

Celebrate the Struggle

Rev. Thomas Cary Kinder

United Church of Strafford, Vermont

March 14, 2021 Fourth Sunday in Lent

Romans 7:15, 21-24; Galatians 2:19-20;

2 Corinthians 11:23-28; Mark 11:15-18

to see the readings go to this service on our website under

<https://unitedchurchofstrafford.com/category/on-line-services/>

Call to Worship: Welcome to the United Church of Strafford, Vermont, on this Fourth Sunday in Lent and Struggle Sunday. A year ago last night Annemieke and Jeremiah gave a concert in the sanctuary with blue tape blocking every other pew. The Church Council met after the concert to discuss how we would respond to the growing pandemic. It was the first meeting where we included people by video, but it was because of road conditions, not COVID.

I came into the meeting wanting to keep the church open—I felt people would need it. Bill Burden was with us by phone, and when his turn came, he said he had studied pandemics, especially the 1918 flu, and that the only way to beat COVID would be to shut things down and stay apart.

The Council still felt hopeful the danger would be over by Easter three weeks later, but we took the precaution of saying we would not gather for a whole month. We will not be gathering this Easter, either, but as Deadra said last Sunday, we will be celebrating it with new hope.

Today we pass the halfway point in the Lenten wilderness. The Gospel readings are now coming from the last week of Jesus' life as tensions with the authorities increase and the cross draws near.

The themes of Lent's remaining Sundays are Struggle, Truth and Oneness, and looking back, they are themes of this pandemic year, as well. Today we celebrate the struggle as we worship together...

[The sermon begins on the next page.]

Celebrate the Struggle

Swahili wisdom says, “Life has meaning only in the struggle. Victory and defeat are in the hands of the gods, so we might as well celebrate the struggle.”

Life is not all struggle, but there will always be some until we reach the Promised Land of God’s realm on earth, until compassion, justice and freedom are extended to all, until we live in harmony with our planet, until we have attained the Spirit-filled heart and mind of Christ and experienced our oneness with God and the universe, until we are fully evolved.

Until then we will need to struggle in those directions, and those struggles will be among the most meaningful moments of our lives.

The co-founder of Centering Prayer, Thomas Keating, loved the metaphor of the butterfly struggling to get out of its cocoon as an archetype of human transformation. If a sympathetic person comes along and helps pull the butterfly free, it will be disastrous. The butterfly needs the struggle to strengthen its wings, or it will never fly.

Keating was a brilliant teacher of the spiritual journey, combining ancient Christian tradition and the wisdom of other faiths and modern psychological insights.

He was just the spiritual teacher we needed to come along in this moment of history, because we will not escape the dangerous wilderness that humanity has created if we do not complete the journey that Jesus and Paul and the Buddha and other traditions have called us to take.

Struggle comes on those paths as both a mysterious fact of life and a miraculous gift of grace.

Keating taught that in the Christian tradition the spiritual journey travels in spirals up a mountain. We climb to our first spiritual awareness and find ourselves on a blissful plateau, but if we continue from there we come to an overlook where we see our materialistic, selfish lives in painful contrast to the ideal of Christ-like love we aspire to reach.

If we keep going, we enter a hard stretch of the journey, a process called purgation or dark night or kenosis where we empty ourselves of that selfish self, not knowing what will take its place.

As Keating said, “Surrender to the unknown marks the great transitions of the spiritual journey. On the brink of each new breakthrough there is a crisis of trust and love.”

We struggle through that crisis of letting go to reach the higher plateau of illumination, more completely and purely filled with the love and light of God, living more Spirit-filled, creative lives.

As we climb from there we are likely to come to other struggles of purgation, dark night and kenosis until we emerge at last above the treeline and experience universal oneness and fill with unconditional compassion and love.

The churches most of us grew up in never talked about this spiritual journey. Jesus fervently prayed we would take it, but the Western church abandoned it and made Christianity all about believing dogma and obeying rules so we would get into heaven. It was a fatal mistake.

Thomas Keating was the abbot of St. Joseph’s Trappist monastery in Spencer, Massachusetts in the 1970s when young Christians from Boston began knocking on their door trying to find the Buddhist Insight Meditation Center just up the road. Keating asked why they were turning away from the church. They said they were looking for a spiritual path.

The St. Joseph’s monks struggled with this. They were distressed that Christianity was losing spiritual seekers when it had exactly what they were looking for at the heart of its tradition. A butterfly was born of their struggle: the inspiration to translate the Christian contemplative tradition into the contemporary form of Centering Prayer.

Keating then began his life work of translating the hidden tradition into a brilliant, accessible set of modern teachings. The result is that the spiritual journey and the ancient contemplative path are being followed by more people than ever before, transforming consciousness and transforming the world in just the ways we need.

The next three Sundays of Lent each look at a key component of that journey: Struggle, Truth and Oneness.

The scriptures today were about two different dimensions of spiritual struggle. The inner dimension is described by Richard Rohr who says, “It is in the struggle with our

shadow self, with failure, or with wounding, that we break into higher levels of consciousness.”

The outer dimension is described by Frederick Douglass who said, “If there is no struggle there is no progress. Those who profess to favor freedom and yet deprecate agitation are [people] who want crops without plowing up the ground.”

These two dimensions of struggle are inextricably bound. We will not have racial, economic and environmental justice until more of humanity has attained the consciousness of oneness, and we will not advance on the inner journey unless we are ever-widening our understanding of who the neighbor is we are called to love.

So let us celebrate the struggle! Let us thank and praise those who engage in it as Jesus and Paul did for the sake of love.

A few weeks ago Kate Reimanis came to church in her bed after having an emergency appendectomy. She opened our hearts with her courageous intimacy and made us laugh at the story of her ordeal—we celebrated the struggle with her. She said afterwards how grateful she was for others who had shared their struggles. They made her trust in our oneness enough to share hers.

I am moved by the struggles each of you undergo, struggles with loss and grief, with illness and aging, struggles with an unjust, unkind world or with the spiritual journey.

Lent begs us to accept the wisdom that this kind of struggle gives life meaning. It is heroic, it is liberating, it brings goodness of life, it is the door that opens to transformation. Your struggles are gifts to us all.

So let us open our hearts to the Spirit that led Jesus into the wilderness and then out again as a powerful force of light and life and love. Let us pray in silence inviting that Spirit to lead us through the struggles we face... Amen.

A tanka by Mel Goertz:

I caught the feeling
of being part of something bigger
as I swept early morning snow
off the step.
Chickadees were singing.