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From the Senior Pastor

One of the things that we most celebrate at The United Parish in Brookline is our diversity. We are young and old, Baptist, Methodist, or members of the United Church of Christ. We come from an amazing number of religious backgrounds and from no religious background at all. We are gay and straight, single and married, in committed relationships or not. We are a community made up of people of different races and ethnic backgrounds. It is this rich mix of people that makes us who we are.

At the same time, no matter what might make each of us unique, there is also that which we have in common. All of us experience transitions, change and growth. Our lives move from periods of calm and predictable to times of crisis and new challenges to periods of adjusting and adapting to new realities.

It is this very human movement – from equilibrium, to disequilibrium to new equilibrium – that we see expressed in the Book of Psalms. Walter Brueggemann talks about three kinds of psalms. The first are psalms of orientation – those prayers that emerge out of a season of well-being and express joy, delight, and gratitude. They are prayers of praise, thanksgiving and celebration of God's care and reliability. The second categories, psalms of disorientation, express the rage, resentment and anger that come out of seasons of hurt, suffering and death. They are frank expressions of despair and anguish. The third kind of psalm, psalms of *new* orientation, recognize the surprising ways that joy breaks through despair and new gifts from God break into difficult times. They express the amazement, wonder and gratitude that God has come through when all appeared lost.

The psalms are prayers of real people of faith struggling to maintain a relationship with God in the midst of life's ups and downs. No experience, no feeling, no doubt, no question is outside of the realm of what can be brought to God. They are examples of authentic prayer and the deep spirituality of the people who prayed them.

During Lent, our Sunday services will be lifting up a number of psalms for our reflection. A copy of the next Sunday's psalm will be inserted in the bulletin so that you can read and pray it before coming to church. We will be chanting or singing the psalm of the week and the sermon will focus on how we can connect its words to the living of our lives and the deepening of our prayer. At the same time, you are invited by the Vision 2 team to participate in reading a fuller selection of psalms independently. It is the hope of the team that this practice will help us to prepare to celebrate the resurrection more fully on Easter Sunday.

United Parish is a praying church. One of the four directions we are committed to is Deepening. Let's begin this adventure of reading, praying, singing and learning about the psalms with openness and anticipation. I think God will surprise us with the insights we will gain and the meaning we discover! *Shalom, Pat*

From Your Associate Pastor



Our hope is not deceptive. The love of God has been poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit that has been given to us. (Romans 5:5)

As Paul asserts, grounding our hope in God is trustworthy, since the Living Spirit has been extravagantly poured out among us. Such wisdom is worth remembering during this time of transition at United Parish! Although desired outcomes can sometimes feel slow in coming, our congregation IS already shifting into our discerned vision (*The 4 Directions*). The “Deepening” Direction has organically emerged as Stage 1 in the implementation plan; it serves as a preparatory step in the process of our growth. In strengthening our relationship with God and each other, we will find new energy and imagination as we seek to bring the other “Directions” more fully to life.

Our prime conduit for “deepening,” as churches across the country have discovered, is through Small Groups. Our beta program of Small Groups at UP has offered us an opportunity to gather for fellowship, learning, and practicing our faith. Themes of our Small Groups so far:

Phase 1: **Discernment** (Feb-March 2009)

Phase 2: **Spiritual Practices** (Advent 2009)

NEW! Phase 3: **Resurrection** (Lent 2010beginning Feb. 28th)

The thematic arc of these groups is evolutionary. That is, the first two programs established a foundation, while our third offering—the Lenten Small Group program, which begins this month—offers something new. These Small Groups in Lent are built upon an exciting new format, utilizing the very principles of the new model of ministry we are exploring as a church. That is, instead of staff selecting a uniform curriculum and then asking for volunteers to teach it (“fill the slot” nominating mentality), we are guided by the spiritual concept of “call.” Called leaders are building small group offerings around their own prayerful sense of passion, gifts, and the Spirit’s leading. Although unified around the Lenten focus of resurrection, the exploration of this theme will be diverse.

A few examples:

Finding Your Monastery in the World

Have you always wondered what the holy people in monasteries and convents do all day? Have you heard of the Rule of St. Benedict and been curious about what a Rule of Life might look like for you? Are you interested in fixed-time prayer and what Lauds and Vespers are all about? Did it ever occur to you that some of the practices and habits of those who have separated themselves from the world might enrich and center those of us whose frenetic lives are lived very much “in the world?” Come and explore what the wisdom of the monastic way of life might have to say to you! Led by Rev. Pat Coughlin.

Power(ful) Poems for Easter People

How do great poets frame the same spiritual urgency that the gospels express, including those who are agnostic? This small group will look closely at four examples of verse which render the power of resurrection in different ways. No reading required ahead of time. Just come as you are, ready to explore with others how human words reach out for and describe the divine. Led by Lisa McElaney.

Watching for God

As our culture changes, new ways of experiencing the holy are emerging, with images and storytelling becoming more central. How might believers and seekers alike experience God’s presence beyond traditional words and creeds? This small group will explore the imaginative power of film & art (utilizing the spiritual practice of “*viso divina*”), as we deepen our awareness of Christ’s invitation to new life through emergent forms of discipleship. Led by Rev. Suzanne Bossert and Kate Common.

