

Centre Street Congregational Church, UCC

August 28th, 2022

A Mighty Perspective

Rev. Susie Maxwell

Let us pray . . .

Oh God, we have done this many times together over the years. And each time, we pray that we are as sincere as we were the very first time. Always the prayer is that the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, for truly you are our rock and our redeemer. Amen

Life is a series of hellos and goodbyes. I read that a long time ago and while it feels a bit over-simplistic, at the end of the day, it reads true.

By the end of this day, we will have shared many “goodbyes” and next Sunday, you will all begin your new “hellos” as you carry on in your faithfulness with each other and to this wonderful worshiping community in a shared ministry.

I know we all thought my goodbye was not anyway near the horizon — even I was surprised to be moved in another direction so soon. Trust me; I wrestled with God greatly on this.

But in all of my 60 + years of living, I have learned that when it comes to the Almighty and wrestling, as willful as I can be, I’m going to lose every time — only not in the way I think because nothing ever gets lost on God.

And the same goes for you ~ For when we wrestle with God — which might be another way of saying when we honestly and fully engage with the things that stir *us* from deep within the soul — God will never lead us astray.

That doesn't mean we won't get lost or misread the signs along the way.
And it doesn't mean that God isn't listening to our pleas and our tears.

God is a very good listener.

We just don't often understand God's response because we aren't as fluent in "God" as perhaps we should be. And while we might never truly understand what God is saying, we can certainly always improve our ability to comprehend something of the Divine.

Across our time together, I have encouraged you to pay attention to your deepest feelings, patterns, coincidences, dreams, unexpected events, gut feelings — for these — and so much more — are some of the ways God speaks to us.

I remember when, in seminary, it was time for me to decide where to do my field education — the setting in which I would practice ministry. The Dean of Andover Newton recommended a church.

I laughed loudly, “No way! Oil and water!”

I then went on to have an amazing year of training at a Hospice house in Manchester, NH.

Two years later, God laughed back at me — and brought me here to Centre Street. Although I still wasn’t looking to be a pastor, God was looking for me to be yours and for you to be mine anyway. And that was over 7 years ago, and I’d say, by and large, it has been a match made in heaven.

I have mostly loved my time with you beyond measure. For sure, I got a little cranky with some parts of the job, but “some parts of the job” were never why I was here. I was here to love you and to walk in faith with you, to learn and grow with you, and I believe God blessed us immeasurably in that journey.

Through journeying in faith together, we have been shaped by each other under God’s guidance, and I trust that we land here this morning with *exactly* what we need as we each continue on in some new ways.

Through our time together, I learned that I’m actually not much of a leader — I’m more of a supporter and encourager — which is perfect for Centre Street for you are a strong and independent faith community with excellent leadership from within.

It has suited me deeply that you are independent...giving me the space to walk alongside you, pray over and with you, and support you in the many ways the Divine has been expressed here.

Together, with some of you often in several leading roles, we partnered with Mano en Mano to support our migrant farm worker friends with resources during the wreath-making season. We revived our children's nursery, revisioned the Blueberry Festival, acquired a festival storage shed, started the Follies!, restarted Sunday school, birthed a mighty Just Action Committee, repainted the church, built a new stage, expanded the music program, restored stained glass windows, painted Machias' first rainbow crosswalk, created an outdoor reflection garden, acquired an outdoor stage, are only months away from breaking ground for a new food pantry, offered stunning lay-led worship services and Zoom church.

Across our time, we persevered through many things: An increasingly polarized nation and strange configurations of what it means to be patriotic. We wrestled with the Black Lives Matter movement, a

pandemic shifting to an endemic, a brutal war in Ukraine and its associated global fears, and the normalization of mass shootings, all while trying to find the edges of hope without falling into apathy or despair.

We have marched, held vigils, lamented, prayed, cried.
And we have celebrated, given thanks, and carried on through it all.
These things and so much more.
Our time together has been incredible and life-giving on so many levels.

Jesus came in part to teach us how to get out humanity right.
You have been and will continue to be spectacular in living into that teaching.

We also said goodbye to some mighty beautiful souls as well. The Centre Streeters with whom I was blessed to journey and whom now dwell in the mystery of what is to come:

Ellen Huggins

Walter Getchell

Richard Burman

Lucille LaRue

Eileen McKinnon

Dave Warren

Marcy Grabrovac

And there were so many other loved ones who had a meaningful walk
with us at some point in their lives, now in God's mystery too.

I keep using the word *we* and *us* — while for sure I mean the flesh and
blood we and us, I am also and especially referencing *The Divine* we and
us.

