

FIRST CHURCH CHATTER

March, 2023

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 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 the meantime, we will deliver the Chatter to those who would prefer paper copy or don't receive email.

We are always looking for stories, poems, thoughts to contribute. If you have notices about upcoming events which you would like published, please let Anne or Jody know and we will try to include. We try to publish by the beginning but realistically often it is sent out by the 10th or so.

In this chatter:

[Rev. James Lunden – March 12 Reflections](#)
[International Day of Nowruz](#)
[March and April Birthdays](#)

Rev. James Lunden

March 12, 2023 Sermon, WILLIAMSTOWN V: Lent Three

The bard of Vermont, the late Frederick Buechner, changed the way I speak of living faithfully:

If you keep your eyes peeled to it and your ears open... your life will show you something of God's grace... there is no event so commonplace, but that God is present within it, always hidden, always leaving you room to recognize God or not, but all the more fascinatingly because of that, all the more compellingly and hauntingly. So, listen to your life. See it for the fathomless mystery it is. In the boredom and the pain of it no less than the excitement and gladness: touch, taste, and smell your way to the holy and hidden heart of it because in the last analysis ALL moments are key moments and life itself is grace.


In addition to his natural born gifts as a writer, he ripened into what my friends in the African American community of Cleveland used to call **mother wit**: wisdom distilled from **real** life experiences. These words still give shape to my soul: “You never know” Buechner says, “what may cause them.”

The sight of the Atlantic Ocean can do it, or a piece of music, or a face you've never seen before. A pair of somebody's old shoes can do it. Almost any movie made before the great sadness that came over the world after the Second World War, a horse cantering across a meadow, the high school basketball team running out onto the gym floor at the start of a game. You can never be sure. But of this you can be sure: whenever you find tears in your eyes, especially unexpected tears, it is well to pay the closest attention. They are not only telling you something about the secret of who you are, but more often than not God is speaking to you through them of the mystery of where you have come from and is summoning you to where, if your soul is to be saved, you should go to next.

In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus calls this being wise as serpents and gentle as doves. This affirms that there's always a connection between our inward journey and our outward encounters. Those with eyes to see recognize that Jesus consistently links the personal to the political, our private epiphanies to our public personas, and the mystical movements of our soul with the hard work of engaging the world with love.

Activists as well as contemplatives tend to favor one path over the other – that's just human nature – part of living into the unique charisms God gives to us at birth. To mature, however, to become our truest selves who consciously incarnate the holy, creative, and unique blessings of God into our ordinary days is a balancing act. A mystical dance that requires intentionality, imagination, trust, and accountability. It's so easy to lose our place in this dance which is why the Hopi people crafted this word – “*Koyaanisqatsi*” – it means life out of balance. Activists afflicted by this disequilibrium fail to nourish the inward disciplines of humility, beauty, and awe and wind up cranky and cynical; while contemplatives who don't practice putting themselves out on the line from time to time atrophy into self-righteous, privileged, navel-gazers who are so heavenly focused as to be no earthly good. Ours was designed to be a both/and spirituality honoring flesh AND spirit, action and contemplation, social change AND grace-filled prayer, serpents as well as doves.

Today's story of Jesus meeting a Samaritan woman at a well in the center of town helped me make this truth my own. I'll tell you how in a sec, but three key features in the story warrant our attention:

 **First is the symbolic dismantling of two spiritual taboos:** one against a male religious teacher speaking with a woman in public, the other against Jews and Samaritans interacting in intimate ways like sharing drinking water. St. John goes out of his way to call attention to the scandalous dimensions of this dialogue that rattles both the woman at the well and later the disciples: “*Two fault lines of social division — gender and religious/ethnic sectarianism — are brought front and center*” as Jesus links the inward with the outward aspects of faith. (SALT Project)

📖 **Second is St. John's use of contrast:** last week in chapter three, a pious Jewish man, a Pharisee and religious leader, came to Jesus in Jerusalem only to leave baffled because Jesus spoke metaphorically while Nicodemus heard "literally and prosaically." Today, 30 miles outside of Jerusalem, Jesus initiates contact with a woman – an outsider despised by traditional Jews – who catches a glimpse of God's grace in the poetry Jesus shares and experiences inner renewal while old Nicodemus stays stuck in bewilderment. This gospel is saturated with good people missing the point because they're focused on tradition instead of imagination.

