**Grace United Church, Tavistock June 12, 2022 Stepping Forward Means Letting Go**

**Prayer**: Loving God, as we begin another chapter of our story here at Grace, open our eyes so that we might see all the things that You have prepared for us in the coming weeks and months. Open our ears that we may hear Your message for us today. In our understanding and discernment, may all glory, honor and praise be Yours. Amen.

A few months ago, I talked about the sheepgate and how the Shepherd would lead the sheep back into a safe place where they were fed, watered, and kept safe until they were guided back out into the rich green grassy fields. I talked about Jesus, our loving Shepherd who is our guide and provides for all our needs. In the sheepgate, we learn from the Shepherd all that we require for living in this world – the plans God has for each one of us as well as the plans God has for the ‘church.’

Well, I have to admit after Rev. Gail’s news about moving on to another church, I felt sad and wondered where or who I could turn to for spiritual guidance each Sunday. You see, I left my former church and followed her here to Grace. She was and still is my guide as I continue to lead services as a licensed lay worship leader.

And for that reason, I had decided to join Grace. Little did I know how warm your welcome would be for me here, and just how fond I have become of you folks at Grace.

However, it was time for me to slip back into that sheepfold and get some comfort, some strength, and some guidance for what is to come. Sometimes losing a minister, especially someone you don’t want to leave brings not only sadness but sometimes anger. Not anger at the person leaving, but just anger of things that bring change.

So, there are people I probably need to forgive including myself (for being so self- focused), and there are things I need to let go of so that I can begin to wait upon the Lord for guidance (that is, the Holy Spirit’s guidance). Letting go of what was and moving on takes patience, courage, prayer, and discernment.

Don’t get me wrong, I am very happy for Rev. Gail. Working closely with ministers over the last 20 years – I know a little bit about the struggle and heartache they go through when God intervenes – and when they must hear God’s call to send them to another church. It is not easy to always obey God’s bidding.

 Perhaps some of you are feeling a bit sad as well. Perhaps you are wondering – asking yourselves: “Well, where do we go from here, or why this had to happen?”

Many times, in my walk along our country road in the mornings I pray and ask God these types of questions. Why God? What happened? Why do things have to change?

And then, that ‘still small voice’ makes me realize that this is not my story, and not this church’s story either, although we certainly do have a part to play. It is God’s story!

And I finally realized that if God is calling one of His Ministers to another church, far be it for me or anyone else to argue with God. I think God was telling me, and perhaps all of us that His plans not only for Rev. Gail, but His plans for us as well – are plans for change. That ‘still small voice’ is telling us that we need to listen – listen to what God is now planning for this community of faith.

Isaiah 55:8 says: “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways.” Declares the LORD. (9) “As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts. (10) As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, (11)so is my word that goes out from my mouth: it will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it. (12) You will go out with joy and be led forth in peace.”

Change always shakes us up. We no sooner start something and then things change. Most of us don’t like change, but we either persevere, or we let go of someone or something so that we can do something new or at least something different from before.

God reminds us that we are Resurrection (Easter) people, children of the risen Christ! Did we not walk with the risen Christ along the road to Emmaus? Were not our eyes opened when He broke the bread and blessed it with His two disciples at supper that day?

Were we not reminded that the “Wind” came and breathed the Holy Spirit on the disciples in that room in Jerusalem? Even the disciples did not understand the meaning of the crucifixion and the resurrection. Sometimes I wonder, are we any different?

There is another passage in Isaiah that says: “The LORD will guide you continually, giving you water when you are dry and restoring your strength. You will be like a well-watered garden.”

How do we stay watered?

We are encouraged to let God’s Word water and feed us every day. I call it ‘manna from heaven.’ Perhaps there are people we need to forgive as we move forward.

And in order to move forward, we first have to forgive, just like Jesus said on the Cross: “Forgive them for they know not what they do.”

Perhaps this is how we let go and move on. This is how we support and love one another – in forgiveness and in love – we can let go and let God’s plan be planted here in this church.

Perhaps the first thing we need to do is pray and ask the Holy Spirit for guidance. Think about all the things that have gone on in our midst over the past few months (Lent, Crucifixion, Resurrection, Ascension, Pentecost).

After all, we are filled with the Holy Spirit. We are given a message of forgiveness to share with one another, and to release anything that may be keeping us bound or stuck.

We accept the challenge to make changes under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. We at Grace now have the opportunity to step up higher and bring God’s glory into this church. Accept this opportunity for change and move on – not so much with our personal agendas, but with an agenda inspired by the Spirit. I encourage each one of us here at Grace, the members of the Board and all committees to discern what God wants for this church. As you pray each day, ask the Holy Spirit what is best for Grace. Pray individually, pray as a committee and pray as a church.

