

April 20,2008

1 Peter 22 Like newborn infants, long for the pure, spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow into salvation--

3 if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good.

4 Come to him, a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God's sight, and

5 like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.

6 For it stands in scripture: "See, I am laying in Zion a stone, a cornerstone chosen and precious; and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame."

7 To you then who believe, he is precious; but for those who do not believe, "The stone that the builders rejected has become the very head of the corner,"

8 and "A stone that makes them stumble, and a rock that makes them fall." They stumble because they disobey the word, as they were destined to do.

9 But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.

10 Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

NRS John 14:1 "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me.

2 In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you?

3 And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also.

4 And you know the way to the place where I am going."

5 Thomas said to him, "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?"

6 Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.

7 If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him."

8 Philip said to him, "Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied."

9 Jesus said to him, "Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'?

10 Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works.

11 Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; but if you do not, then believe me because of the works themselves.

12 Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father.

13 I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son.

14 If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it.

Sermon: Didache

Loving Creator shine as a light before me that you may be seen and not I.
Give me words that I may speak give us ears that we may hear and through your Holy Spirit help us understand.
Amen.

Our confirmation class is based on what are known as the five marks of the Christian church , community, education, service, worship and proclamation. Today I want to discuss Didache, or the teachings of the church. Didache is the root for didactics for you teachers.

It has been a difficult time here in Monson lately with the finances so tight. Something that always comes up in these town discussions is the amount we pay for educating our young people. As cuts are needed we ask: what do we need to do to be sure our children get a good education?

Education is crucial for living in this world; people need to know certain things to be able to survive in the world. People need to be able to read and write to get along. They need to know something about history, math, and science. We would not want our children going out into the world without learning the things they need to be happy, well adjusted and productive members of society. Educating our children does not just benefit those with children, it impacts the whole community. We need a strong foundation.

In the church it is the same, we want to be sure our children learn about the Bible and God and how we worship. There are lots of things to know about our faith, we need a strong foundation for our faith as well.

When I was a teen, our church had a student pastor as our youth leader. He was attending Princeton Seminary, and, as a Presbyterian, he was bemoaning the fact that he needed to take Greek and Hebrew.

Some years later, as I was thinking about ministry, I quickly dismissed the idea of going to seminary, because I was sure I could not handle Greek or Hebrew.

It was not until many years later that I realized that if I was not Presbyterian I would not be required to take Greek or Hebrew that I decided it might be possible to make it through seminary.

When I made the decision to apply to Andover Newton Theological School, I started wondering about taking Greek. The New Testament was written in Greek and I always wondered what there was in that original language.

So one day I was driving along thinking about this question when I passed one of my favorite used bookstores. I walked in and the owner was sitting on the floor with several stacks of books around him.

I said, “this may seem like a strange question, but do you have any books on New Testament Greek?” He looked at me a bit funny, which did not surprise me given my question. He said, “New Testament Greek?” almost incredulously.

I said, “Yeah, New Testament Greek.”

He put his hand on the pile next to him and picked up the very top book. He handed it to me and I looked at Thayer’s Lexicon of New Testament Greek. We were both a bit dumbfounded.

I knew right then that I would be taking Greek.

The reality is that there are many things to learn about being a Christian, not just Hebrew and Greek, and that is good news indeed!

We try to teach our children what they need to know to live in the world; without this, they would be rudderless in this big world. In the same way, Christians have a great deal to learn about being Christian.

Paul says to look to the spiritual food of the faith for our sustenance.

In the early days of the church a person underwent a 2 to 3 year process of learning about the faith to be baptized. This was just the process of becoming ready to be a Christian, and then began the life long learning of how to live the faith.

Becoming educated in the ways of the church was for everyone and not just children sent to Sunday School, in fact the idea of Sunday Schools is only a little over one hundred fifty years old. Christian education was part of family life, and it was part of church life.

