

Centre Congregational Church, United Church of Christ
Sunday, November 17, 2019
Twenty-third Sunday after Pentecost

“Ingredients for Bread”
Three of Four in “Give Us This Day Our Daily Bread”

The Reverend Dr. Scott Everett Couper
Hebrew Scripture: Haggai 1:3-8
Christian Scripture: Romans 16:1-16



Welcome to the *third* of four sermons dedicated to our Stewardship Campaign entitled “Give Us This Day Our Daily Bread”! In honor of our sermon series on bread, I have decided to tell an irreverent joke about bread. Now, I don’t normally tell jokes in my sermons for two reasons. One, I want to keep them as brief as possible. Two, I’m not very good at telling jokes in sermons. At the last church I served, so as to garner some laughter, I resorted to tugging on my ear to prepare my congregation that a joke was immediately forthcoming - and they had better laugh!



Representatives of Budweiser beer met with Pope Francis recently and argued, "For 2,000 years your prayer has included the words 'daily bread'. We believe the time has come to change that to 'daily beer'. The Pope frowned and responded, "We can not question the words of our Lord and Savior".

Undeterred, the Budweiser representatives continued, "If you do this, your Holiness, our company commits to offering the Vatican \$1 billion a year. The Pope, now hesitating, turned to his assistant and said, 'Go and bring me the Wonder Bread contract'".¹

(Should any of you be Catholic, like Stephanie, take comfort that I just came from St. Michael's mass and I received a blessing from Father Justin.)

¹ Much appreciation to Jim Levinson for the passing-on of this joke to me.



Now, as I mentioned in my first Stewardship Campaign sermon, bread is essentially made out of two ingredients: dough and water. Now, I know most of you here can quibble with me and say that other ingredients can go in bread. Of course, you are right. Especially for all you healthy types who don't like Wonder Bread, you can put all kinds of ingredients in bread to make it unique - for example, bark, twigs, and leaves. I think that's called 'whole wheat' bread. You can put oatmeal in to make it oatmeal bread; you can put sour stuff in, to make it Sourdough bread. You can argue yeast also needs to be included. But, I can argue there is such a thing as unleavened bread. So, basically there are two ingredients in bread: dough and water.



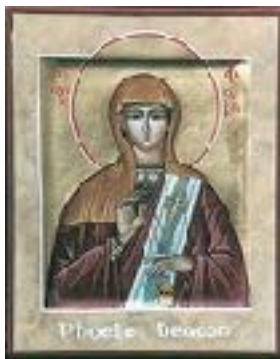
This stewardship message is arguably the most important one in our series because it is the last one before Pledge Sunday. Therefore, I would like to speak to you about the two most crucial ingredients in our church: its staff and building. These two ingredients are those to which our pledges are primarily devoted. I wonder what Anne's answer would be to the question, 'what percentage of our budget is devoted to staff salaries and repairs and utilities for our building?' I am guessing over seventy-five percent.

In my November *Centre Bells* ministerial column, I emphasized that when we give to this church, "we give to what we love".



And, I for one, love the staff of this church. I also love our beautiful sanctuary, steeple, chapel, Memorial Hall, music room, Christian education room, and, especially when time necessitates, the bathrooms! So, I intend for us today to honor the staff and this building that serve us.

Our Christian scripture reading this morning was chosen, no doubt, to inflict as much pain and anguish as possible for our liturgist, Sue Rowell. We read it if only to remember that the early Christian church was founded against impossible odds by wonderful and beautiful ‘flesh and blood’ people.



They had names, they had families, they had talents, and they had flaws. I believe it is important to hear their names. What is important to note about this reading is that it is evident that the author Paul personally *knew* the people to whom he wrote.



Through the Holy Spirit, these ordinary and normal people founded and nurtured our church against massive odds set against them. I know we struggle with aging and the increasing secularization of our society. But

know that the early Christian church overcame huge obstacles as well - some of those obstacles were soldiers and sometimes lions.



Our staff is composed of Christine Yost our bookkeeper, Bruce Landenburger our administrator, Jeremy Bertolini our sexton, me (your longwinded minister), and the most important staff member without whom every service would be completely miserable, our musical director, Mary Milkey-May. Because we give to what we love, I am going to speak glowingly about each member of our staff.



The most important thing to know about Chris Yost is that she has never failed to pay me *on-time* every second Friday. Ha ha. Seriously, but my humor points to somethings important about Chris. She is trustworthy, reliable, sober, consistent, and drama-free. With Chris as our bean-counter, we have never, as long as I have served here, had to ask, “Where are the beans?”