Whatever we may be feeling, let us ask the Holy Spirit for that comfort, strength, and guidance that we may need. Trust me, God has a far better plan for Grace than any plan we could think up on our own. Remember what God told Peter, James, and John on that mountain of transfiguration? God said, “This is My Son, listen to Him!”

We will need patience in our discernment. We will need to be brave as we speak out boldly for Christ. And we will need ingenuity to let go of what was and move forward with a new plan – new decisions in discerning what God has in mind for us. That discernment will be critical for the members of your search committee as it is formed and takes root.

God promised that we are not alone. God walks before us and leads the way; Jesus walks beside us and if necessary, carries us when we stumble or fall; and the Holy Spirit encircles us with the Spirit of wisdom, knowledge and understanding. We just need to pay attention and listen to the Spirit each step of the way.

God, through the revelation of Jesus Christ gives us all the necessary essentials as we discern His plans for us. Did you know that? We are not given a spirit of fear. We are given the very Spirit of God to help us move into the next chapter of our story.

In Revelation 4:8 symbolically and in the Spirit, we are given various strengths to overcome whatever is before us. These strengths or characteristics are explained through beings in God’s Creation – animals like the lion, the ox, and the eagle.

It says that we can be strong like a lion. Through the risen Christ, we can as strong as the lion who has the power and strength to overcome any obstacle. Just like the lion, we can step up bravely and overcome any struggle. This means overcoming anything that steps in our way of letting God bring us into a plan that gives God great glory, honor, and praise.

We can also be resourceful like an ox. The ox is there to be a support for whatever is needed. That includes each one of us supporting each other, providing help whenever and for whatever is needed. I see this in the members of our Board as we continue to make decisions during Covid and other decisions they make on behalf of Grace. And in the Worship committee as we plan for pulpit supply and how to lead worship services during the summer months. Supporting one another is critical to our success.

Then there is the eagle, lifted up higher and higher. The eagle has wings that take it higher than any other creature, making his nest in a place where he looks down and sees many things that the other birds cannot see.

The eagle has eyes that see everything in front, everything in back, and everything all around it. From that extremely high place, it can search out its prey and feed its young ones. The higher the eagle flies, the stronger it gets. Its perception and perspective changes because it can see more clearly at such a great height.

We can be similar to the lion, the ox, and the eagle. As we look up and step up, we can change our perception and perspective if we look with spiritual eyes in the midst of these changes. We can have eyes like the eagle. As we journey together into what is next for us, and as we look up and step up, we are given gifts of comfort, joy, and peace. Remember when Jesus entered into that Upper Room in Jerusalem He said to His disciples: “My peace I give to you!” And what a gift His Divine Peace is for us!

These are all characteristics that Jesus has revealed to us in the Book of Revelation – it’s the revelation of Himself as the risen Christ.

For Jesus was lifted up high on the Cross, died and was resurrected to new life, ascended high above the earth to the heavenly places where He sees everything, (everything in front and behind, everything around and forward).

 Yes, Jesus can see all that is ahead for us because He sees our path forward – what is in the future for Grace. So why not ask the Holy Spirit for answers. The Spirit breathed on the disciples and the Holy Spirit breathes on us every day.

And just like the disciples, we are filled with the Holy Spirit of God. Jesus gave us everything He had – He gave His **all** for us and for the whole world!! Can you even imagine just how much love Jesus has for us – the Divine Love of God!

All of these gifts, give us hope and assurance, that in the risen Christ, we have everything we need to make whatever changes are necessary as we listen and follow all the wonderful plans that God has for us here at Grace United.

So many times we just focus on believing. We spend so much time on **believing** that we forget to **live** on God’s Word **everyday**. With our hearts we believe, with our mouths we speak of God, and because we speak and sing of God, our hearts hear, and then our hearts believe.

The kind words we speak to one another, those words of **comfort**, **strength and love** are the words we learn while we spend time in the sheepfold, where our good Shepherd explains these things to us, where we can step up and then share these words with one another – the very words that come from the lips of God! (Romans)

And for those who feel sad or overwhelmed with all the changes that are happening right now, in your quiet time with God, pray for yourselves and pray for your Board, for your committees and for your congregation here at Grace.

Will you make the decision to ask for God’s guidance today? Ask for a new foundation based on the New Covenant. If you do, you will never be the same. God will change your life **and** change your church – and you will be blessed beyond measure!!!

Thanks be to God.

Amen.

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