

GOOD NEWS

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Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

Eleventh Sunday in Ordinary Time

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Matthew 9:35-10:8

Then, Jesus went (which is to say, after a whole series of stories about Jesus teaching, healing and liberating) then Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and curing every disease and every sickness. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd... so, he summoned his disciples... and instructed them, "You go, proclaim the good news, 'The kingdom of heaven (the reign of love!) has come near.' (You) Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons. You received without payment; give without payment. (Matthew 9:35-10:1, 7-8) You go proclaim good news.

Good news seems to be in pretty short supply these days. Every day, sometimes every hour, we receive word of some new madness out of Washington, or London, Orlando, Syria, Sudan, not to mention Shepherdstown. What do you mean Randy is retiring? So, here we are, in the midst of these *most* bewildering times, sheep without a shepherd. Or are we? When Jesus saw the crowds, growing, harassed, helpless—he gathered together a community, prepared them with love, and sent them out to heal and liberate.

We've been preparing here for quite some time now for Randy's well-earned retirement; some of us have been working for several **years** to lay a firm foundation for this transition that we all knew would come one day. For the last several months, various different groups have been actively engaged in planning, preparing, and exploring new patterns and forms of leadership, including worship—which you will notice is already happening here this morning.

We've nearly all been engaged in the marvelous work of storytelling, reflecting on the past, celebrating and lamenting. I, for one, have found mostly hope and joy in all of this good and important work. I know we all have loss to process here, it will take time, care and compassion; I can't even name all that I have lost—not just pastor, preacher, friend, but also mentor, colleague and co-conspirator. But like many of you, I have experienced a lot of endings in my life, some quite traumatic. So an ending like this one, that is firmly in the natural order of things, that has been well planned and celebrated, feels to me more like fulfillment than loss. I am left with an overwhelming sense of gratitude for all that has been and all that will be, for the glimpses we have already been given of new potential and possibility.

It seems like a good time to recall that this is just one leg on a very long, unfolding journey. I especially appreciate what some of our old timers keep reminding us—that the man who arrived here 42 years ago is not the same one we sent off so magnificently last Sunday. He did not arrive here fully formed—who has? -- he became the pastor, the preacher and the man that we all know and love today. As he has said many times, it takes a congregation to raise a pastor. And it seems to me that SPC has a particular gift for that. Trust that!

Randy *became*, as we are all becoming, shaped by participation in this particular beloved community, this school of love, where the Spirit has been at work for a very long time. In 2018, we will observe what I'm told is our **bicenterquasquigenary**, 275 years as a spiritual community. Good thing we have plenty of time to plan another party. And, as Randy was very fond of pointing out, this story *actually* began some 4.3 billion years ago when the Spirit first moved over primordial chaos, bathed it in light, and brought forth new life. It's what the Spirit does.

So: our history is long, and it will continue. And, every one of us here, and all those out there touched in some way by this beloved community, is invited to be part of what comes next, to keep

shaping and being shaped by our life together, by the Spirit of Love that called it all into being and makes it all possible, year by year, day by day, and breath by breath.

Our journey together thus far has been magnificently blessed and it has formed us with a shared identity and particular vision of the world, something we will continue exploring together, starting next week in a forum between services called "Only at SPC: Our Stories, Our Values, Our Future." Please come and be part of this important and hope-filled conversation.

This is actually a continuation of our congregational assessment work, that began with a survey some 18 months ago (carefully laying foundations), which depicted SPC as a very high energy, high engagement, progressive congregation. We were so healthy by this particular measure, in fact, that it was recommended we do some deeper digging to try and articulate better just what was going on under the surface of things.

So, a remarkable group of people with very specific training, skill and experience in just this type of work showed up and said yes to this challenge. (And, in case you had not noticed by now, this is a recurring pattern around here. Again and again and again, some need, or opportunity arises, and just the right person or persons with just the right gifts turns up, and says yes. Randy was one shining example, and he in turn became a genius at seeing and trusting that pattern. Now, this task—pay attention, listen deeply and trust -- falls to all of us. Along with the invitation to be willing to say yes to the idea that you may be just that right person every now and then).

This phase 2 assessment, which we did this past winter, was based on deep listening and attention to people's stories—lots more about this next week. But for now, let me just say, those stories are like leaves on a tree, just the outward and visible expressions of very deep, healthy and abiding roots, which lead in turn to some pretty profound shared commitments--**everyone is welcome; everything belongs; and love is the heart of everything.**

Attending to our roots will help us stay close to what grounds us. Naming and claiming our communal values will help us assess where we measure up, and where we fall short; all of this will help us move forward together into this next leg of the journey with greater confidence and intention.

This is not just any journey, where we rush from one place to the next, it is spiritual journey, a most peculiar thing, because its actually not ever meant to end. Its not about arriving somewhere else at all, it is more about learning how to be here, now, more fully awake and more deeply aware of what has already been given. Waking up to the good news that, as the Apostle Paul puts it in our Romans reading today, we live in hope because *God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit*. This radical, universal claim is a thread that runs through all of Paul's writing—everyone is called into the heart of Love, everyone belongs. Just a few chapters later in this same letter to the Roman communities, which were experiencing all kinds of divisiveness and division, Paul declares this: *I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God* (Rom 8:38). That Love connects us to one another, to all those who have gone before us, to all those yet to come, and to the larger world that we inhabit. That Love poured out into our hearts – all hearts -- keeps inviting us to wake up and say yes.

As Marcus Borg puts it, at the heart of Christianity is the way of the heart – a path that transforms us at the deepest level of our being. At the heart of Christianity is the heart of God – a passion for our transformation and the transformation of the world. At the heart of Christianity is participation in the passion of God.

So, our deepest communal root, our tap root, runs right into the heart of Jesus, that broken open heart, that is, in the words of Parker Palmer, "indistinguishable from the cross, where God's heart was broken open for the healing of the world, broken open into a kind of love that Christ followers are called to emulate." *You go and proclaim good news.*

We have all been called in some way to be part of this journey of transformation, in this beloved community, this particular expression of God's desire for wholeness and liberation. Even if you are just passing through, I trust you will take some seed, some gift, some invitation along with you. Pay attention. The Reign of Love is right here, right now at work in the midst of all the chaos, uncertainty, in the heart of sadness, in loss, in love, its here in community. And you know, that is pretty good news. Because it also means that *you* are good news. That *we, together*, are good news. Trust that. And, say yes.

Song
"We Are Called"