

Twenty-fourth Sunday after Pentecost
Welcome First Church UU
November 20, 2022

PRELUDE

Berceuse
Darry Dolezal, cello
Migratory V
Katelyn Frazer, Soprano

Frank Bridge

A. Guettel

WELCOME and ANNOUNCEMENTS

Rev. Christopher Lyman Waldron

HISTORY MINUTE

FIRST CHURCH AND PARISH

In the past year, our congregation has been engaged in exploring the lives of our previous ministers. We have read their biographies written by our resident historian and one of our Deacons Geoff Tegnell, who has been actively searching for information in the Dedham Museum and Archive.

In light of our collaboration for this 384th anniversary, Geoff shared with me an archive of church calendars and correspondence between your congregation and mine that shed some light between our past collaborations and today. Historically speaking, our two congregations collaborated in the years from 1918-1945, even more than we do today. We held joint services not just on annual anniversary commemorations but also on Armistice/Veteran's Day, Thanksgiving Day, and Easter, and on such civic celebrations as the Tercentenary of the founding of Plymouth Colony. During that period, our congregations also joined together in meetings of men's and women's groups, musical vespers, social events, and intellectual pursuits such as lectures, religious education classes, and youth events.

During what he called the "Church Union Movement" between 1935 and 1945 Geoff found a folder of communications between our church leaders and yours suggesting that we share a minister starting in 1935 when Reverend George Manly Butler resigned. These negotiations culminated in another offer from First Church for both churches to share a minister, and split the cost of visiting ministers, music, and administrative expenses in 1945 when Reverend John Franklin Robinson retired. However, these negotiations ultimately did not result in a closer merger of our two churches.

The context for this initiative for closer collaboration of our two congregations was the Interfaith movement emanating from the 1893 Parliament of World Religions at the Chicago World's Fair. Following up on this international ecumenical initiative, in 1900, at a Boston conference, Unitarians and other religious liberals founded the International Association for Religious Freedom. "The object of this council," its founders declared, "is to open communication with those in all lands who are striving to unite Pure Religion and Perfect Liberty and to increase fellowship and cooperation among them." First Church ministers of that era, Rev. William Henry Parker, Rev Charles R. Joy, and Rev. Lyman Vincent Rutledge, were all advocates of liberal religion, as were many Congregational clerics. This created an ideological bridge between Congregationalists and Unitarians that had not existed before, and one sees the terms "Interfaith" and "liberal religion" increasingly in both the Allin Congregational Calendars and the Parish Records from that time.

CALL TO WORSHIP

We gather together in celebration of our history, the anniversary of founding

We come together in our anticipation of giving thanks this holiday season.

We come into awakening to our mutuality.

We come into the realization of oneness.

We come into celebration of our diversity.

We come into thanksgiving for our shared community.

We come into loving one another and our neighbor, as we feel the energy that comes with connection.

May we together create new traditions of thanksgiving and celebration in the Spirit.

Based on a prayer by Rev. Sheree Taylor-Jones

*HYMN

#284 Gather Us In

*UNISON PRAYER OF INVOCATION

God, you who is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. We gather together, celebrating another day that you have kept us. Keep us from leaning into our fear, though the earth should change around us.

Help us to bear witness to all that you have done for us.

Let us reflect on the grace that we have received and the work of the Divine in the world. Be with us as we gather together in community, thankful for our connection, with another and with your Spirit. Amen.

CHILDREN'S MOMENT

THE SANDWICH SWAP -RETOLD

Rev Rali M Weaver and Christopher Lyman Waldron

Singing the Children to their activity

*May your mind be open to new learning
May your lips bring truth into the world
May your heart know love*

And your hands do the work of justice, As you go your way in peace

CALL TO PRAYER

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE and THE LORD'S PRAYER

Please Lord, we also pray for: Those suffering from the effects of flooding, fires and war; healing and comfort for Olive Barrett, Marcia Bibeault, John Glore, Michael Martens, Bev Poole, Muriel Porter, and Lois Walsh. **“Our Father, who art in Heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever.” Amen.**

PRAYER RESPONSE

The Greatest Gift

Mark Hayes

CALL TO OFFERING Shared offering to support Dedham Food Pantry

*DOXOLOGY

HYMN TO JOY

Thou art giving and forgiving, ever blessing, ever blest, well-spring of the joy of living, ocean depth of happy rest! Thou our Father, Christ our Brother, all who live in love are thine, teach us how to love each other, lift us to the joy divine.

