

Centre Street Congregational Church, UCC

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*Persuaded Yet?*

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*Let us pray . . .*

In the movie “It’s A Wonderful Life,” the story’s essential point is that our lives are of immeasurable value and that — in the grand scheme of things — we have no idea how we impact others. We just need to remember that what we do matters and that somehow God is present.

Now of course, that message is all throughout the Bible, but movie references tend to grab our attention over Scripture.

Anyway, after reading the lessons for this morning, I was reminded that not only does what *we* do matter, but the same goes for God and those two things are kind of one and the same — if only we'd let ourselves be persuaded by God.

Some of you know the story of when I was 6 years old and noticed stars for the first time. I later came to understand that I was divinely persuaded into trusting that I belonged to something more than I could see or fully know.

Then in my 30s, in answer to a prayer I put out there, I was divinely persuaded through an unexpected conversation, to become an occupational therapist.

In my 40's, I was taking a class on spiritual development and as my heart responded with joy in hearing people talk about their experiences of God, I was divinely persuaded to go to seminary.

About 6 years ago I was sitting in one of the back pews — where the Kryszaks usually sit — when my deep gut saddened at hearing you'd found a pastor. In that moment, I was divinely persuaded to serve this church.

God is very busy with me and much has yet to be revealed. But for now? When all is said and done in my life, I'll know two things for certain: The first is, I've had a fantastic life and the second is, I am susceptible to God's persuasions. And it's probably because I let myself be persuaded by God that I have a fantastic life.

Of course our Holy Scriptures bear witness to story after story of God's persuasions as well:

Last Sunday we heard about Jairus and the unnamed woman in their shared stories of what was essentially divine persuasion to have faith in Jesus' abilities to heal.

Then in this morning's lesson from Mark's Gospel, despite the cloud of hometown rejection and unbelief, Jesus calls his twelve disciples and they answer.

The other 3 readings from today's lectionary share a similar spirit when it comes to divine persuasion:

From the Book of its namesake — the prophet Ezekiel thought he was destined to be a priest, but after the Babylonian captivity, he and many of his fellow Israelites were forced into exile. While sitting along a river in his refugee camp, Ezekiel has an extraordinary vision of God's Glory and from above the vision, he hears God's voice calling him to be a prophet — whether or not the people “listen or fail to listen” (chapter 2:5).

In the 2nd Book of Samuel, we have the story of David's call — as in puny David from David-and-Goliath fame. All the tribes of Israel recognized him as “flesh and blood.” And so they remind David that the Lord said to him during a military campaign, “You will shepherd my people Israel, and you will become their ruler.” And David becomes King over all the tribes of Israel in the Judaeen Dynasty.

And lastly, from 2nd Corinthians, we have Paul defending his ministry from other Christian preachers in Corinth. Seems they felt he did not exhibit the powers fitting of an apostle because he hadn't accomplished great deeds, hadn't had an amazing spiritual experiences and performed no miracles. So in his own defense and through a vision, Paul boasts of the things that make him weak and vulnerable — with a thorn in his side to keep him humble and keep him going.

Divine persuasion. It is a powerful force that can compel us to move in some mysterious ways for the purposes of God, which might be another way of saying for the purposes of love, justice, mercy, hope — those kinds of things.

But God's persuasion isn't just for George Bailey or Susie Maxwell or Jairus, the unnamed woman, the disciples, Ezekiel, King David, or Paul. It's for Cindy, Laurel, Charlie, Meri, Dot Mae, Sarina, Maria, Kai, Beth, Cooper, Wesley, Ken, Lisa, Laura, EACH of you

God's persuasions are for each and every single one of you — it's even for people who don't sit in pews and honestly? I think it's especially there for those of us whose lives have been or are messy.

I mean, think about it:

Ezekiel was depressed and in a refugee camp. Didn't stop God.

David was just a shepherd boy and King Saul was his tormentor. Didn't stop God.

Paul was apparently an incompetent boob. Didn't stop God.

Outside of my early childhood experience of encountering the stars, I wouldn't exactly say I felt like I deserved to be tapped on the shoulder by God.

In my 30s I was a complete disaster, making many embarrassing and regrettable personal decisions in my life. Didn't stop God.

In my 40s I was very stormy, angry and self-absorbed. Didn't stop God.

I'm 59 today and I'm confused as I stand in the junction of a crossroad. But my experience now tells me that God is present and at work trying to help me do some new things. Doesn't stop God.

Have you detected the theme yet?

The funny thing about God's activity is, while it does direct our lives, it's completely a choice — sometimes people follow it and sometimes they don't.

For example, from our lesson, we heard that despite being astounded

by Jesus' teachings,

by Jesus' wisdom

by Jesus' deeds of power,

his own hometown people take offense and reject him.

Which might be another way of saying they reject God.

In other words, they are NOT divinely persuaded.

Seems this baffled even Jesus himself because verse 6 tells us

*he was amazed at their unbelief.*

Imagine what that facial expression would look like on Jesus. I mean, he's typically unflappable!

Sinners, tax collectors, prostitutes, thieves, Pharisees, stormy seas, hypocrites, stumbling disciples, wine shortages, food shortages, leprosy, 40 days of testing, possessions and on and on and on.

The man is solid.

Not too much gets a rise out of him — although the money changer thing in the Temple was bad and even though he was going to restore him to life, Jesus wept at his friend Lazarus's death.

But my point being that by and large, Jesus was steady and yet *he was amazed at their unbelief.*

The Greek word for unbelief refers to “being without divine persuasion.”

I have a friend who can make one eyebrow go way up high — I like to imagine that's the face Jesus made when the hometown people take offense and reject him, rejecting the things of God.

That's what we're doing when we don't allow ourselves to be persuaded by the Divine, we're rejecting the things of God.

Things like hope, love, mercy, grace, justice ... ..

And the only reason I think we might do that is because we too have unbelief.

And yet, we call ourselves believers.

Beloveds, I mentioned that God's persuasion is especially there for those of us whose lives are messy. I call that good news because who here has known a mess or is in a mess? (Raise hand)

Sit tight, God is present and actively trying to help you — you can have a wonderful life.

It won't be perfect, but it will be perfectly yours and God's.

Do you believe it?

Or are you not feeling it, like Jesus' hometown people ——

As we begin a new week together, my prayer is that if you are in a mess, seek God. Ask for a new thing to be done with you and the mess.

And then believe your heart's responses, your gut feelings, unexpected conversations, deep knowings, Scripture's witness . . .

believe where God wants to persuade you to go

and then follow.

*Amen*