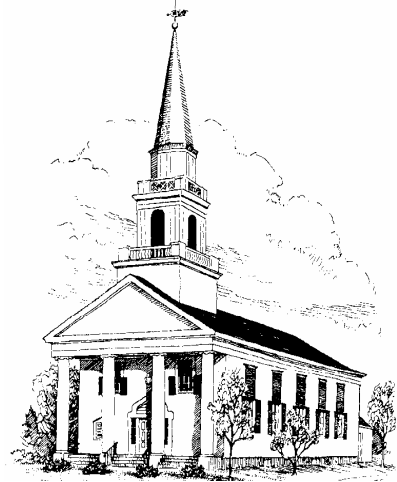


Mystic Congregational Church, UCC

Mystic, Connecticut

Sermon from May 4, 2008
Rev. Barbara J. Libby
“Waiting Faithfully”

Scriptures:
1 Peter 4:12-14, 5:6-11
John 17:1-11



Both of our texts speak about the need for unity in the face of being tested and being challenged, of moving through whatever fiery ordeal life deals us! Both these texts speak about times in life when things are not ordinary or usual, rather when life is out of the ordinary and un-usual. We all face times of great turmoil, times of great pain, times of difficulty, right? We all face such times at one time or another in our lives.

In both cases the writers are talking about how much we need God’s presence in the face of adversaries. None of us wants to face life’s trials and tribulations alone. We all yearn for someone to be present with us and it is God’s presence that is always there to help us in times of trouble & trial.

Both of our texts also stress the need for us to be on alert, to be disciplined, and to increase our faithfulness and trust in God in the course of all that life deals us. The writer of 1st Peter stresses the need to learn to wait, and the need for patience and strength, for courage and fortitude. Jesus models that he has spent his lifetime being in touch and in communication with God, whom he affectionately calls “daddy” in this touching prayer where he asks on our behalf for God to accompany us in all that we do.

Both of our texts speak of the need for unity in the face of adversity. Jesus’ final words are that God should protect us so that we all might be one. I hear Jesus yearning for a oneness and unity among the various parts of any community so that we become true partners in a covenant together that says the whole is greater than the parts.

As we come to this final Sunday of the Easter season, a Sunday when we might have talked about the Ascension of Christ that was recognized in this week past, we also prepare to come together next Sunday for the celebration of Pentecost, the birthday of the church, when we recognize the Holy Spirit’s official arrival among all of us...

As Laurel A. Dykstra writes in her book entitled *The Creator of Life*:

“Easter, Ascension, and Pentecost are not three distinct seasons, but rather celebrations of and grapplings with three aspects of Christ’s Resurrection and what they mean about Jesus, God, Spirit, and us ... Easter did

not just happen one morning 2,000 years ago, and it does not happen one Sunday a year; it happens over and over again through the life of the church and the life of those who would follow Jesus. It happens after the chocolate and jelly beans are gone; it happens when we know that love and hope have died. Then and now, powers and principalities say no to resistance, but God says yes to life. Death does not have the last word. Each new Christian generation has Easter experiences that demand the absurd proclamation, "He is alive!"

So as we move through the seasons of the church year, please know that we are never "done with" one aspect or other of the story. The story merges and flows together. We hear the story differently as we move through our own life stories and the story of this community of faith.

Mystic Congregational Church continues as a community of faithful Christians. We are all followers of the Risen Christ. We are all Resurrection people. We are also all individuals and families trying to move as best we are able through all of the challenges that life deals us.

Both as individuals and as a community of faith, we try to wait faithfully with lives that are over-full & over-busy. Both as individuals and as a community, we try to live good lives with all of the challenges of rising food prices, sky-rocketing oil and gasoline prices, the threat of recession, the uncertainties of a global economy, the growing environmental concerns for planet Earth. Living in the early 21st century is not easy or simple. And waiting faithfully is not easy or simple either. Continuing to learn how to live as a covenanted body of Christ here at Mystic Congregational Church is not easy or simple.

We know some of the challenges that this church faces, don't we? We know about times of transition that seem to go on and on. We know about dwindling attendance and the threat of dwindling membership. We know the fear of not having enough. We know about on-going fallout from one challenge or another in the life of the church. We know how hard it is to wait for the Search Committee to find a new pastor. We have come to discover this week some of the peculiar challenges of searching for a new youth director. We know about an aging congregation and fears about unity and dis-unity. We know how hard it is to talk about difficult issues.

I hope we know (and can remember) that none of these challenges are unique or peculiar to this congregation. Rest assured. These are common problems of churches in the early 21st century as they have been problems for many churches through time from the 1st into the 21st century.

After all, the challenge of unity has been a concern since New Testament times. The Scriptures reveal that unity is not a new problem. The writer of 1st Peter emphasizes how vital it is for communities to hold together in times of great challenge. Peter may be encouraging when he says in so many words, "Don't worry, be happy." He also says that it's important to "Discipline yourselves and keep alert."

Jesus' prayer is all about the need for unity. He focuses on the desire that we may all be one. The kind of unity Jesus asked for his disciples (and us) to find was nothing less than the unity he had with God, his father. Christian unity does indeed have a great deal to do with relationship and the presence of the spirit of God.

One part of our waiting faithfully is to trust in the capacity for unity in Christ that is built into our spiritual DNA by our Triune God into whom we are baptized. Another part of our waiting faithfully is to allow ourselves to see potential for connection in mission across all sorts of artificial lines we've drawn among so many of our churches with our existing institutional structures, denominations, and separate community organizations. The "mission field" that is always everywhere isn't just for folks here at Mystic Congregational Church. It is a mission field for all Christians everywhere and even out beyond our faith to others of many faiths. We are invited to live out Christian community and witness to the power and reality of God's kingdom with all.

Each week we gather here in this sanctuary in the name of the Triune God, around the word, around song and scripture, around sermon and sacrament. Each week we try to keep the focus on God as we move through the events of our lives in this increasingly secular world.

There are lots of things that pull our focus away from God—lots of busy schedules, meetings, work settings and family concerns; lots of sports schedules, doctor appointments, lessons for the kids, and events for our youth. Our busy lives just keep getting busier and more frantic as we try to run faster and faster and try to fit more things into our already full lives.

Active waiting is not, of course, a one-time experience for us. How then do we wait faithfully? Waiting faithfully is all about trusting. It's about believing that there is a God who walks with us every step of the way. Waiting faithfully is all about being one in the Spirit.

We are one in the Spirit. We are one in the Lord.

We are one in the Spirit. We are one in the Lord.

And we pray that all unity will one day be restored.

And they'll know we are Christians by our love, by our love.

Yes, they'll know we are Christians by our love.

We come to the communion table each month hoping to be filled with the peace of Christ, to be nourished by the body and blood of Christ so that we might be strengthened to go out and face all that life deals us—challenges at home, challenges at work, challenges of our bodies and our health, challenges of the world, challenges of this moment in time and space.

We come to this table to be fed in the replaying of a simple yet splendid meal of sharing that took place over 2000 years ago. We come to remember and we also come to this table to be renewed so that we might go out into the world and do it all again.

Amen.

