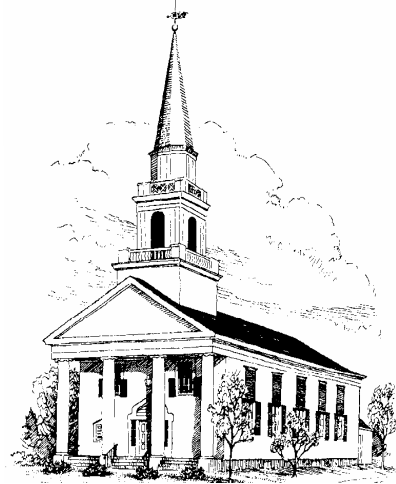


Mystic Congregational Church, UCC

Mystic, Connecticut

Sermon from March 4, 2007
Rev. Patricia L. Liberty
“The Road Goes On”

Scriptures:
Philippians 3:14-4:1
Hebrews 11 Selected Verses



Somewhere in the heart of every preacher, this moment is always lurking. If there is a first sermon, a first worship, there is also surely a last. As pastors, whether we are here for two years or twenty, we are all temporary shepherds. Pulpits and people are entrusted to us for a time.

September 5, 2004, I stood in this pulpit for the first time. I was a stranger in your midst. Two and a half years later, you have no doubt figured out I am stranger than you ever imagined.

I remember the text of the day was challenging and not one I would have chosen for a first sermon. Jesus was speaking to a gathered crowd and says, “Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, and, yes, even life itself, cannot be my disciple.” I remember thinking, “This ought to be fun.” I was tempted to choose a more sedate text.

But the wisdom of the gospel and the discipline of the lectionary launched our time together and we began exploring and celebrating the life of discipleship to whom we are called. I said, that first Sunday, that the gospel is a constant reminder that having a relationship with God is going to cost us everything we trust we more than God, everything we count on more than God. It is a call to daring discipleship. Now, as our time of shared ministry comes to an end, that remains true—the road goes on and it is a road of daring discipleship.

Our shared journey has bumped along in ways we never could have imagined and, while there is much healing to be done and much learning to be garnered, it is clear that the faith that brought you to this place has kept you in this place, and that summons to pilgrimage is stronger than all that has happened among you, around you, and within you. These last two and a half years are a chapter in your history that remains to be written, and there are many more that will follow after it.

For today, it is ours to mark this part of the journey—times of laughter and tears, moments of worship and prayer and song, times of watching and waiting as this unpredictable thing called life blurred the lines between yesterday and today, and stretch on into tomorrow.

There is value in remembering these times, not because the past has any intrinsic value—there is always a danger in building monuments to the past. There is value in remembering because there are timeless truths hidden in specific moments.

During our time together, we finished building a building, born of the dream, vision and commitment of this community. We gathered in a circle in the Parish Hall as the choir sang, “What is this place where we are meeting? Only a house, the earth its floor, walls and a roof sheltering people, windows for light, an open door. Yet, it becomes a body that lives when we are gathered here, and know our God is near.” Together we dedicated the space to God’s glory with a prayer that faithful ministry would unfold within its walls.

As the months rolled, pieces of the dream that visioned the Youth Space became reality and, today, with the leadership of a few and the willingness of many, our drop-in center is steadily growing. Jamie would want me to remind you that Friday night volunteers are always needed and the sign-up sheet is on the bulletin board outside Chris’ office.

Early last summer, our gathering spilled outside for a cookout and music with a DJ. Just about the time all the chaperones were in the parking lot doing the *Electric Slide*, the police showed up and the evening was branded a success.

These two and a half years have afforded you the opportunity to sing countless hymns you never heard of, chosen not to aggravate you as you may have been tempted to think but because the words build a container around the timeless message of the gospel.

Mostly, I think these years will be remembered as bittersweet. After ten years of unsettledness and outright conflict, the dream of stability and growth seemed finally within reach. As I look back over these last eight months, it occurs to me that the evaporating of that hope and the reality of several more years of transition is a large part of the loss that reverberates through this community.

But even as we lived through the shock, disappointment and trauma of those days, we were held together by the presence of the Holy Spirit, years of relationship, shared vision and, sometimes, habit. It brought out the best and the worst in all of us and, while we were all over the map, God was in our midst: constant, faithful, and quietly reminding us that the work of the kingdom is ours to do and that ministry belongs to the whole people of God.

When we didn’t know what else to do, we showed up here. Week after week, we gathered to sing our faith, hear words of comfort and pray and, bit by bit, the way unfolded and we continued the journey. When we didn’t know what to do, we showed up at the *Soup Kitchen* and the *Shelter*, at the food pantry and *Pawcatuck Neighborhood Center*, to deliver *Meals on Wheels*, and chaperone Friday nights. We showed up to Bible study and committee meetings and continued being the church because, whatever else may be true, whatever we gain and lose in the course of our days, this is who we are—part of what it means to be the church.

Sometimes what happens in those moments connects us to something essential about our faith and ourselves. A word of comfort reaches to a place of brokenness, a scripture familiar from a lifetime of hearing comes alive in a new way and, once again, the word that is time-

bound becomes timeless, the word that is written becomes the word alive, living in you and me.

We gather here time and again to say prayers over our dead, welcome children to the waters of baptism, welcome new travelers to our shared journey, and bless the unions of those who enter into covenant with God and each other. We sit at the table and share cubes of bread and thimbles of grape juice and remember a time long ago so that we might be strengthened for the time that is at hand.

We come back week after week in search of those moments that connect our past to our present and point the way to the future. Like Abraham and Sarah, Moses and Miriam, we are on the journey from here to there and, from time to time, we come to know something of the truth we are seeking. We continue to live the faith in search of the faith.

And, by God's grace, that is enough. The road goes on and the journey is our home. Buechner calls it the summons to pilgrimage, the truth that whatever else may draw us here, there is a joyful, nagging, never-let-you-go call to be the hands and feet and mouth of God in a world that has no other hands or feet or mouths but ours.

He goes on to say, "Here is the one in whose employ we finally find ourselves, and the chances are pretty good that, this side of the Jordan, we will never see his face except mirrored darkly in dreams and shadows and, if our best memories are any indication, in the faces of those who journey with us."

He is our shepherd, but chances are we will never feel his touch except as we are touched with the joy and pain and holiness of our own life and each other's lives.

We are sister and brother to Abraham and Sarah, Moses and Miriam, because like them we live in faith not having received what was promising but having seen in and greeted it from afar, and often only from afar.

But the truth and beauty of their stories and ours is that Christ is there with us on our way. He has brought us to this place and time. He is with us, that is our faith."

Whatever else may be true, the journey is our home. We are always on our way from here to there and, as we get closer to one destination, another stretches out before us, and God is in the traveling.

Bless now, O God, the journey that all your people make,
The path through noise and silence, the way of give and take,
The trail is found in desert and winds the mountain round,
Then leads beside still waters, the road where faith is found.

Divine eternal love, you meet us on the road,
We wait for lands of promise where milk and honey flow
But waiting not for places, you meet us all around
Our covenant is written on roads, as faith is found.

Thanks be to God and amen.