

Gratitude and Hope
Rev. Thomas Cary Kinder
United Church of Strafford, Vermont
November 20, 2022, Twenty-fourth and Last Sunday after Pentecost,
Thanksgiving Sunday, Reign of Christ Sunday
Psalms 95; Philippians 4:4-9; Matthew 6:19-33

Welcome: Welcome to the United Church of Strafford, Vermont, on this Twenty-fourth and Last Sunday after Pentecost, Thanksgiving Sunday and Reign of Christ Sunday. Welcome to you who are in the sanctuary and also welcome to those of you online.

We do not often read the longer version of our Future Directions Vision statement, because it's long, but listen to its beautiful first paragraph, and think of this both in terms of Thanksgiving, what you are grateful for, and in terms of the Reign of Christ, the creation of a world that lives by the laws of love that Jesus taught. Here it is:

“The United Church of Strafford aspires to be a welcoming congregation of open doors, hearts and minds, accepting our imperfections, embracing our differences and other cultures and traditions, and maintaining freedom to choose beliefs as individuals while living up to the name United Church. We want to be a place of faithful Christ-like love to which anyone who needs spiritual, personal or material support can turn, a beloved community connecting deeply and sharing honestly our joys and concerns, honoring and celebrating the experience of our elders and helping to raise the children of the town, a warm nest for us to land in when we are new to the church that becomes in time our spiritual home and extended family.”

To help create that loving community here, please extend your care and support to those around you, especially those you do not know well or know are struggling, so that everyone here may be grateful to be a part of this family today, both in person and on Zoom.

Call to Worship: Fyodor Dostoyevsky wrote in *The Brothers Karamazov*, “Love all God’s creation, the whole and every grain of sand in it. Love every leaf, every ray of God’s light. Love the animals, love the plants... If you love everything, you will perceive the divine mystery in things. Once you have perceived it, you will begin to comprehend it better every day. And you will come at last to love the whole world with an all-embracing love.”

We are grateful for what we love, and that moves us to preserve and nurture it. Our greatest hope is that humans will become grateful for the whole earth and all its creatures and all people and choose to live by the laws of love. Let us worship together, opening to the possibility that the realm of God on earth that Jesus came to establish could happen in our time.

Children's Time: President Abraham Lincoln said, "I care not for a man's religion whose dog or cat are not the better for it."

Lincoln meant that religion should help us be better people and treat everyone and every creature on earth and the earth itself in a loving, kind and fair way—caring especially for those who are weak or hurting. Church should be a place where we ask ourselves, what is the ideal way to live, and where we work to change ourselves and change the world around us to be better.

Lincoln felt that a good religion was one that led people to end slavery. There still are slaves in this world, and one of my big thanks this year is that Vermont voters agreed to take an important step to keep slavery out of Vermont forever. People in this church I'm sure were influenced by their religion in deciding how the world would be the better for their vote. Lincoln would be pleased.

Today we both give thanks for things past and look forward with hope to things to come. Our biggest hope is that the whole world will decide to live by the Golden Rule and treat everyone else including their dogs and cats with lovingkindness. This church is going to keep working toward that in every way we can for as long as we can.

It makes us so thankful and hopeful when we hear that children who grew up in this church are working as adults to change the world for the better. We hope to help the children of today do the same. The pageant this year will be the first of a series of monthly Story Sundays that invite children here to learn and grow and eat ice cream sandwiches.

One of the things we will be talking about is a certain tool we have, what Mahatma Gandhi called his greatest tool in his struggle to free enslaved India, a tool we can use every day to help us be better people and make the world a better place... Prayer!

Prayer turns us toward the source of all that we are thankful for and the source of all our hope, and says "Wow, you are great!" and "Thank you!" and "Please help!" In that spirit, let us pray the Lord's Prayer...

Gratitude and Hope

The Benedictine monk, Brother David Steindl-Rast, says, “It is not joy that makes us grateful; it is gratitude that makes us joyful.” The Psalm we read today sings a joyful song of thanksgiving, grateful that “we are the people of God’s pasture, and the sheep of God’s hand.”

This is the primal gratitude that every living being shares. The Spirit of life formed us out of the dust of the stars and the earth. We are the people of that Creator’s pasture. We can find an abundance to be grateful for if we have basic necessities and people to love and serve. We can be grateful for what we make of the life we have received.

