

Looking Back and Looking Forward

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United Church of Strafford, Vermont

January 26, 2025, Third Sunday after Epiphany, Transition Sunday

Psalms 84; Acts 4:32-35; I Corinthians 12:4-13; I John 3:16-18; 4:16b, 21

Welcome to the United Church of Strafford, Vermont, an Open and Affirming Congregation, on this on this Third Sunday after Epiphany and Transition Sunday. Welcome VTones, and thank you!

We acknowledge that we are on the ancestral and unceded land of the traditional caretakers, the Western Abenaki people. We share the belief that the land and all life are gifts of the Spirit, and our role is to honor and protect the creation, building a loving community that includes all.

This is my last Sunday in this pulpit and my last chance to speak to you about the past and what I consider most important for your future. For my first ten years as a parishioner and Deacon here, starting in 1983, I sat as far from the pulpit as I possibly could. Then in 1993 I stopped running from my calling and this congregation shepherded me as I began seminary. It has been deeply meaningful and a joy to get to serve as pastor these seven years in this beloved church where my journey to the ministry began.

Today I am thinking about what this church was forty years ago and what it may be forty years from now. Much is different now and much more will be different then, but there is one thing that will have to remain true, or the church will not exist.

Everything we do here depends on our being first and foremost a loving, caring community offering extraordinary hospitality to all who come through these doors. Please do not ever lose sight of this, and please practice it again today, reaching out with a wide open heart especially to those you do not know or do not know well, and those you know are struggling.

Call to Worship The two sermons I remember most clearly from this pulpit in the past forty years are Mike Manheim's on Robert Frost's poem, "Two Tramps in Mudtime," and William Sloane Coffin's sermon on the 23rd Psalm. Both were beautiful and wise and affected me deeply, and they represent the wide range of resources we draw upon here, modern and ancient, secular and sacred, Judeo-Christian and all other traditions.

We have entered a tough time for churches and this nation and planet, and it will have an impact on all our lives. The need for the wisdom, beauty and support of spiritual communities will only increase in the years ahead, yet younger generations are not attending as they once did.

Finding a way for Strafford to have an ongoing center for spiritual, philosophical, ethical and material support will not be easy. It will take inspired vision, courageous experimentation and resilience, reimagining our church.

I hope you will find a way to bring forward the best of our tradition along with the new. The profound psychological structure of the church year, the music of Johann Sebastian Bach, the poetry of the Psalms and hymns, the teachings and model of Jesus and insights of those who have come after him, the contemplative path, and the prophetic path of peace, justice and the care for the creation—you have a huge treasure of helpful resources to draw upon and to add to here.

I hope you will continue to serve as a repository of these treasures and as a center of reflection, deliberation and action for thoughtful people of all backgrounds as they find their way through the uncharted wilderness of a rapidly changing world.

We are hearing some of these treasures today, so let us savor their wisdom and beauty and open to their inspiration as we worship and reflect together.

Assurance of Pardon and Grace One thing remains that does not change. God has loved you, loves you now and will love you always. The Spirit is always waiting to welcome us back when we get lost, and always ready to transform us so that we may transform the lost world around us. Let the congregation respond in this faith by saying Amen.

Looking Back and Looking Forward

Many years ago a family was driving through a village when the three year old in the back seat said to her parents, “That’s my church!” They were not a church going family, they had never talked to their daughter about church, and when they asked her why she said it, she told them “It just is!” So they took her to church there, and she grew up in it all the way through youth group, and in time her parents discovered it was their church, too.

I think there are many people in Strafford who drive by here and think “that is my church,” even though they may come only on Christmas Eve or for memorial services. But forty years ago

that feeling of belonging was more widespread, and diverse segments of the community participated.

The Rev. Dana Douglass was the pastor when I arrived in 1983. He was eager for the church to make the world a better place. Our neighbor, the Rev. William Sloane Coffin, suggested that Dana go to El Salvador. He came back and proposed that we become a sanctuary church, housing refugees from the rightwing government and death squads until they could find a permanent home.

This was a new thing for this congregation, and controversial, so we set up five committees to consider different aspects of it. Finally, there was a public meeting where presenters spoke both for and against the idea. The pews were packed with people from the town who thought of this as their church. Supporters saw that the community was so divided that it would harm the church if it moved forward as a sanctuary. Many people were disappointed, and Dana left not long afterward.

Yet much good resulted from the consideration of becoming a sanctuary that has shaped the role the church plays in the town and world.

For one thing, people in all segments of the congregation and community said to one another, we have people in poverty and distress among us right here—why aren't we doing more to help them? After the public meeting our Deacon's Fund received more contributions in one week than it had ever received in an entire year.

The idea that the church should be involved in peace and justice work also had been established, and although Dana left, Bill Coffin remained a presence and inspiration here.

The church also had become for at least that one night a center where thoughtful people of different perspectives from all corners of the town gathered to consider an issue that would affect their lives.

All this was in addition to the church being a place where individuals could come and find the comfort, guidance or strength they needed.

It was a dawning of new or transformed ways of being a congregation that grew incrementally over the past forty years.

Today our Deacons Fund is very active and people donate generously to it to support Strafford neighbors.

Our Mission Committee is also well supported and does weekly work on the church's behalf for peace, justice and the care of the earth.

