

Listening to the Spirit with Thanksgiving

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United Church of Strafford, Vermont

November 19, 2023 Twenty-fifth Sunday after Pentecost

Psalms 95; I Corinthians 12:4-7; Galatians 5:22, 25-26, 6:6; Acts 2:17-18; 44-47

Welcome: Good morning, and welcome to the United Church of Strafford on this big Sunday celebrating Thanksgiving and the last Sunday in the season of Pentecost and the last Sunday in the Church Year. Traditionally this is called Reign of Christ Sunday, a mountaintop moment to envision what the earth will look like when humanity finally evolves to be as loving, compassionate, merciful, nonviolent and Spirit-led as Jesus.

On top of all that, this is the first Sunday of the post-sabbatical time, starting a long stretch of special services. It is the last blast of joyous light before Advent's quiet darkness which starts next Sunday. So welcome to this pivotal service, those of you in the sanctuary and those online, and welcome back to Rolf Pechukas, the musician and choir director today! I am overjoyed to be here with you all.

It is most important at Thanksgiving to acknowledge that we are on the ancestral and unceded land of the traditional caretakers, the Western Abenaki people. We give thanks for the opportunity to share in the bounty of this place and to protect it in the spirit of indigenous wisdom that sees all life and the land itself as gifts of the Spirit.

We acknowledge that the American holiday of Thanksgiving is painful to many Native Americans because of the romanticized story of the Pilgrims and Wampanoag people at the first celebration, ignoring the more complex reality and the betrayals and violent abuses that followed. May our awareness of that pain renew our commitment to the Reparations Fund we have established and the conversations our Fulfilling Our Vision committee has begun about how we can best support our Abenaki neighbors.

We also honor and support those neighbors by celebrating Thanksgiving with all our hearts, because the more deeply grateful we are for our life here the more we align ourselves with the spirit of indigenous peoples and their more sustainable and harmonious way of life. As Robin Wall Kimmerer says in *Braiding Sweetgrass*, "Many Native peoples around the world...have this in common—we are rooted in cultures of gratitude...."

We also need to let ourselves envision a future where humanity fulfills the ideals that Jesus and wise indigenous elders have taught and modeled. We often give thanks for the land in this church, but today, as Kimmerer says, “We are dreaming of a time when the land might give thanks for the people.” We dream of making this a community that lives by its ideals, and that stands against abuses of indigenous and all marginalized peoples.

To that end I invite us to read together the Open and Affirming Covenant that we passed unanimously at Annual Meeting in September. Let us stand and read it with joyful thanksgiving and heartfelt commitment:

Open and Affirming Covenant
Adopted unanimously at Annual Meeting
on September 17, 2023
after a well-informed, careful process
open to our entire church family.

We, the members of the United Church of Strafford, Vermont, regard all people as beloved children of God. We give thanks for the many and diverse gifts of God among us.

We declare ourselves to be an Open and Affirming congregation. We welcome and accept into full participation, membership and leadership, people of every sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, race, ethnicity, faith background, political affiliation, age, marital status and family structure, physical or mental abilities, education and economic status. We acknowledge with humility that this list is not exhaustive and that the terms are in some cases harmful and evolving social constructs. We honor the worth and dignity of all people. We affirm all relationships founded on the principles of love, justice, the Golden Rule and treating others as they wish to be treated.

We commit ourselves to integrate the spirit of this covenant into all aspects of our church life. We pledge to work to end oppression, discrimination and hateful behaviors whenever we encounter them, and, guided and empowered by the Holy Spirit, to help create the beloved community of God’s realm on earth.

Whoever you are, wherever you are on life’s journey, you are welcome here.

Listening to the Spirit with Thanksgiving

Yesterday Kate and Erik Reimanis attended the memorial service for Judith and Frederick Buechner in Manchester, Vermont. Frederick was Kate's cousin and a beautiful writer and wise ordained preacher and theologian. The title of this sermon is "Listening to the Spirit with Thanksgiving," and the following paragraph from Buechner's book *Listening to Your Life* sets the context:

Listen to your life. All moments are key moments.... Taking your children to school and kissing your wife goodbye. Eating lunch with a friend. Trying to do a decent day's work. Hearing the rain patter against the window. There is no event so commonplace but that God is present within it, always hiddenly, always leaving you room to recognize him or not to recognize him, but all the more fascinatingly because of that, all the more compellingly and hauntingly.... If I were called upon to state in a few words the essence of everything I was trying to say both as a novelist and as a preacher, it would be something like this: Listen to your life. See it for the fathomless mystery that it is. In the boredom and pain of it no less than in the excitement and gladness: touch, taste, smell your way to the holy and hidden heart of it because in the last analysis all moments are key moments, and life itself is grace.

To listen deeply to our lives is to listen to the Spirit, and to discover depths of gratitude and hope, and we have so much to be thankful for today! Here is just a partial and general list generated by listening to the life of this church. Please feel free to shout out "Thank you!" after each one.