Christian education is important not just for children, it is also a life long part of being a Christian. That is evidenced by what my position is. My title here in Monson is Pastor and Teacher, not just Pastor. I am charged with teaching the community about the Christian life. I am not the only one. Each of our committees has a responsibility for teaching as well.

Stewardship teaches us the importance of giving our time and talent, the Deacons teach us about service and worship, the Music committee teaches and encourages music, Outreach teaches about the connections to the wider world, I hope you get the idea.

So what do we need to learn?

A good place to start is with scripture.

Most people will never need to know anything about Greek to study scripture, but the scripture, as Martin Luther said, is the foundation of the faith.

When I talk with other clergy, not just United Church of Christ clergy, but also in other denominations, I hear the same story: people do not know the scriptures today. This was not true even a generation ago. Biblical literacy is at a low right now.

When I conduct funeral services and include a reading of the 23rd Psalm, I hand out copies because so few people know that familiar Psalm.

The Bible is our book, our story, and studying scripture is an important part of Christian growth.

Bible study in groups and in private is a powerful tool for developing a deep spiritual connection to God. The scriptures challenge us to think and respond more deeply to Jesus' call, follow me.

History is another part of our story.

I remember when our kids were young, they would ask us to tell them stories about family, stories about growing up, about how we met. Most families have stories that are shared down through the generations. Our story, our history, give us a sense of identity.

How about the story of God in the world? The scriptures stop their chronicle of events at about 50-60 AD. Does God's story end there? What about everything between then and now?

As one might imagine, the entire story of the development of Christianity is enormous. No one person could ever know it all, but how Christianity came to be a world wide religion, how the church grew and reinterpreted itself through the generations, and how the church flourished here in Monson is quite a story.

The early church leaders, the martyrs, the councils, the divisions between groups with different ideas, these things formed what we know as the church. We in First Church are protestants, because Martin Luther protested the Vatican and was excommunicated. But we are not Lutheran, and that is a longer story.

People came to Monson as Calvinists, and then they settled here and built this church, after petitioning the state to become a town. For the past 246 years The First Church of Monson has had a story of ups and downs.

We are here now, but without a sense of history we have shallow roots.

What every Christian community has in some form is an organizational structure. Different people have different roles as Paul says to the Corinthians: And God has

appointed in the church, first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, administrations, *various* kinds of tongues.

There are other places where other jobs are broken down more specifically, but what we see is that there is a structure we call the church. How a church is organized is called its polity, from the same word root for politics.

Our polity is our church organization.

Here in First Church we have a congregational polity which means that we seek God's guidance as we work together in community. It is a kind of polity we might call democratic, although that is not entirely accurate. It is true that what we call democracy in our nation was originally patterned after the congregational polity of the Puritans and Pilgrims.

The other two major forms of church polity are Presbyterian, with a group of elders who run the church, and Hierarchical as is seen in the Orthodox and Roman Catholic traditions, a top down structure.

Members of this church know that we have boards and committees that are responsible for the smooth functioning of the church. Understanding this structure is part of being a member of the church.

Lately we have been getting a bit of education for some and review for others on the use of Robert's Rules of order as we use this system to run our congregational meetings.

Related to both polity and history we have traditions.

There is a story about an Easter dinner tradition.

A mother was teaching her daughter how to prepare the lamb for the Easter dinner.

Mom showed her how they always cut off the end of the leg and set it in the pan next to the rest of the leg. The daughter asked, Why do we cut the end off the leg like that?

The mother replied that that was how her mother taught her to do it. So the young woman went to grandma and asked the same question: why cut the end off the leg?

Grandma said, "that is how my mother taught me to do it."

So the young lady went to great grandma and asked the same question, why cut the end off the leg of lamb?

Great-grandma smiled and said, “when we came from the old country we did not have a big enough pan, so I always cut the end off to make it fit.”

Traditions have meaning for us. I think of the traditions we have in our family for holidays, for gatherings and for day to day life.

Saying grace is a good example.

We said grace when I was growing up, and it became a tradition in our house as we had children. Recently Jodi and I went out for pizza with our kids and with little Walker. We held hands and said grace and we all said “amen”. Walker thought this was great and every so often he would grab the hands next to him and said “amen”.

