

Feb. 28, 2010

Third Sunday of Lent
Farewell

Title: Have you noticed?

Hebrew Scripture, Psalm: I give you thanks. Psalm 145:1-9

New Testament, Letter: Paul's prayer for church members: Philippians 1:3-8

A prayer from Uganda: We thank you God for your creation. You created earth and heaven. You created man and woman. You created sun and moon. We thank you for the good sunshine and the good rain that causes the crops to grow. We thank you for giving us children. We thank you God for giving us life. Amen.

Have you noticed? This is a day of celebration, joyful music, many friends, and a party waiting for us downstairs. And so much to be thankful for. I feel like shouting the words of Psalm 145: "I will proclaim your greatness, my God and king: I will thank you forever and ever." I thank you, God, for this church and for all the people here.

Have you noticed, I love you all very much. Who would have imagined that we would have gotten along so well and accomplished so much over the years - interesting, challenging, and fun things we did together. There is no doubt in anyone's mind or heart that God is indeed, 'still speaking' in this place we call Centre Street Church.

When we built the addition and added the elevator - this was a very big thing in the life of the church. It gave us a new identity. We were told we couldn't raise the money, but we did. That's when we became a people with purpose and an attitude of, 'Of Course, we can do that. We can do most anything.' Then, we went out and quadrupled our land with the purchase of the Green Space.

We sent nine teenagers to a national youth event way down in Nashville, Tennessee. With over 4,000 youth praying, singing, laughing and learning together I came back convinced that the future the United Church of Christ is in good hands. Going to national events gets us up out of our seats as the Spirit of unity sweeps over the crowd of thousands of people - all belonging to the United Church of Christ. This happened again when seven of us went to the 50th anniversary general Synod of the United Church of Christ in Hartford a few years ago. I encourage you to keep going to national events, regional and conference events too. They are fun, enliven your love of the church.

Have you noticed, I really like being with teenagers. They are so insightful, terribly honest and full of questions - and I love questions. Jennifer Beckwith and Asher Reisman were my first confirmation group, and believe me, they stretched my faith to the limit. There were many more teenagers over the years having rock-a-thons, car washes, and mission trips to the Heifer Farm in Massachusetts. Now you have a group getting ready for confirmation, and another Heifer Farm mission trip in 2011. Go for it. Be with these kids and watch them grow.

The Spirit was alive and active when we sent 24 adults and teenagers to Biloxi, Mississippi. The church had never done such a 'far away' mission trip before, but we did it. And, you can do it again. Would you believe, miracle of all miracles, we revived Vacation Bible School for the past four years. Remember how the vestry was transformed into an ocean scene with fish hanging from the ceiling and pictures of Noah and the Ark everywhere - little children and older kids doing science projects with Shallee, cooking with Jaap Helder, art with Nancy Look, singing with Bonnie Dunn and Betty Duzen was there too. Have you noticed, little children are fun too.

We took another big risk when we became an Open and Affirming Congregation. Mary Folsom was the one who led the way giving us courage, finding resources and planning thoughtful conversations. Her Spirit of unselfish love gave us strength and clarity and we give thanks for that. This same Spirit will carry you into the future as you continue to practice unselfish love.

There were those silly pound auctions when we would bid on stuff we couldn't even see - some good, some not so good. Plenty of community suppers under the direction of Dot Mae with the kitchen crew laughing away as they did their work. There was the community Peace Walk from our church to Hannaford and back. The youth participating in a number of Down East AIDS Network walks. Chris Gibson wrote a prayer for the AIDS walk one year and it was published in the UCC book, *DayBook for New Voices*. We have copies of this book in our church library. Go, check it out.

We expanded the Blueberry Festival under the direction of Ellen. This year there will be antiques booths, a magic show and much more. Every Sunday we fill sixty food bags - you will be doing this next week, next month, next year.

Where do we get the energy to do so much? and have a fun time doing all these things plus more? This is the only place I know where it is fun to go to committee meetings. So much laughter, it is a wonder we get anything done. We thank God for such a joyful strategy that builds community.

Part of living in community is accepting people as they are. I wonder, have you noticed my 'learning disability?' You know, how I say one thing but mean another. I could say Bangor, but mean Portland, I could say March but mean April, I could say tomorrow but mean yesterday. Some how you seem to know what is in my head better than I do. When I get things mixed up, you don't hesitate to correct me right there on the spot in the middle of a sermon. As I say, I can use all the help I can get. Thank you for accepting this persistent disability.

There is a special person I want to thank for being there for me every step of the way, and that is Felix, my husband. He is an ordained minister too with many years of church experience. He has been a consultant and advisor to me. Being in the choir he is here every week, sometimes stepping in to read scripture. He has always been by my side. This ministry has been a delightful partnership. Thank you Felix, for walking with me.

I'm going to miss the laughter of the choir at rehearsal each Sunday morning. Hearing the singing of the children drift up from downstairs. Visiting people in their homes and at the hospital. Holding hands as we offer a prayer. Placing ashes on the forehead of a beloved church mem-

ber. How strange - it is the little things that we miss the most. We miss them because each remembered activity, each thought that brings tears to our eyes, each event that we recall - all those things bring us in touch with people - their faces, their personalities, their funny ways of doing things. We remember the people who we held hands with. The people who made us laugh. The people who worked so hard to get things done. The people who listened to us when we were hurting. Most of all, it will be you, each one of you, that I give thanks for - for being here as our church family.

The spirit of God has been good to this church. But I don't see the spirit as a friendly ghost swooping around the building making things happen. Instead, I have experienced the spirit living, moving, laughing, singing inside each one of you in all that you do. Called by God, you become the carriers, the translators, the builders of the spirit of God. Without you there would be no 'God is still speaking' in this place.

So it is, like the psalm writer of the Bible, we look to the past to call out and identify the presence of the Spirit with us. This gives us courage and guidance when we look to the future and say with assurance, "Why would the future be any different." Look at all that is coming your way - the Lenten soup and study, community suppers, Palm Sunday breakfast, 'Sunday Best' calendar, mission trips, blueberry festival, blueberry musical and each Sunday morning you will come together for prayer, song and, of course, coffee fellowship.

We heard this morning the apostle Paul's prayer for the people of the church. This is a beautiful prayer that comes from the heart and is filled with compassion for the people he knew and loved. When I read it I knew how he felt for this is how I feel about you. Now I offer the prayer as my prayer for you: "I thank my God for you every time I think of you; and every time I pray for you all. I pray with joy because of the way in which you have helped me in the work of the gospel from the very first day until now. And, so, I am sure that God, who began this good work in you, will carry it on." Amen.