

“Lenten Journey”

A sermon by The Rev. Darren L. Morgan

Associate Conference Minister, Maine Conference United Church of Christ
at Casco Village Church, UCC

Ephesians 2:1-10 ~ John 3:14-21

March 11, 2018

Ephesians 2:1-10 (NRSV) ¹ You were dead through the trespasses and sins ² in which you once lived, following the course of this world, following the ruler of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work among those who are disobedient. ³ All of us once lived among them in the passions of our flesh, following the desires of flesh and senses, and we were by nature children of wrath, like everyone else. ⁴ But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us ⁵ even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved – ⁶ and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, ⁷ so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. ⁸ For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God – ⁹ not the result of works, so that no one may boast. ¹⁰ For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.

John 3:14-21 (NRSV) ¹⁴ And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵ that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. ¹⁶ “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. ¹⁷ “Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. ¹⁸ Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. ¹⁹ And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. ²⁰ For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. ²¹ But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.”

Returning from a continuing education conference, I had a layover in Detroit and had time to grab dinner, so I headed to one of the many airport restaurants to eat. Music was playing in the background, and I had no sooner sat down when I heard the song, *Home Sweet Home*, sung by Carrie Underwood. I am not really a fan of country music, but it seemed ironic to hear this song at that very moment – because I was on my way home.

Home. The dictionary defines home as a place where one lives, which seems to be a sufficient enough definition. But while I have lived in Glenburn – just outside Bangor – since 1995, I really do not consider it “home.” Home to me is a place of origin, a place of belonging. Perhaps I am defining the word with a bit of nostalgia mixed in. When I think of home, I think of York Beach, Maine, where I grew up.

There are many characteristics about York Beach that cause me to still hold fond memories of that place. A small-town atmosphere that would burst with activity in the summer ... Nubble Light... the rocky coast... sandy beaches... and especially the ocean. The house where I grew up was within walking distance of the beach. When I think of home, I think of the smell of salt air, the sounds of sea gulls, and the crashing of waves along the shore. The town has grown since I left for seminary in 1990. But in some ways, it has not changed one bit. What has remained constant, though, and carries such nostalgic power for me, is the ocean.

Oh, how I love the ocean. I remember as a kid going to the beach whenever I could. The white, soft sand on the beach seemed endless, making it difficult to walk on it because my feet would sink up to my ankles. I would

play on the beach for hours, building sandcastles, and playing tag with the water, as it would inch forward and back again on the sand, as if trying to grab me. The beach is a place where there is much activity, regardless of the season. Couples walking hand-in-hand, surfers looking for “the big one,” kids playing Frisbee, pet-owners walking their dogs.

I remember Mr. Truman raking the beach with his tractor every morning during the summer, picking up all the trash, seaweed, and debris so the white sandy beach would be just perfect for that day’s tourists.

My love for the ocean is equally matched with my love for the church. I can gaze at the ocean, recognizing God’s power and majesty, all the while knowing that I am safe, secure, and loved. I can walk the sandy beach endlessly, praying to God, and reflecting on God’s call to the work that I do. People who are drawn to the ocean become part of a community.

It seems to me that the church can be compared to a beach. Oh, there are times when it is raked pretty, but that does not last for very long. Waves come crashing in, the tide rises, melting the firmly packed sandcastles on the shoreline, and then seaweed and debris are left behind as the tide recedes. It is an endless cycle.

It has been my experience that the institutional church is not always perfect. In my nostalgic reflections of my home in York Beach, my memories are bittersweet because it is mixed with the pain of rejection from the congregation that nurtured me from cradle to seminary, only to turn their backs on me when I came out. I was suddenly no longer worthy of their love and support.

For me, ministry is much like walking the hard sand along miles of beach. Sometimes things get murky and treacherous – you must watch where you are walking so you do not step on stones, seaweed, and debris along the shore. You must be mindful of the changing tide, which is not easily remembered unless you walk the beach every day.

I feel God’s presence in my life most notably when I am at the ocean – the rolling water, the crashing tides, the smell, the sounds, the power – moments of grace. But there are other times I experience God’s grace as well. For me, the experience of God is not a single event in time and space, but rather a journey – sometimes the sand is soft and white, sometimes the sand is hard and gray. My journey to ministry is filled with many twists and turns.

In the verses of scripture just before today’s Gospel lesson, we read of Nicodemus, a Pharisee, who visits Jesus one night to discuss Jesus’ teachings, asking questions about the nature of God and of the church.