The Journey to Easter

In Advent, our small groups walked the road to Bethlehem. Now we're in another season of preparation. This Sunday evening group will walk the road to Jerusalem, preparing us—through prayer, Bible Study, and spiritual practice—for the transformation of becoming an Easter people. Led by Mike McConnell.

Other Small Groups will be offered as well! Logistical details:

- Lenten Small Groups will meet from Feb 28--March 26 (4 weeks),
- Final line-up of leaders, offerings, and timeslots will be announced at church and @ www.unitedparishbrookline.org
- Sign-ups will be held at church on Jan 31 and Feb 7. Additionally, you may sign up for a small group through email: contact Kathy Phenix @ phenix104@aol.com.

In addition to the Lenten Small Groups, you are invited into another “deepening” opportunity this winter: an individual and corporate Psalm prayer practice (see articles by Kathy Phenix and Pat Coughlin in this newsletter). Making room in our lives for the powerful experience of the season of Lent will truly prepare us for the glory of Easter. In these dark winter months, our ever-deepening life and vitality together as a parish is beloved light indeed.

Blessings,
Rev. Suzanne

→ gathering

↑ exalting

↓ deepening

← stretching

Update on Vision Team 2

Your VT2 continues to meet several times a month, working on ideas to bring our congregational core values & purpose to life. The team has been divided into sub-groups:

Gathering: focused on how we welcome visitors, how we sustain our life together as a community, outreach to Brookline, membership development, systems of communication, etc.

Deepening: focused on approaches to spiritual formation, including creating opportunities for individual and communal spiritual practices (primarily but not exclusively through Small Groups), etc.

Exalting: looking at how we worship and explore the Divine through worship, art, poetry

Stretching: exploring ways we might continue to reach out to our community and world through service. How could UP become a more accessible platform of ministry opportunities? How might we better support and develop lay leadership and discernment of individual callings (passion/gifts)?

5th Direction: studying (guided by professional consultants) ways to potentially create more fruitful “facilitating structures” for organizing our parish, to better focus resources around congregational purpose.

Each sub-group is seeking ways to integrate the vast wealth of ideas (generated in last year's congregational Vision Summit) into the life of UP. The sub-groups are aiming to create stepped/staged implementation strategies, which will be communicated in more detail at the next All-Parish meeting.

VT2 remains in prayer and spiritual discernment as a group, even as we continue to study what other churches are doing to address the “new era” of being a mainline church in today's 24/7 world. One interesting resource we are discussing is called “8 Qualities of Healthy Churches,” which can be found at: <http://www.petalumafirst.com/resources/ldrs/8Qualities.pdf>



An Ash Wednesday service will be held in the Sanctuary at 6:00 on February 17. Join us for a time of reflection and prayer as we begin this holy season.

Board of Outreach

Haitian Relief Efforts

The United Parish Board of Outreach has voted to provide \$2,000 to Partners in Health and \$1,000 to Mercy Corps for Haitian Relief efforts. We will be meeting on the 31st to review if we need to spend more and where. *American Red Cross has set up donations that can be made via texting the word "Haiti" to the number 90999. The \$10 is then added to the caller's next cell phone bill, with all proceeds going toward the relief efforts.

The Board of Outreach wants to thank everyone who responded to our recent survey. We got over 50 responses! We are in the process of analyzing the comments and hope to report the results in the next edition of the UP Newsletter.

At our December meeting we voted to make a donation to the Boston Chapter of Habitat for Humanity. The donation of \$1,000 will be matched dollar for dollar by a board member for the organization making the true impact of the contribution \$2,000!

We also voted to contribute \$1,000 for holiday gifts to the children of One Home Many Hopes, the program in Africa where UP member Anne Auerbach is currently stationed. *We encourage everyone to let us know of organizations that you would like to see UP support.*

Finally, we would acknowledge those members of the parish who were actively involved recently in outreach efforts, including the Thanksgiving Dinner in November, the Boston Homeless Census in December, the MLK Day in January and the on-going work at Sunday's Bread. *Bill Coughlin, Pat Burnett, Lisa Wong, Anne Fox Ayanian*



YOUTH CHOIR, CHORISTERS, AND CAROL CHOIR OUTREACH

CONCERT: February 7, 2pm: the youth choir and children's choirs will give an outreach concert at Sophia Snow retirement home. The singers and chaperones will have lunch (pizza, fruit, and crudités) together right after church, then head over at 1pm to Sophia Snow to prepare for a 2pm concert. This is such an important event as it gives us a chance to stretch beyond the church walls into the community and share our music! The concert last year was incredibly meaningful to all involved – AND a lot of fun.

LUX AETERNA CDs are HERE!-The recording that was made of the joint performances of Morten Lauridsen's *Lux Aeterna* at United Parish in Brookline and First Church in Cambridge is currently available for purchase for \$8 a copy. Last year's joint choir performance is also available for the same price. This year's CD also contains the sermons preached at United Parish on November 1 By Rev. Suzanne and at First Church on November 15. The CD was dedicated to the people who were named during the All Saints Service. If you would like one or both of these CDs, please contact Susan DeSelms at susandeselms@gmail.com, or talk to a choir member!

