




FIRST CHURCH CHATTER

September 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.

We have a new layout this month to show the poems and reflections as they were intended. We await your comments if you want this to continue or prefer the columns as has been our previous style. You can connect with Jody Green, Anne Atkinson Short or Carrie Waara for comments if you wish.

 [Hyperlinks](#): If you received this as a *.pdf file, use the links to take you to internet book sites and such, or to open your email program.

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.

In today's Chatter:

["Righteousness,"](#) Mark Seifried
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["Reflections](#) (Buddhist), Mark Seifried
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Righteousness

Based upon Matthew 5:6, August 15, 2021

Rev. Mark Seifried online for First Church Williamstown, UCC

I am often asked how and why I shifted from being a professional chef and running restaurants to becoming a minister only to work for an unstable institution which feels like it's in free-fall. The institution to which I am referring is the church, by the way. I have a pat answer that I often give: I now feed people through their spirits rather than their bellies. The other part of that is that I believe the church and every other spiritual movement have always been most faithful when they are small and scrappy. I enjoy working with congregations to take the remnants of what was and finding new and faithful ways to do and be church.

Unlike some church folk, I don't lament the many changes and even the decline we have experienced in recent decades. The cynic in me says that nostalgia is unfaithful and that we are getting our just rewards for complacency and even complicity in social ills. Whether we are talking about the climate crisis, gender-based discrimination, or racial inequality, the church shares much blame.

We have maintained an icon of a muscular, militaristic, White Jesus waving an American flag for too long and it has irreparably harmed the moral position of the church as well as doing untold harm to many people around the world. I am not pointing my finger at anyone in particular, though I can tell you that the Congregational churches in New England have been touting the glories of the Empire and patriarchy since its inception.

Think about the masters of music through the years to whom the church has endeared itself. Bach, Beethoven, Tallis, Haynd, and Purcell all wrote for Royal Courts while they composed music for the church. As majestic as their music is, there was little distinction between a Coronation anthem in the church and music to herald a monarch. Imperialistic elevation and justification for colonialism have been at the heart of the church's musical aspirations for centuries. The modern church has been more segregated than any other institution in society.

Because of these factors and more, we must confess that our cultural, civic and religious roots have shared the same soil as the Christian nationalists who sacked the US Capital on January 6. We must confess that our civic and spiritual ancestors could not have formed the beautiful hamlet of Williamstown and founded First Congregational Church without dominating and perhaps even slaughtering First Nation people whom we know as the Mahicans. We would not be here if our ancestors had not forcibly removed them. And, of course, you know that we would not be the nation we are, were it not for the sake of enslaved laborers who largely built its infrastructure.

I am resolute in my belief that the church has done much good through the centuries and continues to do so. The church's beliefs and practices have also done much harm, some of it discreetly, some of it overt. Let me give you a specific example of what I mean. We are less than one generation from singing flabbergasting words to an old chestnut of a hymn. It begins with a lovely verse and then a couple of verses later, it lobs a divinely ordained lyrical bomb to support social stratification.¹

¹Cecil F. Alexander, *All Things Bright and Beautiful*, 1848.

*All things bright and beautiful,
All creatures great and small,
All things wise and wonderful:
The Lord God made them all.*

*The rich man in his castle,
The poor man at his gate,
God made them, high or lowly,
And ordered their estate.*

Thanks be to the movement of the Holy Spirit, most hymnals nowadays omit the latter verse, but the song remains in our hymnal and the sentiment expressed is part of our DNA.

So, what do we do? Do we throw the proverbial baby out with the bathwater? Do we cower in fear of what's to come? I don't think either of those are necessary or viable options. I do, however, think we need to realize that the church as we know it is in crisis and that all of us must attend to the damage we have inflicted upon our siblings and upon creation as a whole.

As we think about the work of the church and society that lies ahead, ponder this wisdom from the California based teacher and healer Spenta Kandawalla²:

When I was young, I was taught to fear big forces of nature -- tornadoes, thunderstorms, snow storms, hurricanes. Taught they caused destruction and devastation. Taught to hide under desks, in basements, stay close to home. [My] work has been about re-learning and reconnecting to the wisdom and life in natural forces. That what is most alive leads to opening, creating, change. That in the destruction of something lies a whole new world a possibility – a place where patterns can finally become unhinged and there's space for something new to take its place. Not that this doesn't come without loss, grief, devastation, it often does. But to see there's also resilience, the beauty of survival, the move to create and thrive despite what surrounds us. To me that's the essence of our fights for liberation.

