren't they. Let's own them! Let's share them!

And that brings us to the gospel story – the feeding of the multitudes according to John. And the story of Jesus walking on water. This is a familiar story for sure – but it's in John's version though, that when the disciples ask the question of how they can feed all these people, Jesus turns to them and says, "You give them something to eat." And Jesus is telling us the same thing: you give them something to eat. The feeding of the 5,000 is a parable about what we are called to do and who we are called to be. If we

are going to follow Jesus, at some point, he's going to turn to us and say: You give them something to eat. And it matters how we respond to his command.

This isn't about magic: this is about how we see the world, and what we do with what we already have. In a way, the magic has already happened: God has already given us a world out of nothing, already provided sun and earth and water and seeds—how much more magic do we need? God provides something out of nothing.

Andrew points out, all they can find is five barley loaves and two fish belonging to a boy in the crowd. But then, Jesus gets them to see what's there with new eyes. The disciples are coming from a place of fear, of scarcity: there will never be enough! Six month's wages would not buy enough bread to feed them! What Jesus showed them, shows us is that, whatever we have, whatever God has already given us, is always enough. If we decide to share. If we let go of our fear and stop holding onto to what's "ours" so tightly. If we can do those things, we absolutely have enough bread to feed the whole world.

If we here can do those things, we absolutely have a ministry here that can continue for another 125 years and beyond! Again, we're reminded of the Ephesians passage that promises God's power to "accomplish far more than all we can ask or imagine."

Jesus wants to give us what we don't even realize we need, at least not consciously; he knows what we need, deep down in our innermost, authentic human selves and in our life together as church. Have we actually asked for too little, when God can give us so much more? Can we see beyond our old traditions? Our immediate wants? Our expectations? How else will we begin to see where God is leading us?

John's gospel teaches us about applying the power of God to the life of the congregation, our expectations for our shared life, and the need for those expectations to be transformed. What hope do we have in spite of perceived shortage and scarcity? Do we worry about whether we are being true to the gospel, speaking courageously, and acting boldly on behalf of all those who suffer, or are we worried about whether our church will be able to pay its bills? Does the temptation to concentrate on survival and maintenance distract us from our true mission to be bread for the world?

And we do get worried, concerned, even scared. There are storms on the water. Maybe one of our challenges is to identify what it is we're afraid of.

Because fear keeps us stuck. Fear makes us feel like we're sinking – sinking in debt, sinking in despair, sinking in loss of what was.

Fear makes us grab for the wrong things to protect and save us – fear makes us miss the hand that is held out to us, telling us not to fear, not to struggle, but to recognize that God is God, and we are not, and that we can float, in trust, on top of the water, resting on the buoyancy of God. Do we hear Jesus saying to us as individuals and church, "Do not be afraid." Jesus comes out to meet the disciples when they are, where we are: in over their heads, right in the midst of the storm that rocks their boat, and he leads them to the safety of the shore. Jesus is with us too. We can count on that.

Our Acting Conference Minister, Roddy Dunderson wrote in his article this week, "I want you to feel the deep seated insistence from Jesus, "Behold, I make all things new." It is the promise at the end of scripture, but, it is foreshadowed in the story of slaves who escape their captors to build a new community."

He continues, “Friends, there is something more wonderful still to break forth in this world. So, your church isn’t what it used to be. The past is gone and it is not coming back.

“But, God is still with us.

“Let us go to church with that hope in our heart. Let us face a bleak world with that certainty in our mind. Let us cast our bread upon the water.

“Dream with me that we can feel the wonder of the story and find the strength to tell it again for those who can’t imagine that a new world is possible.

The Central Atlantic Conference of the United Church of Christ is poised to tell a new story to the world.”

May your voice carry the news.”

Let’s believe together that St. Paul’s Congregational Church, United Church of Christ here in Nutley is poised to tell that new story too. May our voices and our ministry carry the news as well. We can do this! We can do this together! So may it be. Amen.