

## Sermon January 9 2022 Sabbatical Committee Welcomes Brent Back

Today's worship service was led by our congregation's Sabbatical Committee to welcome our Pastor Brent Damrow back from his sabbatical.

FRAMING WORDS: Holland Eaton

Good morning and welcome to the First Congregational Church of Stockbridge, on this second Sunday of 2022. Today I'd like to give a very special welcome to our Pastor, Brent Damrow, and his family, whom we are very happy to have back with us today. I think most everyone knows they recently returned from Brent's 3-month sabbatical. Prior to that time, Brent taught us a few different phrases in sign language as a way for us to communicate with one another safely from a distance. Today I'd like to teach you a new phrase in sign language – welcome home!

Today in the church calendar we are in the season of Epiphany, and on this day we celebrate the Baptism of Jesus. We celebrate today in a slightly different way than our usual service. In baptism we are joined to Christ and we are joined together in unity, and today we celebrate that union by sharing what we learned from each other on our sabbatical journey during our pastor's absence.

READING: "Community Makes God Visible" by Henri Nouwen (adapted by Linda Russell)

Christian community is the place where we keep the flame of hope alive among us and take it seriously so that it can grow and become stronger in us. In this way we can live with courage, trusting that there is a spiritual power in us when we are together that allows us to live in the world without surrendering to the powerful forces constantly seducing us toward despair. That is how we dare to say that God is a God of love even when we see hatred all around us. That is why we can claim that God is a God of life even when we see death and destruction and agony all around us. We say it together. We affirm it in each other. Waiting together, nurturing what has already begun, expecting its fulfillment – that is the meaning of ... The First Congregational Church of Stockbridge.

SCRIPTURE: based on Psalm 100

Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth! Serve the Lord with gladness! Come into his presence with singing! Know that the Lord, he is God! It is he who made us, and we are his; we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture. Enter his gates with thanksgiving, and his courts with praise! Give thanks to Him; bless his name! For the Lord is good; His steadfast love endures forever, and his faithfulness to all generations.

CHILDREN'S TIME: "Sabbatical Rest, and Welcome Back" Cathy Clark

It is so nice to be with you this morning. This is a very special day--even more special than most Sundays. We're also going to do things a little differently today, but you're probably used to that. Usually we all gather on the rug in front of the pulpit for Children's Time, but today I'll

stay up here, and you'll stay where you are, which is mostly in front of the livestreaming screen (though it's really nice to see Jake in the sanctuary this morning). We also usually say the prayer that Jesus taught us right before you go to Sunday School, but today we're going to say the Lord's Prayer first. If you know it, say it with us; if you don't, listen and we will teach it to you.

"Our God, who art in Heaven, hallowed be Thy name. Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever. Amen."

I want to talk with you about two things this morning. One is about a pretty long word—sabbatical. Anyone have an idea what this word means? Wait, I think hear someone, it sounds like Ruth Wheat, but I'm pretty sure she's home in Housatonic; what is that, Ruth? "Sabbatical means 'rest,' more specifically it often refers to a pastor's extended time away from the congregation; it is a time for reflection, renewal, rest, and to deepen their relationship with God..., and perhaps even, an opportunity to learn how to bake bread." That's great, Ruth; I couldn't have said it better myself!

A sabbatical is a rest from your usual activities. It is a time to go away for a while, think about things, and often, to talk with God and ask for her guidance. Jesus did this sort of thing quite a lot, often going into the desert to pray. Sometimes sabbaticals can last a long time. There is someone who is a friend to all of us who has been on a sabbatical, for what seems a very long time. But he's back with us today—any idea who it might be?

The other thing I want to talk about with you today is welcoming back someone you love who has been gone for a while. You might have some experience with this. How do you feel when you first see your mom or dad or teacher or friend after they have been gone for a while? Pretty excited, huh?