Beloved, the limitations and brokenness of our society have been revealed. The murder of George Floyd by police officers and the fallout of the pandemic have shocked many people into new levels of awareness and catapulted some to action. Social order is rightly and wrongly being eviscerated. It will continue until the people most adversely impacted have been liberated from oppressive laws and institutions, including the patriarchal church. The good news is that the pandemic has shown us just how resilient we are. The Good News is that liberation is at the heart of the Holy Bible, our playbook. The Bible illustrates the means of liberation from the multitude of demanding gods and idol worship, liberation from Pharaoh and other oppressive rulers, liberation from sin, liberation from systems of repression.

Throughout the Hebrew and Greek Testaments, people of faith are called to righteousness. In today's lesson we are told by Jesus, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness; for they shall be filled." "Righteousness" is a word that has been used and abused in many ways. The façade of righteousness fueled the church and the US government to force indigenous children into boarding schools for the purpose of blotting out their culture. The façade of righteousness fueled the fantasy that Christian nationalists could overturn the results of the will of the people in the 2020

²Spenta Kandawalla in *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds* by Adrienne Maree Brown (Chico, CA: AK Press, 2017) pgs. 125 to 126.

presidential election. People will tell you that they are righteous because they have accepted Jesus as their personal Lord and Savior and that this same Lord forgave them of all sin, even the ones they continue to commit and know are an affront to the teachings of Jesus – like thinking of any human being as lesser than any other human being.

So what is righteousness? The dictionary defines it this way – 1: *acting in accord with divine or moral law: free from guilt or sin.* 2: *morally right or justifiable action.*

Notice the words *acting* and *action*. Righteousness, then, is action that is honorable and just. Righteousness is about being in right relationship with God and all others. I would include being in right relationship with creation as an important biblical understanding of righteousness as well.

I am reminded of the wisdom of President Abraham Lincoln who said, “It is the eternal struggle between these two principles--right and wrong--throughout the world. They are the two principles that have stood face to face from the beginning of time; and will ever continue to struggle.” Lincoln seemed to understand the conundrum and the paradox of being human and our moral aspirations of righteousness.

As an institution with roots in oppressing others, I believe that the church’s faithful way forward means that we are called to do something to curb the tides of unrighteousness that abound. We all have a role to play in repairing harm for centuries of unrighteous action by our forebears. Each of us can make a difference. Some will need to organize, combine resources and work with others. Some will need to work alone to do their part – however large or small. Letter-writing and making phone calls to legislators does more than you think. Committing to daily meditation or prayer about right action is essential for all of us. White people forming meaningful relationships with black, indigenous and people of color is essential for us to restore sanity to our culture. The point is that now is the time for righteous action for every member of the church.

In an important book called Emergent Strategy: Shaping and Changing Worlds, Adrienne Maree Brown quotes Dara Cooper³ and gives us a clue as to how we move forward:

As part of our liberation, the Earth teaches us that everything – E-V-E-R-Y-T-H-I-N-G – is connected. The soil needs rain, organic matter, air, worms and life in order to do what it needs to do to give and receive life. Each element is an essential component.

Organizing takes humility and selflessness and patience and rhythm while our ultimate goal of liberation will take many components. Some of us build and fight for land, healthy bodies, healthy relationships, clean air, water, homes, safety, dignity, and humanizing education. Others of us fight for food and political prisoners and abolition and environmental justice. Our work is intersectional and multifaceted. Nature teaches us that our work has to be nuanced and steadfast. And more than anything, that we need each other - at our highest natural glory – in order to get free.

I would suggest that as a smallish congregation we cannot have much effect on many things, but we can affect the thing or things which continue to pervade our prayers and even the things that keep us awake with grief and longing, or as Jesus says the things

³Dara Cooper in *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds* by Adrienne Maree Brown (Chico, CA: AK Press, 2017 pg. 159

that cause us to “hunger and thirst for righteousness.” Those disturbances are actually gifts from God. The thirst and hunger for righteousness are divine invitations to use our energy toward becoming the change that will bless others and transform our society into being truly equitable and inclusive.

