

February 21, 2010

First Sunday of Lent
New Members

Title: Turning toward the Spirit

New Testament, Letter: "God's message is in your heart." Romans 10:5-8

New Testament, Gospel: The Temptation of Jesus. Luke 4:1-13

Prayer: May the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts, be acceptable in thy sight, Oh Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

Today is my next to last Sunday with you. Change is coming. A time of transition has arrived. And we both have much to look forward to. In our hearts we know that when closure comes new beginnings appear. You know the old saying: when one door closes, other doors open up that you never thought about before. And that is true for me and for you and the church. The future is unknown for both of us; but, guaranteed - new, wonderful, stretching and fun things lie ahead.

Just think back nine years ago when I arrived. We didn't know what was to unfold. I was nervous. You were probably nervous too - nervous about how things would work out. Come to find out - We have had a good time together. Our faith has been stretched, pulled in new directions and friendships formed holding us together. From this we can conclude, based on past experiences, this time of new beginnings promises to be full of the same things - worship services, committee meetings, hard work, new challenges and in the mix of all that a good amount of caring, friendships and spiritual growth.

Nine years with you. Over that time I have gotten to know you pretty well. How you love this building, its organ, stained glass windows, old clock and the Paul Revere Bell. You love it so much you put in an elevator so the whole community could reach this beautiful sacred space. But what is different about this space than all the other churches I have ever known - each August it turns into a theater for the comedy show, the Blueberry Musical. Laughter fills the room, singing brings the house down and the Blueberry Blues is always the finale. Silly, fun, a room packed with people. Sacred space of a different kind. All this was new to me.

Quickly I learned that music is the heart beat of this church. It started with James Lyon, our first pastor coming here in 1771. He wrote hymns and had the congregation singing - singing when churches didn't do that in worship. This was totally new. How daring of them to sing in church. Right from the beginning this church has had the courage to embrace the new. This is our history, the roots go deep and we are still a church that is willing to embrace the new.

Music is a huge part of who we are. There are stories of young boys pumping the bellows to make the organ work. That took place in the little room next to the organ. Billie Ingalls husband, Hollis, had that job along with Bob Foster and many others. Some of their names are written on the wall back there. For the past 40 years the Machias Bay Chamber Concerts has been sponsoring wonderful concerts every summer.

And today music flows through our church with the leadership of Chris, the choirs and the bells. We have Robb playing the organ, the piano and giving us a great variety of music. There is the youth biblical musical that Chris has each year, the Christmas pageant and the summer music camp. In addition to all that music, we have special music with church members playing instruments and giving solos. And, of course, the now world famous Blueberry musical. Music, the year round. This is one of the things that makes this church unique and special.

The church has grown to enjoy babies and children in worship. We have made space for children, church school, teenagers and youth group. At the Ash Wednesday service this week five teenage girls participated and led prayers with grace and dignity. You can look forward to many years ahead of their involvement and leadership here at church. Teenagers - what a joy they are!

Let me see, what else do I know about you? Well, there is this thing called 'calculated inefficiency.' Just last week at the new member session one person asked, How does this church work? Who makes the decisions? This isn't an easy question to answer. We explained that there is no hierarchy of authority here. No CEO, or position, or committee that makes decisions that everyone else must live with. Here committees do their work, and the council coordinates and enhances the ministries. We talk over issues, discuss and discuss again. This means new input, and topics going back to committees to be discussed once again. Sometimes it feels like we are going in circles. We can get dizzy with this form of open democracy, but ultimately it brings us together. For us it is the whole church body, the members of the church, that make the big decisions. As you can see, other forms of decision making are much more efficient. "Calculated inefficiency' is one of your greatest gifts.

Extraordinary things take place at this church - and one of those extraordinary things is our community outreach. We are known for the food pantry and giving assistance to the poor and the struggling.

Over the years I have come to realize that, not only in Machias but throughout all of Washington County, Helen Vose and Centre Street Congregational Church are known as the patron saints of the poor. I have never known a church that has given so much of itself and its resources to meet the needs of the most unfortunate as this church. And this has been going on for over 35 years.

This week I received an e-mail from a local news reporter with the following comments about the Chocolate Fest we had last weekend: "Looks like an absolutely wonderful event. I suspect, if this is continued it will get bigger like the Blueberry Festival. It is unique, it is local and it is done in a loving fashion by church members." That is how we are seen in the community - that all that we do, especially the Blueberry Festival, is local, and is done with care and excellent.

But what stands out more than anything else is that all that we do is done in a loving fashion. If I may be a bit theological here - this is the hospitality, caring and welcoming of Christ shining through the work we do. It's no secret - your faith of love and kindness is known throughout the community.

'Where church and community meet' is the sign over our door. Day in and day out, Sunday to Sunday, you are a community church.

Part of my job has been to see the big picture of church life. Over the years I have read many books on church growth, spiritual renewal and guidelines on becoming a church of the 21st century. With this at my figure tips and because I have grown to love you so much, I want to make sure that you stay on the right track, do the right things and make good decisions. How many times have I played a recording in my head telling you: This is what you should do. This is how you should move ahead. I'm trying to hold back, but it is hard.

So, here I stand before you being tempted, tempted to give you guidance on what you should be doing. Tempted to tell you what to do next.

Temptation. We heard about the temptation of Jesus this morning. How he was tempted to provide bread for all the hungry people, tempted to have control over all the nations, tempted to make a grand entrance and become an instant super star. Instead, he put his faith in the people to care for each other and make faithful decisions.

Jesus was trying to discern what values were most important to him and what he was going to do. His temptation was to gain control over the lives of others. This was his wilderness experience. Wilderness - that is a good description of what it feels like to be tempted. Should I do this. Should I do that. I want to do this. I really want to do this. But I know better. But I still want to do it, any ways. Has that ever happened to you? Being tempted, but having nothing to hold onto to pull you back.

To be honest with you, I'm really tempted to lay out the future path I think you should take, but I'm not going to do that. If I did, it would be all about me, wanting to control and not letting go. And that wouldn't be good for any of us.

Today we heard the words of the apostle Paul as he writes to the Christians in Rome: "God's message is near you, on your lips and in your heart." I believe that and I want to trust that belief, and live by it. So listen to the message in your own hearts. It is the presence of the Holy spirit within you.

What an exciting future lies ahead. Get ready for it and enjoy the journey. Amen.