

Today's service included three Moments for Mission; these are included before Rev. Damrow's sermon, "Perfection," page 4.

MOMENT FOR MISSION: Update on Mission & Action Board projects, Cindy Brown

Have any of you ever seen the movie "The Blues Brothers"? There's a line from that movie that comes to my mind a lot. The character played by Dan Akroyd goes around telling people that he and his brother, played by John Belushi, are "on a mission from God." Well, our Mission and Action Board is "on a mission from God." In fact, we help lead the congregation "on a mission from God." I can't remember what The Blues Brothers' mission was, but I can tell you about the various missions that our church is doing.

With the world's challenges seemingly mounting by the day, it's reasonable to feel overwhelmed, helpless even. But glimmers of hope remain, and they act as a beacon that orients us back to the truth of Jesus. Here are some of our glimmers of hope.

One of my favorite missions here is The Christmas Giving Tree. It's a project our whole congregation gets involved in, so I know most of you already know all about it. Every Christmas we ask various organizations around the county to tell us about families in need, and about what type of Christmas gifts they would like. Then we all go shopping – that's my favorite part – picking out clothes, toys, and household goods. It's heartbreaking to find that the most ardent Christmas wish for a parent is to receive a Price Chopper grocery gift card, or a pair of warm winter gloves. But it's heartwarming to be able to buy baby clothes at Carter's, or pick out a Patriots or Red Sox jersey for a teenager. Last year, we gave away over 140 gifts to families from Pine Woods and the Elizabeth Freeman Center, and other organizations.

Our church is really into food, right? We love coffee hour and potlucks and parties like the All-Church Birthday Party with the parade of cakes, and we look forward to doing all those things again someday soon. And we like to share food with others as well. Mission & Action helps coordinate our church's donations to The People's Pantry in Great Barrington, which gives away food to several hundred families every week, no questions asked. Our church collects food and money to give to the Pantry once a month as our Active Prayer of Thanksgiving after communion. This month we gave \$500 to the People's Pantry.

And then even closer to home, we have our own Pop Up Pantry behind our church building. This is stocked with shelf stable essential food items, and it's open 24 hours a day to anyone who needs it. Again, no questions asked. We take food and money donations from the congregation, and the Mission & Action Board also goes shopping at Big Y grocery to fill in the gaps. We keep the Pantry stocked, and we've noticed a definite uptick in use of the Pop Up Pantry lately, as the economic climate becomes more and more challenging.

Mission & Action has also teamed up with the Deacons to start up the Meal Train again. We currently have one local family in need that you have been cooking for, and we thank all you cooks out there!

And now, a bit farther away from home, Mission & Action is helping to provide food to families in Afghanistan. Our board member Nick Pohl is friends with an Afghani man named Abdul, who currently lives in Washington State. Abdul decided to try to make a difference in the unfolding humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan, and has started a grassroots effort that is making a big impact with modest financial support. Many workers in Afghanistan have lost their jobs under the Taliban, and are having trouble feeding their families. Abdul is able to safely send money from donations to his brother's team of volunteers on the ground in Afghanistan, who then purchase food and give it to families in need. With our recent donation of \$250, we learned that we could feed a family of 10 for about 6 weeks. Our board is hoping this relationship with Abdul continues to build. So stay tuned for more stories about the impact this congregation is having in the lives of people in Afghanistan.

And speaking of Afghanistan, as you know, our congregation is part of a team that has adopted an Afghani family who recently immigrated to Pittsfield. The Hussaini family – a mother and father and three children – have been here almost 6 months. Partnering with Jewish Family Services and with the Housatonic Unitarian church, we have helped to outfit them with clothing and furniture, and continue to help them as they learn English, look for jobs, and get settled into schools. The family tells our board member Martha Floyd how very grateful they are for all that this congregation is doing to help them settle in to their new home.

The members of the Mission & Action Board are excited to help our congregation be involved in all this important work. Thank you for participating in these glimmers of hope.

MOMENT FOR MISSION: One Great Hour of Sharing and other UCC special mission offerings, Cindy Brown

I know this has probably happened to a lot of you already, but if anyone ever asks you, Is your church 5 for 5? You can say YES! What is 5 for 5, you say?

Well, our congregation is one of nearly 1,600 UCC churches that are 5 for 5. This means that we fully support the United Church of Christ's program called "Our Church's Wider Mission," along with all four of our denomination's special mission offerings. Through your financial pledges to the church, Mission & Action is able to give \$500 each to "Our Church's Wider Mission" and to the 4 special offerings.

These special offerings include Neighbors in Need, usually given in October, which supports ministries of justice and compassion throughout the United States, including support for the Council for American Indian Ministry, and a variety of justice initiatives, advocacy efforts, and direct service projects.

The special offering called Strengthen the Church, usually taken on Pentecost, helps build up our denomination. Funds given to this offering support new churches, leadership development, youth ministry, and other programs in congregations. This offering helps to build up the Body of Christ.

The Christmas Fund for the Veterans of the Cross, which we take on Christmas Eve, provides direct financial support to pastors who have faithfully served the church, and who now face financial difficulties in retirement.

