



First Congregational United Church of Christ

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Second Sunday of Christmas

January 2, 2022

We are delighted that you joined us today! We hope you will find us an affirming, uplifting, and committed family of faith. Here we work to make everyone, without any exceptions, to feel accepted, inspired, and encouraged in their spiritual journey. In dialogue, we seek to understand. In encouragement, we seek to heal. In all things we yearn to live by love, for peace, with joy. This is a place where your intellect will be challenged, your heart will be nurtured, and your spirit refreshed. Varying beliefs are expressed openly and freely, and your doubts will not be suppressed. We trust that we are all, every person and part of creation, continuing to be blessed by God's grace; and that in community we can help each other to see this grace alive in our lives and relationships. We hope to share our gifts with you, even as we pray that you will want to share your gifts with us. Whoever you are and wherever you may be in your life's journey, we invite you to be a part of our lives and our spiritual home. Welcome!

POINTS TO PONDER

“^{2,6}God will repay according to each one's deeds: ⁷to those who by patiently doing good seek for glory and honor and immortality, God will give eternal life; ⁸while for those who are self-seeking and who obey not the truth but wickedness, there will be wrath and fury.”

– *Romans 2.6-8*

“The cosmic law of karma, known to Hinduism and Buddhism, was applied to the divine in Judaism. What you put out into the universe, you will receive back from the universe. But by applying this cosmic law to a theistic deity, it becomes an intentional design and willful act of divinity towards humanity, and not simply an impartial universal rule or natural law the applies indiscriminately.

While this produces a plethora of problems when ‘God’ does not repay each according to their deeds, as we know is so often the case in real life, the impetus of applying karma to divine intention may further encourage a person not predisposed to doing good to do good simply to avoid the retribution and/or punishment of the divine for mortal sins.

Adding this ‘personal touch’ towards consequences for own’s actions can be scarier than if an impersonal force of the universe is ‘responsible’ for what happens to one based on one’s deeds. If, as is often the case, we don’t see the evidence of retribution in this life, then wayward ones may continue in their waywardness if negative consequences do not seem to accrue. Whereas if a ‘God’ is in charge of this, then while we may not receive the consequences in this life, we may nevertheless pay the price in a life to come – whether that be the Eastern idea of reincarnation, or the Middle Eastern idea of an afterlife.

Paul, however, may not wish to delve into these matters of what happens after we die in making this point. His emphasis seems to be that it is our ‘deeds’ and not our ‘beliefs’ that will determine our character, and thereby our destiny. Paul is addressing two groups of people, Jewish and Gentile, and wants to make clear to both of them that it is how they act that really matters; not their belief system about divinity.

Jews believed they were the ‘chosen people’ of their God and were allotted special privilege. God would be gracious to them because they believed in the ‘One True God,’ and paid this God homage; whereas they believed God would not be as gracious to those pagan Gentiles who did not believe in their God. Consequently, many Jews became hypocritical in thinking that while they may act in the same wrongful ways as Gentiles, their God would forgive them while punishing the non-believers.

It is a very tribalistic and immature type of faith that accentuates believing the right things over acting in the right ways. Paul, like Jesus, would have none of this. Both would declare that God is impartial. We are not granted special privilege in believing the right things if we don’t do the right deeds.

This pluralistic understanding of God opened the gospel up to Gentiles as well as Jews – making it less important what one’s ethnicity, nationality, or religious beliefs were, and more important what kind of virtues and character traits one lived by.

Paul, here, takes up Jesus’ inclusive message that applies to all peoples, not just Jews, by determining faithfulness by one’s deeds, not one’s belief system. We see the same division of religious thinking in our own time – where some focus on what beliefs we are to profess, and others on what practices we are to do. Jesus and Paul did away with the narrow-minded tribalism and conservatism of their day which presumed righteousness was determined by the ‘God’ one believed in and the proper knowledge of the law, and instead adopted an inclusive and pluralistic understanding of faithfulness determined by our deeds – i.e., our actions and practices in daily living.”

— *Rev. Bret S. Myers, 12/28/2021*

“⁹There will be anguish and distress for everyone who does evil, the Jew first and also the Greek, ¹⁰but glory and honor and peace for everyone who does good, the Jew first and also the Greek. ¹¹For God shows no partiality.”
— *Romans 2.9-11*

“Paul reiterates the emphasis on what we do, and not how we are religiously affiliated. Doing evil will result in ‘anguish and distress’ for those who do it, and it makes no difference what one’s religious faith may be. Some Jews of Paul’s day had come to think that their ‘laws’ made them more holy than those who had not heard of their laws.

