

*Lighting and Lifting Our Candle*

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*United Church of Strafford, Vermont*

*February 5, 2023, Fifth Sunday after Epiphany*

*Readings from Isaiah 58; Gospel of Thomas, 24, 70, 77 and 113; I Corinthians 2:12-16; Matthew 5:13-16*

**Welcome:** Welcome to the United Church of Strafford, Vermont, on this Fifth Sunday after Epiphany. Welcome to those of you in the sanctuary and those online, and welcome especially to Sarah Cantor and the Cantornote Church Musicians.

The United Church of Christ uses the phrase, “extravagant hospitality” to describe the unconditional love and all-inclusive welcome that congregations like ours aspire to offer. I would add the word courageous to the phrase.

Bill Coffin said courage is the first virtue because it makes all other virtues possible. It takes courage to be a truly open, loving community. It takes courage for an introvert even to be here. It takes courage for any of us to walk up to a stranger or someone different from us with an open heart and start talking.

It takes courage to say publicly that we love and welcome people who are excluded and attacked by others, and to stand against all forms of oppression and discrimination. So thank you for your extravagant and courageous hospitality, and please show it again today by extending your care to everyone here, especially to those you know least well, both in person and on Zoom.

**Call to Worship—** This Thursday was Candlemas, the day the baby Jesus was presented in the temple. The season of Epiphany is all about seeing the manifestation of God’s light in the world, and at least two people in the temple recognized it in Jesus that day.

Candlemas gets its name because as part of its celebration people would bring their candles to church to have them blessed so that the light of Christ would be shining in their homes every night.

All our light comes from the same source that created all things, and this same spirit of the universe is trying to guide our evolution even now toward the ideal realm of love and light that we are called to create on earth. Let us each contribute our candle to that cause and celebrate the collective beauty and power of all our light as we worship together.

**Children's Time**— Good morning! A big part of what we do in church is try to understand life, because it is full of mysteries, and the world keeps changing. The last two Sundays we heard Jim Schley read from a beautiful, wise book, called Braiding Sweetgrass. (There is going to be a townwide discussion of that book on Tuesday evening at 7:00 PM in Barrett Hall.)

Like the church, the author, Robin Wall Kimmerer, has devoted her career to understanding life and the wise and good way to live. She braids together her training as a professor of Environmental and Forest Biology and her heritage as a Native American and her own accumulated stories as a daughter, mother, teacher and elder. Braided together, all those ways of knowing give much more wisdom about life than just one could.

I am reading the book and starting to think that this is exactly the combination we need. Science untangles the mysteries of how nature works, indigenous wisdom values all things in nature as our family and our teachers to be treated with love and respect, and a female elder brings the heart of nurture and a passion for the things that make for peace.

If an idea can be braided together with these three strands, then it's probably a good and useful idea. If it goes against science and indigenous wisdom and the perspective of an elder mother and teacher, then we need to question whether that idea is really going to help us and help this world.

Churches have lots of ideas that have been handed down to us, and some churches' ideas directly contradict other churches' ideas. For instance, some churches welcome all people as beloved children of God, and some do not. I think if you try braiding those two ideas of inclusion or exclusion together with science and indigenous perspective and the wisdom of women elders, you could discern whether inclusion or exclusion is the sacred way.

The church has many great ideas about life to bring into the braid because Jesus was a healer who taught us how to create the realm of God's mercy and justice and peace on earth. There is one strand that church teaches that is most important to braid into the mix, and that is...prayer! Prayer opens our heart in search of spiritual understanding and growth, if we listen more than talk.

Let us say together the traditional version of the Lord's Prayer...

## ***Lighting and Lifting Our Candle***

The book *Braiding Sweetgrass* gives a fair critique of the way the exploitive European-Christian culture brought terrible destruction to this continent and its peoples and eventually to the entire earth, whereas the indigenous cultures had brought mostly harmony and sustainability.

It is important to recognize, though, that the white supremacist Christian nationalist worldview is as far from the teachings of Jesus as it is from the teachings of Native American wisdom keepers.

In fact, Jesus and the spiritual masters most like Jesus in the church have dedicated their lives to oppose hard-hearted ego-driven societies like the European culture that invaded Turtle Island.

The purest Judeo-Christian tradition has the very medicine we need to heal the damage that the corrupted Judeo-Christian tradition has inflicted, so it is crucial to incorporate the best teachings of the church in our braid of perspectives.

For instance, today we heard several teachings about the light that shines in the darkness. It is important that we light and lift our candle and let it shine, and that we understand how effective this simple spiritual practice can be in the face of humanity at its worst.

