

I've given a lot of thought

Into to what I would preach on today.

Though my last Sunday at Colchester Federated Church

isn't until next week,

This is my last opportunity to give the sermon.

As I thought about what I would say,

I weighed my options—

Did I want my last sermon here to be full of theological insights

that would impress everyone with the depth of my knowledge?

OR...

Did I want my last sermon to be an intricate analysis of the biblical text—

a line by line interpretation that would bring new understanding

to an old and familiar story?

OR...

Did I want my last sermon to be a passionate call to social justice?

An inspiring message

that would move people to do the work of Christ in the world.

So I looked at the lectionary for this Sunday,

And found even more food for thought.

The gospel reading is the famous story of Doubting Thomas.

I thought about the ways in which I could incorporate the recent film "Doubt" into the

sermon—

Weaving a complex web of faith, doubt, and human drama.

But then,

I noticed the *other* New Testament reading for the day—

The one from the Acts of the Apostles.

The story in which a small band of misfit disciples

Come together to form one of the first Christian communities.

But scripture tells us that this was no ordinary community.

Acts 4 says that they gave up all personal belongings,

shared everything in common,

and there was not a needy person among them.

All of a sudden it dawned on me—

This was text I needed to preach on this morning.

Not because I wanted to advocate that y'all sell everything you own and start a Christian commune—

I wanted to preach on this text

because more than anything else about my time at this church,

I have been impacted by the strong communal values at its core.

The more I thought about what I wanted to say,

The more I realized that this wasn't really going to be a typical sermon.

Because what I want to say to you this morning

isn't about what *I* can tell *you* about theology,

or the bible,

or justice.

What I want to say to you
has nothing to do with all the overly intellectual books and articles
that I spend my time reading for classes at Yale.

What I want to say to you this morning is about

What *you* have taught *me*
about what it means to live as a community—
about what it means to live as the body of Christ.

When I came here for my interview last spring,
I knew very little about how a small town church operated.
My experiences had been primarily in urban churches,
And most of my activity in those churches had been justice oriented.
One of the interview committee members,
Who shall remain nameless,
Told me that Colchester Federated Church
was not a “social justice” church,
And that I might find myself frustrated in such an environment.
However,
it didn’t take long before I was questioning that statement.

On one of my first Sundays here,
I heard the stories of those who had gone on a mission trip to New Orleans
To help complete strangers try and put their lives back together.

Within the first two months of my time here,
This congregation took remarkably quick action
on an opportunity to reach out to a refugee family.

As the weather grew colder,

I heard about the dedicated members of “My Brother’s Keeper”--

A group of women who sewed *by hand*
sleeping bags for homeless individuals in the area.

I saw a dedicated group of compassionate young people
who were willing to brave the cold and sleep outside overnight
in order to raise money
and stand in solidarity with those less fortunate.

Despite tough economic times,
the community pitched in and collected 1000 items of food
for ailing area food banks.

Week after week,

I have heard justice and compassion preached from the pulpit,
And have seen love of neighbor taught in Sunday school classes,
and lived out within the community.

All this from a church that supposedly isn’t interested in social justice?

In February,

I met with the New Haven Committee on Ministry
To ask that they consider me

as a candidate for ordination in the United Church of Christ.

They asked me a lot of questions about my experiences here at Colchester.

One of the questions asked of me

was what I thought the difference was between United on the Green—

My home church in New Haven,

Located down town in the midst of a busy urban area,

And Colchester Federated Church.

I thought about it for a minute,

And said that aside from its surroundings,

There wasn't as big of a difference as I had originally anticipated.

I told the committee about the comment made in my interview—

The one about Colchester not being a “social justice” church--

And then I listed all the things I just mentioned.

Then I said that that even though Colchester Federated Church does not necessarily use the same language to describe it,

they are in fact a justice oriented church.

“They don't necessarily call it social justice”— I said.

At which point the head of the committee chimed in and said,

“No—

they just call it

Christianity.”

We all had a good laugh, and moved on to the next question.

But the comment made by the head of the committee stuck with me.

Why is it,

I wondered,

That we feel the need to give a special designation to “social justice” work?

In many progressive churches I’ve been a part of,

The term “social justice” is thrown about quite liberally.

It is used almost as a point of pride.

“We are a social justice church”--

One church might say as a way of differentiating themselves

from those churches that are more known for

evangelism,

Or fire and brimstone preaching.

But it shouldn’t really be a point of pride,

Should it?

It should be a given.

Being the hands and feet of Christ in the world

is what scripture calls us to do.

Throughout the both the Hebrew Scriptures

and the New Testament,

We find the same commandment,

Over and over again—

Love your neighbor as yourself.

And so when you heard about families in New Orleans who had lost their homes,

You left your own homes in order to help others rebuild theirs,
And there was not a needy one among them.

When you heard that there was a rising need
to assist refugee families coming to this country from Iraq—
fleeing their war-torn country
so that they might have a chance at life—
you offered up your own resources—
time,
talent,
and treasure,
so that you might be able to offer a family
the chance for a new beginning.

While the chance to help a family never came,
The important thing to remember is that
You took seriously
that biblical call to take care of the stranger.
You were, collectively, the Samaritan,
Not passing by on the other side of the road,
Not waiting for someone else to take action.

