

What to do / How to be

Good morning First Congregational. Let me speak for me and Christine both when I say we miss seeing you and can't wait for the time when we can all safely return. The good news is that I have two jokes to offer in today's mediation.

A priest, a rabbit, and a minister walk into a bar. The rabbit hops up to the bartender and says...I think I might be a typo.

I can't help but identify a bit with the rabbit as typo when it comes to offering a summer sermon—close, but not quite what we have in mind.

But today is the day the Lord has made. Let us rejoice and be glad in it!

This is a challenging time for our country—for the entire world. Rev. Dr. Otis Moss has talked about the two pandemics caused by Covid-19 and Covid-1619. Pew research confirms that income inequality in the US has increased since 1980 and is greater than in peer countries. The coronavirus pandemic has left millions of families without stable employment. It is feared that in the US more than 54 million people, including 18 million children, will be food insecure before the end of this year. Given that we can't agree on how to handle such a tangible & immediate threat like Covid, are we remotely up to combat Global Warming? Are issues such as gun control even on the RADAR?

These are Global & national issues which touch us all, but which affect some much, MUCH more than others.

In their sermons, Lisa Loughin and Sarah Gallop said that it's not enough to be a good person, a nice person--we have to be willing to examine the world, our respective places in it, and to act. I couldn't agree more.

And I think we can all agree that just trying to understand *what to do* can be completely overwhelming.

Is it any wonder that this past May it was reported that 1 in 3 US adults were experiencing anxiety, depression or both?

I wonder when considering the mental and emotional state of so many, do we Christians talk enough, offer enough guidance to people about how to *be*? We offer the peace of Christ to each other, but can we do more?

I'd like us to reflect on how our worship does help us with what to do, and how to be—yet we definitely place a premium on one over the other. As a blanket statement, Christians—and particularly *this* community of Christians—are considered 'do-ers.' We judge ourselves by our *doing*. What have we accomplished and how have we affected the world around us? But what we don't examine as often is the peace we feel ourselves, and the peace we can bring to others in the world. In this context I don't mean peaceful as comfortable or relaxed. I mean the peace that comes from being *present* with the world and our place in it—and in fact this can be extremely *uncomfortable*. But doing and being go hand in hand.

In today's Psalm: "Be still and know that I am God." It's an instruction to feel the peace we can then reflect in the world. But a question: are people outside our faith community interested in what we have to say?

A confession of mine is that I love the complexity and nuance of the Bible—it is beautiful—and yet I completely sympathize with the "unchurched" who resist "Religion" (with a capital 'R') when they think they are only offered an overly simplistic set of required beliefs to be taken literally.

With this in mind, the best religious joke of all time comes from Emo Philips:

I saw this guy on a bridge about to jump. I said, "Don't do it!"
He said, "Nobody loves me." I said, "God loves you. Do you believe in God?"
He said, "Yes." I said, "Are you a Christian or a Jew?" He said, "A Christian." I said,
"Me, too! Protestant or Catholic?" He said, "Protestant." I said, "Me, too! What
franchise?" He said, "Baptist." I said, "Me, too! Northern Baptist or Southern
Baptist?" He said, "Northern Baptist." I said, "Me, too! Northern Conservative
Baptist or Northern Liberal Baptist?"
He said, "Northern Conservative Baptist." I said, "Me, too! Northern Conservative
Baptist Great Lakes Region, or Northern Conservative Baptist Eastern Region?" He
said, "Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region." I said, "Me, too!"

Northern Conservative†Baptist Great Lakes Region Council of 1879, or Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region Council of 1912?" He said, "Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region Council of 1912." I said, "Die, heretic!" And I pushed him over.

I had a moment earlier this year. I was walking across a square in Toronto where it was cold and sunny. I passed a couple at a small table, who handing out religious pamphlets in front of a sign which asked, "Is *this* all there is?" I took one of their pamphlets which featured a gory picture of Jesus on the cross. I thanked them, and said, "This really is an amazing day though." Now I didn't mean this in a flippant way at all. And I didn't mean that it was an amazing day because the sun was out. Their question actually made me pause and it generated a deep sense of the pure magic that is God's creation. It made me a bit wishful to think of people who may be simply doing time, WAITING, for God's kingdom to come about *after* this life.

Be still and know that I am God.

If we wonder why people are less likely to go to church, particularly in progressive churches in America, I can only assume that we are viewed as a group that is judgey, dogmatic and out of touch.

I have a friend who is currently "unchurched." Not long ago, I suggested he might want to join us because of the questions posed in sermons and discussions the congregation has. "Oh, I would totally go with you but, you know...I believe in science." He was kidding, of course. Right?

Now I'm undaunted because on the *doing* side, Will, Judy, and this entire congregation push beyond a white-washed version of Jesus--challenging each other to grow--and that we are aware how short we may fall when it comes to the activism that Jesus has asked of us.

Despite everything, I am encouraged because so much of the change I would like to see in the world is being demanded by people much younger than I. Back in the fall of 2018, even before the pandemic, people ages 13 to 30 were predominantly identifying themselves as progressive, and a significant majority of them said they saw the country's growing racial and ethnic diversity as a good thing, and that

they are less likely than older generations to see the United States as superior to other nations. People are moving beyond simple acknowledgment of a need for change, and now profess themselves outraged enough to do the work. This is a great place to start. And this church is a great place to listen and learn and contemplate what must come next.