📖 **And third, once the Samaritan woman connects her life with the poetic promise of Christ's deeper message** – once she recognizes God's grace already in her heart– she starts multiplying the miracle of forgiveness throughout her community. As Jesus asked: she goes home and tells her loved ones what's she's experienced – and the story ends like this:

*Many in that Samaritan village came to trust the way of Jesus because of what the woman told them. In fact, they invited Jesus to stay with them for two days and kept saying to the woman: we no longer believe only because of what you told us, but now we've seen and heard it ourselves and **KNOW** that the wisdom of Jesus brings healing.*

It would seem that Jesus has NO interest in simply preserving rituals – Jewish or Samaritan – just because they're old; rather, he actively dismantles the ancient habits that bind and oppress us so that we might live as ambassadors of compassion. Priests, gender, buildings, tradition, power, and the status quo matter far less to the holy than setting people free. Do you recall how the prophet, Micah, put it: ***THIS is what the Lord requires: to DO justice, to SHARE compassion, and to walk HUMBLY with God and one another.***

That's the story's context. My connection is that 30 years ago in November, I was elected to the Cleveland Board of Education. With the encouragement, resources, and chutzpah of the city's mayor, Michael R. White, an inter-racial team of parents was recruited to be a reform slate called to fix a system rife with cronyism, waste, and patronage. We also needed to negotiate a way out of an obsolete federal desegregation order. Once upon a time it made sense given the city's legacy of racial separation and hatred. Now it just bussed one group of Black children from the East Side of town to another mostly Black neighborhood 45 minutes away on the West Side – and vice versa.

Most of the city's middle-class families of both races, you see, had long left for the suburbs creating a student population that was 80% low income and African American. What began as a righteous act of reparation was now an expensive, exhausting, and frustrating failure. Cleveland's mayor, a young Black educator himself, knew first-hand that change was essential, so he enlisted a community coalition to get us elected – and we won – all of us. Here's a picture from the front page of the *Cleveland Plain Dealer* on election night where our slate won and I became the Vice-President of the Board in charge of Personnel. What a trip! One additional word of context:

📖 While it was an honor and privilege to be welcomed and supported so profoundly by the city's African American community – a blessing I continue to cherish – big city politics are ugly, dangerous, and soul-sapping. Somebody ALWAYS wants something for nothing. Mayor White warned me: *Don't make any NEW friends after election night, ok?* Our labor lawyer was explicit: *Take a good look at yourself in the mirror and come to terms with what you CAN and CANNOT live with because to make big things happen, you must be ruthless.*

📖 He was right and in time I realized being ruthless meant I was becoming someone I hated: I was combative, snarky, always on the defensive, my first marriage fell apart as I started to believe our own press releases, and... I was burning out. Unbalanced action has its costs, ok? Bertolt Brecht described it well in a poem where the rising forces of Hitler's fascism were in combat with the city's progressive advocates for justice:

*In my time streets led to the quicksand. Speech betrayed me to the slaughterer.
There was little I could do. But without me the rulers would have been more secure.
This was my hope. So, the time passed away which on earth was given to me.
For we knew only too well: even the hatred of squalor makes the brow grow stern.
Even anger against injustice makes the voice grow harsh. Alas, we who wished to lay
The fountains of kindness could not ourselves remain kind. So, when at last it comes to pass
That man can help his fellow man: do not judge us too harshly...*

... to which I always add: because we became what we hated. I was an spiritual activist with an untethered mind. Two years into this fray a concerned friend introduced me to Fr. Jim O'Donnell, a retired Diocesan Roman Catholic priest, who'd set up a ministry of presence in one of the East Side's worst housing projects. Patiently collaborating with Habitat and others, Fr. Jim and Sr. Maggie renewed four city blocks that had once been burned out but now boasted beautiful community gar-dens, new homes, and a bit of safety and stability in a tough place.

I began going to Thursday night Eucharists and eventually asked Fr. Jim to serve as my spiritual director. After one overnight of solitude I mentioned being moved to tears by the tale of a WWII vet who found new purpose after going to confession. Jim smiled and said, "Maybe it's time for YOU to do likewise?" I must have gasped out loud: "Hold the phone, Father. I love liturgy, retreats, and all these smells and bells; but confession is for Catholics – and I am NOT that."

