

St. Paul's Congregational Church  
October 21, 2018; Mark 10:35-45 – Proper 24B  
Great Service  
The Rev. Cynthia F. Reynolds

Let us pray: may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer.

Every once in a while don't you find yourself thinking about days long ago – remembering where you grew up, spent your childhood and youth, the places and things that meant so much. It's often a bittersweet time, isn't it – but it also can be a time of centering and appreciating how the past informs our present – savoring memories is a good thing. That's what I did this week when I came across some google earth pictures of the outside of my childhood home – it was sold last January – and the pictures showed the work the new owners have been doing since they moved in. It really looks good – the bones are still there and familiar but it was a reminder that it's not my house any more. Nothing, though, can take away the memories and I'm grateful for that.

Then I thought about the last time I attended worship at my home church in Farmington, Connecticut: it's an old New England meetinghouse, pulpit on the long wall, no stained glass windows, no candles, the chalice and plate resting on the Table each week – on the walls there are plaques noting each of the ordained ministers who have served since the gathering of the church in 1652. The meetinghouse itself was built in 1797 – it's a lovely, stately building near the center of town.

I couldn't help but remember the time I spent there – where my faith was born and nurtured and also challenged – my faith journey that started there and continues today here – that same life long journey we all share - from Sunday School to confirmation to youth group and then to taking my place as an adult member, serving on most of the committees, including being Chair of the Board of Deacons and later, moderator of the church. And this is the church that supported me emotionally, spiritually, and financially when I went off to seminary – I won't ever forget my ecclesiastical council there prior to my ordination – and the ordination service itself.

I remembered that First Church in Farmington has always been on the cutting edge of New England congregationalism – it was a stop on the Underground Railroad. The congregation hosted the people of the slave ship Amistad as they waited for safe passage home. And I couldn't help but think of my pastor who participated in that first March on Washington in the 1960s. And I remembered that nearly got him fired – I didn't understand how that could be. But

I also watched as the congregation worked through that conflict, there came a new commitment to serving “the least of these” – a new committee called Mission Education and Social Action was born and the church made a covenant that 20% off the top of their budget would go to mission giving. Over the years, though, they, like most churches, have faced budget shortfalls and that percentage was reduced, increased when possible, always a lively source of discussion at annual meetings. But this is the time my own commitment to mission outreach began.

Like almost every church, they’re facing financial difficulties these days too –they’ve had to take the step of closing down the office one day a week – reduced their staff - it’s been a tough time for them – and they are working hard in the process of discernment of where their ministry will take them in the future. Today things are looking better – they’ve called a new pastor and there’s a new sense of vitality. But it has been a long journey, one that will continue for years to come.

As I’ve thought about my experiences back home in Farmington, I’ve realized that our churches really aren’t so different from each other, in spite of our dramatically contrasting sanctuaries. We’re asking the same questions, even though our membership numbers are quite different, our demographics are very different, our weekly worship attendance is fewer – none of this is a bad thing – there’s beauty and power in both larger and smaller congregations. God will use us – we are called to figure out what God is asking and how we will respond.

Both churches have reason to celebrate their history and the ministry members of each congregation have carried out. And at the same time, both churches are facing real issues, real opportunities to discern what their ministry will be in the future. Both are asking the same questions: will we be forced to reduce our ministry presence? How can we not just maintain our ministry, but grow our ministry, empower members of the congregation to grow in their discipleship, in their servanthood. Serious questions indeed.

Questions that come to the forefront especially at this time of year – as our Church Council has begun planning for the budget for next year. Questions that each of us are asked to consider. Questions of our own participation, our own engagement in the ministry of this church. Questions of how will we pay for this ministry – and those are especially hard questions this year as we continue to struggle with a very old heating system!

This is stewardship season isn’t it. We expect to be asked for our contributions – especially for our financial commitment for the year to come. And for me, this has been a week of remembering where I had my start on my faith journey, where it has led me, who has walked with me on the way, and then to ask the question, what’s next. How do I continue my commitment to the Body of Christ – what are my stewardship responsibilities? I hope you’ll think back to the roots of your journey and ask yourselves the same questions.

