

“Music, Memories & Meaning”

B, Pentecost 9; II Timothy 1:1-14

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Congregational UCC, Buena Vista, CO

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¹⁻²I, Paul, am on special assignment for Christ, carrying out God’s plan laid out in the Message of Life by Jesus. I write this to you, Timothy, the son I love so much. All the best from our God and Christ be yours!

To Be Bold with God’s Gifts

³⁻⁴Every time I say your name in prayer—which is practically all the time—I thank God for you, the God I worship with my whole life in the tradition of my ancestors. I miss you a lot, especially when I remember that last tearful good-bye, and I look forward to a joy-packed reunion.

⁵⁻⁷That precious memory triggers another: your honest faith—and what a rich faith it is, handed down from your grandmother Lois to your mother Eunice, and now to you! And the special gift of ministry you received when I laid hands on you and prayed—keep that ablaze! God doesn’t want us to be shy with his gifts, but bold and loving and sensible.

⁸⁻¹⁰So don’t be embarrassed to speak up for our Master or for me, his prisoner. Take your share of suffering for the

Message along with the rest of us. We can only keep on going, after all, by the power of God, who first saved us and then called us to this holy work. We had nothing to do with it. It was all *his* idea, a gift prepared for us in Jesus long before we knew anything about it. But we know it now. Since the appearance of our Savior, nothing could be plainer: death defeated, life vindicated in a steady blaze of light, all through the work of Jesus.

¹¹⁻¹²This is the Message I’ve been set apart to proclaim as preacher, emissary, and teacher. It’s also the cause of all this trouble I’m in. But I have no regrets. I couldn’t be more sure of my ground—the One I’ve trusted in can take care of what he’s trusted me to do right to the end.

¹³⁻¹⁴So keep at your work, this faith and love rooted in Christ, exactly as I set it out for you. It’s as sound as the day you first heard it from me. Guard this precious thing placed in your custody by the Holy Spirit who works in us.

OPENING HYMN: “I Love to Tell the Story”

Telling Christ's story

Arabella Katherine Hankey (1834-1911) grew up in the family of a wealthy English banker associated with the evangelical wing of the Anglican Church. As a teenager she taught a girls' Sunday school class. Later she traveled to South Africa to serve as a nurse and to assist her invalid brother.

While recovering from a lengthy **illness** of her own at age 30, she wrote a poem on the life of Christ. This poem had two sections. Our hymn is drawn from stanzas in the second section. The text of the refrain was

written by the composer of the music, William G. Fisher, in 1869. (A musician herself, Hankey wrote her **own** tunes for the text, but others found little use for them.)

The personal, intimate language comes through in such phrases, for example, as "it [the story] satisfies my longings as nothing else can do" (stanza one) and "it did so much for me, and that is just the reason I tell it now to thee" (stanza two). Hankey is passionate about this story and how it has **changed her life**. In the refrain the word "love" takes on a double meaning -- both about the state of the singer and the message of Jesus: "I love to tell the story . . . of Jesus and his love."

Hankey wrote many books such as *Bible Class Teachings* and several collections of verse, and adds: "**All** of the royalties received from these publications were always directed to some foreign mission project."

I. WHO TAUGHT YOU ABOUT FAITH?

Who taught you about faith? About being "one in the Spirit?"

Who was your grandmother Lois? Your Mother Eunice? A mother or grandmother in the faith? Who was your Paul when you were a young Timothy, just finding your spiritual wings?

Who nurtured, guided and reminded of Whose you were? Told you the stories of Jesus, of Yahweh God, the one who created you and called you by name? Assured you of the never-forsaking presence of the Spirit, the Divine Comforter and Counselor?

As we shared them a moment ago in our "popcorn prayer" now picture them in your mind's eye as we explore more together about this notion of the foundation of our faith – the music, memories and meaning we have embraced and have been pivotal in our living the life our Creator has given us.

II. WHAT IS FOUNDATIONAL?

I asked the "great wide world" this week this bigger question of spiritual foundation:

Input please! "Tell me the old, old story"—theme for this week. What stories or memories are foundational to your faith? What do you remember from church, SS teachers, spiritual mentors, the Bible, relatives that formed who you are as a spiritual being?

The responses were as varied as the people and their journeys.