"Suit yourself man," he replied, "Just know that the spirit blows where it will, and you might be surprised where its leading if you just stepped outside your comfort zone." We lovingly argued over that for a bit but I gave in and set up a time for confession. Well, the day came to meet Fr. Jim, and wouldn't you know it, I came down with a wicked head cold and had to cancel. Jim was amused as set up a new time which I quickly forgot about, too – and missed yet an-other appointment. Trying to get back on track, Jim said, "*You can run but you can't hide, man. God is calling so try to get here this time.*"

Which I did: we sat together in a small room as I tip-toed to-wards opening my heart. And before I knew it, I was sobbing and shaking, trembling and caving-in on myself until all my inner junk came out and only silence filled the room. Jim eventually put his hand on my shoulder saying: "*James, child of God, by the love of Jesus I remind you that ALL your wounds, all your sins, and all your brokenness have been forgiven. Pick up your life and walk.*"

A sweet serenity started to swell up inside me – something akin to a fourth and fifth step in AA – until Jim added: "*And now for your penance...*" I freaked: "*Stop with all this Catholic talk ok? Confession was one thing but penance. Really?*" To which Jim said: "*Your penance is to do what Jesus asked of the woman at the well...*" I froze, unable to think, wondering what the hell DID Jesus ask of the woman at the well? And then it hit me: he simply asked her to go back to her community and tell others what she'd experienced. Let them see firsthand what it looked like to be liberated by love: forgiven, unburdened, and renewed. I literally jumped out of my chair, hugged that old Irish Catholic priest, and shouted: **Hell YES. I can do THAT!** And walked out of my first confession like I was floating on air.

Precious people of God: THAT's what religion is SUPPOSED to do! Grace helps us get rid of our inner garbage that keeps us from loving others and shows us how to live as our truest selves. It's about restoring balance, living in ways that honor the bounty of life – even in times of suffering and confusion – and joyfully share its blessings. Not abstractly. Not rhetorically. Not doctrinally. But with flesh and blood acts of holy, human tenderness. Take the music we're about to absorb: not only is it as 12 minute encounter with beauty for beauty's sake; it's also a sensual reminder of what balance and love can bring to the world. Its soul food shared that we might live as living bread and wine for the world. You matter. Your love matters. Concentration camp survivor Viktor Frankl tell us that:

Once a woman called him in the middle of the night to calmly inform him she was about to commit suicide. Frankl kept her on the phone, talked her through her depression, giving her reason after reason to carry on living. Until finally, she promised she would not take her life, and kept her word. When later they met, Frankl asked which reason had persuaded her to live? "None," she told him. "What then influenced you to go on living," he pressed? "It was your willingness to listen to me in the middle of the night. A world in which there was even one person ready to share another's pain seemed to me to be a world in which it was worthwhile to live."

That one person might be you: so let those with ears to hear, hear.

[\(back\)](#)

Peaceful, Sustainable, Inclusive World for All

Following is the text of UN Secretary-General António Guterres' video message for the International Day of Nowruz, observed 21 March:

Nowruz marks new beginnings. A "new day". A new year. The arrival of spring and rebirth of nature.

For more than 300 million people around the world, it is a time for family and friends to come together, reflect on the past and look forward to a brighter future.

Nowruz is also a celebration of humanity's rich cultural heritage and diversity. And a chance — for all of us — to be guided by its values of peace, dialogue and solidarity: to reaffirm our commitment to human rights and dignity; to promote mutual respect and reconciliation; to protect the planet and live in harmony with nature.

As we celebrate Nowruz, let us choose hope and compassion, embrace the opportunities that lie ahead, and work together to building a more peaceful, more sustainable and more inclusive world for all.

May this Nowruz bring you joy, good health and prosperity.

Welcome Spring with Nowruz this Sunday!

Nowruz is an ancient festival marking the arrival of Spring that is celebrated in parts of the Middle East, Central Asia, South Asia, the Balkans, and East Africa. It dates back at least 3,000 years, and it was adopted and spread by the ancient Persian religion of Zoroastrianism, which the holiday is today often linked with. The Zoroastrian calendar was based on the passage of seasons. Nowruz, which means 'New Day', is a celebration of rebirth and renewal, of the end of winter and the flowering of the Earth that warm weather portends.

This Sunday, during Second Hour, we have the honor and opportunity to learn about this widely celebrated holiday. Please join us at 11:15 in Community Hall!

"It is not our differences that divide us. It is our inability to recognize, accept, and celebrate those differences."--Audre Lord

[\(back\)](#)

March	20 Cristina Mancilla	8 Ian Longhurst
	21 Judy Reichert	13 Cynthia Payne
4 Adriana Brown	24 Troy Kobrin	13 Anne Short
4 Ann Clark	24 Shira Lynn	18 Hanbin Koo
7 Carl Faulkner	29 Cesar Silva	19 Mark Seifried
13 Sam Kobrin	30 Laura Jones Kobrin	19 Dick Steege
13 Jake Kobrin		26 George Robertson
14 Anna Bennett Robertson	April	30 Ward Bianchi
18 Wendy Hopkins	7 Will Howie	
20 Phil Smith	8 Dick Markham	

[\(back\)](#)