

Stewarding Witness (4.19.2020)

by Rev. Emilia Halstead

As they met and ate meals together, he told them that they were on no account to leave Jerusalem but "must wait for what the Father promised: the promise you heard from me. John baptized in water; you will be baptized in the Holy Spirit. And soon." When they were together for the last time they asked, "Master, are you going to restore the kingdom to Israel now? Is this the time?" He told them, "You don't get to know the time. Timing is the Father's business. What you'll get is the Holy Spirit. And when the Holy Spirit comes on you, you will be able to be my witnesses in Jerusalem, all over Judea and Samaria, even to the ends of the world." [...] They agreed they were in this for good, completely together in prayer, the women included. Also Jesus' mother, Mary, and his brothers.

[Acts 1:6-8, 14]

~ Poem written by Loretta F. Ross, on The Praying Life blog.
[<http://theprayinglife.com/2012/05/>]

*Something new is coming,
something incredible,
beyond imagination
and manipulation.*

*Something
promised.*

*Well maybe.
That is to say, we hope it is.*

He said it would.

*We watched him rise up
out on the hill,
wind blustering all around,
and the jagged saw of goodbye
chewing us apart.*

Don't go. Don't go. We love you so!

*And the love
filling us up
and tipping us*

*over
with its force.*

*And us, breathless and blown,
rolling and tumbling down
the mountain
flung and spinning
out from the Center of that splendor.*

*His Words,
imprinted
on our souls like a bright tattoo.*

And the angels saying, Get up. Get going!

*He said to wait.
Wait.*

*There would be more, something else,
spirit he called it,
who will help us remember it all,*

*help us catch our breath,
and give us legs for such a world, as we have glimpsed.*

*Oh, why not Him? Why this spirit thing,
when we had a love
we could hold in our arms and look in the eye?*

*The Father, reaching down into humanity,
snatches back the offspring
of his selfless, effervescent generosity.*

*Dear God,
catching up very God of very God, begotten not made,
by the scruff
of his collar
and drawing him back into your joyful dance,*

*what are you thinking,
cutting in like this, sweeping off with our partner?*

*Life is eternal – that is good news.
But what to do with the life and the love,
left here as we are, knocking about in the flesh?*

*Please do not ask of us such vulnerability,
this being clueless, with nothing to hang onto,
suspended between cloud and fire,
dangling
from only a dim memory and a bright promise. (Amen.)*

As Carolyn mentioned in her Stewardship moment this morning, in the middle of March, First Congregational church was just about to sign a contract with a real estate agent to take the next step towards selling our current building and beginning the process of looking for our next faith home. I feel the grief of my people, as they – like the

disciples – are being told to wait.

Our passage from Acts, this morning, speaks to me so strongly of where the world and First Church of Concord is right now. The disciples, and we, are basically told to “hurry up and wait.”

The angels are telling us, “You're not to stay as you here, staring at the sky, long after Jesus has disappeared from view. To do so would be to go in reverse. It would be to idolize what was, rather than to live in the present moment.”

The Risen Christ is telling us, “You are not to launch ahead to transformation and change, way before Jesus is due to return into view. To do so would be to speed ahead, at break-neck speed. It would be to idolize what might be, rather than to live in the present moment.”

In the words of Life Coach, Emily Clement, who also happens to be a member of First Congregational Church of Laconia, NH UCC - Jesus tells the disciples to “Pop it into neutral.”

God, in this time of Covid-19, is inviting us as a congregation and a global community to “pop it into neutral.”

In neutral, it may be that we slow down and roll to a gentle and complete stop, while we wait for the “traffic” to start to move again. It may be that we are able to shift back into 1st gear before a full stop occurs. However, once we are invited to leave our homes again, under no circumstances are we going to go from neutral into 5th gear. If we do, all we'll achieve is a noisy, but useless, revving our engine, and risk stalling out.

Jesus told the disciples, “Pop it into neutral and wait. Wait for the Holy Spirit. Once the Holy Spirit arrives, THEN you will be my witnesses.”

To be stewards of witness, Jesus' witness, means to pay attention to the movement of the Holy Spirit. It means to be in tune with when the power of the Holy Spirit is fueling our engine and moving us forward. That being in tune also means we notice when the Holy

Spirit pulls back and we need to pop it into neutral and coast...to wait. To pause, trusting that the power will return and we'll continue onward to the place that God is calling us to bare witness to God's Love.

So the first message for us as a congregation and a global community, right now, is to wait.

The second important message is in verse 14: "They agreed they were in this for good, completely together in prayer, the women included. Also Jesus' mother, Mary, and his brothers." Even before the arrival of God's power and direction the community of Christ gathered together and promised one another that they were in this for the long haul. They gathered together – all together – in prayer.

It is for this reason, I am dedicated to keeping a time of community worship and prayer going, while we coast in neutral, even as my own entire being turns to mush. It's why I am "game" to move forward with our stewardship season and campaign, even and especially during this bizarre and sad time in our lives.

They agreed they were in this for good.

Have you caught the double meaning? The disciples were in it forever. And they were in it for the good of all people. For the good of ALL people. To steward the witness of Jesus is to carry the love of God to ALL people, as long as we live.

And when we're asked to wait – to pause – on the journey, we are invited to continue in our eternal commitment by being completely together in prayer. To stay in connection with God, with one another, and with all of Creation.

As we wait we need to hear the Divine permission to slow down and to stop. We cannot keep up the pace we had been running before, during this time. Right now it's time to stop and pray. All of creation is asking us to rest. To take a time out. To breathe – just breathe.

As we breathe, we are invited to ponder and pray. As you breathe in, say to yourself “ponder.” As you breathe out, say to yourself “pray.”

One of the things I invite us to ponder and pray upon, during this pause, is “what is God calling First Church to become?” Just as I feel personally pulled into a cocoon by my Soul during this pause, I argue that God is pulling our congregation into it's own cocoon.

Metaphorically, does that mean our congregation is going to turn to mush? Well – yeah. In order for our congregation to come out on the other side with wings? Yeah. In order for our congregation to become a pollinator of Christ, and bare witness to the Love of God? Yes.

So let me break it down. It's true that First Church, Concord needs financial income right now and a promise of future income through monetary pledges, so that we can continue our ministry of feeding people in both body and soul. And it is equally true that First Church needs your pledge that you are in this for good. That you are in this for the long haul. No matter how long we need to wait in our homes. No matter how long we need to coast in neutral. No matter how long we need to wait for the Holy Spirit to arrive in THIS time and place.

God has planted a seed in First Church, Concord, a seed that will die, in order to bring forth an apple tree that feeds people - heart, mind, body, and soul - on the witness of Jesus the Christ. A witness of the power of life being stronger than death. A witness that Love is Alpha and Omega, the beginning, and the end, and EVERYTHING in between.

So, First Church members and friends – are you in this for good?

Amen.