One person said (sitting here among us today) that his parents had a motto:

"Be engaged! When you can't be part of the solution, then at least be part of the problem"

A pastor friend: "Life isn't fair and anyone who tells you different is trying to sell you something."

A college friend of Clarke's: "I grew up in the Lutheran Church and can still recite the Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed. Even though I've not attended that church for more than 40 years, every now and then it will crop up when I visit another church, and the familiarity is so comforting I could weep."

The oldest story? Be a person whose highest priority is to

be loving.

Not a story... a message in a song.. "He's got the whole world in his hands..."

Gretchen (My cousin, who spent her early years in Chile):

1) the Catholic hymn The Prayer of St Francis, which starts "Make me a channel of your peace"

2) I went to catechism in 300 year old churches on the Laguna Reservation, and in a village built by Spanish Conquistadors. Both the pueblo and the town had ancient beliefs and traditions, which local priests encouraged. I now know that there were undoubtedly dark sides to that history. But for me the message was that God is bigger than any one belief system, and that different beliefs can co-exist peacefully.

Bottom line from the two influences: We are the instruments God uses to answer prayers and needs. He doesn't care what label you put on your beliefs, as long as you are serving His people/creation.

In a women clergy study group I'm in, someone raised the question about old hymns. "In the Garden" and "The Old Rugged Cross" seem to be the top two universal requested, repeated, and remembered hymns for so many. We pondered what was behind this popularity, and the conclusion was not only catchy tunes and easy to memorize songs, but a much deeper, bedrock aspect of faith.

A couple ministers summed it up well:

"I see 'In The Garden' as looking to God for strength in the times we feel alone. My nana used to sing it as she peeled potatoes. This was a woman who birthed 12 children, lost two babies, raised ten along with two or three other stragglers like my father, who were drawn to her family warmth. During the 30s she rarely knew where food and rent would come by. She was a strong Christian and faithful church member, but I think she also needed time in the Garden with one who loved her - a place of comfort and renewal from which she could go back out into the world."

"In the Garden" was a favorite hymn, often requested at funerals and memorial services. When you're old and many of your family and friends have died, and you feel like you're in the Garden alone, how lovely that Jesus is there with you, walking with you, talking with you, and telling you that you are beloved by him. It's a foretaste of heaven. "I may be alone, but Jesus loves me, this I know."

Another hymn that's amazingly popular, borne out of struggle and holding onto hope and faith is "What a Friend We Have in Jesus."

Hymns Of Faith ~ What A Friend We Have In Jesus

What a Friend we have in Jesus,

All our sins and griefs to bear!

What a privilege to carry

Everything to God in prayer!

O what peace we often forfeit,

O what needless pain we bear,

All because we do not carry
Everything to God in prayer!

Rev. Moira Finley presents this reflection on the life and loss of the composer, that shed light on its breadth of meaning:

Joseph Scriven was born in 1819 to a wealthy family in Dublin, Ireland where later he graduated from Trinity College. He was engaged to be married, but his fiancée accidently drowned on the night before their wedding. This early loss would be one of the reasons he would dedicate the rest of his life to serving Christ and helping others.

In addition, his faith was influenced by the "Plymouth Brethren", a reforming and revitalizing movement in Ireland and quickly spread to the rest of the British Empire. This non-conforming tradition that rejected the established church estranged and alienated him from his family.

Perhaps for these reasons, Scriven decided to emigrate to Canada which offered him a new life, free from the religious ties of his family as well as the grief and memories of his fiancée.

In Canada, he taught as a private tutor. He fell in love again, with a relative of one of his students, and was to be married when his new fiancée came down with pneumonia and died.

He used his grief and sorrow to help others. He joined the local

Plymouth Brethren community and spent most of his time helping the elderly members. He tried to live out the Sermon on the Mount, giving to anyone who asked something of him, sympathizing with all. He would saw wood for the physically handicapped and spend time listening to the poor and mentally distressed, drawing on his own depression to offer counsel and support.

In 1855, while he was staying with a friend, James Sackville, Scriven received word from Ireland that his mother was terribly ill. He wrote a poem for her called "Pray Without Ceasing". He did not seek to be noticed for it, or to have it published.

Near the end of Scriven's life, he was very ill and a friend was sitting with him going through some papers when he found the text of the poem he had written for his mother. The poem was published immediately, along with several other poems he had written, in a collection called "Hymns and Other Verses".

