



FIRST CHURCH CHATTER

December 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.

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.

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. 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.

Hyperlinks: If you received this as a *.PDF file, use the links to take you to Chatter pages, internet sites and such, or to open your email program to respond to an author. If you received a paper copy, links to the sites can be copied and pasted into your browser to take you to those sites.

In today's Chatter:

[The True Vine](#) – Mark Seifried
[Christian Nationalism](#) – FCC Williamstown
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The True Vine

Based on [John 15:1-12](#), December 5, 2021

Rev. [Mark Seifried @ First Church Williamstown](#), UCC

There are names for what binds us:
strong forces, weak forces.
Look around, you can see them:
the skin that forms in a half-empty cup,
nails rusting into the places they join,
joints dovetailed on their own weight.
The way things stay so solidly
wherever they've been set down —
and gravity, scientists say, is weak.

And see how the flesh grows back
across a wound, with a great vehemence,
more strong
than the simple, untested surface before.

There's a name for it on horses,
when it comes back darker and raised: proud flesh,

as all flesh,
is proud of its wounds, wears them
as honors given out after battle,
small triumphs pinned to the chest —

And when two people have loved each other
see how it is like a
scar between their bodies,
stronger, darker, and proud;
how the black cord makes of them a single fabric
that nothing can tear or mend.

This poem called “For What Binds Us” was written by Jane Hirshfield.¹ It seems so poignant in this moment of history because the reality is that we have all been scarred by the pandemic. Some more than others. We have all be scarred by racism. Some more than others. We have all been scarred by poverty. Some more than others. And, thanks be to God, we have all been scarred by love. Some more than others.

It is a grace that we worship the God of love and not some judgmental and vindictive overlord. It is a miracle that, despite physical distancing, we have, by and large, managed to keep our community intact throughout the last twenty months of the pandemic. Surely love is responsible. Thank you, saints, for your loving faithfulness and patience throughout these trials we have endured. And thank you that you have heeded Jesus, who in no uncertain terms said, ‘This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.’ Jesus was talking about a radical, humble, sacrificial love.

In her commentary on the love-commandment of Jesus, United Church of Christ Pastor, Liz Miller, reflects on love in the time of a pandemic:² *As anxiety provoking as the earliest days of Covid-19 were, it was easy to love one other. We shared a universal love language that came with catchy phrases: Stay Home, Save Lives; Wash Your Hands; We Can Do Hard Things. Almost two years into the pandemic, loving one another has transformed from snappy slogans into convoluted questions more fitting for a Dear Abby column. If someone invites me to dinner but I'm not socializing indoors yet, is it more loving to hurt their feelings by bowing out or to risk a painfully honest conversation? When worship returns in person and beloved faces are still missing, how many times is too many to reach out and say we're thinking about you before it comes across as nagging? What does love look like when we all have different needs and we're not even sure of what our own needs are going to be from one week to the next?*

1 Jane Hirshfield, "For What Binds Us" from [Of Gravity & Angels](#), (Wesleyan University Press, 1988)

2 Liz Miller, “[Love in the Time of a Pandemic](#),” November 3, 2021 Still Speaking Daily Devotional, (Cleveland: United Church of Christ

Rev. Miller concludes: *The love Jesus gave was not one-size-fits-all. He loved some people through healing, some through a shared meal, and others through stories and teachings. If we are to love as he did, perhaps it requires me to define the love that I need—whether it is space (even as we long to be together) or continued invitations with the ability to hear no—and to honor the love you ask for in return.*

Can we do that for each other – name the love we need in this time and place? Whether you know it or not, naming the love you need is a gift to those who want to love you and a gift to yourself.

We might miss the fact that this morning's scripture lesson is ripe with metaphors for love. Unlike the "I Am" saying of Jesus in [chapter 10 of John's gospel](#), where Jesus is identified first as the gate and then as the shepherd, Jesus' identification with the "true vine" and the subsequent description of the connection between vine, branches and fruit is far less confusing. God is the vine grower, the source of love. Jesus is the vine, the conduit for love. And followers of Jesus are the branches who are to bear the fruit of love.

As you heard in the reading, this is not a feel-good lesson. The branches get pruned now and again and some fall away on their own, which suggests the temporal nature of being human. Our beliefs change. Our realities change. Our needs change. It's important to note that the "pruning" to which Jesus refers is not for punishment, but so that the community of Jesus can be fruitful. Indeed, Jesus says that the pruning has already been accomplished and that those who remain have "already been cleansed." In other words, life has changed us and we are stronger for it.

While I like this gospel text, I also struggle with it. It opens with "I am the true vine, and my Heavenly Parent is the vine grower." What a nice image. Then this passage becomes pretty grim. We could say "harsh." After the nice sentiment in verse 1, Jesus gets right to it: "God removes every branch in me, Jesus, that bears no fruit." It gets worse. Even the fruitful branches get "pruned." Think about it. Two sharp blades enclose some part of the branch and cut into it and snap it off. It gets worse: "Branches are gathered, thrown into the fire and burned" (v. 6). If the branch doesn't bear fruit, if it withers on the vine, it's removed and thrown into the fire. This is a lesson in reality – that life upends us from time to time and our reaction to changing circumstances reflects the strength of our spiritual life.