And yet, the most basic ethical laws, such as the 10 Commandments, were widespread in the ancient world. The Code of Hammurabi preceded the 10 Commandments, and some version of them was adhered to by most civilizations of that time.

But the Jews had many other ‘laws’ which involved religious rituals and rites, and stipulations on what foods one could eat, what economic policies were legitimate, and so on. They came to see these ‘uniquenesses’ of

theirs as more important than the ethical commonalities they had with most people at that time. It allowed them to have a sense of superiority over others, even when they themselves were subordinate.

Paul shows the illegitimacy of these notions of superiority and privilege that some of his fellow Jews had, and proclaimed that the only thing that truly mattered is how we ethically interact with one another regardless of our religious heritage. He attests that the Jewish God abides by this same ethical emphasis, and shows no partiality for Jewish people because of their ethnicity, religious beliefs, or cultural uniqueness.

What matters to God is how we behave, not what we believe, Paul makes clear. God is not an impartial God. So whether one believes in God or not, what matters is that we are to live by the virtues and values that are not only typified by the Jewish God, but by the common ethical mandates known throughout the ancient world. Evil was commonly held by all peoples to consist of things like Paul had enumerated in the previous chapter.

Do we judge people based on their beliefs, or their ethics...their ethnicity, or their morality...the religious rituals they perform, or their deeds of love, justice, peace, and compassion? How does our answer to these questions affect how we view our relationships to others, and how we treat them? Which view is more likely to lead to prejudices, racism, and religious bigotry, and which view is more likely to lead to affirmation, inclusion, and open-mindedness? Which view will more likely lead to a sense of superiority and tribalism, and which will more likely lead to a sense of equality and oneness of all people?"

— *Rev. Bret S. Myers, 12/28/2021*

"¹²All who have sinned apart from the law will also perish apart from the law, and all who have sinned under the law will be judged by the law. ¹³For it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous in God's sight, but the doers of the law who will be justified."

— *Romans 2.12-13*

"Paul equivocates on the word, 'law,' here. While Jews claim that their set of 613 laws are the laws that one is to abide by, Paul, like Jesus, differentiates all the ritual laws that are unique to Jewish culture from the ethical ones that are universal among all cultures. It is the latter that both Paul and Jesus attest are most important. Jesus, we recall, readily broke Sabbath laws in order to fulfill the moral or ethical laws that God wants from us. Like the prophets before them, they deemphasized all the religious rituals and accentuated the ethical precepts that are held in esteem by all cultures.

Paul, here, is stating that anyone who violates the ethical laws, Jew or Gentile, will be judged and receive the consequences of one's violations. Jesus had summed up all 613 commandments in the Biblical texts as distilled in a general ethical law of how we treat others as we treat ourselves. This Golden Rule, was common in ancient societies, and was in no way unique to Judaism. And so that law of love is what is most important to follow, not all the pietistic measures that people too often place importance on so as to see themselves as better than others.

It is not those who hear the ritualistic laws of the Jews that are deemed righteous, but rather those who live by the universal law of loving-kindness, known to all traditions, that do the law as God would have us to do it.

In other words, it makes no difference if Hindus, Buddhists, Zoroastrians, Baal worshippers, adherents to the Roman pantheon, and those of all other faith traditions have heard and abide by the uniquely Jewish laws that so many Jews see as separating them from others, and making them special or chosen in God's sight. Rather it is those who treat each other lovingly, justly, peaceably, and compassionately that 'do' the law whether they have heard of the Jewish law or not. All are aware of the Golden Rule, and it is those who live by it, rather than just give it lip-service, that will be justified in the eyes of an impartial and just God.

This viewpoint erases any sense of cultural or religious superiority that any people may feel they have over others. Tribalism is eliminated for globalism; recognizing that we are all siblings of one another no matter our

ethnicity, nationality, religion, or culture. What matters, the only thing that really matters, is that we treat others as we ourselves would want to be treated, and don't treat anyone as we would not want to be treated. That is the universal law in which is known to all peoples. It is the only law that really matters, for by fulfilling it, all the other ethical precepts are also kept in how we relate to and treat one another.

