

Facing Seemingly Insurmountable Problems

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United Church of Strafford, Vermont

May 22, 2022 Sixth Sunday of Easter

Selections from Joel 2 and Acts 2; John 7:37-39a; 14:12-20, 25-27; 16:13

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

Jesus was moved with compassion and did all he could to help the suffering he saw, partly by loving, healing and teaching, partly by protesting and working for positive social change, and most of all by creating a loving community as an outpost of God's realm on earth that would do far more than he could alone.

One of his key teachings was for us to pray always and not faint and we will receive the help we need. The church is one of the answers to our prayers for help. Whatever our struggle, we can find comfort, wisdom and strength for our journey here, in words, music, the presence of the Spirit, and in what we have to offer to one another.

So please linger today after the service to visit with open hearts, extending compassion and care, letting the Spirit lead you, both in the sanctuary and on Zoom.

Call to Worship: The miraculous, world-changing day of Pentecost is two Sundays away and Eastertide is starting to anticipate it.

Today's message is one of hope—the exact hope we need when we face seemingly insurmountable personal or world problems. We will hear the prophet Joel promise that a Spirit of prophecy and vision will come to the human race to match its need, and that turning to God and heeding the Spirit is the path to the best life we can have.

Pentecost was the big bang of that Spirit forming the first church, and the church is still a place where we find the Spirit at work among us, transforming us as individuals and as a congregation so that we may transform the world. Let us worship together in that faith and hope....

Children's Time: Today I want to revisit an old fable. Once upon a time a fox was bragging to a cat about how many different ways he knew to escape the hounds. The fox

described in great detail one plan after another. He said, “If I hear the hounds, I can run around in circles through the woods so they get confused by my tracks. That usually works.”

The cat said, “I have only one way, but it always works.”

The fox said, “Or I can take off under the fence, cross the field and go down to the stream where they will lose my scent. If I am quick enough, that can be quite effective.”

The cat said, “I have only one way, but it always works.”

The fox said, “Or I can go up to the ledges where there are tunnels under the fallen rock that they can’t squeeze through. Let’s just hope I haven’t gained any weight lately.”

And the cat said, “I have only one way, but it always works.”

Suddenly, sure enough they heard the hounds starting to bark, and the fox was full of doubt. “Uh oh,” he said, “should I go in circles or run to the stream or head up to the ledges or maybe one of the others ways?” And he stood there trying to decide which plan he could trust to work, until the hounds arrived and it was too late.

Meanwhile the cat did the one thing that always worked. She scrambled up the nearest tall tree and sat there calmly as the hounds looked up at her barking in frustration.

It is better to know one way that always works than to have many ways that might or might not work.

The wisdom we find in places like church tells us that the one way that always work is to climb the Spirit tree, to turn to God and ask for the Spirit to help us know what to do and give us the strength and inner calm we need to do it. “All things work together for the good for those who love God,” is how Paul puts it in Romans 8.

And there is one thing we can do that turns and opens us to this source of help...Pray! Prayer is always good to do. It puts us in the best position to handle whatever is happening in our life in that moment, good or bad. Prayer doesn’t have to have words, or it can have just one or a few words, it’s the act of turning and opening and listening that is important. Let us pray the prayer Jesus taught us...

Sermon: *Facing Seemingly Insurmountable Problems*

The title of this sermon is “Facing Seemingly Insurmountable Problems.” The word seemingly is important. It leaves open the possibility that miracles can happen. Relationships

can find healing that we thought were over. A person lost to addiction can find grace and recovery. A nation controlled by slave-holding oligarchs can rise to abolish slavery. An impoverished people can stage a nonviolent revolution led by a tiny man in a loincloth and overcome the greatest empire the world had ever seen.

You could say that death is an insurmountable problem, and certainly in some ways that is true, but death is also the occasion for miracles of transformation, for rebirth, for deepening and maturing, for increasing our love and light, and that's for those of us on this side of death. The only reports we have from people who have died and come back to life say that on the other side something even more beautiful and miraculous awaits us.