- four months of extraordinary Seeking Spirit services while I was gone; **"Thank you!"**
- the gifted people among us who led those services, both word and music; **"Thank you!"**
- the dedicated, extremely generous and hard working church leaders who did all the behind the scenes efforts to make the services happen and keep the church vibrant; **"Thank you!"**
- the Spirit that we sought that showed up week after week! Really and truly! **"Thank you!"**
- the historic Open and Affirming vote that took place at Annual Meeting on September 17th making a public "pledge to work to end oppression, discrimination and hateful behaviors whenever we encounter them, and, guided and empowered by the Holy Spirit, to help create the beloved community of God's realm on earth." **"Thank you!"**

- the Fulfilling Our Vision Committee that guided that ONA process and that is now working on a local Native American Reparations Fund; **“Thank you!”**
- the work of so many in the church and town to create the Community Nurse position; **“Thank you!”**
- the refocused care for the church building thanks to the sale of the Parsonage; **“Thank you!”**
- the ongoing work of the Deacons and Mission Committee helping people in need in Strafford and our region and a world in crisis; **“Thank you!”**
- every person who comes through our church doors who is working in their own way to follow where the Spirit is leading them to love and serve in ways little and large, from self-care to neighbor-care to earth-care; **“Thank you!”**
- the faith of the loving people who have gone before us and left us this church and all its gifts, and the hope that the children on Story Sundays give us that this church may continue to serve for generations to come. **“Thank you!”**

We each can add to that list—I have enormous gratitude for specific things in the past year, and I look forward to hearing your list during Joys and Concerns or when we talk after refreshments, but right now I have a gratitude that I suspect you may not fully share that I hope to inspire in you—gratitude for the gift of the Church Year, the flow of seasons from Advent to Christmas to Epiphany to Lent to Easter to Pentecost.

The wisdom of the church year goes back to the Jewish calendar of holy days and from there back beyond recorded history to seasonal rituals we can only guess by their stonehenges. Our church year adds its own refinements based on the life and Spirit of Jesus and insights of the Christian mystics.

Pentecost begins around planting time and ends today at the final harvest celebration. The themes of Pentecost season are all about the work of the Spirit. We watch it nurture seeds so that they grow and bear fruit and ultimately give birth to new seeds. The Spirit does this literally in nature and figuratively in our lives.

The beauty of the church year is in its metaphors but its wisdom is experiential and incarnational, it transforms us as we pass through it to the extent that we live into it.

Today and for the next eight Sundays the church year offer an abundance of beautiful metaphors and transformational experiences. Next Sunday we begin the contemplative season of Advent with its greens and candles and gorgeous music, with each Sunday lifting another theme: hope, peace, joy and love. On joy Sunday we hope to have a church full of children for the pageantry of the nativity story, on love Sunday we remember Mary and the way in which we are all called to bear Christ into the world, and Christmas Eve is Advent's climax. Epiphany, the season of light, flows out of Christmas, when we seek the manifestation of God and Spirit in specific lives on earth, not just in Jesus and saints and heroes, but in everyone and everything.

The church year leads us through seasons of metaphorical darkness and experiential introspection in order to open us to the Spirit's presence more fully. Advent asks us to wait and watch and pray in anticipation of the coming light of Jesus at his birth, and Lent drives us into the darkness of the wilderness so we may be more deeply transformed by the brilliant light of Easter dawn.

Today is perhaps the most dynamic Sunday of the year because past, present and future all meet here, and we pause to look at all three. It is the last Sunday of Pentecost and of the entire church year, so we look back with gratitude at how the Spirit has moved through our lives in that time.

The last Sunday of Pentecost is also called Reign of Christ Sunday. The wisdom of the church year asks us not just to look back at where the Spirit moved but at the same time to look ahead at where the Spirit seems to be leading on the path that Jesus showed us toward the realm of God on earth.

We perform a willing suspension of disbelief on this Sunday and allow ourselves to forget how hard or sad or scary or lost we feel our world is and instead imagine that this same world can and will be transformed.

Imagine a global human civilization where every nation and community at last is nonviolent, compassionate, equitable, democratic, free, living in harmony with all the earth. Imagine humanity bearing the fruit not of its ego but of its spirit, the fruit of unconditional love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

What would be different in our homes and schools, our towns and nations, our economy and international relations? Imagine!

This last day of the church year calls us to look at the Spirit moving in the past and future and also right here and now. We can respond with both gratitude and hope based on the simple fact that we have this precious gift of life, we can take a breath and inhabit a body that enables us to be part of this loving community and this act of worship. We can bring forth the loving gifts the Spirit has given us to give to others, right here, right now, the greatest meaning and joy life can have.

The present also includes what is known as the cloud of witnesses or communion of saints. I came here two weeks ago when Rachel led worship and I intentionally chose the pew where I sat as a parishioner for ten years starting in 1983. It was not an accident that I sat as far from this pulpit as I possibly could—like Jonah, I ran from my calling for a long time.

Rachel led a beautiful service of inner reflection. In the silence I felt the presence of so many people I have loved here—I saw my old pewmate, Marlene Ward with her twinkling eyes. I saw the Lornells sitting near where their daughter Joey Hawkins now sits, I saw my fellow Deacon, Frances Wilson, and Ned and Vi and Bill Coffin, and Pam Ransom, and so many more.

All their passion and creativity, all their shining light, all their wisdom and understanding and teaching, all their work for justice and peace, all their kindness, all the comfort I felt in their presence, all the times they surprised us with insights or humor or gifts we didn't know they had—when I stand here now I am standing in the river of all that has been in this sanctuary, and all that the Spirit will bring forth from this beloved living communion of saints.

Today reminds us that every present moment experienced by a heart that is awake, wide open and seeking the Spirit is a moment of eternity, however fleeting, in which all times meet and flow together, and all people and all creation are one, and we can see that God dwells in us and we in God. Everything we do in such a moment spreads the Spirit's peace and joy and love around us and builds God's realm on earth.

This is the transformation the church year is designed to help us undergo, moment by moment, season by season, metaphor by metaphor, experience by experience. This is the gift it offers. For this also can we say “Thank you?” **“Thank you!”**

Haiku by Mel Goertz

I sing my thanks
for food so good, for friends who love,
for field and woods.