And no matter what one's heritage may be, it is important to live by this universal law rather than only hearing it and claiming we believe in it without actually practicing it. All peoples, no matter who they are or where they are from, are to not simply be hearers of this law, but doers of it. We are all judged, without exclusion, by how our deeds stack up to the requirements of this law. And there is no partiality in which we are to be judged other than our deeds themselves. So, all who think they are better based on some criteria other than how they act are deceived. It is our deeds alone that matter to Paul, as for Jesus.”
— Rev. Bret S. Myers,
12/28/2021

“¹⁴When Gentiles, who do not possess the law, do instinctively what the law requires, these, though not having the law, are a law to themselves.”
— Romans 2.14

“Paul affirms that being knowledgeable about the law is not the same as abiding by the law. We may possess knowledge of the law without actually living in accordance with it. Likewise, we may have never studied the law, but instinctively act in accordance with what the universal law requires of us because we treat others lovingly, justly, peaceably, and compassionately.

When we do instinctively what the law requires of us, this means that we have spirit or character of the law within us. This is what it means to live in accordance with the virtues. One who does good out of duty, compulsion, coercion, or to receive reward or avoid punishment does not act instinctively, but through social prodding or personal will-power. But those who have developed a character or spirit of love, justice, peace, and compassion within themselves do not feel compelled to act good for some ulterior purpose or motive, but simply to do good for its own sake. This is what makes one truly good.

And one need not know what scholars know in order to so live. One simply has to be good. It is clear to the ancient mind that people from all backgrounds and walks of life and degrees of knowledge can be good people by how they act towards others. Paul affirms this common observation and refutes the more partial and privileged idea that only certain people, those who know or believe the right things, can be good. Jesus and Paul yearned for an egalitarian world based on people's behavior, not their belief system.

How often people formulate rules and principles that put them in privileged places and special status over others! This is not God's way. It is not in accordance with the impartial and universal law of love towards all, justice for all, peace among all, and compassion by all.”
— Rev. Bret S. Myers, 12/28/2021

“¹⁵They show that what the law requires is written on their hearts, to which their own conscience also bears witness; and their conflicting thoughts will accuse or perhaps excuse them ¹⁶on the day when, according to my gospel, God, through Jesus Christ, will judge the secret thoughts of all.”
— Romans 2.15-16

“Character is the law that is written on the heart. We act nobly because we are noble, not because we have something to gain or something to lose. When we act for selfish motives, our actions are not written on our hearts; but are done for ulterior purposes. No matter what one's religious faith may be, character is that aspect of our lives where we act in accordance to values that are universal to all. Ethnicity, nationality, gender, and other criterion do not determine character. Character has to be developed over time in accordance with the

values, laws, principles, and virtues that one inculcates in one's own being. People from any and all traditions can do this.

Paul is bearing testimony to this fact of human living that it is the individual person who is responsible for the character that they have; for what is written on their heart. Jews, Greeks, Romans, or any other gentiles may develop the universal law within themselves and practice it daily until it becomes their 2nd nature or instinct – i.e., what they do automatically, and not because they have weighed the pros and cons as it will affect them and their loved ones. They act to do what is right no matter the consequences; for when it is written on the heart, we don't stop to ask how we will be benefitted by our actions. We act good because it is good to do so, and for no other reason.

What is written on your heart? What will you do no matter whether it is a benefit or detriment to you? What do you do automatically or instinctively? And what do you do only when compelled by others or societal norms to do? Purity of heart is when we act virtuously for its own sake, counting neither our gain or loss in the deeds we do. And this purity of heart is not defined by our religious beliefs, our national identity, our cultural assumptions, our political affiliations, or our ethnic, gender, or sexual identity. We all choose what gets written on our hearts; and the way we choose is by the deeds we routinely and habitually do.”

— Rev. Bret S. Myers, 12/28/2021

CALLED TOGETHER AS SPIRITUAL FAMILY

Prelude

Welcome and Announcements

Barb Mardis

Affirming God's Presence in Us All

Welcoming the Light of Love in Our Midst

Barb Mardis

We prepare ourselves for communing with the sacred as love's light is brought into our awareness. The light of love burns within and among each of us, and we carry that light into our sanctuary; visually reminding us of the image of the divine that lives in our hearts, minds, and souls – and that we nourish through our faith-filled fellowship.

***Centering Our Souls**

Barb Mardis

O God of the years past, and the years to come:

We are thankful for your presence in all the times of our lives.

And we are grateful for your presence in the lives of others throughout the generations.

When we are content to only hear your word, prod instead to practice it.

