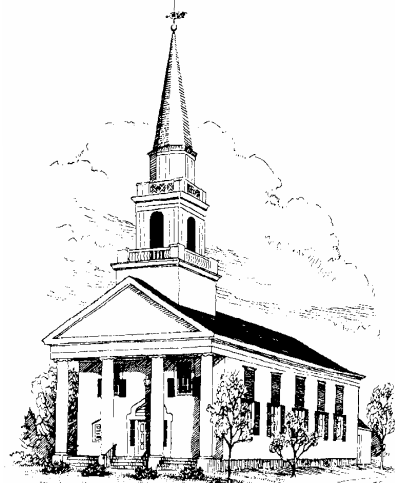


Mystic Congregational Church, UCC

Mystic, Connecticut

Sermon from April 27, 2008
Rev. Barbara J. Libby
“Preparing for Change”

Scriptures:
Psalm 66
John 14:15-21



I don't know about your house but my house and my office are full of mementos and objects that remind me of relationships, events and other times and places—memories. My house is filled with special things that I have collected through the years that remind me of moments, events, or occasions which I want to remember.

There are seashells, pieces of driftwood and stones tumbled smooth by the ocean waves collected from favorite beaches. There are photographs of my family—my mother and my father, my brothers and their wives, my nephews, photos of my daughter at various stages in her life and, more recently, photos of Sarah and her partner, Tara. There are photos of friends and relations from all sorts of occasions down through the years.

There are also favorite poems, “good” quotes, amazing prayers, a few cartoons, and even some of my favorite greeting cards that hang on bulletin boards, on my refrigerator and on the fronts of my kitchen cabinets. There is the design drawn by my younger brother for my ordination bulletin cover. There are special objects I brought from my mother's home when she moved out of the big family house. There are pins and mementos from various conferences and marches I've attended. There are gifts from other churches where I've served as an interim pastor as well as objects bought on trips and cruises. The collection tends to get larger with each year!

I intentionally surround myself with these mementos and memorabilia, both at home and in my office, because they serve as reminders of all the special people, events, places and moments in time which make up the fabric of my life.

In our lesson from John's Gospel today, we hear Jesus say to the disciples that the Holy Spirit will serve as a reminder to them of all that Jesus had said to them. The Holy Spirit, in this case, will serve as a reminder of all that God provides for us to remember Jesus by.

Can you visualize the scene from John's Gospel that we heard earlier? Jesus sits at table in the upper room with his disciples, with the leftovers of the *seder* meal they've been eating spread out on the table. Jesus knows that he will soon be taken away from them. He wants to assure his friends that they would have all the help they would need to endure all that the future held in store for them.

Jesus was facing his own imminent death and still he tends to the needs of the disciples, assuring them that they will never be alone, affirming that there will always be help available for them as they move into the future. He promises them and us the gift of the presence of the Holy Spirit—as a me-

mento, if you will. He promises the presence of the Holy Spirit within us all so we will feel support, guidance, and comfort always.

In a sermon on this same text, the preacher Barbara Brown Taylor (*Good News for Orphans*) uses the parent/child image to describe the feeling of security that children long for when they are left alone. She says that children want to be reassured that someone greater, stronger, and smarter is not only present but in charge.

I believe it is not only children that want to be reassured. We all need to know that someone loves, that we are loved, appreciated and cherished, don't we? So Jesus seeks to reassure the disciples and us that there will always be someone else there with us. He offers his disciples and us the gift that keeps on giving—he offers the presence of the Holy Spirit as a mentor and guide, a holy friend within us.

In the upper room, on the night of his betrayal, Jesus assures his bewildered friends that they will not be left without divine assistance. His promise is that there will always be a special counsellor, the spirit of truth. And here he is not talking about some abstract quality; rather, he is talking about a personal and intimate relationship with a Spirit that moves among us.

These words of Jesus remind us that this community of faith leans into and prepares for changes that are already happening and will continue to happen. Mystic Congregational Church continues in a time designed specifically for this community of faith to make change and prepare for change.

This time between settled pastors—which I know seems as if it has been interminable for many of you, this interim time—is all about preparation time. This interim time is all about preparing for whoever will come to serve you next. It is not time when we can just sit and twiddle our proverbial thumbs. It is important preparation time: time to examine your history, time to examine your relationship to your denomination, time to help develop and enhance the lay leadership here at this church, as well as time to prepare for a new leader to come. Those are the five tasks of the interim time. We have begun some of this work and there is still work to do.

When Jesus suggested to the disciples that they needed to pay attention to the commandments, he was probably not referring here to the Ten Commandments. Scholars believe that Jesus was most likely referring here to his own simple summary of the law when he had said, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind” and a second commandment which is like it which said, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

Jesus was helping his disciples and us prepare for change—big change. Some of the work we have yet to do is to focus on the commandment to love one another as much as we love ourselves. Jesus promised the disciples that the Holy Spirit would teach and remind them of all that he had said.

To remind means to bring to memory. A reminder is something that brings an event, person or a moment in time to memory again. Memory serves to bring to mind the things of our past, both good and bad, that make us who we are.

Frederick Buechner (in his book *A Room Called Remember*) suggests this about remembering:

One way or another, we are always remembering ...

There is no escaping it even if we want to, or at least no escaping it for long, though God knows there are times when we try to and don't want to remember...

In one sense the past is dead & gone, never to be repeated, over & done with, but in an-

other sense, it is of course not done with at all or at least not done with us ...

Every person we have ever known, every place we have ever seen, everything that has ever happened to us—it all lives and breathes deep in us somewhere whether we like it or not, and sometimes it doesn't take much to bring it back to the surface in bits and pieces ...

A scrap of some song that was popular years ago.

A book we read as a child.

A stretch of road we used to travel.

An old photograph, an old letter.

There is no telling what trivial thing may do it, & then suddenly there it all is ...

Something that happened to us once—and it is there not just as a picture on the wall to stand back from and gaze at but as a reality we are so much a part of still and that is still so much a part of us that we feel with something close to its original intensity and freshness what it felt like, say,

To fall in love at the age of 16, or

*To smell the smells and hear the sounds of a house that has long since disappeared, or
To laugh till the tears ran down our cheeks with somebody who died more years ago than we can easily count, or for whom, in every way that matters, we might as well have died years ago ourselves ...*

To remember the past is to see that we are here today by grace, that we have survived as a gift.” (p.11)

I can assure you that there will continue to be more transition work to do here. I can assure you that there will be other and ongoing changes that will occur in the months and years to come here. I can also assure you that you will never be alone as you move into the future. You will also always have the awesome power and presence of the Triune God—Creator, Christ, and Holy Spirit—to assist you.

Trust in that amazing grace. Trust in that gift. Amen.