And there was not a needy person among them.

When you heard that the area food banks were being hit hard
By the economic crisis,
You took responsibility for your neighbors—

Even though you might not know them—

And there was not a needy one among them.

All of these things,

And so much more,

I have seen as evidence that the holy spirit of God

Is alive and well in this congregation.

And in that I have learned an important lesson.

It doesn't matter what words we use to "market" ourselves as a church.

It doesn't matter what language we use

to describe the way we act as agents of Christ in the world.

It matters only that we do it,

And do it with faith and love.

As I reflected on my experience here

in relation to the lectionary texts this morning,

I also thought about the *difficulties* of living in community,

And the difficulties of living out the gospel of love in the world.

In the story from Acts,

We read of a community that is filled with love for one another,

Free from fear and doubt.

It can be daunting to read about this community—

They seem almost too perfect.

Despite all the work we do in community,

We are still filled with faults,

doubts,

And divisions.

Sometimes,

we can't picture ourselves living up to that image of perfect community.

But it is important to remember

that the disciples were not always so faithful,

or so fearless.

In the Gospel story this morning,

we read that after the crucifixion,

The disciples locked themselves into a room—

Not once,

But twice!!

The second time being *after* Jesus had already appeared to them.

Thomas tends to get a bad reputation in this story—

People focus on him as the one with all the doubt.

But what about the rest of the disciples?

The ones who,

Having seen the risen Christ,

Continue to hide out in secret?

How is it that the doubt of one man

overshadows the inability

of the disciples to get their act together?

There are times—

I think—

when we are the ones who hide out.

When we are—

Not Thomas—

But the *rest* of the doubting disciples.

Maybe we are feeling let down

after the festivities of Easter.

Feeling our own doubt

about the reality of God's unconditional love and forgiveness.

Maybe we are overwhelmed

by the continuing economic crisis—

With the list of people we know

who have lost their job

continuing to grow.

Maybe we are dealing with grief,

Sickness,

Or loss.

Maybe we hear about the war torn areas of the world,

And wonder how a loving God can allow so much suffering.

All of these things can prevent us—

from continuing to rejoice in the miracle of Easter.

However,

All of these things—

Grief.

Loss.

Worry.

Doubt.

Instability.

These are all things that the first group of disciples were also grappling with.

Even these first disciples didn't get it right away.

Jesus had to visit them multiple times

before they understood what they were supposed to be doing.

It takes time for them to get there,

But when they do,

Theirs is a community that lives out the gospel message.

The same holds true for us.

Sometimes it takes a while to get there,

We have fits and starts,

We face doubts and fears.

We are a people of God, interrupted, at times.

But every so often,

We get there.

We remember that our call,

As members of Christ's body—

As agents of the risen Christ—

Is to promote God's love,

Peace,

And forgiveness in the world.

When our hearts are full of fear—

Like those of the apostles in the days following the crucifixion—

It is difficult to live out that call.

But when our hearts are full of love—

We can move mountains.

There is a singer-songwriter that I have been listening to a lot lately—

Her name is Sara Groves.

One of her recent albums was written after she visited New Orleans
to help with the clean-up effort.

Many of the songs communicate the deep despair she sometimes felt

When she would start to think about how much work there still was to be done.

But she also communicates a deep sense of hope.

In one song—

Entitled "When the Saints"—

She sings, in reference to the destruction and desolation she saw:

"Lord it's all that I can't carry,

It often overwhelms me.

But when I think of all who have gone before me,

And lived a faithful life,

They're courage compels me.”

I think this is a deep wisdom that we can tap into.

To know that when we do feel overwhelmed by doubt or fear,

We can look back at the lives of

So many saints

Who have gone before us.

Not only those first century saints like St. Peter or even St. Thomas.

But also those saints within this very congregation—

Past and present—

Whose courage and faith

compel us

to continue to live out God's extraordinary dream for humanity.

That is one thing I know I will carry with me when I leave this place.

Not only everything I've seen this congregation do,

But also everything that you are—

Welcoming and compassionate.

Faithful and joyful.

Steadfast and dedicated

to the common life you share together.

So I say thanks

for letting me be a part of your community this year,

And I pray that your work in Christ

will continue to be blessed for many years to come.

I want to close with a quote by one of the great preachers of our time—

Barbara Brown Taylor.

In writing about our call to the Christian life she says this:

“God does not call us once,

But many times.

There are calls to particular communities,

And calls to particular tasks within them.

Calls to seek God wherever God may be found.

Sometimes those calls ring clear as bells,

And sometimes—

they are barely audible.

But in any case,

we are not meant to hear them all by ourselves.

It was part of God’s genius to incorporate us as one body,

So that our ears have other ears,

Other eyes,

Minds,

Hearts,

And voices,

to help us interpret what we have heard.

Together we can hear our calls,

And together we can answer them.

Answering the call requires no particular virtue,

But a good imagination certainly helps.

For there is a chance

that the Christian vocation is--

above all--

a vocation to imagine.

To see what God sees

when God looks at the world,

And to believe

that God's dream

can come true."