The 4th special offering, traditionally taken during Lent, is One Great Hour of Sharing. This offering responds to humanitarian and development needs all over the world. It carries God's message of love and hope to people in crisis, providing clean water, food, education, health care, small business loans, resettlement for refugees, and emergency and long-haul disaster relief. When we contribute to One Great Hour of Sharing, we are working alongside families to restore not only needed physical and financial structures, but we are also helping to restore hope. The Apostle Paul tells us in 1st Corinthians, "And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love." Our giving to One Great Hour of Sharing ensures that no matter how difficult the situation, the Love of Christ remains.

MOMENT FOR MISSION: Justice Task Force, Jeremy Ridenour

I want to share with you a little bit about the Justice Task Force, which is just now in process. I'm announcing it today to encourage you and see if people are potentially interested to join it.

At the beginning of the year, the Church Council discussed the Capital Campaign and the issue of land acknowledgment, and how to think more about the church's history with the Stockbridge Munsee tribe, and to look more into that. And so some of us on Council – myself, Charlotte Rodgers, Anna Duhon – started meeting with Pastor Brent to think about the issue of land acknowledgment, and also more broadly about whether we should form a justice task force.

The purpose would be two-fold. The first is: Can we think more about the issue of land acknowledgment, research it, talk with the tribe, and try to study and understand our history and the complexity of it, and to think about how to learn from our past and move into a better future.

The second thing is more broad. It's about how do we engage in issues of justice in the church. Last fall, the Williamstown church was holding a rally against Christian nationalism, and there was a question around whether our church would get involved with that. We thought about the need to have a process, so that if issues come up around justice – such as immigration, or gun safety – how do we study that together, prayerfully consider it, talk with one another -- dialogue, argue, whatever it might be – and to figure out how do we learn about these issues of justice, and then pursue them and put them into action.

So for the next 12 months, we're going to form a Justice Task Force. If you're interested, contact me, Charlotte Rodgers, Diane Piraino. We're trying to meet to first think about the issue of land acknowledgment, but then more broadly about how to put in a process that could investigate issues of justice, and then hopefully enact them with the support of the church.

If you have questions, you can email me or Charlotte. Thanks for your time.

SCRIPTURE:

Psalm 37:27-28a:

Depart from evil, and do good; so you shall abide forever. For the LORD loves justice; he will not forsake his faithful ones. The righteous shall be kept safe forever, but the children of the wicked shall be cut off.

Psalm 89:14:

Righteousness and justice are the foundation of your throne; steadfast love and faithfulness go before you.

Micah 6:1-8:

Hear what the Lord says: Rise, plead your case before the mountains, and let the hills hear your voice. Hear, you mountains, the controversy of the Lord, and you enduring foundations of the earth; for the Lord has a controversy with his people, and he will contend with Israel. "O my people, what have I done to you? In what have I wearied you? Answer me! For I brought you up from the land of Egypt, and redeemed you from the house of slavery; and I sent before you Moses, Aaron, and Miriam. O my people, remember now what King Balak of Moab devised, what Balaam son of Beor answered him, and what happened from Shittim to Gilgal, that you may know the saving acts of the Lord." "With what shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?" He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?

SERMON: "Perfection" The Rev. Brent Damrow

I think it is precisely because we are finite -- because we are flawed, imperfect beings -- that the pursuit of perfection has so long captured the human imagination.

Perhaps the most known, concrete example of its achievement came in 1976 in Montreal, achieved by a 14-year-old gymnast from Romania, Nadia Comaneci. That first act of perfection took all of 30 seconds for her to finish her routine on the uneven bars. And when she finished, the scoreboard simply read 1.00, because gymnastics scoreboard makers could not imagine perfection, and so they only made the scoreboard go up to 9.95. Nadia would go on to record six more perfect routines. And she would go on to expand just how much strength, grace and beauty we could imagine coming from one human being.

Oh, there's a bowler, his name is Farrell Williams. He's in his early 30s. He knows a thing or two about perfection as well. Through mastery of velocity and spin, and through absolute consistent precision, Williams has already bowled 135 perfect games. He is young. He has got a long career ahead of him. How many more will he roll? Will perfection somehow become boring to him? Will we have to redefine what perfection is, instead of the traditional score of 300.

And then, speaking of, currently there's a collegiate softball pitcher, Hope Trautwein, who recently threw not just a perfect game, but what the sports writers called a perfect perfect game. You may know that a perfect game in baseball or softball is where you retire every single batter that you face. Trautwein took that to the next level. She struck out every batter she faced. Beyond perfect? Gets me wondering. What do you think a perfect perfect perfect game might be?

Each of these is admirable and inspiring. Each of them is masterful. Each of them displayed perfection, even if for just a brief period of time. Each of them showing how much hard work and how much dedication it takes to do anything perfectly, even if for just 30 seconds.