When we are comfortable in thinking our beliefs are sufficient for faithfulness, wake us to seeing that we need also to turn our thoughts into deeds.

Expand our consciousness so that we are inclusive of all peoples and creatures on the earth as our equals.

Forbid that we ever think ourselves superior to others in worth, value, or the way we should be treated.

Remind us that you are not partial to us over others, and that we are not to consider ourselves as privileged in your sight.

Help us to develop within ourselves the traits of character that will be a blessing to others, both near and far.

In all things grant that we will be doers of your will, and not merely hearers. May it be so, now and always.

WE LISTEN FOR THE SACRED IN THE MIDST OF OUR LIVES

***Hymn for New Beginnings
A Time for All God's Children**

“In the Bulb There Is a Flower”

NCH #433
Abbie Chronister

Prayers

Sharing Our Joys and Concerns, and Acts of Compassion or Kindness

Silent Meditation: The Prayers of the People

Pastoral Prayer

The Prayer Jesus Taught (unison)

Barb Mardis

Father-Mother of the Cosmos, Shimmering Light of All: Focus your Light Within us, as we breathe Your Holy Breath. Enter the sanctuary of our hearts, uniting within us the sacred rays Of Your Power and Beauty. Let Your Heart's desire unite heaven and earth through our sacred union. On earth, as it is in heaven. Help us fulfill what lies within the circle of our lives today. Forgive our secret fears as we freely choose to forgive the secret fears of others. Let us not enter forgetfulness, tempted by false appearances. For from Your astonishing Fire comes the Eternal Song which sanctifies all, renewed eternally in our lives, and throughout all creation. We seal these words in our hearts, committed in trust and faith.-- *Translated directly from the Aramaic by Jon Marc Hammer*

Special Music

Kerri Mennenga

Scripture Lessons

Romans 2:6-16

Barb Mardis

^{2,6}For God will repay according to each one's deeds: ⁷to those who by patiently doing good seek for glory and honor and immortality, God will give eternal life; ⁸while for those who are self-seeking and who obey not the truth but wickedness, there will be wrath and fury. ⁹There will be anguish and distress for everyone who does evil, the Jew first and also the Greek, ¹⁰but glory and honor and peace for everyone who does good, the Jew first and also the Greek. ¹¹For God shows no partiality. ¹²All who have sinned apart from the law will also perish apart from the law, and all who have sinned under the law will be judged by the law. ¹³For it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous in God's sight, but the doers of the law who will be justified. ¹⁴When Gentiles, who do not possess the law, do instinctively what the law requires, these, though not having the law, are a law to themselves. ¹⁵They show that what the law requires is written on their hearts, to which their own conscience also bears witness; and their conflicting thoughts will accuse or perhaps excuse them ¹⁶on the day when, according to my gospel, God, through Jesus Christ, will judge the secret thoughts of all.

Message

“Doing, Not Hearing: A Faith Written on the Heart”

***Hymn for a New World Order**

“O for a World”

#575

WE AFFIRM & CELEBRATE OUR UNITY AS GOD'S CREATION

The Sacrament of Holy Communion

(As God calls all people to the table of forgiveness, peace, and loving fellowship, First Congregational UCC affirms an inclusive and open Communion Table. All persons (all ages, ethnicities, sexual orientations/ identities, disabilities, religious affiliations, and other distinguishing features) are welcome to partake of this sacrament which affirms that we are all part of God's family and are to commune together in sacred relationship. Love and peace are the uniting virtues of this spiritual meeting place. Therefore, all who wish to join in this ritual of unity are invited to do so providing that you do so in the spirit of peace and mutual love for one another.)

The Purpose of Holy Communion

Barb Mardis (bold print) & Rev. Bret Myers (reg. print)

God seeks to be in communion with us, and wills that we be in communion with one another. Through the Christ in Jesus, God drew closer to us by living among us with all the desires and temptations of being human, and showed us that we each have the power to overcome wrongdoing by the inspiration of our spiritual lives and the discipline of our physical lives; thereby effecting the Christ in us. Jesus represented the individual model of how we each can do this; and in calling to his side the disciples and followers in his way of love and peace, many of whom were ostracized by the wider society, he revealed how to model this in our community here on Earth.

Reminding us symbolically of this union of body and spirit, Jesus took a loaf of bread, broke it like we are often broken in our relationships with one another, and showed us the way to reconciliation by asking us to share our bread with one another in remembrance of his own example. Through the broken bread, we participate in and become the body of Christ in the world.