From the Board of Worship **Communion Preparation-** Would you like to help prepare the elements for communion on a first Sunday of the month some time this year? We are looking for more volunteers. Please contact Pat Howkinson at 781-393-9176 or howkinsonp@hotmail.com for more information. We are also looking for someone to coordinate communion preparation.

Tower Bells-Would you like to help announce the United Parish on Sunday mornings to the local community on the tower bells? We are looking for more ringers. Training on the special keyboard will be available. If you are interested, please call Pat Howkinson at 781-393-9176 or email at howkinsonp@hotmail.com

Fellowship Opportunities - There are now opportunities to volunteer at the United Parish. Time commitments vary from 10 minutes to 3 hours and can be done once, every week or something in between. Many of the activities are behind the scenes and some are not. Each and every activity is very important to the health and well-being of the United Parish community. Please contact Louise Bowler at 617-567-3130 or louisembowler@aol.com. Thank you.

Sunday's Bread –February 28th we will send a team of 5-6 people to set up, cook, serve and clean up a meal for about 100 guests at St. John the Evangelist on Beacon Hill. We leave UP at 12:00 and are there from 12:30-4:30; rides are arranged. Please see or call Pat Howkinson (781-393-9176) for more information.



The Thrift Shop hours are Fridays and Saturdays, 11:00am-4:00pm. There is a 50% off sale on all winter clothing.



the **directions**

* deepening * exalting * gathering * stretching *

“The Work of Christmas by an Easter People”

A message to the United Parish Congregation from Vision Team 2

Deepening your relationship with God, each other, and our community

The Work of Christmas by an Easter People

*“Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of
God in Christ Jesus for you.”* *1 Thessalonians 5:16-18*

These are the words of Paul found in his letter to the church in Thessalonica. We can think of this passage as guidance as to what will sustain us to do the “work of Christmas” we heard about in the worship service on Epiphany Sunday. To be the light of Christmas in the world, we need to pray without ceasing. **How is it possible to do that?**

The Advent small group program taught us several ways of deepening our spiritual practices – breath prayer, centering prayer, praying the hours, walking the labyrinth, lectio divina, guided meditation, and sharing with each other the road of our own personal spiritual journey. **So, what is next?**

Vision Team 2 is working on developing another small group program for Lent. But the challenge put to the Thessalonians and to us here in the United Parish is to “pray without ceasing” NOW. **So, let’s do it!**

Starting January 17th, and until Easter Day, on Sunday, April 4th, Vision Team 2 is inviting each member of the congregation to engage in personal spiritual deepening by Praying the Psalms. **What does this mean?**

Each day carve out a few minutes to use a Psalm as your prayer. Be creative in how you do this. You can:

- Read an entire Psalm silently or aloud to yourself
- Read an entire Psalm aloud to a friend or partner or family member
- Take a passage from a Psalm and make it into a breath prayer
- Find the essence of a Psalm and use this to be the name of God that you use in a centering prayer
- Draw a picture of the Psalm
- Sing the Psalm

Be creative and come up with other ways of approaching the Psalms in prayer. Do it one way one day and another way another day, but **do a new Psalm each day**. If you do one Psalm a day from Sunday, January 17th, through Sunday, April 4th, you will have gone through 78 Psalms and if you do two a day, you will have gone through all 150 Psalms.

Why the Psalms? Jesus, as a devout Jew, prayed the Psalms every day and went through the whole Psalter repeatedly. Jesus' disciples and the early church also prayed the Psalms repeatedly. They did so because the Psalms speak to various needs and emotions that we experience in our daily life. Prayers of gratitude, lament, confession, forgiveness, longing, fear, anger, praise, and more are contained in the Psalter. In other words, the Psalms are food for the soul.

How will we know if we've succeeded? Our hope is that by Praying the Psalms each of us becomes more aware of God's steadfast love, better able to communicate with God, more conscious of God's presence in our lives, and spiritually fed so that we might better discern our response to God's grace and love. To gain a sense of our commitment to this effort as a congregation, there will be a poster in the Marion Street Lobby where you can put a star next to the Psalms you read during the past week. Place your stars and let's see how many points of light we will have by Easter.

"Praying unceasingly" is possible – particularly when each of us takes a few minutes and we have an entire congregation working and praying together to become an Easter People.

So, join with other members of the congregation and take up the challenge, make music in your heart, and receive God's love.

"I will extol you, my God and King, and bless your name forever and ever. Every day I will bless you, and praise your name forever and ever. Great is the Lord, and greatly to be praised; God's greatness is unsearchable." Psalm 145:1-3

The Work of Christmas

When the song of the angels is stilled,
When the star in the sky is gone,
When the kings and princes are home,
When the shepherds are back with their flock,
The work of Christmas begins:
To find the lost,
To heal the broken,
To feed the hungry,
To release the prisoner,
To rebuild the nations,
To bring peace among brothers,
To make music in the heart.

By Howard Thurman