

Rev. Sally May
January 1, 2017
First Congregational Church UCC of Burlington, Vermont
“New Year’s Day Meditation”

Ecclesiastes 3:1-13 (NRSV)

For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven: a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted; a time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up; a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance; a time to throw away stones, and a time to gather stones together; a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing; a time to seek, and a time to lose; a time to keep, and a time to throw away; a time to tear, and a time to sew; a time to keep silence, and a time to speak; a time to love, and a time to hate; a time for war, and a time for peace. What gain have the workers from their toil? I have seen the business that God has given to everyone to be busy with.

He has made everything suitable for its time; moreover he has put a sense of past and future into their minds, yet they cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end. ¹²I know that there is nothing better for them than to be happy and enjoy themselves as long as they live; ¹³moreover, it is God’s gift that all should eat and drink and take pleasure in all their toil.

Matthew 25:31-46

³¹“When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. ³²All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, ³³and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. ³⁴Then the king will say to those at his right hand, ‘Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; ³⁵for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, ³⁶I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.’ ³⁷Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? ³⁸And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? ³⁹And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?’ ⁴⁰And the king will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.’ ⁴¹Then he will say to those at his left hand, ‘You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; ⁴²for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, ⁴³I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.’ ⁴⁴Then they also will answer, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?’ ⁴⁵Then he will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.’ ⁴⁶And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.”

“New Year’s Day Meditation”

Now these were the lectionary texts for New Year’s Day, today, and there’s a ton in each of those, and I’m not really touching either of them, but I also love them in the context of baptism and what that means. As I prepared for this morning I remembered when I was a young woman, in my early 20’s, and my sister, also in her early 20’s, and how we would cry every New Year’s Eve. People around us questioned our emotional response to the midnight countdown, thinking it quite laughable usually, and we could never fully explain it. Yet, it seemed we mourned for what had been and knew would never, could never be again. I also think while the future held such hope for two young women, it also was completely unknown to us what that would look like, what that would be, and thus unsettling, even scary. We were beginning to experience the loss of loved ones with grandparents and great aunts and uncles. As I have gotten older, I fear far, far less the future and look to the future more and more to offer Good News, and blessings in healed and new relationships. I so much more appreciate the last verses from Ecclesiastes that Carrie read. While we humans keep time in our own way, then there is God’s time. “[God] has made everything suitable for its time; moreover [God] has put a sense of past and future into their minds, yet they cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end. I know that there is nothing better for them than to be happy and enjoy themselves as long as they live; moreover, it is God’s gift that all should eat and drink and take pleasure in all their toil.” I just love that.

So today, this first day of 2017, we, together, celebrate a wonderful time. A time in the lives of Luke and Maya, and their families, and this church, this community of faith, as Luke and Maya experienced baptism; and for those of us who witness and affirm this sacred event, this Holy Sacrament, a time that offers new life through living water that heals, offers community, and an powerful acknowledgement of the blessedness, the royalty of every child, every human being.

In our baptisms we are called to do as the reading from Matthew’s Gospel calls us to do. That we baptize with water in the 21st Century as did the early church, as Jesus was baptized, offers water as a thread of connection for each of us to Jesus, to our ancestors and forward into future generations. And as we all know, water is essential to all life and thus it symbolizes its value in life. So, for me, the water is also a reminder of this morning’s words from the Gospel of Matthew: As a Christian community, we are meant to recognize and value those in need, all of life and the specialness of human life, and thus necessarily and inevitably we are called to give food to the hungry, drink to the thirsty, welcome the stranger, clothe the naked, care for the sick, and visit the prisoner. And I bet you that those two [those having been baptized] will do that.

In this time, at this time, we are reminded of our connectivity as we learn and strive to live in the world. In this church, through this community of faith we are gifted with the relationships formed out of faith expressed in worship and mission and loving our neighbors as ourselves;

our neighbors being as close to us as those sitting with us in the pews, in our families, in the greater community, and in the world. And let us not forget the reminder and import that it says of loving ourselves; recognizing our own royalty through our unique experiences and unique creation that each of us is. Maya and Luke may never cross paths again, but today, today they are one in the Spirit of God as they have been baptized into God's kingdom in this space, in this church, with you, you their witnesses. A unique experience by unique, one of a kind individuals created in the image of God. This is a time of its own in a season of its own. And that is really true for every baptism: A unique and special moment in time in the seasons of our lives.

May the baptisms of Luke and Maya remind us of the beauty and specialness that each of us is as God made, as God makes, and as God will continue to re-make us in God's image.

The sacrament of baptism reminds us that we are church ~ a special community of people rooted in a faith, in a God that loves unconditionally and eternally all of life. This moment in time affords us to remember why, as a faith community, we are here. And that we do matter. This is our time. An opportune time.... to consider what our role as a church, and as people of the church is in creating God's kingdom here on earth. I had an aunt who wrote a book titled "All God's People Are Ministers." And I believe that. We are all ministers with gifts that offer support, healing, and hope to our families, to one another, and, again, in the world. To be fully human is to use those gifts, to be faithful is to use those gifts so as to work towards a world that not only reflects but *is, becomes*, God's kingdom on earth. Like Moses, we may never and probably will not, get to the promised land, but this is our time, our season to continue the human journey of seeking all that is good and just. I am reminded of a quote from JR Tolkien's writings:

"I wish it need not have happened in my time," said Frodo. "So do I," said Gandalf, "and so do all who live to see such times. But that is not for them to decide. All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given us."

On this first day of a new year, and as witnesses of two beloved children of God baptized into this family of faith, let us remember the possibilities and the responsibilities born of faith and in faith to make the world a better place for all of God's children, in this time, in all times.

I would like to close with a reading that is usually attributed to Bishop Oscar Romero but was written by Bishop Ken Untener. May it offer you not only hope for the future, but thanksgiving for the time that has been and faith-filled strength for the times that are to be. And perhaps most important, as a reminder that you, and that we, are never alone.

A Step Along the Way

It helps, now and then, to step back and take a long view.

The kingdom is not only beyond our efforts, it is even beyond our vision.

We accomplish in our lifetime only a tiny fraction of the magnificent enterprise that is God's work. Nothing we do is complete, which is a way of saying that the Kingdom always lies beyond us.

No statement says all that could be said.

No prayer fully expresses our faith.

No confession brings perfection.

No pastoral visit brings wholeness.

No program accomplishes the Church's mission.

No set of goals and objectives includes everything.

This is what we are about.

We plant the seeds that one day will grow.

We water seeds already planted, knowing that they hold future promise.

We lay foundations that will need further development.

We provide yeast that produces far beyond our capabilities.

We cannot do everything, and there is a sense of liberation in realizing that.

This enables us to do something, and to do it very well.

It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning, a step along the way, an opportunity for the Lord's grace to enter and do the rest.

We may never see the end results, but that is the difference between the master builder and the worker.

We are workers, not master builders; ministers, not messiahs.

We are prophets of a future not our own. *Bishop Ken Untener of Saginaw*
May it be so. Amen.

*This prayer was composed by **Bishop Ken Untener** of Saginaw, drafted for a homily by Card. John Dearden in Nov. 1979 for a celebration of departed priests. As a reflection on the anniversary of the martyrdom of Bishop Romero, Bishop Untener included in a reflection book a passage titled "The mystery of the Romero Prayer." The mystery is that the words of the prayer are attributed to Oscar Romero, but they were never spoken by him.