

FIRST CHURCH CHATTER

June 2021

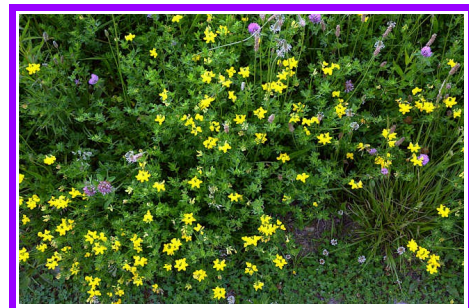
We are always looking for stories, poems, photos, thoughts to contribute. If you have notices about upcoming events which you would like published, please let [Anne Short](#) or [Jody Green](#) know and we will try to include. Thanks.
Special thanks to John Green for his technical work.

In today's Chatter:

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This is another edition of our church newsletter. We thank those members and friends who have contributed stories, biographies, reflections, letters, poems and encourage any who wish to contribute to our church newsletter. As you can read in this edition, we have many talented friends and church members. We would like to get to know all of you better and encourage you to send your thoughts, poems, stories, photos, to us to publish. Thanks so much.

The newsletter will be printed at the beginning of each month and be sent via email to church members and friends, be sent by mail to those who would prefer a written copy and be available in the foyer for all to pick up when the church is reopened.



Language of Love

Based upon Romans 8:18-28, May 21, 2021,
Pentecost Sunday
Rev. Mark Seifried online for First Church
Williamstown, UCC

I love the story of how the Christian Church was birthed, which is what we are celebrating today. Pentecost is a holiday throughout Christendom when we commemorate the gift of the Holy Spirit that Jesus promised would occur after his death. The Book of Acts reports that huge crowds were gathered in Jerusalem from all over the world for a religious holiday to celebrate the first fruits of the wheat harvest. All those people from many places spoke many languages, yet they could all understand each other. Luke, the writer of Acts, says that thousands converted to Christianity that day and were baptized. Thus began the miraculous multiplication of people committed to following the way of Jesus.

You know, I rarely hear Christian preachers talk in any believable way about this huge crowd overcoming language barriers. Sure, it could have been some kind of miracle. Or it could be as simple a fact that the people who gathered in Jerusalem were devout Jews and most knew the Hebrew language. I think what happened that caused this great conversion experience is that they all began speaking the language of Jesus, which is the language of love. The vernacular of love is universally understood because it is accompanied by joy and lightness of heart. Those alight with love have a peace about them that speaks for itself. And the language of love is contagious because it breaks the spell of fear and anger.

I celebrate the love that was at the heart of the early church and I would really love to be a cheerleader for the Christian Church, for the way we have stuck together, for all the good work we have done throughout the centuries. Many Christians have done a lot of good work and so have our churches, including this one of which we are a part. The truth is that historically Christians have also done a good deal of harm – harm that includes Crusades and Colonialism, both led by religious zealots and marked by genocide and other forms of violence. I'd like to say "Bravo!" to the church for sticking

together during hard times, but the fact is that we are divided into more than 45,000 denominations. Pentecost's passion and the language of love have been subdued by nonsensical dogma and moral nit picking that have caused and continue to cause deep divisions.

I confess that I don't know what to do with my skepticism of the modern church that seems so antithetical to the Christ-like love in the Pentecost story. On the one hand, we have Christians who are largely apathetic to human suffering. On the other hand, we have religious extremists who seem to care a lot. Fanatics, whether religious or political, make me anxious. Most often they are angry and spewing vitriol instead of advocating for liberation, grounded in the radical love of Jesus.

Let me share an example of what I mean. Rev. Mike Piazza of Broadway United Church of Christ in New York recently wrote,¹ *"Thirty states have proposed 118 pieces of anti-transgender legislation. WHY? I mean, .06 percent of the population identify as transgender, so why this sudden obsession with such a small portion of the population?"*

I get that bigotry isn't rational, and I get that angry white folks seem to need someone to hate. So, a small, mostly invisible, completely non-violent segment of the population makes a safe target, but why are scarlet red state legislatures so passionate about "protecting" the public from our transgender siblings right now? There are 12 bills under consideration in Texas alone, and another 10 in Tennessee ([Legislative Tracker: Anti-Transgender Legislation](#)). Why so much fury aimed at a small minority who hasn't done anyone any harm? Compounding my puzzlement is a recent poll showing two-thirds of Americans oppose transgender discrimination.

The tragic truth is much of this trans phobia is rooted in evangelical Christianity. No institution is more invested in the misogynistic idea of traditional sex roles than the conservative church. As this branch of the church watches societal values irrevocably change [toward greater equity and inclusion], this trans phobic legislation is little more than their frustration striking out at defenseless victims.

Like Rev. Piazza, I think that we need to try to stop

¹Rev. Dr. Michael Piazza, Trans phobia in "The Liberating Word," April 26, 2021.

the trans phobic madness that is sweeping through parts of the church and the nation. Congregations like ours need to offer a counter narrative. We need to speak the language of love for all people, especially those who are marginalized. The language of love is a counterbalance to the pain that others are inflicting upon those who are different from them. Through our mission and ministry, we are called to love our neighbors to manifest equity, access, participation, and rights for the whole human family. This is the model we were given by Jesus and what allowed the diverse multitude to catch the fire of the Spirit on Pentecost.