In like manner, Jesus took the cup filled with the fruit of the vine, the vine that sustains us and links us to one another, and the fruit that nourishes the spirit of virtue that abides within and between each of us, and asked us to drink of that same spirit of loving-kindness and uniting harmony that was in him. Through the cup of blessing, we participate in and become the new life of Christ in the world.

The bread and fruit we partake nourishes us that we may nourish others. Through this sacrament of Holy Communion, we affirm that we are committed to Christ's way of love and peace by our motives, thoughts, actions, and practices in this world. We acknowledge that we are one community made by God, and that we must consciously choose, day by day, to be in right relationship with God, each other, and our sacred values. We therefore dedicate ourselves, individually and collectively, to make the Body and Spirit of Christ real in this world, here and now, and throughout our life as a community of the faithful. What we symbolize here in this holy space, we make real by our service when we go forth from this place.

Invitation

Christ invites "all" to the table of reconciliation – those who affirm their intrinsic worth, and those who are yet to do so...those whose hearts and minds are admirable, and those still struggling to make them so...those who are most like us, and those who are least like us. In the spirit of Christ, we at First Congregational United Church of Christ welcome you to share your spiritual journey with us as we share ours with you in a sacrament designed to bridge all differences in a spirit of extravagant welcome, of heartfelt openness, and of mutual loving-kindness. In coming together, let us recognize our responsibility in living in love and peace with one another and all creation so as to be joined together as one Holy Communion of Body and Spirit throughout this good earth.

Partaking of the Bread and Juice

Commissioning

Go forth with forgiveness, courage, faith, hope, love, peace, justice, kindness, and gentleness. May these virtues, representing the image of God in each one of us as was also manifested in Jesus, strengthen you to reach out in compassion as you nurture and aid others within this worldwide community. May the Spirit and grace of God be with you and among you. Blessings be.

WE DEDICATE OURSELVES TO GOD'S SERVICE THROUGH FAITHFULNESS

Giving of Our Tithes and Offerings

****Unison Prayer of Dedication***

O Light of Love that lives in every person and throughout creation: We have been blessed as the recipients of your goodness, and now we offer a portion of that goodness back to replenish and nurture our world. Multiply the sum of these gifts we present by the sincerity and joy of our giving that they may bring forth a harvest of

Barb Mardis

compassion and justice. May our thoughts and prayers we have raised today inspire us to go forth more caringly and kindly for all our tomorrows. Be born in us that we may carry on and create stories of love to all peoples and to all the earth. May we always be the gift of being givers. Now and always.

***Encouragement for the Journey**

Go to be a blessing! This is your calling.
Do not worry whether your task is difficult, or your efforts are successful.
Life is serendipitous; so what you may think will or has failed may actually renew a life.
Advocate for justice for those unlike you.
Work for peace with those opposed to you.
Kindness offered and love delivered can transform relationships.
Trust in this! Live by this!
Let God be responsible for the outcome;
just commit yourself to the journey of sacred living.
If you do, you will find that you will have not only been a blessing to others,
but that the synergy of life will have created a blessing for you.

Postlude

Get In Touch with Us!

Questions?

**Call 319-234-8927 or email us at
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(Messages will be checked periodically)

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*Please make an appointment with Rev. Myers if you would like to meet with the pastor.
You may email him at revbmyers@yahoo.com, or call/text his cell at 608-370-9472.
Video talking is also available via Skype or Zoom.*

Nourishment for the Journey

One of the ironies I found in growing up as a “Christian” was the rather un-Christlike view that only Christians had the truth, could live the right life, and would go to heaven. This view is far removed from the ideas of Jesus, his disciples, and even the Apostle Paul – all whom trusted that those who live by God’s values, regardless of what may be their beliefs, are the ones who best exemplify the ways of God.

Jesus seemed always be saying “go and do likewise,” “you will know them by their fruits,” “love others as you want to be loved,” and other such encouragements to get us beyond the banality of mere belief to the devotion of our actual deeds. Paul, in Romans 2.6-16, picks up on this same theme of “doing” our faith; though perhaps with a different purpose than Jesus.