I think about Millennials and Gen Z-ers—particularly the majority who don't have the same experience of growing up with a community of worship. But without a faith community, this demographic believes in the power of activism, and they care about social issues more than institutions.

Who can blame them for being skeptical of organized religion? Do any of us really believe that if Jesus weighed in on today's church as a whole he would be excited by how Christianity has been incorporated into the power structure? No. And he doesn't need to come back to check in because he said plenty. (Matt 25:40) "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me."

So let's forget the church as an institution for a moment and reflect on what Jesus did, what he taught, and how we must live our lives to honor God.

Jesus' instruction of surrender in order to enter the kingdom of heaven is simple in concept but more challenging in execution than nearly all have in mind when fighting for social justice. Many will protest, more will vote, but ultimately most prefer to be comfortable. And to be clear, it is not much of a confession from me to admit that while I believe in the word and work of Jesus, to this point in my life, I haven't had the fortitude to live his word. I took comfort in Jessica McArdle's sermon that Jesus does not ask more than what I can do with my individual gift. Perhaps I am still living into my gifts.

Rather than Christians pointing to John 3:16 as the quintessential message, I'd like to see Luke 6:36: "Be compassionate as God is compassionate." This belies the well worn but spot-on prompt, "What would Jesus do?" And THIS is where the passion of any religious debate should lie: what would Jesus' compassion look like today?

Another confession is that while I know that Jesus' actions should be considered perfect, I strongly identify with the frustration that the disciples clearly felt. In

today's scripture, Jesus has just fed 5,000 with loaves and fishes. But then goes up the mountainside, off by himself, to pray.

Perhaps this is covered by John 21:25, "Jesus did many other things as well. If every one of them were written down, I suppose that even the whole world would not have room for the books that would be written."

I'll just say that when they argued over what to include in the canon, I wish the early leaders of the church had included more guidance from Jesus on how to pray. When it comes to beliefs, or strong suspicions, I am confident that Jesus had much to say about how to be still and pray. No, I'm not forgetting the Lord's prayer, but I am suggesting that the power of centering prayer is understated. When Jesus catches Peter in the water and then chastises him, "You of little faith," he said, "why did you doubt?" I blaspheme with the suggestion that Peter's faith would have been stronger at that moment had Jesus brought his disciples with him up that mountainside.

1200 years later, one of my favorite heretics, Meister Eckhart, wrote: "This then is salvation: to marvel at the beauty of created things and to marvel at the beauty of their Creator."

And again I am pleased with FCCW for our exploration of centering prayer. Pre-pandemic, we were holding a time for centering prayer early each Wednesday in Ripley chapel. I look forward to the time we can join together in prayer again, and highly encourage everyone to explore what centering prayer and meditation can do to help recognize the magic and mystery of each moment we're here.

"Be still and know that I am God."

This is not the promise that good will come to those who believe. This points to the immediacy of this world, and the knowable fact that God is here.

The question from the couple, "Is this all there is?" We can get into what we believe happens in the next life. But *this*? What we have right here, right now is a mystery. I love science and have enormous faith in what it will continue to do for the world, but science doesn't preclude this mystery. It is a part of it.

I hope everyone has gotten to hear the sermons of Jessica and Lisa and Sarah. We all feel the weight of these times. Our church has the opportunity to speak out, work toward and contribute to the progress we want to see in our nation and the world. We have more to learn than most imagined. And we have the challenge to bring the younger generations into the fold—not to instruct, but to hear, learn and better understand how they envision the future.

Taking up this fight for equality is not new for the church or the UCC. One of its more influential ministers, William Sloane Coffin Jr—probably best known as a peace activist during the Vietnam war—wrote in 2003:

“Law is not as disinterested as our concepts of law pretend; law serves power; law in large measure is a recapitulation of the status quo; it confirms a rigid order designed to insulate the beneficiaries of the status quo from the disturbances of change. The painful truth – one with a long history – is that police are around in large part to guarantee a peaceful digestion for the rich.” (Credo, 2003)

This is a critical time for our country. More people than ever before have seen that the system of justice is certainly not color-blind—and are shaken to feel that the very foundation of our society isn’t either. Books and movies abound, but none is more traumatic than the video coming from phones.

Now, despite it all, I look at the state of our country and I am still filled with hope and optimism. The idea of being anti-racist is new to many, but the most encouraging sign is that men who look like me seem to be more willing to just stop—not pretend to have answers—but to acknowledge that, yes, this is systemic, and acknowledge that change is imperative.

There is so much that needs to be done, but today I think we have a clearer picture than ever of what our actual challenges are, and more people than ever are willing to act. But it is not only action. Doing and being are two sides of the same existence—feeding each other. And when we are overwhelmed, the works and words of Jesus provide the answer with the infinite power of love and compassion, and the recognition of God in the present with prayer.

I offer this in the name of his son, Jesus, amen.