Well, we are all pretty excited to see Pastor Brent again after he's been gone on his sabbatical for the last three months, and I think we can show him just how glad we are to have him back. We can even, just this once, use our outside voices and some joyful noise-makers to make it a big welcome back to Pastor Brent. If you're at home, of course, you would need your parent's approval to use an 'outside' voice inside the house. And if you have any noisemakers (including clapping your hands) you can do that, too, and that includes all us kids here in the sanctuary.

Let's practice once quietly—"Welcome back Pastor Brent." OK, now all together and give it all ya got, "WELCOME BACK PASTOR BRENT!" (*clapping, yelling, bell ringing*) Let's do it one more time, "WELCOME BACK PASTOR BRENT!" Thank you for giving Pastor Brent such a good welcome back.

Now this is usually when you go to Sunday School, but you're not having Sunday School in person today because of covid (and the sleet and freezing rain), but you can show your parents how to go to the 'family resources' guide where you can find a lesson and activity.

You can go now, or stick around for a few more minutes while we sing a welcome back hymn to Pastor Brent, written by our friend, David Anderegg. The music's the same as the hymn that we sang when Pastor Brent started his sabbatical way back in September when it was warm and sunny and we were outside, but the words are new and can be found as an insert in today's bulletin and also to download from where the livestreaming bulletin is. But before we sing the welcome back hymn, I'm going to read the words David wrote when we sent Pastor Brent on his sabbatical back in September on that gorgeous fall day.

*Go, pilgrim, go with all our gratitude, for God commands your Sabbath rest.  
May all your steps be sweetly blessed until you can come back to us renewed.  
We hope you will inhabit woods and seas, to contemplate Creation's expanse;  
To walk in beauty and to dance along the edge of God's infinities.  
We will be here, attempting to discern our mission, and our thoughts of you will teach us  
what we need to do, until we celebrate your safe return.*

And now we'll sing "Pilgrim's Return" by David Anderegg.

*Thank God that now we see your face so dear, and, after all this time apart,  
We bless you for your wand'ring heart and bless your feet for bringing you back here.  
So pilgrim, welcome home, familiar friend; but altered by the pilgrim way?  
We, too, have changed; for good, we pray, for now our path and yours converge again.  
The new year's come and now the page has turned; whatever in you has woken,  
Take the pulpit and the yoke, and teach us every thing that you have learned.*

REFLECTIONS: "What is Our Church For?" Charlotte Rodgers, Holland Eaton, Ron Hanft, David Anderegg

Today we celebrate the return from Sabbatical of our pastor Brent, and welcome him, Jon and Jake, back into our fold. We are so happy to have you back! Now, Brent, I know you told us that we're supposed to be up here telling you about our Sabbatical sessions, and we will get to that in a minute. But before we do, we thought you, Jon and Jake might like to hear some highlights of what you missed while you were away...

- The Deacons pulled off miracles on a regular basis, most especially when one of our guest pastors had an unfortunate accident on her way to Stockbridge. Donna Jacobs and her team took swift action, aided by The Rev. Barbara Kershner, and held a truly meaningful service of personal testimonies of faith, shared by Ashley Collins, David Anderegg and Jennifer Williams. It may not have been the service we had planned for, but in the words of one who sat in a pew that day, it was exceptional.
- Our youth group had a reboot, and started meeting this fall, complete with hikes, cookouts and learning more about the KIVA loan program by participating in the selection of loan recipients. Our dedicated Board of Christian Education and the teachers created a robust fall program, complete with our very own Ted Randolph as the Cat in the Hat... followed by the children trick or treating for the Heifer Project.
- In December, as you have probably seen, the World's Largest Advent Wreath, the sequel, was beautifully laid out on the church's front lawn by deacons Ted Randolph, Don Eaton

and Michael Deegan, complete with weekly “lightings” of white lights atop each of the candles, and a beautiful meditation labyrinth encouraged us to linger.