Charles Converse, an American lawyer and composer, set the poem to music, changing its title to "What A Friend We Have In Jesus". In 1875 Ira Sankey, the gospel singer, composer and collaborator with Dwight Moody, came upon the words and music and included it in his collection "Sankey's Gospel Hymns Number 1" which brought the hymn to a much wider audience.

Scriven suffered from poor health, including deep depressions,

during his later years. He also struggled with his finances, often finding it difficult to make ends meet.

Scriven died, drowning under mysterious circumstances, in 1886 and is buried next to his second fiancée in Rice Lake, Canada. (Another source said he was delirious with fever and stumbled outside into the dark night and nearby river.)

Rev. Finley reflects on the hymn:

Prayer is a living conversation, taking everything in our lives to God, sharing our burdens and our joys, our hopes and our dreams, and quieting our minds enough to hear God speaking to us, guiding us and leading us.

And that is what Joseph Scriven is trying to teach us with his hymn, “What A Friend We Have In Jesus”.

Scriven knew grief and sorrow. He left his family and everything he had known to move to Canada so that he could more fully live out his faith. He lost not just one fiancée, but two, to terrible and tragic circumstances. He knew depression and hardship, physical, emotional and mental pain and anguish.

Yet, Scriven knew more than just grief and sorrow. In the midst of those struggles he knew that there was someone who he could always turn to, someone who would be there no matter the hour or the day, who would listen and receive the yearnings of his heart and soul. Scriven knew that, whatever life might bring he could always turn to Jesus.

Let’s turn to #473 and sing this poem-become-hymn together, reflecting on where we find comfort in dark times, what we cling to.

Prayer means many different things and is embraced differently by people across the spectrum. How do *you* “take it to the Lord in Prayer?”

IV. CONGREGATION’S FOUNDATIONAL STORY?

The second question to ask ourselves, after: “Who taught you the faith”, that old, old story” as individuals, is this:

What is our foundational faith story as a congregation? We’ve been exploring some music that is core for some here over the years. Many of you who have suggested songs for the summer series have brought forth songs and memories that originated right here at CUCC. “As the Deer” with the 4th verse written by Janie Clark; “Pass It On” and “Jesus Loves Me with sign language – these are from our own earlier days. “Just Be Held.” “Hymn of Promise.” Thank you all!

As we ask, “What are the memories, messages and meaning that have formed the bedrock of our faith experience here in *this* place?” It is *just* as important to explore: “What are the memories, music and messages that bring meaning as we go into our future together?”

What is the story we are now writing and telling as

this family of God, looking *ahead*? What will we look back on with a warm heart and touch of nostalgia, a few years from now? I know for me, Scarlet Rae singing during the songs and Miss Gabby marching forward to make her solo debut with “Jesus Loves Me” will forever be unforgettable moments! Oh, and Lane dipping his hand in the baptismal font and putting water on my forehead!

As vital as it is to look back and remember the past fondly, to take stock of what and who gave us a firm foundation, it’s *also* imperative that we bring that *forward*, learn from the memories and meanings and bring them into the new day. That we write our next chapter *together*.

I love that we’re learning some things about each other and the past that are shaping and informing our lives in the present and into the future. That Warren sang “Amen” and plans to sing more. That Marge D. was picketed for writing a play about Cockeyed Liz. Protested right here in Buena Vista for “painting prostitution in too positive a light!”

I love that Marge and Warren and Charlotte and even Bryce Kelly and others want to bring their stories forward and inform our future together. That Janet and others are gathering up those stories and little-known facts –those delightful SMYNKs! Bryce told me he’s got quite a few to share! Some bad, some good. Some involving fishy smelling kids in church!

We are at a watershed moment in our life together as a congregation. We are bringing our stories forward, not to be forgotten, and honoring the foundation that has been laid and those who have laid it –on both sides of the veil.

But we can’t stop there with looking back fondly on the past. History compels us move forward in this pivotal time in faith, with courage, with collaboration and conversation around the table together as we write the next chapter of our Story.

