

“You Do Not Always Have Me”

Rev. Thomas Cary Kinder

United Church of Strafford, Vermont

April 3, 2022 Fifth Sunday in Lent

Psalm 126; Philippians 3:4b-14; John 12:1-8

Welcome: Welcome to the United Church of Strafford, Vermont, on this Fifth Sunday in Lent. Welcome to those of you in the sanctuary and those online.

Abraham Lincoln said, “I care not for a [person’s] religion whose dog or cat is not the better for it.”

Sometimes it is tempting to neglect our spiritual life when we have too much to do, when it seems that our dogs or cats or dust-bunnies would be the better for it if we gave more time to our material life, but we come away from spiritual time with qualities that improve our lives and the world around us and make up for postponed chores.

We see this here. After turning our attention to the spirit in word, music and silence, we turn to one another with an outpouring of care and support. We form a loving community powerful enough that our dogs and cats and homes and towns and world are the better for it.

Let us reach out to one another after the service again today so that everyone here, both in person and on Zoom, may be the better for our Christ-like love.

Call to Worship: Psalm 126 is so joyous, so full of assurance that all shall be well, that we can miss the context in which it was written.

Psalm 126 is a Lenten cry from the wilderness, from heartbreak, from one of Israel’s many devastations when all the riches of the land were carried off by an invading army, when much of the population became refugees, when houses were flattened and the Promised Land was reduced to scorched earth.

It was a time like the one Ukraine is living through, and the whole human-afflicted earth.

Being aware of that context does not take away the joy of Psalm 126. Quite the opposite. It tells us that no matter what is going on in our lives, no matter how hard or grievous they get, new life waits beyond for those who keep turning to the Spirit for comfort, guidance and strength and keep sowing the seeds of God’s realm on earth, as Jesus did.

Let us worship together in that Lenten faith....

Children's Time— Good morning! Which would you rather have, all the yummy food you can eat or just a small crust of stale, wormy bread? Which would you rather have, the freedom to go wherever you want, or to be locked behind bars in jail? Which would you rather have, everyone treat you like a prince or princess or everyone treat you like a dangerous crazy person?

Most people would rather have the comfortable, respectable, easy life, but there was a character in the Bible named Saul who had comfort, respect and ease and traded it all for jail and floggings and stale wormy bread and being scorned and hated. Saul started out hunting and arresting the followers of Jesus, which made Saul a popular leader because the church was considered to be a threat to society, but then Saul had a vision and he saw how good and loving Jesus was and he threw all the popularity and comfort he had away as if it were garbage and joined the Jesus movement.

He was considered a traitor, a bad guy by the people in power, but we think of him as a superhero called the Apostle Paul. Our church would not be here today if it were not for all he did 2000 years ago.

Paul wrote a letter saying, whatever gains I had in my old life I came to see were losses compared to following the loving way of Jesus, and all the comforts and honors I had I now consider rubbish, and I gladly suffer their loss the way Jesus did so I may gain the truly good life.

To Paul the good life was not the comfort and ease of the rich but a love that sacrifices itself for the sake of serving and saving the lives of others, a love that is willing to go to jail in order to set other people free.

Paul calls us to try that kind of love and see how good it feels, and the church is here to help us do it. There is something we learn to do here that can help us be superheroes of love with spiritual powers like Paul...

Prayer is a form of self-sacrifice because if we do it with our whole heart focused on God, we are for that moment suffering the loss of all other tempting things we could focus on, trading them all for what we feel would be even better, which is to have God's help being our most loving or courageous or patient selves. So let us pray the Lord's Prayer with that in mind...

Sermon: *“You Do Not Always Have Me”*

We are now in the deepest wilderness of Lent. The lectionary readings have arrived at the final days of Jesus’ life, so it is no surprise to find ourselves brought face to face with death. Our challenge is to find a way through the life-threatening wilderness to the life-sustaining Promised Land, a way through despair to hope.

The spiritual wilderness where we confront hopelessness and death was the birthplace of the Jewish people as children of God, and it was the birthplace of Jesus as a Spirit-filled son of God. The spiritual traditions of the world did not arise because people had easy lives and were happy all the time, they arose because people sought a path through struggle and suffering to a wiser way to live. People believed that there was a sacred way that could overcome death and create a more meaningful life. Today’s scriptures can help us find that hope for our own lives and for this endangered planet.