Psychologist Robert Emmons defines gratitude as “A felt sense of wonder, thankfulness and appreciation for life.” Joanna Macy and Chris Johnstone comment on this, “If you’re feeling low, it might seem like a stretch to focus on something so positive. Yet recognizing the gifts in your life is profoundly strengthening. By savoring these gifts, you add to your psychological buoyancy, which helps you maintain your balance and poise when entering rougher waters.... Gratitude enhances our resilience, strengthening us to face disturbing information.... While gratitude leads to increased happiness and life satisfaction, materialism has the opposite effect.” (from *Active Hope*)

Macy and Johnstone’s book, *Active Hope*, is subtitled, *How to Face the Mess We’re in without Going Crazy*. They look squarely at the suffering and existential threats in our world today, and they find a path through. They find a hope strong enough to carry us into the world to make it better. That path leads through the pain we feel and into a new way of seeing the world and our place in it. That new vision energizes us to go out and make a difference for the better.

Gratitude is the first step on that path. It enables us to live in a world we know is in dire condition and still feel meaning, purpose and joy rather than despair.

Today is both Thanksgiving Sunday and Reign of Christ Sunday. The one looks back with gratitude, the other looks forward with hope. The one assesses the world as it is, the other reminds us of the ideal world we are working to reach.

This church has a Future Directions Vision statement that describes the ideal church we are working to build. We have fulfilled it in many ways over the past church year, and we can give thanks for that.

“We want to be a place of faithful Christ-like love to which anyone who needs spiritual, personal or material support can turn, a beloved community connecting deeply and sharing honestly our joys and concerns.” We can be grateful for every time in the past year that the Deacons used the Deacons Fund to help a person who was struggling. We can be thankful for every time someone spoke during Joys and Concerns and moved us to tears with a sorrow or joy or reflection.

“We want this church to be a warm nest for us to land in when we are new to the church that becomes in time our spiritual home and extended family.” We have been blessed in the past year by the arrival of new people to surround with our love and welcome into this family and home.

“We want to be a congregation that has vital involvement in everyday life in the community and that reaches out to help those in need.... We intend to be a force, not just a presence, responding to wrongs, threats and destructive forces in the world and effecting positive social change, connecting religion to issues of peace, justice and the care of God’s creation.”

There are many ways in which we do this. I am not sure how widely known it is that the church is playing a supportive role to establish a community nurse in Strafford. The Mission Committee has done extraordinary work on our behalf in the past year giving assistance to local and national groups.

This year’s Annual Meeting voted unanimously to have the Fulfilling Our Vision committee organize a series of educational and explorative discussion sessions about issues relating to sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression in the context of our society, the Christian church and our circles of family and friends.

Our Vision also says “We want to offer training in contemplative practice,” and we have a daily Zoom meditation time and a weekly session for more in depth training in Centering Prayer.

It says, “We appreciate the old feeling and simplicity of the spirit-filled place in which we worship. It was built with love and we want to continue to love and care for it. We also appreciate the beauty of what takes place within it...the music in worship and concerts that is so important to us, and all our acts of creativity, compassion and love.”

We are enormously grateful for the loving stewardship that the parsonage committee and the Trustees and our sexton and assistant treasurer have poured into the church in the past year.

We have realized that to care for this building and all that happens within it, we have to let our other building, the parsonage, go.

The greatest benefit of having a vision of the church we want, or the world we want, comes when we enter a wilderness of transition. We lost our beloved church musician, but not the fact that “the music in worship is so important to us.” We have been blessed by our faithful choir, by Becky’s leadership, and by the guest musicians who have brought their gifts to us, including Emerson today.

I could say much more—it is awe inspiring how much this small congregation is doing to fulfill its vision of the ideal church.

We have a vision of the ideal world, too. We heard part of it today from the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus teaches us to dream of a world that has the wisdom to serve God and not wealth, a society that rules material goods with spiritual values. In this vision, humanity turns from the anxiety, depression and destruction that materialism has caused and learns that only when we strive to establish the realm of God on earth does the material realm work out for the best and the human-made problems that threaten our existence disappear.

Sounds impossible, doesn’t it? And yet everything we have done to fulfill this congregation’s future directions vision has also been working toward establishing the reign of that Christ-like love on earth. The greatest power in the universe, the force of love and life and light that created us, continues to flow through us, guiding and empowering us, working small miracles whenever we step onto its ideal path.

Who are we to say that the Spirit that created life on earth cannot bring about the next step in human evolution today, lifting us to the level of Christ’s consciousness? Our job is not to doubt, but to dream, and feel grateful for every small step toward fulfilling that dream, and feel joy to be alive right now to help establish the realm of God’s love on earth in our time.

Let us pray in silence, asking the Holy Spirit to show us the vision for our lives, our church and our world that it needs us to fulfill in the year ahead...

Haiku by Herbert A. Goertz:

The geese fly in V’s.
Honking their way south dreaming
Of snow-free green leas.