- Mission and Action formed a Task Force to answer the call from Jewish Family Services of Western MA in the resettlement of families arriving to the Berkshires from Afghanistan. This led to our partnership with the Unitarian Universalist Meeting Church of South Berkshires, who had already formed a HOSTs organization. Our family of 5 arrived in Pittsfield on December 28!
- And we also want to mention the beauty of our church this Advent season, a journey led by The Rev. JaQuan Beacham, with glorious music and stories of Peace, Hope, Joy and Love. The annual Christmas Pageant was spectacular with a manger and a full complement of angels, shepherds and sheep!
- And Growth & Fellowship provided us with beautiful hand-decorated Advent cookies, encouraging us to mingle and nibble after each Advent service.
- Finally, no overview of the last 3 months would be complete without mentioning the amazing Will Garrison, who coordinated more things than most people could possibly do, supported us all, answered a million questions – and did it all with a smile!

And now to the heart of our discussion today. As you know, Brent, before leaving you charged us – your congregation – to answer three questions, and you told us that you would do the same during our time apart. The purpose of those questions was to help re-focus our shared responsibility for the church – through giving everyone the opportunity to share their thoughts on the purpose of church and how that purpose manifests in our relationships to each other and our community. It is through these conversations that we could identify what’s important, what we are here for. It was our chance to step back and to share, to listen, and collectively commit to how we become a stronger, more faithful, more alive, and more sustainable church.

Our discussions were framed by the work of Tim Sorens, author of Everywhere You Look: Discovering the Church Right Where You Are. His perspective is that church is not something that we simply go to (like a concert, or out to dinner) but rather something that we become. And if we are to become something, it is good to have an end result in mind or at least an understanding of why we are doing it.

In the first session, we sought to answer The Big Why – Why do we engage in this thing called church? What is church for?

In our second session, we built on the answers to The Big Why, carrying them into a deeper discussion on how our purpose impacts the relationships we have with each other.

In our third and final session, we revisited The Big Why again, this time in the context of our community – not what we do for our community, but how we see ourselves in, and influenced by, our broader community.

Thankfully, we didn’t have to lead these sessions ourselves. We are very grateful to The Rev. John Nelson, the pastor of the Congregational Church of Salisbury. With his masterful guidance, we reflected and shared deeply in our Sabbatical sessions.

So how did we answer these questions? What do we think church is for? We came up with seven themes underlying that purpose:

## SEVEN THEMES

### 1. Community in-formation

First, our church is “community-in-formation”: people gathering in order to worship, to develop relationships of depth, and to be shaped by our shared experience of the holy.

As we talked, we reflected on how we have grown individually and bonded as a community, often exceeding our own expectations of what we thought we would experience in being part of our church. Our church is in a perpetual state of formation, both due to outside circumstances, and as a result of what we as a church do as a group and individually: study the Bible, share personal testimonies, and take care of one another in times of need.

### 2. Community host

Our church is a “community host”: a place and a people who intentionally make space for those seeking community, and for groups of our neighbors to pursue their own artistic, social, and educational aims.

Our church shines as a community host year-round, hosting yoga classes, AA and Alanon meetings, and opening our doors to other groups in the community to use our sanctuary for concerts, and a myriad of other activities. But it is during Advent when we shine brightest. From the aforementioned Advent wreath to our in-person Christmas Eve service, we welcome our community to enjoy all we have to offer.

### 3. Sanctuary

Our church is a “sanctuary”: a physical place and the activity that maintains that place as holy, set apart for meaningful encounters with the Spirit in us and beyond us.

Many of us feel that we have had moments of peace, alone with God and with our own thoughts, in this very room. That is the definition of sanctuary, is it not? But the sanctuary provided by this building is only a part of the peace and safety we feel in our church. The people here are also our sanctuary, providing opportunities to open ourselves to the message of God delivered from and through each other.

### 4. Locus of innovation

Our church is a “locus of innovation”: a people who continually seek refreshed ways of connecting deeply with one another and of welcoming neighbors and newcomers.