Lent is the time in our liturgical calendar when we as people of faith go on a journey. Our Lenten journey is a time for more than just casual introspection. It is our big religious season for repentance, renewal, and commitment. Just as Jesus once said, “No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.”¹ (or as Eugene Peterson puts it in *The Message*, “No procrastination. No backward looks. You can’t put God’s kingdom off till tomorrow. Seize the day.”)

¹ Luke 9:62

Lent is our moment for decision. Are we who we say we are? Is this really the way I choose to follow? I have only one life – is this how I wish to spend it?

In these 40-days before Easter, we hear stories of God’s amazing grace. Today’s Gospel reading is one of the best-known and most-loved verses in scripture, frequently lifted-up as the perfect and concise summation of Christian faith. *“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.”*²

Grace means that God’s gift to us – the gift of life – is good, even though it is so very fragile. Perhaps life is so good because it is so fragile.

We all know people who have experienced a deep sense of grace. Many of us have experienced it. Maybe you have been in a deep, dark hole, a corner so dark that you no longer really care whether you lived or died.

Have you ever hit rock bottom, literally or spiritually, and found that there was no way to go – but up? I imagine that we have all had waves crashing on us so hard that we could barely stand, or perhaps been too far out in the water that the undertow literally grabbed and pulled us out further into the deep water.

We can also share the sense that we live in grace – not just dumb luck or good karma, but grace – amazing grace. The grace of which I speak is not cheap grace; it is not easily gained optimism. This redeeming love God has showered on us is hard-won. Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote: Grace is costly because it calls us to follow, and it is grace because it calls us to follow Jesus

² John 3:16

Christ. It is costly because it costs us our lives, and it is grace because it gives us the only true life. It is costly because it condemns sin, and it is grace because it forgives the sinner.³

The Apostle Paul reminded the Ephesians that our salvation comes not from anything we are or anything we do but comes solely as God's gift to us.

So, on this fourth Sunday in Lent – a time of preparation for the joy of Easter – we are the church gathered. We build our many sandcastles of hospitality, justice, diversity, testimony, and worship. We work to transform lives, to transform communities of faith, and to transform the world around us. Sometimes our castles stand for a long time, but then the tide comes in and carries the sand away. It is easy to think we are here to maintain an institution – to lay out our plans and carry them through, to produce the kind of programs, worship, and education that make everyone happy and comfortable, and to get it right.

But we are not! We are here to offer thanks to God for the gift of love in Jesus Christ even though we can never get it right.

We are here to offer praise that even when we cannot extend our lives, Christ gives us eternal life.

We are here to confess that our best-laid plans often fall short, our best efforts turn to dust, and still God does not condemn us, but rather saves us.

In the United Church of Christ, we are people of God's extravagant welcome, and insist that 'Jesus did not turn people away. Neither do we.' "We believe in a God that is still speaking, a God that is all-loving and

³ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*

inclusive. We are a church that welcomes and accepts everyone as they are, where your mind is nourished as much as your soul. We are a church where Jesus the healer meets Jesus the revolutionary, and where together, we grow a just and peaceful world.”⁴

Being the kind of community who believes, practices, and shares this message, we will make happen the reality to which Jesus pointed in the prayer that he taught us to pray: God’s will be done on earth. I pray it will happen.

Last week as I was preparing the PowerPoint presentation to today’s luncheon program, I was reflecting on my photographs of the Sea of Galilee, remembering the Gospel text in Luke in the fifth chapter where Jesus provides a miraculous catch of fish. Jesus tells Simon to *“Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch.”* And while Simon moans, *“Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing. Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets. When they had done this, they caught so many fish that their nets were beginning to break.”*⁵

The next verse resonates with me as I journey from church to church: *“So they signaled their partners in the other boat to come and help them,”*⁶ which is a constant reminder that we are not in this alone – we have partners in ministry.

The ministry of Jesus Christ at Casco Village Church is important to the Maine Conference. You are not alone in responding to God’s call. Even Jesus did not “go it alone,” but rather he gathered a community around him,

⁴ <http://www.ucc.org/about-us/>

⁵ Luke 5:4b-6

⁶ Luke 5:7

the same community to which we are called today, as his followers. Each of us has a vocation, and there are things that we need to do in this world, no matter what great challenges we face. It is a blessing for me to be a companion in the faith with you in your ministry.

It is amazing grace, indeed, that can take a gathering of fragile people on a Lenten journey, who have all known failure and many little deaths, turning us from our sorrows of the past to hope for the future.

But such is the nature of life. And such is the very nature of our God. God bless you and the ministry of Casco Village Church United Church of Christ. Amen.