I saw a little cartoon last evening that just implanted on my brain. It’s a caterpillar and a butterfly sitting at a café, sharing a glass of wine together. It says: **“You cannot talk butterfly language with caterpillar people.”**

It made me ask the question: am I a caterpillar or a butterfly? What language do I speak? “This is who I am, and that’s how it’s gonna be. That’s my story and I’m sticking to it!”

Or, can I trust God enough to go through the process of becoming a butterfly? Of moving into the next phase of life, with its challenges, cocoon-time, unclear vision of what lies ahead, with enough trust that the One who has created us and walks with us will be there leading and guiding all the way? Can *we* be butterfly people as a congregation? We say we’re “Easter People!” Tombs and cocoons are a lot alike. And the transformation on the other side of both involves wings to fly and souls that soar.

V. CREATE THE FUTURE --HOMEWORK

Another quote hit my vision this week, right as I was considering that this week's exploration needed to go on beyond Sunday. (Yes, it might be a little *homework!* But, you haven't had too much this semester ☺)

Maxine Hong Kingston says:

“In a time of destruction, *create* something: a poem, a parade, a community, a school, a vow, a moral principle; one peaceful moment.”

So, this week, as we go from this place and this time of remembering: ponder this foundation of your life – your faith. Ponder the fathers and the mothers of the faith and the lessons and learnings you remember that were foundational to who you are today – as a spiritual being, a seeker of truth, a part of a church community.

Think about these hymn writers over the centuries who have written hymns that have been passed down even today – part of our Cloud of Witnesses. They might never have *intended* to compose a hymn, but were facing incredible challenges in life, and were led to *create*. To reach out to the Source of their life and their own foundational faith, and to write a poem.

Think *back* to those moments and messages those songs that gave meaning to your life. Shoot me a note as you remember. Even if you've already shared favorite songs this summer. Let's keep gathering up

the stories and sharing what's meaningful with each other.

And then, think *forward*. Take it one step further for “extra credit.” Create something. Jot down a poem, or just some thoughts on faith and life. Begin to write our story that is now and imagine what might be next. Organize a gathering or simply plan a peaceful moment for yourself or a loved one.

This Fall, we will move from our Song Series to a season called: The Way of Jesus – what it means to be followers in the life of faith. We will continue this “both/and” – reflecting back on the music, memories and meaning we have found in our past, *and* exploring what it means to follow our friend Jesus into our future, collaborating on *that* story, building *that* foundation together.

Even if you have a lot of work to do, if you think of it as *wonderful*, and if you feel it as wonderful, it will transform into the energy of joy and fire, instead of becoming a burden. (Tulku Thondup Rinpoche)

"The way is long - let us go together. The way is difficult - let us help each other. The way is joyful - let us share it. The way is ours alone - let us go in love." (Joyce Hunter)

It only takes a spark! Amen.

"Blessed Assurance" –Fanny J. Crosby

*Blessed assurance, Jesus is mine!
O what a foretaste of glory divine!
Heir of salvation, purchase of God,
Born of his spirit, washed in his blood.
This is my story, this is my song,
Praising my Savior all the day long.*

Tune composer Phoebe Palmer Knapp (1839-1908) played a melody to Fanny Crosby and asked, "What does the melody say to you?" Crosby replied that the tune said, "Blessed assurance, Jesus is mine!" and proceeded to recite the entire first stanza of the now-famous hymn. Knapp was one of several tune writers that worked with Fanny Crosby. It was not unusual for one of her texts to be inspired by a preexisting tune. Knapp was the composer of more than five hundred gospel hymns and tunes.

Fanny Crosby (1820-1915), blind at the age of six weeks, was a lifelong Methodist who began composing hymns at age six. She became a student at the New York Institute of the Blind at age 15 and joined the faculty of the Institute at 22, teaching rhetoric and history.

An author of more than 8,000 gospel hymn texts, she **drew her inspiration from her own faith**. This hymn became hugely popular – one of the Top Ten of Methodists hymns, countless renditions of it on Utube, and innumerable gospel hour and tent revival debuts.

Its popularity, though, is a testimony to how it touched people's core. Middle class women in nineteenth-century United States had little voice in worship. One of the only ways for a woman to claim the authority to be heard was by **direct personal revelation from God**. Fanny Crosby readily claimed God's personal revelation as a source for her hymns; her personal revelation then became a communal inspiration as Christians throughout the world sang her hymns and confirmed her faith experience as their own.