

**FONTHILL UNITED CHURCH** | Scripture & Story  
Sunday July 26, 2020 ~ 8<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost

*I have been thinking about three things this week, and have written a story for you this week as a result.*

*The first thing I have been thinking about is how the COVID19 pandemic is teaching us and rewarding us for saying no. Now I know that there are things that we need to say 'no' to right now, but I worry that 'saying no,' can easily become a habit, and this worries me, because I think for the most part that it is saying yes that leads us to Christ and true transformation.*

*The second thing that I have been thinking about, as you all know from recent sermons, is the concept of systems and how to change a system. Last week I talked to you about how one small change can perhaps change everything. I have been thinking that perhaps an illustration of this process might be useful for everyone. What does a small positive change really look like?*

*The third thing that I have been thinking of this week, is a poem by ee cummings entitled, "I Thank you God for Most this Amazing." Former United Church Moderator Gary Patterson often used to reference this poem when he preached. The poem explores God's invitation to each of us, and how the way that we respond can make all the difference. Paul's writing from Romans today and the Parable of the Wheat and the Tares, are all about choosing to say yes. As I was thinking about this poem this week, and our scripture, I discovered a posting on a blog called 'Watermelon,' written by a very sick woman concerning this poem. It indicated in some specific ways that saying 'yes' instead of saying 'no,' can change everything.*

**1<sup>st</sup> LESSON:** Romans 8: 26-39 (NRSV)

Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose. For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn within a large family. And those whom he predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified.

What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else? Who will bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us. Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written,

*"For your sake we are being killed all day long;  
we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered."*

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

## 2<sup>nd</sup> LESSON: Matthew 13: 24-30, 36-43

He put before them another parable: “The kingdom of heaven may be compared to someone who sowed good seed in his field; but while everybody was asleep, an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and then went away. So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared as well. And the slaves of the householder came and said to him, ‘Master, did you not sow good seed in your field? Where, then, did these weeds come from?’ He answered, ‘An enemy has done this.’ The slaves said to him, ‘Then do you want us to go and gather them?’ But he replied, ‘No; for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them. Let both of them grow together until the harvest; and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, Collect the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn.’”

Then he left the crowds and went into the house. And his disciples approached him, saying, “Explain to us the parable of the weeds of the field.” He answered, “The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man; the field is the world, and the good seed are the children of the kingdom; the weeds are the children of the evil one, and the enemy who sowed them is the devil; the harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are angels. Just as the weeds are collected and burned up with fire, so will it be at the end of the age. The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will collect out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all evildoers, and they will throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. Let anyone with ears listen!”

### REFLECTION: “Systemic Goodness”

Another day.

Beatrice shuffles into her messy kitchen. She pushes the dirty dishes aside to clear the space she needs to make coffee and to sit down to eat at her kitchen table. She sits for breakfast. The coffee tastes like crap. It tastes like the same crap Beatrice has drunk for the past seventy-five years.

“Good to the last drop,” Beatrice mutters, stirring in her usual milk and sugar, “Good enough until my last drop!”

Beatrice peers at the Rice Crispies in her bowl. There is nothing snap, crackly, or poppy about them.

She squints at the label on the cereal box.

No genetically modified ingredients.

No gluten.

No artificial sweeteners.

No additives.

Beatrice brings the spoon to her mouth.

“No taste,” she declares, spitting everything out. “That’s why it’s just mush. That’s why it tastes like crap.”

Beatrice decides that she is sick of drinking crappy coffee and mushy cereal.

She pours the cereal and the coffee into the kitchen sink, turns on the radio and sits back down at her kitchen table.

Beatrice listens to the news. There is more bad news about COVID19. There is more ridiculousness about Donald Trump. There are riots in the streets of some major North American cities. A woman is interviewed. Beatrice is not sure what exactly she is talking about, but she can hear the whine in the woman’s voice.

