

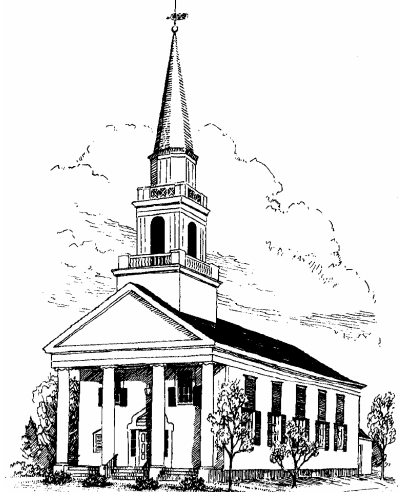
Mystic Congregational Church, UCC

Mystic, Connecticut

Sermon from August 2, 2009

Rev. Ann M. Aaberg
“Balancing Act”

Scriptures:
Exodus 16:2-4, 9-15
John 6:24-35



The temperature control in my car does the same thing with the air conditioner as it does with the heat in the winter. There just doesn't seem to be a spot on the dial that is just right, a place where we can set it and forget it. Throughout the course of even a short drive, we turn it way up to begin with, then turn it down when it's cold enough, but then have to tweak it incessantly as the temperature somehow vacillates between a little too warm and a little too cold. It's a balancing act.

We find this fine-tuning in many aspects of our lives. Anyone on any kind of medication knows about this as we attempt to regulate our blood pressure or blood sugar or back pain.

Just getting through our daily lives in an attempt to achieve an adequate level of physical health presents all kinds of balancing challenges. There are rules. We need to incorporate 8 hours of sleep every night and 8 glasses of water every day and whole grains and fruits and vegetables and at least 30 minutes of daily exercise, and time with friends and family and time alone, but we also need to get our work done. We're advised to spend time outside to get our Vitamin D, but limit our exposure to the sun, watch our intake of red meat, but get enough iron and protein, eat enough good fat to get our omega-3s without putting on weight, enjoy the fresh fruits of the season but monitor our sugar intake, and I don't know about you, but drinking 8 glasses of water per day lands me in that little room right *next* to my office more often than the room with my desk in it!

Some of us in our attempts to be physically healthy become single-minded, some to the point of obsession, and in our attempt to follow the rules very closely, we lose the very balance we're trying to achieve. And it might not be towards physical health, but some other worthy goal that can start controlling us instead of the other way around. I knew of a woman once who declined a spontaneous luncheon invitation with some friends one day in the middle of the week because Wednesday was the day she dusted the baseboards. Her aspiring to a clean home was squeezing out the importance of community.

In everything it seems it's the extremes we need to avoid. That's pretty easy for those of us who have enough and who are free enough to make choices. Yet we know there are many in this world, in our own community, who are forced to make difficult choices to keep their

lives in balance: heating oil or groceries, medication or milk for the kids, rent or the car payment. The fine balancing act for them is more like an impossible juggle.

A common circular discussion raised by our scripture passage this morning revolves around the balance between food and faith. This crowd whom we met last week on the mountain, who were fed till they were full with just 5 loaves of bread and two fishes, know a good thing when they see it. So much so, the next day they come back for more and, when they see that neither Jesus nor the disciples are still around, they hop into boats and start paddling to go find him.

Jesus knows their motivation and calls them on it: you're following me because of the loaf thing yesterday. He says: "Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. For it is on him that God the Father has set his seal."

The crowd responds: OK, Jesus, so what do we have to do? Because we have lots of rules to live by, you know. Take a look at our Scripture and we have rules about food preparation and what things can touch each other and what we need to bring to the Temple and what we can and can't do on certain days. So what do we have to do?

Believe in me.

OK, then where's your sign? Because in our Hebrew Scripture, our ancestors in the wilderness got bread from heaven and the Lord said at that time, *then* you shall know that I am the Lord your God. So what are you going to do? What sign are you going to give us then so that we may see it and believe you?

Jesus says: It's God who gives you the true bread of heaven, the bread which gives life to the world.

Great, give us that bread always.

I am the bread of life.

We don't hear the crowd's response to this, but we can imagine what it might have been, even if it was internal questioning, because we still do it today: But, Jesus, we still gotta eat.

And this is where we encounter the balancing act between food and faith, between bodily hunger and spiritual hunger. Through John's version of the gospel, is he telling us then that completely relying on our faith in Jesus will produce food on the table? Some of our TV evangelists have been criticized for promoting a "prosperity theology" or "prosperity gospel" which says: believe really hard and live as the Bible dictates, and you will be blessed with abundance—cars, houses, bank accounts. I had one person express one time that, of course, God must have been pleased with Mel Gibson's interpretation of Jesus' passion because the movie producer was raking in millions from it! God was blessing Mel Gibson with money for his efforts. Try telling this one to the very poor whose faith is as strong as any.

Then should we go the other way? Not talk about faith until all the stomachs are full? Certainly it is hard to impart lofty thoughts about Jesus to those who can't hear above the growls in their empty bellies. Yet, I learned while I was in India that Christian missionaries, at

least in some states, are prohibited from meeting the bodily needs of the rural poor because it could be considered a bribe towards conversion.

Our guidance comes from biblical scholar and preacher Fred Craddock, who points to the mountainside and the loaves and fishes and writes that Jesus “provide[d] food for hungry stomachs before moving on to the sermon on the bread that lasts forever.” The author of the Gospel of John does not spiritualize the gospel to the point of abandoning basic creature needs and neither should we. Mahatma Gandhi said: There are people in the world so hungry, that God cannot appear to them except in the form of bread.

It’s a balancing act. One way *we* face the challenge of balancing food and faith as a church plays out in how we seek to allocate and balance our budget. We are committed to maintaining this building so we can worship together, yet we wonder about the dollars being better served by going to the poor. We believe in Jesus and his promise to be all that we need, but know that we need to collect enough in the offertory to meet our expenses. We want to spend time in study and prayer together, and our committee meetings need to be held, too. We need to keep our feet on the ground and address practical earthly concerns at the same time we yearn to connect with the spirit of God, to experience the holy.

With all our personal tensions and waverings, with all our struggles as a community of faith, the perfect balance is found here, right here at this table. In his infinite divine wisdom, Jesus knew exactly the combination of what we needed and gave it to us freely: he gave us himself. His body broken for us, his blood poured out for us and a way to remember him and take him in again that is as practical as sharing a loaf of bread and a cup of wine with each other. A way to find communion with each other and communion with God that connects our bodies through sharing this sacred meal together and connects our spirits with the holiest of holies at the same time. A way that is as grounded as wheat and grapes from the soil of this very earth and as uplifting and lasting as experiencing oneness with the Divine. Here we find in the same bread we can touch with our fingers in real time the bread of life for all time. Not too hot, not too cold. Not too much, not too little. Just right. Sir, give us this bread always. Amen.