So, if followers of Jesus are the "branches" of this text, we should think about the hard work associated with this passage. The Giver of Life, AKA the Vine Grower has expectations for fruitfulness. The questions this begs are numerous: Are we able to submit to the pruning shears? Will we make the most of the nutrients provided in the forms of worship, mindfulness, prayer, meditation, Sabbath keeping and other spiritual practices? Will we abide in the loving way of Jesus, even through heartache and grief? Even through sickness and pain?

You know, emotional pain causes us fallible humans to lock up our hearts and throw away the key. When grief arrives, we simply shut the door. We think we're so cleverly outwitting life's pesky problem of pain. The truth is that love and belonging are found in the shared experience of our darkest hours. When we can ask others to be with us in our pain, when we can sit in the sorrow of another and look straight at illness, death and grief with them, that's love.

When we can show up to relationship with our shadows in tow and no one runs away, that's real love, that's transformational love.

We can be bewildered. We can be rattled by life. We can be afraid. And if we are walking the way of Jesus, we can be open. Openness is redemptive. You can be bewildered, rattled, scared, angry, hurt, lost, and if you can find it in you to be open and curious, open to the pruning that comes with life, you'll be okay. Actually, you'll be way more than okay, you'll soar on the wings of your broken heart and broken life. Brokenness gives us our wings. Openness is our navigator. And love is our destination. No matter how broken you are, remain open and love will meet you there.

Abiding in Jesus keeps us grounded in good times and bad. Compassion, forgiveness, generosity, and loving kindness get us through times of trial. Pruning times like pandemics offer opportunities to discover God at work. Prunings such as illness can be an opportunity to learn something from our difficulty and discomfort. We can choose to examine how we handle suffering, resentment, grief, failure, disappointment, despair, isolation, and waiting. We can learn and grow even during times of suffering. Pruning times and pandemics can be opportunities to re-examine how we handle relationships and how we look at other people. Through the pruning process we learn about ourselves and we learn from difficult people we encounter. Pruning compels us to own our choices, to discern our personality deficiencies, to modify our behaviors and habits that adversely affect our relationships. Pruning keeps us close to the vine and the teachings of Jesus become life-giving.

"I am the vine. You are the branches," Jesus says. "Abide in me and Love will abide in you." Amen.

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Greetings from the First Congregational Church of Williamstown, Massachusetts:

We write you to join us in a public witness against Christian Nationalism on January 6, 2022, from Noon to 1:00 pm.

The Jan. 6 insurrection shocked us when it exposed how religious faith was being exploited to fuel anti-democratic violence. Over the past year, our congregation has studied the upsurge of Christian Nationalism in evangelical and mainline churches, and we have decided that at 12 noon on Jan. 6, 2022, we will hold a one-hour public protest to denounce this linkage of faith with the anti-democratic forces that continue to foster division, white supremacy, and authoritarianism in our country right now.

Even before Jan. 6, 2021, our church had grown concerned with the misuse of religious language and symbolism to advocate for political extremism. Employing the cross or figures of Jesus to justify threats or to condone coercion contradicts our conviction that freedom of religion is an essential tenet of our democracy. By unanimous vote, we added our church's name to the national statement, "[Christians Against Christian Nationalism](#)," and we are planning further steps to highlight the dangers in giving religious blessing to authoritarian or autocratic social movements.

We are writing to invite your congregation to gather in front of your own house of worship on Jan. 6, 2022, in testimony to a fundamental truth: religious faith unites and should not divide us, and -- at least in the United States of America -- there are no religious grounds for pushing others to the sideline because of race, gender, or creed. Our plan is to advertise our protest in as many local media outlets as possible; to provide materials and slogans for sign-making in our sanctuary the hour before the event; and to stand out in front of our church on the main thoroughfare through our town, from noon to 1 p.m.

We invite your congregation to join us. If your faith community elects to join in this public testimony, please let us know so that we can widen the circle of support to include everyone who stands up against this growing alliance between Christianity and anti-democratic forces that undermine freedom of religion.

With hope and in faith,

[Betsy Burris](mailto:betsburris@gmail.com) betsburris@gmail.com

[Sherwood Guernsey](mailto:sherwood@sglawoffice.com) sherwood@sglawoffice.com 413-822-5894

[David Langston](mailto:fb9741@gmail.com) fb9741@gmail.com

[Bridget Spann, Community Outreach Organizer](mailto:organizer@firstchurchwilliamstown.org) organizer@firstchurchwilliamstown.org

<https://www.christiansagainstchristiannationalism.org/faqs>

<https://berkeleycenter.georgetown.edu/events/christian-nationalism-in-the-united-states>

<https://divinity.yale.edu/calendar/ensign-lecture-phil-gorski-flag-and-cross-white-christian-nationalism-and-threat-american-democracy>

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December Birthdays

6. Sam Smith
7. Leon Alberts, Magnus Bernhardsson
8. Lynn Chick
9. Betsy Burris
10. Anne de Gersdorff
21. Karen McComish
22. Margaret McComish
23. Jinx Tong
29. Jina Ford
30. Charles Fox

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December Photos



Jody and John, Anne and Carrie wish to
wish you a Merry Christmas,
Peace and Blessings in the New Year

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