“I’m sick of everyone whining,” Beatrice decides. She turns the radio off abruptly.

Beatrice sits in the morning sunshine.

She just sits.

She listens to the grandfather clock strike 9 and then 10.

When it strikes 11, Beatrice decides that the sound of it is irritating. She rouses herself from her chair, marches to her hallway, opens the cabinet housing the pendulum, and stills it.

Beatrice walks into her living room and sits down in one of her chairs. “It’s not as if anything ever happens,” she says to herself, “There’s no need to have that clock playing Westminster every useless, meaningless hour of my existence.”

Beatrice sits in her living room. She sits in her anger. She sits in her fear. She sits in her sorrow. She sits in her anxiety. She stew. She glances at the books and magazines her daughter has brought for her, to help her pass the time.

Beatrice snatches one up. It’s a book of poems. She remembers vaguely that there was a time when she used to like poems. She recognizes a poet as she flips through the book; ee cummings. She reads a few lines of one of his poems:

*i thank You God for most this amazing  
day: for the leaping greenly spirits of trees  
and a blue true dream of sky; and for everything  
which is natural which is infinite which is yes*

Beatrice glances out the window. It looks into the neighbour’s backyard -- the backyard of the neighbours she hates: the people with all the tattoos, always smoking and drinking; the people with the motorcycles, and she is sure, all the drugs. Beatrice just knows that people with all those tattoos have to be drug addicts. And not just pot. Heroin! And they have to be dealers. Beatrice is sure they are dealers. She is sure they are dangerous. This morning the backyard is empty – a wasteland of dried grass, weeds, empty beer bottles, and cigarette butts, and – Beatrice is sure – syringes. She closes her drapes angrily. Beatrice’s living room becomes a penumbra.

Cumming’s “*Leaping greenly spirits of tress and a blue true dream of sky*,” are words that Beatrice rejects. “I bet he was a hippie,” Beatrice pronounces, “I bet he did even more drugs than my neighbours. I bet he had tattoos. I don’t need to read a poem written by a beatnik.”

Beatrice sits in the darkness. She senses that she is hungry. She is starting to feel light-headed. She realizes that she should probably go and check her insulin levels.

“What’s the use,” she rules, “I can inject myself with all the insulin in the world, but I will still be an old decrepit lady with diabetes.”

Beatrice stays in the gloom of her living room, dozing off and on until the mid-afternoon when her phone rings. It’s her daughter.

“Hi Mom,” says her daughter.

“Hi Gloria,” says Beatrice dryly.

“How is your day?” asks Gloria, her voice hopeful.

“Same as every other day,” says Beatrice.

“Oh,” says Gloria, her voice sinking, “What are you doing?”

“Nothing, absolutely nothing,” says Beatrice, “Just like every other day of my life.”

“Oh, come on Mom, you know that’s not true,” says Gloria, “You used to march for women’s rights, you burned your bra in front of city hall, you lobbied the government for equal pay for equal work.”

“Fat lot of good that did me,” says Beatrice.

There is an awkward pause on the line.

“Mom, do you need me to come over?” asks Gloria gently.

“No,” says Beatrice, “I’m the mother here. I don’t need my daughter wheedling to me on the phone about coming over and trying to tell me how to think and how to change my life. What do you know about life?”

“I just think. . . “

“I don’t want to know what you think. . . .”

“Mom?”

“Yes.”

“You always say no. When was the last time you said yes?”

“I just said yes!”

“I don’t mean that. I mean said yes to something -- decided to do something -- to embrace anything -- to get on board.”

“The only train I’m on board with is the train to the graveyard. Trust me, I know; there is nothing else for me to say yes too.”

“Sure there is Mom.”

“Tell me that when you are in your seventies and sick and dying and lonely, living in a big old house with tattooed bikers selling drugs out of the house next door. People coming and going all hours of the day and night. None of them wearing masks. I can’t even leave the house safely. What do want me to do, die of COVID19?”