To most of the world these days, innovation means new and different uses of technology. We certainly have that covered with our live streaming, texted check-ins for worship services and Zoom prayer meetings. But to us the technology is the means through which we’ve connected with each other in new and different ways, enabling our out of town members and friends to join us in our worship and our studies. But innovation doesn’t have to include technology, and it can also mean “new to us”. We recalled very moving innovations in how we worship – walking the stations of the cross at Easter, singing a Taizé chant at outdoor evening worship, the fires and walking pathway of Ash Wednesday – all of which created feelings of togetherness, of being church.

### 5. Locus of continuity

Our church is a “locus of continuity”: a people who honor, remember, and re-enact traditions of spiritual practice and spiritual arts that have been developed over millennia.

Regardless of whether the approach is innovative or not, our traditions are an important part of our purpose. Attending services at 10 am on Sundays, lighting candles in prayer, taking communion, and meditation walks – these are intentional acts of worship and spirituality. We may engage in them for personal reasons, but at the same time we deepen our connection to each other in a powerful and positive way by having our church as the centerpiece of that engagement. And by sharing these symbols of welcome, love and gratitude freely with those in our community, we invite participation in the glory of God’s love and light in our lives.

#### 6. Locus of service

Our church is a “locus of service”: a people who gather to sharpen and deepen our work for the well-being of our wider community.

Church enriches our lives by enabling us to be present in the community, doing the work of God in caring for those around us. We feed our community’s hunger, both literally and spiritually – Open Table, Pop up Pantry, People’s Pantry and the Giving Tree, among other things – providing gifts to families served by local social services agencies. We teach the community as volunteers for various community agencies such as Literacy Network. We are grateful for the means to connect with each other and provide for our community as servants of God through our church.

When we see the man with a prosthetic foot who stands at the CVS in Lenox and asks for donations to help him get by, some nice people who are perhaps unchurched might feel a vague sense of needing to give back. But for us in the church, we feel a specific need to respond to what Jesus asked us to do, and what we expect of each other. So when we see that person, we can say to ourselves there is Jesus. (*“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.” – Matthew 25:40*) And that’s what our church does for us in terms of being a locus of service.

#### 7. A gathering for renewal and re-formation

Our church is a “gathering for renewal and re-formation”: examining ourselves and our community; learning from Christ Jesus and prophets and teachers what needs reinforcement and how God would lead us to change.

Through our conversations, we discovered that many of us have shared powerful experiences of spiritual growth through the many programs and activities at our church. Whether small groups, the Covenant studies, weekly prayer sessions or even informal coffee hours, church is our “safe place”. It is here that we share intensely private, spiritual experiences, we strengthen our faith, remove the distraction of the noise around us to home in on what’s happening within us, both personally and collectively, as our church and our community. We open our eyes and ears to the expression of God’s love, which is everywhere!

For those of you who witnessed when our guest minister was not able to be here, we were able to have a lovely worship service by people standing up and sharing stories of faith,

including myself. And I have to say that the reason I was able to do that was because I trust the people sitting in this place. I trust people with my internal spiritual life. I trust that I can speak it and it will be heard and respected. In our discussions, we all talked about collectively how important that is for all of us.

CLOSING WORDS: Charlotte Rodgers

The vision of what church is, that Tim Sorens offered in his book, is one of relationship, movement, justice, life and becoming. He contends that when done well, church is something not entirely of our doing, but joined with what God is already doing. The church is ACTION.

In these discussions, we articulated what we think our church is for – to us, to each other, to our community. These themes resonated with me most during one of Rev. JaQuan’s Advent sermons – the one in which he talked about HOPE. He said that we cannot manifest hope on our own. That our church has been investigating together what church is for. I quote him here: “I think that the church is called to inspire hope when those in our world may feel that hopelessness abounds. I think that the church ought to serve as a reminder of the power of El- Roi, the God-who-sees.” So let us continue seeing, seeing one another, seeing our neighbor...and being our church.

Brent, these seven themes are our gift to you. We are looking forward to hearing your reflections next week!