The 126th Psalm cries out from a time of war and refugees and environmental devastation. The people beg, “Restore our fortunes, O God!” and their faithfulness is rewarded with mouths filled with laughter and tongues with shouts of joy.

The Apostle Paul dies to his former successful life and chooses instead to share Christ’s sufferings, and he gains a life on earth of surpassing value.

Jesus speaks devastating words in today’s gospel passage, and it is hard at first to hear any hope in them. He is defending Mary’s sacrificial act of pouring a jar of nard on his feet, which was worth an entire year’s wages. Judas is demonized by the Gospel of John, but he asks the very reasonable and responsible question of why the oil was not sold and the money given to the poor. We can imagine the stunned silence when Jesus replies, “You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me.”

Whatever else we make of that statement, we need to feel the emotional impact of it. Jesus was only 33 years old, he had miraculous power, profound wisdom and the spiritual maturity of limitless compassion and unconditional love, so it was shocking to hear him say, “You do not always have me.”

Imagine Mary’s grief. Mary had sat at Jesus’ feet absorbing his every word, turning her back on social expectations and bearing her sister Martha’s rebuke. Mary saw Jesus raise her

brother Lazarus from the dead. Jesus freed and saved and served her and her family. She loved Jesus so much that she gave this extravagant gift, and now he says, “You do not always have me.”

Many of us know what it feels like to realize that we are not always going to have someone or something we love or need. We may attempt denial, but if we have ever suffered or feared a loss, we know that grief is the inevitable cost of love.

As we age we can hear our own body saying to us, “You do not always have me.”

The earth has said, “You do not always have me,” from time to time over the ages. Whole civilizations heard arid winds whisper it as drought shriveled their crops and dried up their wells and buried their cities under desert sands.

But our generation is hearing what no human generation ever has, which is the entire planet crying out that we will not have the stable conditions that make life possible if we do not respond wisely to its warnings. We feel grief like Mary’s if we let the enormity of that loss into our consciousness.

Every single moment of time says, “You do not always have me” as it arrives. Wisdom replies “Carpe diem,” seize this moment and live it fully. Yet how often do we let opportunities go by and let the gifts, talents and possibilities God has given us for making a difference go undeveloped and unused when the realm of God on earth needs all we can give?

We will not always have this moment. We need to let the shock of that truth break down our denial, because if we can accept life’s transience, its truth can set us free to fulfill our life’s greatest meaning. We can see more clearly what we value most when we live in the awareness of death, and that vision can enable us to sacrifice lesser things for the loving service of what is most important.

Philip Simmons was diagnosed with Lou Gehrig’s disease at age 35. He had two young children and was just starting a promising academic and literary career. He became well known for his wise and joyful book entitled, *Learning to Fall: The Blessings of an Imperfect Life*, a collection of sermons he gave in his New Hampshire church during the course of his illness.

Simmons wrote, “A fuller consciousness of my own mortality has been my best guide to being more fully alive.... Only when we accept our present condition can we set aside fear and discover the love and compassion that are our highest human endowments.” Simmons lived

twice as long as expected, fully alive and free, inspiring those around him with his humor, compassion and love.

He wrote, “Only by letting go our grip on all that we ordinarily find most precious—our achievements, our plans, our loved ones, our very selves—can we find, ultimately, the most profound freedom.”

Our spiritual traditions hold out the hope that we can transform our suffering into wisdom when we hear life saying, “You do not always have me.” The wisdom comes from recognizing that now you *do* have me. You will not always have this moment, but now you *do* have this moment. You may not always have the gifts and opportunities that you have, but now you *do* have them.

The hope is that like Mary, we will use this moment to pour out the precious oil of our lives to serve what we love.

We each have this chance to love and serve what we will not always have, and we need to decide how we will respond. We may not always have Jesus, but the Spirit of Christ is here now, the source of love and life and light that can work the miracles we need. It is here for us to find and serve.

Jesus said, “Split a piece of wood and I am there. Lift a stone, and you will find me there.” He said that the realm of God is within and among us. The Spirit is wherever we are, in every moment, in us and in all that surrounds us.

Christ is saying, the earth is saying, this moment is saying, everything we love is saying to us, “You do not always have me.” God is calling us through it all, asking us to sacrifice, to serve, to use the gifts we have been given, to lay down our life to help create the realm of God on earth now.

Let us pray in silence listening to how our heart is responding to that call...

Haiku by Mel Goertz:

a sip of frosted trees
and deep blue sky,
a sip of sunshine in my glass