Now, I truly believe that stewardship is a year long effort: we have been given gifts of time, talent, and treasure in abundance – how much are we willing to share that the ministry of this church be a vital, active presence in our community, state, nation, indeed around the world, today and tomorrow?

For some of us, the gift of our time is a tough one – our families are sometimes so very scheduled that we just don't have the time to serve. But there are also people here who give so generously of their time – serving on the various committees, trimming the trees outside, caring for the Memorial Garden, providing coffee hours each week, our choir who rehearses every week and leads us in worship through music each week– the list goes on and on. What a joy it is to have someone ask, what can I do? What a joy it is when someone comes forward to volunteer their time, either for a short term project or to help with the day to day running the operation of the church as institution.

We need your time and your talents – the ministry of this church depends on your time and talents – it did yesterday, it does today, and it will continue so in the future. It's no accident that the confirmands will be expected to do 3 service projects each year and one with their sponsor. Why? Well, the first and most important answer is that Jesus tells us to serve our neighbors. Service is an important part of our discipleship journey, isn't it – and every year confirmands have asked if they can do more – I tell them, of course, I just stop counting at 4. Why do they often do more? Because they find out it's fun – and it builds community when members of the congregation of all ages work together in our common ministry. Here's a challenge: how about each of us covenant to participate in 3-4 service projects a year? How can each of us contribute our time and talents in creative ways that our ministry go forth and our community, the body of Christ here in Nutley, be enriched to the glory of God?

But this is indeed the time of year that our Stewardship of treasure is highlighted – through our annual pledge campaign. And yes, we do need your money as well so our ministry might continue. Hopefully we'll all think of times in our own lives when the Spirit has moved us in extraordinary ways – when we have felt a sense of belonging to something bigger than ourselves, without which we are incomplete – when we have experienced a sense of joy deep in our souls.

It's always been hard to talk about money in church, hasn't it.

Mary Miller Bruggemann has worked for the UCC Stewardship Council: she writes, "It is time to be over our fear of talking about money in the church. It is not a new idea. Jesus talked about money. When we have gotten the order straight and joined the band of pilgrims, it then becomes our call as missionaries to tell the good news. Money doesn't get hidden in that community. It is an integral part of our faith journey. It is one of the many ways we live out our Christian faith. We give gifts of money because that is how we can more fully tell the good

news. We are not afraid to speak about money and tithes and gifts because all our life is under the reign of God's goodness and righteousness. We don't leave the part about money and savings and stock returns for Monday – they are a part of who we are and how we do mission. We rejoice in God's goodness to us and are thankful for the neighborhood – the Christian community – and give in order that others may hear and know and eat and live in shalom.”

We're all getting 2-3 solicitations for donations a day from any number of agencies, all good causes worthy of our support. But the pie is only so big and I have to pick and choose who will be the beneficiary of my limited dollars. And so do you. Where does the church appear on your list of priorities? How will you take your place in our ministry serving our neighbors: those who live near us, those who live around the world. Those who will come after us.

I believe, in fact I know, these days we live in a culture of fear. We live in a culture of competition. And this is not new either – our gospel lesson for this morning talks about just that! James and John ask Jesus for a position of prominence in the realm – they want to sit at his right and at his left in glory. And this angers the other disciples – that James and John request a place of power ahead of the rest of them. Seems like they might be a bit jealous, doesn't it. Jesus' loving response to them is to take the opportunity to contrast earthly greatness with divine greatness – earthly greatness meaning having power over – divine greatness, however, meaning as being a servant. The question we might all consider is not the usual secular question, “what's in it for me?” – not unlike what the Zebedee brothers were asking – but rather, “what can I do for you?”, the question Jesus asked of his disciples, then and now.

