

Peace United Church of Christ  
October 10, 2021  
Stewardship Sunday  
Rev. Charlotte Frantz

### Rooted in Love

Texts: Isaiah 61: 1-4 and Romans 15:13-14

What a year we! What a miracle that we are gathered here and can look forward with hope and confidence. At this moment, being church isn't easy. The specter of the pandemic is still very much with us. Any plans we make have a caveat attached, "we will do thus and so, depending, of course, on co-vid."

The virus' damage has been more than physical illness. It's made us so much more aware of our own mortality; it's made us more protective of our children and grandchildren; it's isolated us much longer than we expected. It's exhausted many of us. In some ways we are in a much more difficult place than a year ago. A year ago, we were under emergency orders. Congregations closed their buildings. The steps we took were difficult, but we managed. We offered worship on line. We found new ways to connect to each other. We maintained many of our ministries in the community.—All these efforts demanded creativity and a fast learning curve—but there was clarity about what we needed to do.

That clarity that is missing now. As recently as mid-summer, we harbored hopes that we would soon resume something that resembled our pre-pandemic congregational life. Now we realize there will not be such a return. Post pandemic life in a congregation-not just this congregation, but in most mainline congregations- is going to be different. We're not sure how, but this truth is dawning—we will not go back to what once was. The pandemic has moved us forward into something new, and we don't know yet what that looks like.

To quote the song the choir sang at the beginning of this service, "Oh, the storms may howl and the wind may blow."

In the midst of this pandemic year, we here at Peace experienced another congregational trauma—a major shift in leadership. Kathy's retirement and the subsequent experience with an interim whose time with us was very short contributed to that trauma. There were numerous other changes as well. Some staff left and those who are here have taken on new or different responsibilities. The Co-ordinating Council membership changed; the roles of the Council and the Human Resources Committee

were adjusted. A newly formed Pastoral Relations Committee is figuring out their role. An additional Search Committee was unexpectedly called into being.

We've experienced an exceptionally large amount of organizational change in a short period of time. Some of it is expected change and some of it we had anticipated for some time. But our knowledge did not lessen the impact. Such a cumulative amount of change can sap a congregation's vitality and erode its sense of mission. Many congregations turn in and focus on themselves as folks begin to worry over the financial and emotional costs of change. I know because I've seen it happen. Some years back I was on the staff of the Iowa Conference, and my responsibilities included caring for congregations impacted by significant change. Many of them did not survive.

Oh, the storms may howl and the winds may blow.  
But we are like a tree that's planted by the water, grounded and rooted in God's love."

The image comes from Psalm 1, but that is not the only place where Biblical writers used the image of trees to describe lives deeply rooted in an awareness of God's steadfast love.

Stop and think for a moment about trees—trees in an arid landscape. You and I live in a land of plentiful trees. The Biblical landscape was quite different. Most of the Middle East is hot and dry. Trees are not plentiful as they are here. There are no forests or woods.

I lived in the hot, dry plains of eastern Montana for ten years. When you drive along Highway 2 you drive through flat desert like areas. From the highway you can see across miles—sometimes 2 or 3, and you know where the Missouri River is, because there in the distance is a line of trees. In the Biblical landscape, trees are rare, and they grow mostly along riverbanks.

Now listen to the words of the prophet Isaiah. "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me," the prophet wrote. "The Spirit of the Lord has anointed me to bring good news, to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty and release to the captives, to provide garlands of flowers for those who are sitting in ashes, to exchange funeral oils for oils that celebrates gladness; to dress those with timid spirits in capes of praise."

And, the prophet said, "Those who experience these gifts from me will be oaks of righteousness, a planting of God. They shall build up what has been destroyed and they will repair what has been ruined, even ruins that occurred generations before.

I don't think many people read this whole passage. We tend to remember those first verses which Jesus quoted when he went to his hometown synagogue. We tend to read them as if they are a charge given to us.

But I'm not so sure that's how the prophet meant for us to read this text. If you read the whole text, the Spirit of God is given in order that we might hear the good news, so that our hearts can be healed, so that we might be freed, so that the ashes of our regrets might be exchanged for fragrant flowers, so that our sadness can be turned to gladness, and praise for God's goodness can be our super-power. When we experience those blessings, we grow strong; we become like huge oak trees that can endure hurricane force winds—because we are rooted and grounded by these gifts of God's spirit.

In the face of change. In the midst of transition. Amid every uncertainty. Through every adversity. We stay strong because we remind each other that we are not left to face the storms alone. Even apart, we are together.

Last June I was asked to become a temporary part of your staff. I've had the opportunity to see Peace up close. We're not a perfect congregation. Not by any means. But we have found ways to be church even when we are apart. The Spirit of God has been active in us and through us. A cadre of folks sent cards to our elders and others isolated by the pandemic. Gudrun stayed in touch with folks who faced medical challenges or were living in long term care facilities. The tech team—Doug and Susan and Tim and Tyler and Alex along with the office staff made it possible for us to worship online, every Sunday. Our 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday Intergenerational events created opportunities for personal connection. The tent made possible outdoor gatherings for children, youth, and community groups.

Food and Fellowship recently figured out how to serve us outside. When we couldn't go to CHUM in person, the breakfast crew packed brown bag breakfasts. Thursday evening dinners were cooked in our kitchen and delivered to CHUM. The Gabriel project fed families. The Sanctuary Fund helped international students. We kept medical personnel and public health officials in our prayers.

Think of all the ways we've kept the fabric of our church and community life stable in a most unstable time. We are Peace strong. Our strength is rooted in God's continuing presence and care.

We are at a pivotal point in our life as a congregation. In less than two weeks Rev. Jim Mitulski will be here to serve as our interim pastor.

For many of us, his coming elicits a sense of relief. Finally someone who will be in charge. Someone to offer consistent guidance and direction. At the same time, our anticipation may be tinged with a bit of hesitancy. What will he be like? How well will he understand us? Will he respect our way of doing things? Those are natural questions.

I want to say this now—before he arrives. He is not coming to save us. He is not coming to rescue us from trouble. He is coming to join us in ministry. This week he said to some of us on staff, “I’m choose to come to Peace because you are a strong congregation. You have resources. You are resilient. A good many congregations are coming out of this time not sure of their future. You have a future and together we will find it.”

His words echoed Paul’s comment: “I myself feel confident about you, my brothers and sisters,” We are moving into a new chapter in the life of this congregation. We do not know what it holds, but we know that God’s spirit continues to hover over us and around us. Together, we will proclaim the good news, bind up the broken places, and open prison doors, Together, by the power of God’s spirit, we will transform regrets into garlands of flowers and the scent of gladness. God’s spirit works among us and through us so that we are strong and resilient, like oak trees. God’s own planting. May the God of hope fill us all with joy and peace as we plan for another year and consider the abundant resources we can share. Amen.