

Looking Back
Rev. Ken Read-Brown
First Parish in Hingham (Old Ship Church)
Unitarian Universalist
May 22, 2022

Reading

Matthew 25:34-40

Then the king will say to those at his right hand, “Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me. Then the righteous will answer him “Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you? And the king will answer them, “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.”

Sermon

As some of you know, when I arrived here at Old Ship in 1987, I discovered, thanks to genealogical research that my Great-Aunt Helen had done years and years ago, that I was a descendant of the first minister of our congregation, Peter Hobart.

Well, this seemed very cool indeed – even though Peter and his wife Elizabeth likely now have thousands and thousands of descendants. But in any case pretty cool to be Peter’s successor as well as his descendant.

And it *is* pretty cool. But as the years have passed, I’ve realized – as I should have right from the start – that it is a mixed blessing. For Peter was not only a fine leader of this Hingham settlement and congregation in what was for them a challenging new world... he was among those who had – though with good intentions as his early talks make clear – supplanted, to put it mildly, the people who had made this land home for generation upon generation; Peter Hobart and the other colonists had in short taken the land of the Massachusetts people with a seriously misplaced sense of divine calling.

We survey a mixed history here in Hingham as anywhere, here where not only the initial land-taking, but also slavery and white supremacy are part of our story. Yet history is always mixed, is it not? Whether the history of our nation or the history of a congregation or our personal history. Yet though we cannot change the past, we can indeed change how we are in the present, which in turn will affect how the future unfolds. This is, I believe, what our congregation has strived to do, generation to generation, including during this past generation that I’ve shared with you here.

And though it has been for not even ten percent of the life of our congregation... even so, a lot can happen in thirty-five years – which is, after all, a good chunk of most of our lives, half of mine.

Pondering all this... the other day I pulled from one of my desk drawers a directory of Old Ship members and friends from 1988 (the year Mike Dukakis lost his bid to be president, the year before the fall of the Berlin Wall, a year when gas cost about a dollar a gallon).

Well, it was a moving experience to turn the pages of that directory, particularly moving to see the names of so many who have died since then. Early in the directory, for example, were the names of Katharine and Wilmon Brewer. At the time already in or near their 90s, they had been married here in our Old Ship Meeting House in 1918. Well, before too many of my early years here had passed, I had officiated at Katharine's and later at Wilmon's memorial services – just two of the almost four hundred memorials at which I've officiated during these years for members and friends of Old Ship – including many of your dear ones – as well as for others who, with no church of their own, came here for solace and healing that we could offer.

And all of their lives still in some sense echo here amidst these posts and beams.

As for the Old Ship folks who are gone, I can still picture where they sat – the Brewers over there, Ellen and Karcher Blaser back there, Ed and Jan Colby over there, Percy Lee over there, Alice and Ware Williams right up front... Alice sometimes nudging Ware awake.

There are so many more, I surely won't name them all – the pews are filled with their presence!

And that we are here now (yes with challenges, but what generation is without challenges), is because they – including some of you long-time members – were here then... following a dozen or so previous generations of folks dedicated to the health and well-being of this congregation. Dedicated because they, like us, believed that communities of faith and love such as ours can change lives, can inspire kindness, can inspire work for justice and peace... because they, like us, affirmed that it mattered then as it matters now that we are here, keeping the light of our free faith burning brightly for ourselves and for the wider world.

Now, I can measure my years here in such things as numbers of memorial services, or in the five hundred weddings, almost three hundred child dedications... not to mention about a thousand sermons... along with innumerable meetings and classes.

But numbers don't tell stories.

Stories of the lives of each family in mourning, each couple about to marry, each parent preparing to celebrate the new life of their child, stories shared during coffee hours or potlucks or classes or during counselling in times of crisis.

Believe me, I feel the privilege and blessing of all this. Just as I feel the privilege to have been part of the larger story we share of this First Parish in Hingham, Old Ship Church, our congregation – however mixed the history.

