

Susan M. Craig, Interim Pastor  
September 25, 2016  
Matthew 16: 21-28  
**How Then Shall We Live?**

Recently, I shared that my time with you will be concluding (can't quite say the word "ending") come Thanksgiving. And looking ahead across the upcoming couple of months, I find myself wondering for me and for all of us "How then shall we live?" Given both interim time and the onset of retirement, I think this an appropriate question. But, I also believe it is a question we all ask whenever we encounter change – be it in the workplace, the economy, our health status, or as we anticipate a move or change in our personal relationships. How then shall we live? It comes right up within us because we cannot see into the future. We ask it in recognition of our unknowing - a status which is not very comfortable. And, we ask it because there is possibly - and most probably, more than we can imagine that needs to be taken into consideration if we are to move forward wisely.

Across this month, I have thought about the different areas to which this question applies and the following has come to the forefront. The year, the program year that we are now entering already is very important. The days and hours which we spend together, and what we say and do in that time does and is going to matter.

A year ago now, in our "Coffee and Conversation" meetings you discerned many of the strengths and needs of First Congregational Church. And it is important that you continue to talk about these as well as your own hopes and dreams as you look to the future. In your worship together, your reading and studying, your fellowship time, your reaching out to neighbors, your caring and teaching our children, and living through the known and unknown challenges ahead –how you live together matters. Time for fellowship – at cook-outs and potlucks, in small groups and in large groups matters. This is not a time for waiting for the next chapter in your life together to begin. This is a time, an important time - right now - for being church.

Now all of that may sound a bit overwhelming. But if we really love and care for one another, we will discover anew what it means to be church family. Your transition team – made up of your pastor/parish relations committee and representatives from the search committee are thinking about how to take such care of us all– even now. Your ideas for ways you would like to be church, and your recognition of need in one place or another, are welcomed. Speak up!

But what may be most important though, is that we also realize, that we are not doing this alone, but are accompanied by the One who created us, who walks with us, and who will be there in all our tomorrows. But before I continue any further, let us come to that One in prayer.

Loving and Everpresent God,

It is in times of need and times of uncertainty that we most often turn to you – for in these times we realize that our intellects and even our careful considerations are less than complete. We come to you this day as your children and as your church. Be with us as we enter into this fall. Help us to discover anew what it means to be your people in this time and place. May the winds of your Spirit be at our backs and direct our footsteps. May the gift of your grace surprise us uncovering the foundation stones of our faith, while also showing us new and wondrous possibilities. You have brought us to this day, now we would pray for your continuing companionship. Amen.

As a congregation, we hold our scriptures at the center of all we do. So before, we simply run forward with our thoughts so far, let us consider this morning's reading from Matthew's gospel.

I want to thank Linda Winterberg for helping us begin to look at our scripture lesson. And now let us take an even closer look. In the eight short verses we heard, we find our Lord gathered with his disciples. They had already spent much time with Jesus, being exposed to his teachings and healings, but the formation of the disciples and the other early followers as a new community of faith, as the early church, was far from complete.

In this lesson we hear the first proclamation of Jesus' impending death – and if you had your bibles opened, you would see that it comes only moments after Peter, for the first time, identified Jesus as “the Messiah, the Christ”. Jesus' announcement that he must go to Jerusalem and be killed must have been not only troubling, but more accurately, beyond belief, beyond imagination. And haven't we each had those moments – when the bottom seems to fall out, when our lives over which we think we have some modicum of control, suddenly take a sharp turn from the direction we have been traveling.

Jesus was the disciple's security as a community, their mainstay. And now, things were going to change. In the midst of their inability to comprehend and their efforts to block his return to Jerusalem, Jesus told them that if they wanted to continue as his disciples, they would have to “take up their cross” and follow him.

“...take up your cross and follow me.” That short, very familiar phrase has been interpreted many times – most commonly it has been used to point to the hardships and suffering that could follow such a choice. When we hear the words, the instructions, “taking up a cross”, one of our first images is that of Jesus carrying his cross to Golgotha, the site of his death, and we see it as an impossible burden. But, I'd like to propose another view. If we look again at the words and their context, we see Jesus is talking to the disciples as a group, telling them that together they were to take up their crosses, to gather around in faith, and move forward. They were to journey together faithfully, a much easier task than going it alone.

We should also be mindful of Jesus' final words to his disciples, again telling them of how to go forward and I share this, remembering that it is often the last thing that someone thinks to tell you in a conversation, that is the most important. Matthew quotes Jesus speaking to his disciples in the Upper Room after his resurrection saying, “And lo, I am with you, even to the end of the age.” Put these words alongside today's scripture and we realize Jesus' intention that his disciples were to journey together as a faith community – with the knowledge that he was with them.

As a congregation, you have been journeying through unsure times, and doing very well. Like the disciples, you, too, have been exposed to many faithful teachings, and to the fullness, so far, of what it means to live together as a community of faith. We also gather around the cross, this visual image is very important, for as we look around, we become more aware of the different ages, concerns, talents, and gifts which create the rich mix of who we are as a congregation. On your continued journey, it will be important to make the opportunity to name your concerns and hear those of others. To speak of the large and small things that define you as a faith community. And as you do this, it is important to do this realizing the God is with you. Just as important as it is to gather together, it will be important to intentionally come to God. This may be a year in which your prayer life is deepened. I know it already is for me.

At the beginning of this sermon, I mentioned my belief that over the course of our journey together, we all may discover different sources of inspiration to carry us forward. That possibility being so, I would like to share one experience that came for me this summer, shared by my friend, Rodney Brown and our young people while we worshipped outside at HOME Coop, confirming my belief that the beauty of creation is a reflection of our Creator.

It was a meditation written by Milton Olson and I want to share it with you as well. It is entitled Lessons From Geese.

Fact 1. As each bird flaps its wings, it creates an uplift for the bird that follows. By flying in the "V" formation, the whole flock adds 72 percent greater flying range than if a bird flew alone.

*Lesson: People who share a common direction and sense of community can get where they are going more quickly and easily because they are traveling on the thrust of one another.*

Fact 2. When a goose falls out of formation, it suddenly feels the drag and resistance of flying alone. It quickly moves back into formation to take advantage of the lifting power of the bird in front of it.

*Lesson: If we have as much sense as a goose, we stay in formation with those headed where we want to go. We are willing to accept their help and give help to others.*

Fact 3. When the lead goose gets tired, it rotates back into the formation and another goose flies into the point position.

*Lesson: It pays to take turns doing the hard tasks and sharing the leadership. As with geese, people are interdependent on each other's skills, capabilities and unique arrangements of gifts, talents, and resources.*

Fact 4. The geese flying in formation honk to encourage those up front to keep up the speed.

*Lesson: We need to make sure our honking is encouraging. In groups where there is encouragement, the production is better. The power of encouragement (to stand by one's hearts or core values and encourage the heart and core of others) is the quality of honking we seek.*

Fact 5. When a goose gets sick, wounded, or shot down, two geese drop out of formation to care for it, then later catch up with the flock.

*Lesson: if we have as much sense as geese, we will stand by each other in difficult times as well as when we are strong.*

God's creatures have much to teach and show us all. I hope that as we move into this new season, we can live keeping the teaching of our faith before us and coming to God again and again in prayer. Let us live learning from the creatures and beauty of our planet, reflections of our Creator, and, as we walk or fly together, know we do not travel alone. May God bless us on our way. Amen.