Jesus saw ‘doing’ as essential to being faithful – both ethically and spiritually. And while Paul might concur with this view, at least at times, he sees this emphasis on doing as a way to spread the gospel to the gentiles. What non-Jew would be attracted to a religious faith that demanded 613 different requirements, many of which

were more cultural, ritualistic, and ethnically construed rather than based in ethical or moral precepts? Paul saw this “Jewishness” of Jesus as a distraction to the wider world, and so focused on this pluralistic and inclusive notion that our ethical deeds and moral practices mattered more than all of these more Hebraic aspects of faith. He took Jesus’ essential message, and saw how it could be used to attract Gentiles of all different backgrounds if the unique “Jewishness” of Jesus’ faith was deemphasized. And it worked wonders.

Whereas many Jews had come to see themselves as set aside from the rest of the world, as especially called and chosen by God among all the various peoples of the world, and as prideful in their uniqueness (all of which might be seen as pompous or exclusive to outsiders), Paul instead accentuates all the commonalities of Jesus’ faith and practice with the faith and practice of peoples from all around the world. By accentuating his ethical teachings and moral understandings, and how these were all to be put into practice, Paul was able to captivate the attention and hearts of peoples from many different traditions. They would recognize the same ethical precepts in Jesus’ teachings that they had learned in their own religions and cultures. They would identify with the importance of making their beliefs real in action rather than mere figureheads of their faith.

And they would come to see that they would be treated as equals, not inferiors, by the deeds they did and not the religious rituals they performed. Paul found a way to make them feel included, affirmed, and accepted within the Christian community. He changed the way he spoke of his own Jewishness and what was, and wasn’t, important about it. What was important were the universal ethical precepts and spiritual insights of Jesus. What was unimportant were the exclusive, pietistic, legalistic, and doctrinaire religiosity of Judaism.

Moreover, he turned the partial and tribalistic God of many Jews into the impartial and pluralistic God of Jesus; a God who taught us to love one another, make peace with one another, and create justice between each other – no matter our past nationality, religious upbringing, ethnicity, or other cultural factor. Paul emphasized how all people, regardless of their background, could partake in the true goodness of Jesus’ message, which was to act in ways that any ancient person would identify as ethical and fair.

People of all cultures are aware of the difference between authentic faith and hypocritical faith – the former resulting in a lifestyle that derives directly from one’s values, and the latter revealing the chasm between what one says one believes and values versus how one actually acts and lives out their life. The metaphor of some being ‘hearers’ and others ‘doers’ would resonate with peoples of every culture and religious heritage. Who isn’t annoyed by those who say one thing and act in different way? And who doesn’t respect those who act in accordance with what they say they believe, even if it is to their own detriment?

Paul was able to attract many followers by this change of language – discarding much of the Hebraic notions that would not resonate with a Roman culture, and focusing on those elements which they could best identify with and respect. He, of course, was opposed by many Jewish people who had come to think of themselves as superior due to their uniqueness from others. But Paul instead focused on how we could all be one in the Spirit of Christ – which happened to be a “spirit” that they could all recognize as the highest ethical and spiritual standards within their own faith backgrounds. And this inclusive and pluralistic understanding of Jesus’ views that he presented would be appealing to people all over the world, as many of their own traditions were as tribalistic and narrow-minded as those of the most legalistic and rigid Jewish people.

Christianity in our own age has, unfortunately, come to be interpreted by those outside of it to be more in line with those who have perverted Jesus’ message than with the teachings and practices of Jesus himself. Churches in the 21st century need to do the same sort of reformulation of their faith that Paul did if they are going to have their message to resonate with peoples outside the church. We live in a different world than we did even a decade ago, and people’s attitudes have shifted monumentally with regard to how they perceive those who are “religious.”

If we are to flourish in the new year, and a new era, we will also have to be more concerned with how to make our faith relevant to people who are not interested in “the way we have always done things,” but rather in the points of commonality in ethical understanding and spiritual insight that will not only include them, their loved ones and friends, but can be appreciated and respected by peoples all over the world – of varying faiths, and even of no faith. We, too, need to focus on authentic faith, not the hypocritical variety. We need to be doers, and not merely hearers of the universal message of Jesus which can be found in his ethical precepts and spiritual insights rather than all of the other “traditions” that serve more as distractions, or even aversions, to a faith that has too often been identified with right beliefs rather than right practices.

May we have the wisdom Jesus and the insight of Paul in making the essence of our faithfulness more important than all of those beloved traditions of ours that others see as anachronistic, exclusive, irrelevant, rigid, tribalistic, dogmatic, legalistic, and archaic.

Blessings may we be.

— *Rev. Bret S. Myers, 12/28/2021*