We often read a Hanukkah story during Advent or Epiphany by Isaac Bashevis Singer called *The Power of Light*. It takes place in the ruins of the Warsaw Ghetto that the Nazis have just bombed and burned. Three hundred thousand Jews have been gunned down or shipped off to death camps for no reason except they were Jews. Only a few remain in hiding.

Rebecca and David are thirteen and fourteen years old, both their families have been killed and they have been living for weeks in a lightless, collapsed basement as winter has deepened. Every few days David has snuck out to search in the ruins for food to keep them alive. Each time he goes Rebecca knows he could be captured or killed. They both know they will starve or freeze to death if they stay in this dark room, but they also know that the Nazis watch the Ghetto day and night, and to try to escape would be extremely dangerous.

One day Rebecca's heart stops when she hears someone drop down into the basement, but it is David, and he has found not only a few scraps of food but also a candle stub and some matches. They realize that it is the first night of Hanukkah. They say the prayer and light the candle and see one another's faces for the first time in weeks.

They are dirty and much thinner, but their eyes shine with love, and with something else as well. Singer puts it this way: “That glimmer of light, surrounded by so many shadows, seemed to say without words: Evil has not yet taken complete dominion. A spark of hope is still left.”

Years later David and Rebecca would say that it was the power of that one tiny candle flame shining in the darkness that filled them with the courage they needed to make their long and dangerous journey to a new world. They left that very night.

And here we are today. The situation in our nation and world can feel like theirs, as if we are trapped in a dark room of danger and fear, as if massive forces are at work around us that are destroying what we have loved, our democracy, our natural world, and we see no way out.

Yet we know that the majority of people long as we do to live in the light of love and justice and peace. We know that we are part of a resistance movement of loving people who are struggling to create that harmonious and sustainable world that we call God’s realm on earth.

Like David and Rebecca, we need hope and courage to be part of the struggle for a new world, and hope depends on us finding our candle and lighting and lifting it.

So what useful pieces of wisdom can we glean from today’s scriptures to braid together and strengthen our light?

First, we heard that the light is in us each and in all things. Jesus says, “You are the light of the world.” And he says, “I am the light that is within and around all things... Split a piece of wood; I am there. Lift up a stone, and you will find me there.” The light is in everyone and everything because it is a metaphor for the essence of all creation, the spirit that flows through the universe from the Big Bang to here and now.

Second, the wisdom we need in order to find the light is in the Gospel of Thomas, where the disciples ask, “Show us where you will be so we can seek you.” We need to keep seeking the light, we need to keep growing in the light—that is our calling and that is what the world needs.

We may get so lost that we no longer believe that light exists, but we need to trust that it is within and around all things, that all came forth from it and all naturally find their true identity in it. The light is our home in our heart’s core. We need to keep seeking even when we feel lost.

Third, it is not enough to seek the light for the self-satisfying pleasure of it. We need to lift it and shine it to the world once we find it. “If you bring forth the light that is within you it will save you,” Jesus says. “If it does not shine, it is darkness.” Isaiah expresses God’s anger at

people who seek spiritual light but do not translate it into works of unconditional love and compassion, and daring actions for justice and peace.

The Christian writer, Madeleine L'Engle, wrote a book entitled *Walking on Water: Reflections on Faith and Art*. She wrote, "If the work comes to the artist and says, 'Here I am, serve me,' then the job of the artist, great or small, is to serve. The amount of the artist's talent is not what it is about."

She goes on, "Jean Rhys said in an interview in the *Paris Review*, 'Listen to me. All of writing is a huge lake. There are great rivers that feed the lake, like Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky. And there are mere trickles like Jean Rhys. All that matters is feeding the lake. I don't matter. The lake matters. You must keep feeding the lake.'"

This is the ultimate wisdom about the light. It does not matter how much or how little we have to shine, we need to keep lighting and lifting our candle and contributing our part.

If you shine through daring acts of love and justice, Isaiah promises, "God will guide you continually... Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt; you shall raise up the foundations of many generations; you shall be called the repairer of the broken, the restorer of towns and of the earth."

It is not your light alone, it is a whole lake of light, it is all the universe's light, it is God's light. All we need to do is contribute our one candle and our congregation of candles. Keep lighting and lifting, keep feeding the light.

Let us pray in silence, seeking the light within us, seeking God's help to let it shine through our lives and our love.

**Haiku by Mel Goertz:**

Jacket, hat, fresh air,  
sun and walker.

Ten laps on the porch this morning.