Jesus said, "Do not fret." Over and over he urged or commanded people to be at peace. Over and over he lovingly reassured us that there is a higher power, a real live Spirit, that can comfort, guide and empower us in the midst of our seemingly insurmountable problems. The Spirit is within us all, and the only reason people don't experience it and don't let it work miracles through them is that they don't really believe it. They try every other approach and give up and call a problem insurmountable before turning to the Spirit.

As GK Chesterton said, "The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting. It has been found difficult and left untried." The human ego finds it extremely difficult to let go of its craving, clinging desire to be in control. That's why Jesus said we had to lose life to gain life.

The life we could gain is the very life we need now. The ancient Hebrew prophet Joel foresaw that the Spirit moves especially when life's problems seem insurmountable, when it seems as if we have reached the last days. 12 Steps groups like Alcoholics Anonymous call it hitting rock bottom, and they know that is where grace can be most abundant and intense. In the last days, Joel said, we can expect the Spirit to fill us and help us see visions and dream dreams and speak truth to power and find a way where there is no way.

Jesus said that people who believe enough to open to the Spirit will find it within them, and it will flow out of them with life-giving gifts. Every one of us has that Spirit within us. Every one of us has gifts that the world needs—as Frederick Buechner says, "where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet." It could be a gift of a smile and kind word in line at Coburns, or it could be the gift of a concert or bulletin haiku, or it could be the gift of being a

teacher or healer or builder or community volunteer or an infinite number of vocations, all of which match something that gives us joy with a deep need of God's realm on earth.

The Spirit came upon the first church at Pentecost in a scene that is like something out of *Star Wars*. The community was gathered and at a loss what to do. They were in danger of being arrested and executed by the Empire. They were waiting for inspiration, praying in the belief that it would come. Then suddenly, as we will hear in two weeks, the Spirit came upon them like the Force and they were able to do miraculous things.

George Lucas said that Joseph Campbell's writings on the hero's journey inspired him to create *Star Wars*. Campbell said, "Follow your bliss. If you do..., you put yourself on a kind of track that has been there all the while waiting for you, and the life you ought to be living is the one you are living.... I say, follow your bliss and don't be afraid, and doors will open where you didn't know they were going to be. If you follow your bliss, doors will open for you that wouldn't have opened for anyone else."

In *Star Wars* Yoda trains Luke Skywalker in mindfulness and meditation in order to draw upon the Spirit or Force within and around him. Today mindfulness and meditation have been studied scientifically and discovered to access a real life-changing power. In one study a Zen master was given complex puzzles to solve. He got flustered and was getting nowhere. Then he centered himself, took a few mindful and meditative breaths, and suddenly he became the most effective puzzle solver in the entire study—they called him an insight machine. "Trust in the Force, Luke," the Spirit of Obi Wan Kenobi whispers in his heart, and Luke takes a few deep centering breaths and the Force enables him to overcome a seemingly insurmountable problem.

Mahatma Gandhi said that his greatest weapon against injustice was silent prayer. He meditated twice a day and throughout the day he repeated as a mantra the name Rama, the Hindu god of wisdom and courageous and right action. At crucial times in the campaign for Indian independence he went on retreat in order to let the Spirit guide him, much to the consternation of other leaders who wanted a quick decision and fast action. The great Salt March came to him on one of those retreats and became a turning point in the struggle.

The Tao Te Ching says that if we have any wisdom at all, our only fear will be of straying from the sacred way. The inner place we come from determines the outer place we will arrive.

Right now we could easily feel overwhelmed by the seemingly insurmountable problems in our nation and world, and we have plenty of personal struggles on top of that. We need to hear Jesus saying, “Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.” We need to trust that we have the Spirit within us, and that it will guide and empower us to contribute our part if we believe in it, seek it and follow it moment by moment, situation by situation.

As Valerie Kaur, the Sikh human rights activist and author says, “The future is dark. What if this is not the darkness of the tomb – but the darkness of the womb? What if this is our greatest transition?”

Let us pray in silence waiting for the Spirit to show us our next step on the Way...

Haiku by Mel Goertz:

A new view of the countryside
Orchard road
in a horse-drawn wagon