The connections we make with others along life's way often bring us comfort and friendship. And also, along life's way, we — as today painfully reminds us — are wired to say hello and goodbye, each in our time.

But God is not wired that way. While I mostly don't know God, I can tell you that across all of our lives and in and out of time, God is the constant that holds us all together — meant to be expressed and lived out in a Triune way that Fr. Richard Rohr described as Community, Diversity, and Relationship.

We have been able to do all that we have done together — the easy parts and the difficult parts — because of our “we” because of what we brought together in Community, Diversity, and Relationship.

And in faith, hope, love . . . within the loving gaze of God's love and guidance.

And although we part ways from what has been typical for us these past
7 years,

the God part stays.

And so does something of each of us to one another.

You may recall that — well over a year ago — I sent you each a letter with a self-addressed stamped envelope, asking you to send back to me a piece of paper — something in color and texture that somehow represented something that spoke to your soul or that you felt gave a hint about your soul.

Each time one of the self-addressed stamped envelopes came back to me, it felt like Christmas. It was exciting and deeply moving for me to receive something from you that was something *of* you.

I received papers with gorgeous textures and varying degrees of color saturation.

I received practical things like the wrapping for toilet paper and Walgreens receipts.

There were patriotic sayings and photos.

Birch bark and shimmery green organza came my way, as did whimsical scenes, wrapping paper and wallpaper.

I received yarn and images of scenes that somehow moved the giver.

Papers were thick and thin, translucent, rough, shiny, practical, exotic, smooth, loud, quiet, store-bought, torn from a magazine, and handmade.

Some of you gifted me with special cloth from another time in your life, including a piece of a baby blanket from your now 6-foot-tall baby. And at the time the papers were coming in, the age range of givers was from 4 to 93!

As the treasured items came in, I laid them out, waiting for an image to come to me. Some figures began taking form, but I put them aside for months and months.

This past spring, when I knew it was time for me to do the next thing in my life, the papers began talking to me again, telling me what to do.

For countless hours across the past 3 months, I have been combining every single one of all or some parts of your papers and such with my own colors and images for a sort of Spiritual Collective.

Together, your spirit, as expressed in what you gave, combined with my spirit of interpretation, became our “we.”

In turn, that became Sophia — or God's Wisdom, God's wife, and co-creative partner, because that is what we have been doing throughout our time together. We have been in partnership with God and each other in co-creating our own bit of life through our shared faith and shared wider community.

Like the elements that came together to create the whole design, we will always somehow belong to each other. With the help of God, you have shaped me to become someone I didn't see — in fact, I never could have landed here without you.

I am a better person for having journeyed with you. And for that, I will forever be grateful. You helped me see myself in a new and greater light, and if that is not the point of God, then I don't know what is.

And in turn, I pray I have at least given you a hint of the same.
God designed us for relationship and co-creation.

As I begin to bring this to a close, take a look at another image, the one on the cover of your bulletin. It's from the James Webb telescope. It is of the dazzlingly beautiful spiral galaxy NGC 1300 — not an especially dazzling name, but that's not the point.

The point is that each life is a series of hellos and goodbyes — As Renee read for us, To everything there is a season and a purpose under heaven.

And each life, your unique lives, are a journey and an unfolding and sometimes that will feel as near as a piece of paper — or cloth, or bark, or yarn.

And other times, your being will feel as unknowable and as far away as a spiral galaxy.

And sometimes — perhaps often enough — if we're lucky — we stand in tension between the two as we do now:

Between familiar and unfamiliar,
knowing and unknowing,
near and far,
grief and joy,
between hello and goodbye . . .

But do not despair.

It is the cosmic design and these things are part of God's ways.

Marie-Louise von Franz, who was a contemporary of Carl Jung's said, "If we can stay with the tension of opposites long enough —sustain it, be true to it—we can sometimes become vessels within which the divine opposites come together and give birth to a new reality."

Beloveds, as you continue unfolding and responding to how to be the church in this next part of your journey, whenever it feels difficult or discouraging — because it will at times — my prayer is that you do not break out of things only for comfort's sake. Stay with the tension.

Imagine all that you are doing together like this Sophia image, and then recall the beautiful spiral galaxy, something only God can truly understand.

That's kind of like the tension of opposites that you will have to bear at times. The new reality that can be birthed is hinted at through mystery and waiting and promise.

The unfolding presence of this faith community is hinted at in the beauty of each of you. Stay with it — and remember that you are not alone. You are co-creating *with* God,

It's going to be different for a while, but it is also going to be all right. As Ken read for us from the 23rd Psalm, you shall not want, or you have all that you need. So, say hello to that good news and remember that God never says goodbye.

Amen