“Sure you don’t want me to come over?”

“I am sure. Definitely sure. In fact I don’t want you telephoning me.”

Beatrice slams the phone down.

“Telling me to say yes!” she explodes, “Yes just leads to pain. Trouble. Inconvenience.”

And yet, Beatrice’s daughter’s words stay with her. Beatrice wonders when the last time she said yes actually took place.

She remembers the time she said “I do,” in front of the minister, wearing her white dress, her husband Hank in his military uniform, his smile so strong and gentle and fragile, their mothers weeping in the front pews, the smell of the pale cream roses trembling in her hand, the taste and sting of salt, and the joy of finally being able to say those two words, “I do,” and of leaping into the unknown.

That “I do,” had been worth it. Her daughter might be a royal pain now, but she and Hank had made her and her daughter together. That “yes” had been worth it.

“See, I don’t always say no,” Beatrice insists, conjuring up her absent daughter and the ghost of her husband, “I have said yes.”

Beatrice glances down at the book open before her, and looks again at the poem. She can’t see the words very well, so she gets up, goes to her bedroom and puts on her glasses. Things suddenly seem so much clearer.

There seems to be a commentary on the poem, written by a woman with cancer on the page opposite the poem.

*“And so you are wondering: can I taste now too? And yes, I can. I taste-tested with a few fresh raspberries. Eating them slowly and enjoying every sensation.*

*And, after my vanilla coffee with real maple sugar (now also tasting good) I made myself an egg-white omelette with mushrooms, cherry tomatoes, rosemary, spinach, mushroom, grated Parmesan and a scrawl of sriracha. On a red plate. Mmmmmmmmmmm!!! Which I ate slowly and pleurably: stopping because just full enough, while there were still several large bites left.”*

“Humph,” proclaims Beatrice, “Probably written by one of ee cummings’ beatnik, drug addict, groupie girlfriends.”

And yet, and yet.

The cummings poem has a part which says,  
*how should tasting touching hearing seeing  
breathing any—lifted from the no  
of all nothing—human merely being  
doubt unimaginable You?*

Beatrice admits that she spends a lot of time saying no to things she does not like, and that saying no means that she tastes, touches, hears and sees and breathes nothing.

“When was the last time I enjoyed anything?” she asks herself.

Strawberries.

Beatrice suddenly remembers that her daughter recently brought her some strawberries. She remembers that she likes strawberries. And she remembers that there is a can of real maple syrup in the cupboard somewhere. And that there are some eggs in the fridge, and a can of parmesan cheese, and that there is some fresh basil growing in a pot on the deck -- another gift from her daughter.

And so, Beatrice gets up and opens the kitchen door to her deck to collect some basil. The deck does not look onto her neighbours’ garden. It looks onto the golf course. Beatrice watches a group of young people trying to chip in from the rough. She hears them laughing. She smiles. Beatrice remembers how one of the reasons she and Hank bought this place was precisely because of how much they loved golf.

One of the golfers waves at Beatrice.

Beatrice waves back.

Beatrice leaves the kitchen door open and lets the fresh air into her kitchen.

She turns on the radio. She remembers that there is a station that plays the music she loves – the music that she and Frank loved so much – she fiddles around with the dial and tries to find it.

When she does, Ella and Louis are “*Stompin’ at the Savoy.*”

Beatrice busies herself with her omelet and coffee. This time she makes her coffee in the Moka Pot she and Hank bought on one of their trips to Italy. She finds a grapefruit, cuts it in half and puts a maraschino cherry in the middle of it.

“I’m so old-fashioned,” she says to herself gleefully, “no one puts a maraschino cherry on their grapefruit anymore.

She puts a piece of toast in the toaster.

“Perhaps a change in routine is all I need,” she hopes.

She sweetens her coffee with the maple syrup.

Beatrice sits down and slowly eats her breakfast, tasting everything as if it is the first time.