Just as important for us to spread love is our need to manage ourselves as we do mission and advocacy work. I am reminded of Resmaa Menakem's thesis in his book *My Grandmother's Hands* which highlights the hard truth that we are all carrying trauma in our bodies. The way we publicly and privately hurt each other is a sure sign that he is right. We are living with centuries-old pain and we do not know what to do with it. So, we inflict others with our pain, whether we are racist, woke, or somewhere in between.

Here's the thing, good and faithful people: pain is dealt with by feeling it. Any attempt to push it away, to deny it, or tell yourself it shouldn't be happening will make it worse. It's like throwing water onto a grease fire; it will only complicate the situation. Once we are able to name and come to terms with the pain in our souls, we have to be vigilant and practice self-care because managing psychic and spiritual pain requires a lifetime of work.

Pain manifest as exhaustion, anger, anxiety or depression may come in waves that surprise us. At some point, you may think you are done hurting only to have a sudden wave rise up in you. It is important to recognize when these waves arise and to know their source as an old betrayal or inherited trauma. Otherwise, you may think other people and situations are making you angry or anxious when they are not. So many problems occur in the world because we mis-attribute the source of our pain and we blame other people.

Alcoholics and other kinds of addicts are notorious for this kind of behavior, which is why Twelve Step recovery programs teach that alcohol isn't the biggest problem. It is the behaviors that stem from

unresolved psychic pain. A lot of people don't want to let go of their pain. They become hard-hearted. They put up walls. They succumb to controlling behaviors. They blame others. They self-isolate in order to prevent being hurt again, which basically is equivalent to self-imprisonment. I do not recommend that method.

I do commend the work of Step Seven which calls on us to humbly ask God to remove our shortcomings. This work requires a knowledge of our pain and a desire to have God mold it into compassion for ourselves and others which will make us more loving and gracious. Many of our shortcomings are a result of unresolved pain manifest as anger, depression, and anxiety. Unresolved pain and trauma is why angry white people who think they are losing power often appear to have the same behaviors as addicts. They are misappropriating their pain.

I'm reminded of a story. One day Buddha was walking through a village. A very angry and rude young man came up and began insulting the Buddha. He shouted, "You have no right teaching others. You are as stupid as everyone else. You are nothing but a fake." Buddha was not upset by these insults. Instead, he asked the young man, "Tell me, if you buy a gift for someone, and that person does not take it, to whom does the gift belong?" The rude young man was surprised to be asked such a strange question and answered, "It would belong to me, stupid, because I bought the gift." Buddha smiled and said, "That is correct. And it is exactly the same with your anger. If you become angry with me and I do not get insulted, then the anger falls back on you. You must own it."

In the passage from Romans, which is our scripture lesson for today, the images of the Spirit's work are similar to fire and wind which Luke used in the Book of Acts to describe the movement of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. The apostle Paul talks about the Spirit as the groaning of creation and human anticipation of new life. Paul recognizes that, as a species, we are in pain. We are fearful and angry. Because of that Paul says, "we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that the Spirit intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words."

These are words of consolation for those of us who find ourselves tongue-tied before God, or more so, for those of us who are aware enough to know that

we need to pray for God to take away the unhealed parts of our being which carry and transmit pain to others. It is not difficult to look at our white body supremacist, fossil fuel addicted, consumerist, substance abusing culture and not perceive the human agony and the groaning of the Spirit.

As people who worship a God of love, we are called to pray for and work toward a new world order where love reigns. It can be hard to ask for it when we are rightfully angry at injustice. But here, as in the mystery before birth and after death, the Spirit speaks where we cannot and she goads us not to give up on love as the means and motivation for community life.

Beloved, it is my belief that our culture, including our town and our nation, is presently in a lot of pain. We have much to learn from this pain. May we remember the wisdom of the phrase, “No pain, no gain.” Rather than deflect and inflict pain upon others, may we consider the present distress we are experiencing as a gift from God and a sure sign that something new is about to be born. Let us groan and pray with the Spirit as we work for greater justice, equity, and inclusion and as we await that glorious day of spiritual transformation which benefits the whole human family. And may we, like those first Christians, be so filled by the Spirit that we speak the language of love, a language that the world so desperately needs. Amen.



Starting Over at the End of Life

At the end of March 2020, with lots of help from my daughter, Karen, my son, John and friends at church, I packed up my home in Williamstown, and moved to Macungie, PA to begin a new life near to my son John's home in Allentown, PA. I had not planned to make such a major change in my life at this time, having promised myself to stay put for a full year following my husband Dick's death toward the end of April in 2019. We had been married for 52 years at the time of Dick's death. I could not even begin to imagine my life without him. I knew that I needed time to adjust to my new reality.