As for my part in that story: When I arrived in 1987 our congregation was poised to grow in numbers, had already begun to grow during the two years of interim ministry that preceded my arrival. You see our nation's turbulent years of the 1960s had been turbulent here

also, resulting in decreasing numbers. Today is not the occasion for those stories, which some of you know firsthand. But my immediate settled predecessor, Ken LaFleur, who served from 1972-1985, brought his calming presence and extraordinarily fine preaching to Old Ship, laying the groundwork for the era of growth that came next, after two good years of interim ministry from Jon Luopa and then Wayne Shutee.

In short, I was most fortunate to arrive when I did, which also happened to be just a year after Diane Elliott had become our wonderful Director of Religious Education, eventually serving for nine years. Together we rode and did our best to encourage a wonderful wave of growth.

But numbers in pews or religious education classes too are by no means the whole story of our or any church, not even the most important part of the story.

When, for example, it comes to religious education, we know we've done something right when we hear the inspiring faith statements of our Coming of Age youth (as we will again next week). What a gift to the world are those dozens of young people who've come through that program over the past generation.

We know we've done something right when our shared work in the mid-1990s to become a congregation welcoming to, as we put it then, gay, lesbian, and bisexual people, good in itself, and also resulting in our activism in regard to equal marriage and then in the celebration here of a dozen or so same sex weddings in just the first months of legalization.

We know we've done something right when we have been able to generate the funds to make our buildings fully accessible as we did about twenty or so years ago.

Historians will know we've done something right when they see that we were able to raise almost a million dollars to restore this old Meeting House, a National Historic Landmark, as we did during our shared ministry – shoring up beams, repairing dangerously damaged ceiling plaster and replacing a dangerously outdated electrical system.

Musicians will know our generation did something right when they play the beautiful digital organ that required generous gifts in order to replace the old, deteriorating pipe organ.

Social justice activists will know we've done something right, not only in regard to our Welcoming Congregation and equal marriage activism, but also when they read in our annual reports of the evolution and growth of our social service, social justice, anti-racism, and climate justice work – including our certification as a Green Sanctuary congregation.

And I sure hope that future generations will see that we did something right when we build a new parish house that is net zero when it comes to carbon emissions, a new parish house that will have helped our congregation to renew and meet the needs of generations beyond our own.

Look, I'm not suggesting we have been perfect as a congregation – there is no such thing. Did we – did I – rise to every occasion to speak for justice? Did we – did I – meet every pastoral need, help every one of those among us who needed help in hard times? Did we, together, make perfectly wise financial decisions along the way?

No to all these questions, of course not, however much we might wish it were so.

But did we always act in good faith and with best intentions? Of that I am certain, because I know you: Yes.

Which brings me, to conclude, to the spirit of our reading from the gospel today. May we never doubt that when we act with kindness and a good heart to help another, to bless another... we are doing the work we are meant to do – whether we call it God’s work or simply the work of love... and we are already entering what Jesus called the kingdom of heaven, right here, right now, with the kind word or helpful deed.

One more personal word. As you know and as I reaffirmed last week, my mantra from the beginning of my ministry has been to affirm the life-changing potential of “conversations about things that matter” – wherever and whenever those conversations take place.

I know that such conversations here at Old Ship have enriched my life. I hope they have enriched yours – conversations to nourish our spirits, feed our souls, and inspire our hands in this journey of interwoven joy and sorrow that we call life.

It is a privilege, I’ll use that word again, to have shared and to share for a while longer these conversations with you, the dear people of First Parish Old Ship Church, Unitarian Universalist.

Amen. Blessed be.

Closing Reading

by Rev. Barbara Pescan

Because of those who came before, we are;
in spite of their failings, we believe;
because of, and in spite of the horizons of their vision,
We, too, dream.

Let us remember to praise,
to live in the moment,
to love mightily,
to bow to the mystery.