“Delicious,” she says to herself.

Perhaps it is the sugar, and an upswing in her insulin, but forty-five minutes later, Beatrice rises, and rings up her daughter.

“So I am going to say ‘Yes,’” she says, “Are you satisfied? Yes! Come over. Bring one of those roasted chicken from Food Basics. We’ll have roast chicken for dinner. I feel like a roast chicken.”

Beatrice washes the dishes that are stacked up in her kitchen. If she is going to have a guest for dinner, she realizes that the place better be neater than it is. As she does so, she looks out of the window over her sink, into the backyard of the bikers. There is a little boy just out of diapers

playing all by himself. Beatrice watches him putting mud in a big yellow Tonka Toy dump truck. She sees that he is gloriously and wonderfully dirty, having the time of his life.

Beatrice waves at the little boy.

The little boy sticks his tongue out at her.

Beatrice laughs and sticks her tongue out at him. “Back at ya!” she cackles.

The boy laughs with her.

Beatrice decides that she needs to make this boy some cookies. Now that she has this kitchen cleaned up suddenly everything seem possible.

She prepares vegetables for dinner. She sets the table. She rummages around for some candles. She catches a glimpse of herself in a mirror – an old lady in dirty pajamas and a ratty pink nightgown.

Beatrice goes to her bedroom, chooses some clothes she likes and then has a shower.

Freshly dressed and made up, she walks to the living room, stopping in the hallway, bending down in front of the grandfather clock. Beatrice sets the hour and minute hand. She sets the pendulum back in motion.

In the living room, Beatrice opens the drapes. Beatrice sits. She anticipates her daughter’s coming visit. She reads some more of her poem and the sick woman’s commentary. She decides that she likes it, even though she is pretty sure the sick woman is a crazy beatnik, hippie.

*One more day of antibiotics left and I'm not 100% but feel miraculously improved. My spirit is leaping greenly with the tiny fan shaped ginkgo leaves opening against the blue sky.*

*Yes, I am optimistic that this episode of illness and sensory deprivation will only make me more attuned to the pleasurable principles of intuitive eating and movement. . . and every other pleasurable experience which surrounds me in such abundance. Everything which is natural which is infinite which is yes.*

“Maybe my daughter is right,” wonders Beatrice, “Maybe it is time to start saying yes.” In ee cummings’ poem, it is clear that for the poet, saying yes makes “*the ears of our ears awake and the eyes of our eyes open.*”

“*Everything which is natural which is infinite which is yes,*” writes the sick woman.

Certainly, as Beatrice sits in her living room, listening to the ticking of her grandfather clock, neatly dressed, her kitchen clean, her table set for dinner, listening to her favorite old songs on the radio, enjoying a new book of poetry, the sun streaming pleasantly through her living room window, waiting for her daughter to arrive, Beatrice realizes that yes has made all the difference, at least today.

“I still think that ee cummings is a hippie,” she grumbles, but as she reads his poem some more and considers its words:

*(i who have died am alive again today,  
and this is the sun's birthday; this is the birth  
day of life and love and wings and of the gay  
great happening illimitably earth)*

Beatrice decides that perhaps, without any doubt, she can say yes to that!

~ Here ends this story ~

In case you want to read the whole poem by ee cummings, here it is. Cummings wrote it in 1950. Beatrice is correct -- he was definitely a beatnik.

*i thank You God for most this amazing*

*day: for the leaping greenly spirits of trees  
and a blue true dream of sky; and for everything  
which is natural which is infinite which is yes  
(i who have died am alive again today,  
and this is the sun's birthday; this is the birth  
day of life and of love and wings: and of the gay  
great happening illimitably earth)  
how should tasting touching hearing seeing  
breathing any—lifted from the no  
of all nothing—human merely being  
doubt unimaginable You?  
(now the ears of my ears awake and  
now the eyes of my eyes are opened)*