Dick and I had planned to eventually move to be near John, and Dick had told John that he was to

“take care of your mother” when we knew that he had two to six months to live. But when I had visited with John and his family at Christmas, 2019, I became aware that I wanted to check out other living arrangements than the one Dick and I had discussed, at a nearby Senior Living Community. Dick wanted us to be in a setting where I would have help in caring for him, as we knew that his health was failing.

I no longer needed help like that. John said that I could have a room at his home, but I knew that would not meet our needs. I needed to figure out just what I needed, so I went looking at homes for sale in the area to assess how much they cost and begin deciding what I was looking for. My daughter-in-law Janet went with me.

We lined up a single home and a condominium to see with a realtor. When we looked at the home, it was clear that what I wanted was a home all on one floor, with few or no stairs. My house in Williamstown had given me a good taste of how difficult stairs became for Dick. When we saw the condo, I was surprised at how it suited me. It was all on one floor, had a washer and dryer and lots of closets. It had two bedrooms and two baths, so my daughter could visit and stay comfortably. I laughed when John asked me to give it a rating. I told him it was an 8 out of ten, because it did not have a fireplace. It had just come back on the market after a sale had fallen through. I knew it would not be on the market for long, so I surprised myself. I bought it at the beginning of 2020.

I came back to Williamstown with measurements of all the rooms and began to plan my downsizing to fit my new condo. I found that I had room for most of my memory pieces that would be hard to leave. I worked with John on prepping the condo before I moved in. I was amazed at how I already knew what I needed. I was much more decisive than I expected to be. Of course, I also began to realize how hard it would be to leave Williamstown and the dear friends that I have had over the many years. Dick and I had lived in Berkshire County since he came to do a Postdoctoral fellowship at the Austin Riggs Center in Stockbridge in 1971, moving to Williamstown in 1984.

Then the pandemic began. The condo had been repainted, the carpeting removed. I worked with Jody to get what the church could use for the tag sale.

None of us was aware of how intensively the pandemic would affect us, the tag sale, the move to a new community where I would have to shelter in place rather than get out and about and learn about my new neighbors. John and I decided that I would be a part of his family even though I was not in the same home. Thank goodness for that decision. I have not been totally isolated. I have met my closest neighbors, and I was pleased to find them to have a pattern of looking out for each other.

The neighborhood is varied in ages, racial diversity and folks are friendly. I am getting to know some of the wider flung folks by walking about a mile each day. Interestingly, I know their dogs names first and learn their names later. I learned how to use zoom, and participate in one group here run by the mother of a good friend of John's and one book group in Williamstown which read *Soul Talk*, by Kirk Byron Jones and *Two Dimensions of Reality*, by Dick Markham. These groups have helped me to focus on reflection that is especially helpful in a pandemic. I have been able to attend church, both here at a small church called The Barn, with a UCC trained pastor whom I find stimulating and engaging, and at Williamstown.

I still need to get to know more folks at The Barn, but my son has also been attending and it is good family time. I am so glad that First Church has a zoom service. I love being able to see all of you and know that you have kept healthy. I have also found it incredibly enjoyable to learn how to sing in a virtual choir with Ed and my friends in choir. It is challenging and delightful. Getting through a pandemic requires friends as never before. It is truly a community effort and I have been fortunate. We are almost all vaccinated now, and I look forward to a new normal that extends our caring for each other, in community here and at a distance. I find that I am more hopeful for our country after seeing how so many have responded in caring for each other. I know we still have ways to go in learning to trust each other across the country, but the opportunity is here and we can address the inequalities that have become so obvious. Churches are responding in beautiful ways.

So what have I learned on this journey? That friends and family become even more important and dear. That new friends are possible and welcome. That grieving is not something you have to "get over". I will always love and miss Dick. Surprisingly, he still feels like a part of my life. I am much more decisive on my own than when I share decision making. That pandemics offer interesting time for reflection and growth.

I hold all of you in my prayers. In the words of my new church: Love Wins! Jina Ford



Milne Public Library with W'mst'n Council on Aging

The Williamstown Council on Aging in partnership with the Milne Public Library is offering a service to older homebound people who would like to check out library books, DVDs, or CDs. Individuals can call the library, 458-5369, to request materials between the hours of 10-4 Mon, Tues., Thu; 10-6 on Weds, and 11-2 on Sat. (The library is currently closed on Fridays.) If you need a library card, it will be issued when the request for materials is received. Library staff will contact the Harper Center and a Council on Aging volunteer will pick up and deliver the requested items to your home; and then pick up and return them to the library on the appropriate date. Books can be checked out for three weeks; movies and DVDs for 7 days.

Pam Burger



June Birthdays

- June 1. Margy O'Connor
- 3. Mark Robertson
- 8. Bill Oberst
- 12. Larry Wright
- 18. Nina Donati
- 19. Margaret Oxtoby
- 27. Holly Edwards

Please remember to send in the dates of the birthdays of everyone in the family.

Anne
[↑](#)

Scenes at the Spruces and progress on the bikepath and the new bridge

[↑](#)

