

St. Paul's Congregational Church
September 10, 2017, Matthew 20:1-16; Exodus 16:2-15, 20A
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 Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

As disciples living in the real and broken and hurting world, what are we to make of the haunting images of the flooding we've all been seeing these past couple of weeks – and the infernos raging in Montana, in California, in Oregon, in Washington state, a major earthquake in Mexico resulting in tsunami warnings. So much devastation! How do we get our heads and hearts around it? How do we deal with the raw emotion, the horror of some of the pictures, the tremendous loss our neighbors have experienced and will experience as Hurricane Irma nears the east coast. Sometimes a feeling of hopelessness and helplessness overcomes us, doesn't it. And I've noticed a widespread sense of unease, of nervousness, of anxiety this week as we're surrounded by bad news – and many of us are haunted by the fact that tomorrow is September 11: 16 years ago our lives did change in horrendous ways – we will never forget!

The reality is, though, we can't help but be affected by all these events in one way or another.

Today we gather here with much quieter weather conditions around us – certainly we gather with concerns for those suffering around the country, around the world, but here we are – the gathered Body of Christ. Our lives have not been forever changed by these storms today – and perhaps in some ways that's too bad. Because it's during the storms of life, whether hurricanes, earthquakes, fires, or sickness, that transformation often happens.

This week and next week we're taking the opportunity to dedicate our ministry here at St. Paul's for the next program year – it's an exciting time for us – there's a spirit of "go for it" here – and it's good to pause and reflect.

You know, there are three reasons a church exists: worship, education, and service – the challenge is to balance each of these priorities and to engage our congregation according to their gifts and call to do God's work here. So today we take some time to reflect on our calling to be servants, God's hands and feet in the world around us and to re-dedicate ourselves in service.

This church has long been involved in service to our neighbors for sure – and I have been so impressed by your response to Hurricane Relief efforts – so far we have 6 cleanup kits that within a few days will be on their way to Church World Service for distribution probably to Texas. Obviously the need will continue as we deal with Irma and possibly two more hurricanes now churning their way west.

Service also includes outreach to our neighbors who sit beside us in the pews or those we meet at Shop Rite. Service to others includes our Christmas in August Vacation Bible School, offering hospitality to groups needing a place to meet, those struggling with gambling addiction; it also includes the simple, yet not so simple, affirmation that we all matter! That's why we list birthdays in the newsletter now, for instance – a snail mail card means the world to someone who can't get out and often feels so very isolated or to one of our young people seeking to find their place in this Body of Christ. Service

includes signing up to host a coffee hour, serving as liturgist during worship, weeding our gardens, volunteering to deliver food donations to the local pantry, bringing in a box of cereal or a jar of peanut butter for the pantry. It also includes participating in our communion offerings – agencies who are our neighbors and who serve our neighbors in ways we can't alone.

We do need each other, don't we. Somewhere deep inside of us we know that - especially at times like this, we do need each other. We come out from our homes, behind closed doors, and look after each other – every day of our lives, with or without a hurricane turning our world upside down.

And why do we do this? Because Jesus tells us to. Because we can. Because we are so very interdependent – because we are a community, called by God to worship, teach our children and each other the stories of our faith, and to serve our neighbors. It's really pretty simple, isn't it.

One of the agencies we have supported here for many years is the Nutley Family Service Bureau – and we have the opportunity to support this wonderful group in new ways in the coming days. We'll use our space here in an awesome way – storing food for distribution to our hungry neighbors and then serving as a distribution center for this food during their time of renovation. But Nutley Family Service feeds our neighbors in so many other ways – providing food not only for hungry stomachs, but also providing food for hungry spirits and souls. Providing manna from heaven indeed.

It's such a pleasure to have Eileen Painter, executive director for the past year, with us this morning to share her reflections and update us on future plans which do include us –

Last week I came upon a reflection written by Frederick Buechner around the story of Noah's Ark. (*In The Hungering Dark*) As I watched news footage of flood waters surrounding Texas, Louisiana, islands in the Caribbean, Florida, and indeed so many places around the world, I couldn't help but think about this story that we all learned as children. It's really a rather violent, depressing story isn't it – but...there are lessons for us.

Buechner writes after telling the story as only he can do, "Then finally after many days, Noah sent forth a dove from the ark to see if the waters had subsided from the earth, and that evening she returned, and lo, in her mouth a freshly plucked olive leaf. His cheek just touches her breast so he can feel the tiny panic of her heart. His eyes are closed, he weeps – no longer with anguish about the flood waters, but with wild and irrepressible hope. That is not the end of the story in Genesis, but maybe that is the end of it for most of us – just a little sprig of hope held up against the end of the world."

A little sprig of hope – a temporary bridge, bottles of water dropped from a helicopter, a community meal, a phone call, Clean up kits with laundry soap, clotheslines, work gloves, clothespins, cleaning cloths – you've got the list in your bulletins – how we all yearn for that little sprig of hope, symbolized by these every day items. And you know, our service to others helps us too – helps us to know that we are connected, part of the Body of Christ that's so interrelated.

Then comes the challenge to keep that alive after the storm passes and we return to life as usual.

Buechner continues, “The story tells about the ark which somehow managed to ride out the storm. God knows the ark is not much – but the ark was enough, is enough. Because the ark is wherever human beings come together as human beings in such a way that differences between them stop being barriers. The ark is wherever people come together because this is a stormy world where nothing stays put for very long among the crazy waves. The ark is where, just because it is such a world, we really need each other and know very well that we do.”

So how do we maintain the community that forms so often before, during, and after a natural disaster? What is it about hard times that allows us to be vulnerable in a way we so resist when things are going well? How is that the differences between us don't matter so much when we're all facing a common struggle, common fear?

It's all about relationships, isn't it – we are called into an ongoing conversation with our brothers and sisters in Christ who struggle with what it means to live faithfully in relationship, in community, and to look beyond ourselves. Sure is a tough thing to do, isn't it. But we're called beyond the tokenism of inclusiveness to a radical inclusivity where we take each other seriously, listen to each other, and dare trust that we all belong in God's love as much as we all do. We as church are called to be something different from the rest of the world – and wouldn't it be wonderful if we all lived that out wherever we spend our time and energy. Wouldn't it be wonderful if we could share that little sprig of hope every day!

Let's not forget for one minute why we're here: to make disciples, to reach out to a hurting and worried world, sharing the good news we've come to know, to know that hope we've experienced and then to share, to offer that sprig of hope to our neighbors, to the person sitting right next to us in the pew, to the wider world where most any inconveniences we experience are a common occurrence, life threatening to most of the world – where children and families are dying of hunger – physical hunger but even worse, the hunger for hope. Everything we say and do here in this church community must be about bringing people into relationship with God and each other and sharing all that we have and all that we are that others might know a fullness of life, a wholeness and joy and peace that God wants for each and every person.

And perhaps most importantly: all these events have brought us to our knees in prayer. And maybe that's a good thing – our church, our faith community, is like a three legged stool – worship, education, service – none of these is complete without each other. Prayer is a force that can move mountains. Prayer brings forth miracles. How can we help? First and foremost, by praying for everyone affected by these storms and for all the storms of life. By praying for wisdom in the days ahead for our leaders, for strength and courage for all those in the heart of the disaster areas working, for those people who have lost everything – everything! Oh yes, we need to put our prayers into action but we need to pray first, to center ourselves in the eternal, everlasting, ever loving presence of the God who cares for us all. And let us then offer that little sprig of hope, that manna from heaven, to each other. We can do this! Amen.