Now, every time we eat together he wants to hold hands and say “amen”. We need to say it several times during the meal. Does he know what this means? Does he understand what we are doing? No, but he knows it is something we do, and he wants to join in with us. If children don’t learn these traditions by attending church services, praying before meals and bed time, they may not develop a close connection to their faith.

There are also traditions within the church.

We have a service at 7 pm on Christmas Eve every year. If I were ever to say we were not going to have that service, I’d probably be sent packing, because that is a tradition, a deep rooted tradition. In the same way, the Christmas carols in the New Century Hymnal changed the familiar words of the songs, this is difficult for many people, because it breaks tradition.

Unfortunately, the reality is that many children today do not know these songs the way prior generations did; we are not passing our traditions down in the same way today as was once done.

The thing about traditions is that they are always changing and adjusting.

The great grand daughter with the leg of lamb, once she found the reason for the tradition may, as she teaches her children the tradition, alter the tradition. She may have a big enough pan for the whole leg, and, rather than cut the end off, she starts a tradition of telling great-grandma’s story each Easter to keep the tradition alive.

When I read the old histories of churches, I find that many of the things that people think have always been done are not so old. When we talked about changing the time of Sunday school to be before the service a few years ago, some said, “we never did it that way before.”

The reality is that for the first 100 years that this church existed, there was no Sunday school at all. And for many years the Sunday school met at a time other than during worship. There are some who still remember that time.

So traditions serve to hold a community together, and living with traditions helps draw us closer as a community, as a family.

We are also called to learn about our faith. Faith, seeking understanding and knowledge, is called theology, the study of the God.

We learn that Jesus was fully human, and fully divine, we learn about the Trinity, we learn about salvation and justification and the power of Grace. We learn the Lord's Prayer, the Gloria, the Doxology. We learn that humans were created in the image of the Creator.

We can learn all about these things the scripture, the history, the traditions, the theology of being Christian, but none of these completes the process of learning. That comes as we take all those pieces and learn to live in communion with God through Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. We experience this as our life of prayer.

We learn the prayers of the church and we also learn to pray, to speak to God. That is when faith really begins to come to life, as we speak with God, as we learn to lean into our faith through prayer.

That is the goal of all the other stuff of the church is to help us develop the faith to speak to God who is closer to us than our breathing.

Returning to God in prayer on a regular basis changes us. Praying several times a day, we develop the spiritual muscle to withstand the blasts of life. If your prayer life is rich and a roadblock appears in your path, you will call on God to help. When challenges arise do you find your first thought to be of God?

I have been with a number of people at the end of life, and the ones who were least afraid were the ones who thought first to call on God. When they had difficulty they turned first to God. Their foundation was strong and unshakable.

All of this helps us to develop spiritually, and that is what God is seeking, a deep and abiding place in our lives.

Jesus says, "I am the Way", my way is the Way to live, the Way of life.

This is what we come here to learn.

Jesus said to his disciples, see the amazing things I have done? You will do far greater things. The only way to do that is by learning what we need to know to follow Jesus' way, his way needs to become our way. That is a life-long endeavor of learning in our heads and hearts.

The church is where we come to live and learn our faith. This brings us closer to the glory of God.

We have seen Jesus and we know him and it is through him that we come to know God.

In a world filled with rabid atheism, secularism, relativism and greed, we need to be sure we are learning the lessons of Christ. You don't need to learn Greek to study the Bible, you don't need to attend mind numbing seminary classes to learn theology, you don't even need to know the names of all 23 pastors of First Church, but if you wish to follow Jesus there are things to learn. That process does not end this side of glory, we will always find new things to learn, but the journey is richer for learning something new every day.

We look to our public schools to prepare our youth for life in this world, we also need a spiritual foundation to live in this challenging world. We find that in Jesus Christ and in the Church

Next week we will continue with diaconia.

Thanks be to God.
AMEN.