*UNISON OFFERING PRAYER

God of Generosity, thank you for the many ways in which you provide for us: Food, family, friendship, housing, health, happiness, and community. We lift these gifts to you out of our needs and abundance, trusting that it will nurture and nourish those in need in our community. May they be a thanksgiving feast! May they become soup and bread, vegetables and casseroles, meat and gravy, fruits and sweets! In our giving help us to live more fully into your call to love our neighbor and to change the world. Amen.

SCRIPTURE

Janice Girard

Jeremiah 23:1-6

Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture! says the Lord. Therefore thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, concerning the shepherds who shepherd my people: It is you who have scattered my flock, and have driven them away, and you have not attended to them. So I will attend to you for your evil doings, says the Lord. Then I myself will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the lands where I have driven them, and I will bring them back to their fold, and they shall be fruitful and multiply. I will raise up shepherds over them who will shepherd them, and they shall not fear any longer, or be dismayed, nor shall any be missing, says the Lord. The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In his days Judah will be saved and Israel will live in safety. And this is the name by which he will be called: "The Lord is our righteousness."

Luke 23:33-43

When they came to the place that is called The Skull, they crucified Jesus there with the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. [[Then Jesus said, 'Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.']] And they cast lots to divide his clothing. And the people stood by, watching; but the leaders scoffed at him, saying, 'He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one!' The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine, and saying, 'If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!' There was also an inscription over him, 'This is the King of the Jews.'

One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding him and saying, 'Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!' But the other rebuked him, saying, 'Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong.' Then he said, 'Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.' He replied, 'Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.'

SCRIPTURE RESPONSE

Through the words of scripture God spoke to our ancestors and speaks to us anew.

Thanks be to God!

ANTHEM

Draw the Circle Wide

Mark Miller

SERMON

"What Holds Us Separate, Keeps Us Separate"

Rev. Rali M. Weaver

As I considered how the words of the lectionary scriptures might "speak to us anew today," I remembered a rabbinic legend dating back to the first century called the "Fathers." In the story, four rabbis enter a garden. The first rabbi looked at the garden and died; the second looked at the garden and lost his mind; the third looked at the

Garden and renounced all religious beliefs, and the fourth entered the garden in peace and departed in peace. In most redactions of this Midrash story, the garden does not represent some afterlife but an understanding of the scriptures.

Scripture can be understood through several different lenses. Scripture can be understood literally (as words that make sense with no other meaning or examination). Historically (as words that fit in a specific time and place). Rationally (as words understood through our reason and experience). Metaphorically (as words that are figurative and require imagination to understand.) And Mystically (as words that can have infinite meanings and are never fully understood).

While a person cannot die, like the first rabbi who enters the garden, from reading scripture, reading the scriptures only literally is likely to, eventually, make the words feel dead and irrelevant in our time. Similarly, when a reader over-emphasizes any one way of understanding scripture to the exclusion of other perspectives, we may find ourselves quite confused, like the Rabbi who lost his mind. Suppose we look at the scriptures through three concomitant lenses yet ignore the mystical nature of the scriptures. In that case, their entire message will be lost to us, and we would likely apostatize like the third rabbi who preached against faith and religion altogether after looking at the garden.

With that fair warning, I look at our scriptures today.

The scripture from Jeremiah is presented as words from God. If we understand the reading literally, God is speaking to the shepherds themselves. Historically, shepherds are among the poorer classes, and, especially if I hadn't also read the scripture just before where God is chastizing the Kings and rulers for not following his laws, this literal fact could easily lead us to miss the metaphoric language of shepherds as Kings and leaders of the time. It then makes sense that God is still talking to the Kings and rulers in the following scripture when it says, "Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture!" Shepherds are supposed to protect and nurture their sheep and keep them together; when they don't, it matters to God. "So I will attend to you for your evil doings, says the Lord. Then I will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the lands where I have driven them, and I will bring them back to their fold, and they shall be fruitful and multiply."

These words are curious: "I myself will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the lands where I have driven them." Didn't the Lord chastise the shepherds who scattered his flock? And then afterward claims to have driven the community to where God chooses for them to go? Does this mean the divine hand is in the scattering AND the rebuilding?

Scripture's metaphysical or transformative nature reveals itself upon such examination. Imagine a loving god who both scatters and reconnects. Yes, God calls the uncaring leaders into account; God also is in the scattering and where the disenfranchised go is part of the divine plan.

Last week I shared with my congregation an article from the New York Times by Daniel Overbye titled "Black Holes May Hide a Mind-Bending Secret About Our Universe." This article fits this week as well because this passage from Jeremiah points to a truth about the divine that is reflected in the scripture and throughout all creation. Generations of theologians wrestled with the idea of free will and the omnipotence of God. In the same way that physicists have wrestled with the nature of the universe and the purpose of black holes. The article pointed out that scientists are just starting to make sense of the startling fact that what is inside the black hole and what is outside of it are the same, just as the words in Jeremiah point to the fact that God is part of the scattering and part of rebuilding and reconnecting and rejuvenating afterward.