In addition, in the past seven years the church hosted a climate book discussion for the community out of which grew the Strafford Climate Group that continues to keep that issue in the forefront of the town's consciousness and helps us respond.

The church hosted conversations that launched a town anti-racism effort.

We unanimously declared our congregation open to and affirming of people of all sexual orientations and gender identities.

We hosted a contemplative group where people of all traditions or no tradition could meditate together and enrich their spiritual practices and lives.

We held diverse and deep services seeking Spirit, and remained a center for spiritual support.

We have been a cultural center, too, offering concerts and readings for the community.

And yet even as the church has played these positive roles and many activities have been well attended, the number of people who will have anything to do with a Christian church in our society has steadily declined.

Our Church Council has looked honestly and imaginatively at the future. We have foreseen a Strafford with even greater needs for spiritual and material support yet where the reputation of Christianity is so tainted that it will alienate the vast majority of people in the next generation, no matter what good happens here.

The Council has established the Reimagining Our Church Committee to look at how we can change in order to work for more people. The committee will come up with a five year vision and plan, but I want to end by balancing my view from forty years in the past with my own vision of forty years in the future.

I imagine a little girl passing by this building with her parents and telling them that it is her church, and the parents bringing her through the door for the first time and finding they have entered a beautiful, well-cared for, sacred space.

On the bulletin board in the back they see listings for regular gatherings not only for this congregation on Sunday mornings, but also for other congregations, and Jewish members of the community, and humanists, and an interfaith meditation group, and groups for Buddhist, Sufi and

Taoist studies, each meeting at its own time in this space, which is designed to feel like home to them all and has flexible seating to accommodate any size or configuration of gathering.

They may each be a small group, but they join together as partners on many activities that only a larger group can do.

For instance, the new family finds listings for a support group for young families, and for interfaith children programs exploring creatively the basics of spirituality, philosophy and ethics. They see youth projects listed, some serving the community and others promoting a just, peaceful and healthy world.

They find similar interfaith projects for adults.

They see information about the charitable funds in Strafford that meet in this building to coordinate efforts to provide support for neighbors who are struggling.

They find a list of concerts, readings, plays and book discussions hosted in this space. As they look around they see art by local artists on the walls.

The family has been standing quietly because a group of twenty or so people is talking in a circle in the front of the sanctuary, but now an older woman comes back with a smile and invites them to join them. There is childcare in the back, or their daughter may sit with them. She explains that this is a regular gathering where everyone in town is invited to talk about important developments in Strafford or the world that have an impact on their lives, to discern a path of wisdom that they can take in response. The format is like a Native American talking stick or restorative justice circle, where all are given the chance to speak in turn and be listened to with respect, accepting their differing perspectives.

The little girl already feels completely at home so she happily goes to the back with the older woman. Everyone makes room for the couple and smiles and nods.

Together these Strafford neighbors are finding their way through a world of change and challenge caused by the upheaval of the climate and the strain on economic and political systems that result. Strafford is changing, too, including an influx of new people drawn here in part because of the loving, wise stewardship and beauty and oneness nurtured by all that happens in this building.

Maybe the word church will have expanded to the point where that is what this is still called, or maybe it will be called by some other name. Whatever it is called, it will help to shape

Strafford as an island of sanity, kindness and well-being, offering a model of a harmonious, sustainable way of living that the world desperately needs.

That is my dream for the future of this church forty years from now. It may seem unrealistic, but if you had described to me the church of today forty years ago, I would have felt this was unrealistic.

You can trust that the Spirit we heard about in today's scriptures, the Spirit that creates, evolves and ceaselessly flows through all life, will guide and empower you to serve its loving purposes here. And with that Spirit, anything is possible.

Let us pray in silence reaching out to hear or feel where the Spirit is leading us now...

Words from Teilhard de Chardin “We are impatient of being on the way to something unknown, something new. And yet it is the law of all progress that it is made by passing through some stages of instability— and that it may take a very long time. . . Give [the Spirit] the benefit of believing that [its] hand is leading you, and accept the anxiety of feeling yourself in suspense and incomplete.”

Benediction May God bless your time ahead with the **loving heart** of the congregation that unanimously declared itself Open to and Affirming of all people, a love that supports struggling areas of the world through its Mission Committee.

May God bless you with the **compassionate heart** of the congregation that has held one another through joys and sorrows and has generously supported community members who were struggling through its Deacons Fund.

May God bless your time ahead with the **faithful heart** of the congregation that has heard a call or seen a need and said yes, trusting that the way would open, as we stand amidst the beautiful evidence of only one of many examples, the Creative Nursery.

May God bless you with the **courageous heart** of the congregation that pledges to work to end oppression, discrimination and hateful behaviors whenever it encounters them, and has worked to promote anti-racism and climate action and respect for all sexual orientations and gender identities.

continued

May God bless your time ahead with the **peaceful heart** of the congregation that has sat in silence together in the Heartfulness Circle and in worship.

May God bless you with the **joyful, hopeful heart** of the congregation that has come together week after week to sing and savor beautiful music and hear spiritual wisdom from many traditions to help us live better lives and create a better world.

May your heart rejoice in all these past and present blessings, and may spiritual depth and wisdom, gratitude and celebration, and inspired action born from love flow through this beloved building and community in the time ahead and forever more. Amen, and Amen.

Haiku by Mel Goertz
6 below zero
I put out seed.
Chickadee came and sang his song.