We have to take the first step - in any direction away from complacency. According to Jesus’ guidance and one of the hymns I love: *Seek ye first the Kingdom of God and God’s righteousness And all these things shall be added unto you, Hallelu, Hallelujah!*

Beloved, the church shall rise again and we shall be filled when right action motivates us individually and when righteousness drives the mission and ministry of the church. May it be so, with the help of God.

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"The Wind Within"

Hugh L. Guilderson

with attention and compassion

with courage and justice

in mercy and forgiveness

in songs of sorrow

and songs of joy

the wind within us

is the breath of creation.

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There is a beautiful expression in Buddhism about death
Pastor Mark offered for Dick Steege’s memorial service:

*It is not the end of the world, when it is the end of a life;
it is the beginning of another life, in ‘another’ world.*

*the best way to honor a relationship is not by despair that it is lost,
but to be grateful for what it was worth.*

*It is not the end of a relationship, when it is the end of a life;
it is but the temporal suspension of it, till another time.*

The following was the commendation for Dick, also from Buddhism, grounded in the spiritual practice of detachment:

Into the freedom of wind and sunshine, we let you go, Dick.

Into the dance of the stars and the planets, we let you go

Into the wind's breath and the hands of the star maker, we let you go

We love you, we miss you, we want you to be free

Go freely, go dancing, go with wonder and joy and with our gratitude!

Light and love,

Mark

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"First Gathering with Friends"

Colleen West

Adrian Dunn's sister in CA.

I make ready all day
Clean, cook, arrange sunflowers in a blue vase

Sew a new tablecloth the color of persimmons
Light the long candles

My skin cannot remember your hugs
My heart cannot remember your cradle

A little cry issues from the back of my throat, unbidden,
When I hear your car pull into the drive

I have forgotten how we melt into you,
How you melt into us, without trying

Overlapping laughter is unexpected music,
Faces, a new art form moving in three dimensions

We break bread
With the reverence of a sacrament

We toast, *L' chaim!* (to life!)

For we survived--

Survived the loneliness, the isolation,
The fear, the invading devil itself

Around the table, the lively
Play of light, glowing eyes, and smiles

Hear the tinkling of silver against the good plates,
Ice swirling in the thin glasses

A burst of laughter soars and bounces off the walls
Followed by a brief hush as we bow to what has been lost

I hold my breath for a moment,
Stopping the action to burn it on my retinas

Then it hits me hard--
That to let our breath mingle

In the same room
Is a holy communion

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"A Prayer of Preparation"

Richard Markham

Mysterious God, we need help

Our human world seems chaotic, sometimes irrational, and prone to violence

We experience confusion and anxiety, and search for security by clinging to
our ideas and beliefs

Yet, we realize that doing so contributes to the polarization in our culture

So, we find ourselves relying on one another, thankful for connection and
fellowship

What we also need is inspiration to strengthen our souls

And to become aware of our finitude and fallibility

Which can help open our hearts to the wisdom expressed by Jesus in the
Beatitudes.

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from Deborah Brown:

"#130" (c.1859), Emily Dickinson (1830-1886)

These are the days when Birds come back –
A very few – a Bird or two –
To take a backward look.
These are the days when skies resume
The old – old sophistries of June –
A blue and gold mistake.
Oh fraud that cannot cheat the Bee –
Almost thy plausibility
Induces my belief.
Till ranks of seeds their witness bear –
And softly thro' the altered air
Hurries a timid leaf.

Oh sacrament of summer days,
Oh Last Communion in the Haze –
Permit a child to join.

Thy sacred emblems to partake –
Thy consecrated bread to take
And thine immortal wine!

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From Lynn Chick:

The Berkshire Food Project (BPF) continues to serve to-go meals every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday at noon at the North Adams Congregational Church. Right now there is a need for volunteers who can help with food preparation, packaging, and clean-up. Contact Darlene Ellis at: Darlene@berkshirefoodproject.org

From Anne Atkinson:

September Birthdays

1st	Abbie Hatton
22nd	Adrianna Duhan
25th	Marilyn Faulkner
27th	Elizabeth Smith
28th	Brad Wells

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