Consider the reaction after the Marathon bombing and how Boston Pride coalesced our city and helped everyone come together after the unthinkable happened. Consider how as covid restrictions are lessened, it has felt doubly good to reconnect to old friends and family. Out of our discomfort and even outright tragedy, god, the universe, or the collective unconscious brings us back into reconnection.

We don't have to wait for tragic events to see how discomfort or unfairness leads to positive change. Just as in the Sandwich Swap, after a crisis of disagreeing over what makes a good sandwich, Salma and Lily tried something new and encouraged all their friends to try something new too. Perhaps the discomfort and the crisis are not so different than the solution at all. Selma and Lily needed the problem to come up with a solution in the same way all our concerns can become opportunities for new attitudes and positive change.

Our second scripture came from the book of Luke and set the stage for Jesus being disregarded and chastized while hanging on nails on a cross, waiting to die. This is a gruesome scene. The Son of God is being tormented and crucified with nails through his hands and feet, hanging from a cross like a common criminal. While one criminal - let us call him Criminal A - makes fun of Jesus and harasses him, the other - Criminal B - suggests that Criminal A stop. Criminal B says, "Do you not fear God since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong." Criminal B doesn't identify himself with Jesus to get Criminal A to stop; he identifies himself with the other criminal, spelling out that which distinguishes the two criminals from Jesus. In his humility and recognition of Jesus for who he is, he asks, 'Jesus,

remember me when you come into your kingdom.' (and Jesus) replied, 'Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.'

Jesus doesn't say that all those others who are tormenting him or casting lots for his clothes will go to hell. He asks his father to forgive them "for they know not what they do." He tells the man who asks Jesus to remember him that he will be with him in Paradise.

Some may believe that only the criminal who asks to be remembered is going to paradise. In fact, for generations, this simple Calvinist idea that some people are a part of God's plan and others are not has kept our two churches separate. That oversimplifies, though. I genuinely believe that the Calvinist idea that some are more righteous and deserving of God's salvation is a life-enhancing, joy-filled, peaceful belief for some. While for others, the idea that only some righteous people can receive God's love is deadening.

There is a street ministry in San Francisco called the Faithful Fools. They lead street retreats so interested people can spend the day or a weekend walking and living with the homeless in the city. The mantra they offer participants is "What holds us separate, keeps us separate, as we walk the streets, what still connects us?" It would behoove us to remember this mantra when we come together and approach the table for our Thanksgiving celebration. What holds us separate keeps us separate, yet there are so many things that still connect us.

The more we understand science and study scripture and the world, the more I believe our minds create the separations that keep us apart. The truth of God or the universe or whatever you want to call the spirit of life that lives and moves within each of us is that it is likely more lively and expansive than anything our human brains can compute.

At First Church, we call this Bread and Cider Celebration a Bread and Cider Communion, accepting communion as the sharing or exchanging of thoughts on a mental or spiritual level. Because we are in your church where Communion means the part of Christian worship where bread and wine are consecrated and shared in remembrance of the life and resurrection of Jesus, we have changed the name to a celebration. As we come to this table today, I invite you to ask, "What holds us separate and what keeps us separate? And, as we worship together, what still connects us?"

Let us pray
PRAYER

Precious spirit of life that lives and moves within each of us and in every living thing on this earth. We come together in praise and thanksgiving for all the many gifts you have

bestowed upon us. Let this celebration of bread and cider with our friends and neighbors remind us that you love and bless all of your creation. May we always be thankful for the bonds that connect us. Amen.

As we approach the table for this bread and cider celebration, let us remember that this bread was made by many hands and brought to us from all our diverse communities. This cider was made from many different apples, some riper than others but all sweet to our tongues. Help us celebrate and give thanks for the diversity of this gathered community and the gifts we all bring to this table. Amen

As you walk to the table from this isle and return via this isle, I ask you to repeat silently to yourself, “what holds me separate and what keeps me separate, and as we celebrate together, what still connects us?”

BREAD AND CIDER CELEBRATION

Spirit of life and love, let none of us be separated from your kindness and generosity; help us to live more perfectly in connection with the divine plan treating our neighbors with the love and respect we wish for ourselves. We ask this in the name of the loving presence that permeates all life. Amen

*HYMN

#485 Diverse in Culture, Nation, Race

*BENEDICTION

Rev. Rali M. Weaver

POSTLUDE

Allegro Giocoso, op. 150 no. 7

Saint-Saens