Today there are examples all around us of the secular quest for greatness and its often spectacular fall. You can all name a bunch of these examples – we hear about them every day – and honestly, they often make me sick to my stomach - what's happened to our priorities? What's real, lasting, greatness anyway: let's get back to basics: it's to be great in God's eyes – greatness is to be a servant modeled after Jesus' own life of service. And I get some comfort in the fact that if the disciples who knew Jesus so well had trouble with this, it's no wonder that we do too.

When we're afraid, we pull in, don't we. We scramble for safety and security – we hold back, afraid to share of our time, talent, and especially our treasure. But what does Jesus call us to do? He sends us out into the world to baptize and break bread and share the cup with all who have not yet come to know him.

Jesus calls us to extend the love of God to all who cross the threshold into our community – it's not the safety and security of privilege that saves us – it is

radical risk taking for the sake of the gospel. It is living in the abundance of God's love and grace that will provide all we need and sharing that in joy.

I've thought back to my time in worship in Farmington a lot this week and how grateful I am for my history there – how it's informed how I live, what I've learned about living in community, times when I felt God's presence there so clearly, and the call to share that love and presence wherever I am. Remembering my time there from Sunday School classes to running Church Council meetings. Remembering the good times and the hard times as well. That's all part of my formation.

But I was also aware of a sense of heaviness of heart, of sadness there in that gathered community – they're worried. They're afraid for their future. And I know I sense some of that here as well. The more afraid we are, the more we pull back – not just in our financial contributions, but in how we treat each other. How we welcome each other. It was striking to me how many new faces were in the pews back in Farmington – and while people dutifully shook hands during the time of worship when we passed the peace, the only person who spoke to me after worship was the minister as she greeted at the door! Not a person came up to me at coffee hour to welcome me. A symptom, perhaps, of a culture of fear.

A culture of fear that paralyzes us instead of a culture of joy that frees us.

Is that what we want for this church? Do we truly want our ministry to continue for generations to come? Have we been so touched by the radical good news that God offers us that we want to share it, now and always? Is our culture one of fear or one of abiding and empowering joy!

I went back to my home church and looked around me, remembering – it even smells the same – and I offered a prayer of thanksgiving for the opportunity to serve and be served by that church.

I want that for this church too. Don't you? I want to know that our youth will come back home and remember how they were nurtured and supported here. I want our children to know that this is a safe place for them – a place where they will always be welcomed and loved. I want all of us to be able to come here when tragedy strikes, when we're hurting, to feel love and acceptance and strength. And I want us to be able to come here when we have joys we want to share! I want us to reach out in radical ministry that serves all people – and I hope we'll have light and heat in this place when we do that.

This week we'll host the last distribution of the Food Pantry – what an opportunity we've had to care for our neighbors. What's next? How will our outreach continue in the community? It's been wonderful to have this activity in the building – I will personally miss it! What will be our next opportunity? How will our light shine?

This week I received an email from the sister of a man who is in hospice care – she was asking about our Memorial Garden. Their parents are here and she was beginning to make plans for her brother – she wondered if we were still receiving ashes in the Garden – her brother wanted to be buried with his parents. I responded that we would be honored to inter her brother when the time came and gave her my cellphone number. Our light is still shining for this family – we are blessed with a rich history of ministry over these past 125 years. What will the next 125 years bring? How will this ministry continue?

Isn't this what we all want for this church? To be a beacon of light in a hurting world? Not a community mired in a culture of fear or competition but a place of sanctuary, a community of joy and abundant sharing. A place where we can be empowered to live out our call as disciples. For yesterday, today and tomorrow. God has given us what we need to fulfill that call – and it comes from each of us: our time, talent, and our treasure. Let's leave the culture of fear behind and boldly go into God's future in joy and rejoicing. So may it be. Amen.

Let us pray:

Gracious God, may the days ahead of us span a time of love and compassion, of radical giving and abundant praise, of prayer and blessing, of hope and newness as we answer your call to faithfulness in this time. In Jesus' name, Amen.