Bruce Landenberger is an absolute rock star. He is efficient in that he packs a whole lot of productivity into twenty hours a week. The wheels on this ‘bus’ might very well fall off without him. While Bruce sometimes has colourful ‘discussions’ with the photocopier with his not-so-virgin-tongue, he is the one who has enabled me, as a very new minister in New England, to give the impression that I am competent and know what I am doing. Bruce knows the institutional history of this church; I feel this is invaluable. That which I most marvel about Bruce is the very fine line he makes between friendly and genuine small talk with folks and the need to make very subtle, and to me, some not so subtle, verbal warnings that whoever is talking to him is telling him far more than he needs to know and he’d like to get back to work!

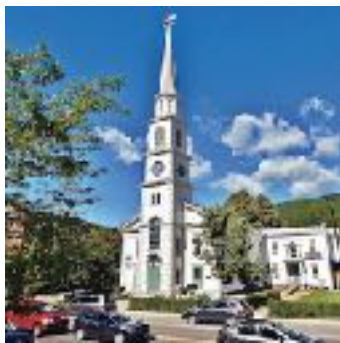


Jeremy Bertolini has been with us just a short time, but he has proved himself conscientious and diligent. If you watch him work, it is with great intention. When I walk into the church, I can, instantly, smell that Jeremy recently been there. (O.K., that did not come-out right!) I should say, 'After Jeremy works, it is patently evident to anyone entering in the church that much has recently been cleaned,' for there is a sparkle on the floor and the scent of detergent lingers in the nostrils.

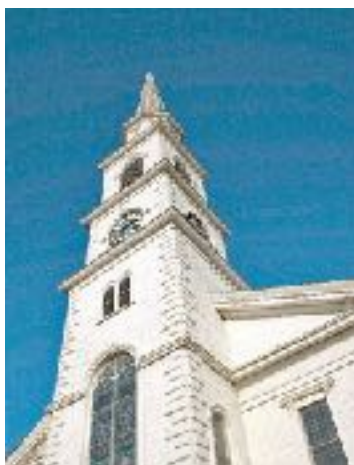


Finally, are we not blessed to have a private concert every week? For that is what we receive each Sunday: a private concert by a stunningly competent musician who knows her instrument and, perhaps

more importantly, knows and loves her congregation. Usually ministers have ‘challenges’ with idiosyncratic music directors. Not me. Mary has only benevolently educated me and together she and I seek to cooperate to ensure this time and space evokes that which is transcendent.



Friends, as we give to our building through our tithes and offerings, we are conscious of the fact that while love our building, we do not worship it. Many congregations would rather die than merge with another church or relocate to another site. In those cases, it is the building that is worshipped rather than God and it is their own security that is sought and not faithful ministry.



At Centre Church, our building is used for ministry six, and sometimes seven, days a week. Last month, our sanctuary hosted a benefit concert for our sister church in El Salvador.



Last night, our Memorial Hall hosted a benefit dinner for Carry Me Home that supports north and west African refugees in south-eastern Europe. As you heard this morning for the Lighting of the Peace Candle, our church building provides a non-judgemental and affirming space for those suffering from addiction and who seek solidarity with one another. Our church is a safe place for our children to learn about their faith and a place where our leaders can grapple with what it means to 'Be the Church' in this day and age.



I will be the first one to admit that many aspects of our building are tired and worn. But they are tired and worn because we have not hoarded this church for ourselves but rather opened it up to the community for peace, education, protest, and worship.



This winter, as our church stands proudly on Main Street, I want you to see how its spire reaches up to the heavens, seemingly to pierce through. On Christmas Eve, I want to admire the soft glow of our watchtower and know that its light is a beacon that points to that which is transcendent.



Through the operation, maintenance, repair, and improvement of this church building (for we need to install an elevator and replace the roof), we proclaim in the words of the prophet Haggai to a busy secular and commercial downtown business district (with all of its shops and restaurants), “Give careful thought to your ways. You have planted much, but have harvested little. You eat, but never have enough. You drink, but you never have your fill.



You put on clothes, but you are not warm. You earn wages, only to put them in a purse with holes in it” (Haggai 1:5-6). We ask downtown and the wider Brattleboro community to seek that which is sacred, that which is transcendent.



Next Sunday as we pledge our gifts to this church, we commit ourselves to “go up to the mountains and bring down timber and build the house” so that the transcendent, God, “may take pleasure in it and be honored” (Haggai 1:8).

This was the word of God, and it was preached to the people of God and the people of God responded, “Amen”.