So why all of this talk about perfection on Justice Sunday? Well, it actually has to do with a passage from Matthew's gospel that I've never been able to get out of my mind. It's a passage from the Sermon on the Mount. It's a thesis kind of statement for Jesus and his ministry, one of those "therefore" statements that Jesus was famous for. The crowd on that day kept up with Jesus even as the challenges he laid out before them grew more and more rigorous. When he looked at them and said "Give to everybody," they hung in there. When he said "Love everyone, even your enemies," they were still with him. Even when he said "Pray for those who persecute you," they wanted more. And so when he arrived at this statement, his thesis statement, he said "Therefore, be perfect." Not just any kind of perfect. "Be perfect just as *abba* God is perfect." And you know what Matthew says about the end of that sermon? They all left astounded. And you know what else Matthew says? They kept coming back, wanting more and more and more. Perfect, not just for 30 seconds, or even 135 times. Don't *do* something perfectly, Jesus says, but *be* perfect, just as God is perfect.

In Micah, these three elements that Ronnie so beautifully read – the doing justice, the loving kindness, and the walking humbly – has been looked at by scholars over the ages of an interwoven dance of how to answer Jesus' call in Matthew of perfect justice. Not to just *do* perfect, but to *enter into* perfection, and notice humbly and always with God.

If you look across the Bible, it becomes clear that far less often in the Bible does it reference that God *does* justice. Instead, far more often it references that God *is* justice. To talk about God is to talk about justice. And to really talk about true justice means by definition that God has to be in the conversation.

The two Psalms from our kids' time are just two of the dozens of the Psalms that make it abundantly clear that people knew God to be justice. God loves justice. God's very throne is built upon justice and righteousness. God is worthy of our praise and our best because where God sits is in just relationship. You can look through the Psalms and you'll find dozens more.

The Exodus reveals and exalts God's justice over Pharaoh's slavery. The Prophets drip with imagery of God as justice. Paul thundered with it. In fact, recent research seems to indicate that Paul precisely chose the cities he wanted to go to because they were seats of Roman power, and he wanted to bring his message of what real justice looked like, not just what the Empire thought.

Biblically, you see, justice is more than fairness or equity. Justice is not merely a governmental or power thing. Justice is always profoundly relational. It is the pursuit of right living, dedicated to goodness, in order to promote communal flourishing. Say that three times fast. To pursue justice is to pursue right relationship – yes, with God, but also, friends, with each other and with all of creation, too. In the Bible, when it says “For God so loved the world,” that is not just some emotional statement, but a justice statement of God for *why* it all needs to be done. When Jesus said “I came that you might have life abundantly,” it wasn’t just a statement of hope for people. It was a statement of unfolding justice. When John the Baptist wanted to know if Jesus was the Messiah, Jesus answered quoting Isaiah’s very definition of what justice looks like.

And there is that foundational parable that vexes many good and faithful Christians, including many of you, because you have told me that it does. It’s the parable of the laborers. So many workers wanted to work, and yet only a few were called, some early in the day, some at mid-day, and some later. And when the management finally paid them, the manager gave each of them a full day’s wages, no matter what time they got to start working. A fair living wage was given to each, enough to eat, enough to live. Maybe importantly, enough not to worry. Each a full wage, no matter when they started. And people, including people in churches, say that’s unfair! That’s unjust. And yet, what I think Jesus wants us to remember is that justice is not just equity. It’s about all having the chance for enough. Enough dignity, enough choice, enough work, enough food, enough life. It is a parable that is scandalously inequitable, while being scandalously just.

Friends, what I want you to remember today is that perfection – the kind Jesus calls us to – is not just a moment or an achievement. It is something to strive for and to become. Today as we celebrate justice and as we launch our exploratory Justice Task Force, what we’re doing is we’re committing ourselves to learn. To learn how to understand and how to learn. To learn how to talk and to listen and to share. Learn how to be changed and then maybe even be agents of change. Learn how to look this world in the eye and respond to it in ways that are sustainable and impactful. Learn how to step forth and then come back here for prayer, discernment and depth.

We’re supposed to step forth, not so that the world will look at us and then hold up placards saying “Perfect job! Ten! Way to go, First Congregational Church!” We’re going to do it so many times that we never become bored, even though Wikipedia will never put us on their site. Our goal of doing it is that the whole world, even here in Stockbridge, will be able to see through our flawed but faithful endeavors that perfect love, that perfect justice of God who enables it all, even if, like Paul would gently say, only dimly.

And I think we are up for the task if we follow two other Biblical notions. The first is that our work never comes from our own striving, but always in reaction to God’s love and God’s blessing. That if we take the time to notice how deeply and fully we are loved and we are blessed, yes especially those places that the world whispers for us to take for granted, or even worse, seems to suggest we have earned, and instead not just give thanks for them but want everyone else to have those blessings, then we’re going to be off to a good start.

And secondly, to remember that while we are called to be absolutely zealous for justice, it is never to be by our own standards, but always leaving room for the expansive standard of God, to leave our egos at the door. Because no matter how good we get at this, no matter how much we

think we've figured it out, we always need to let go and let God's perfection in. Walter Brueggemann, who loves the Psalms, points out how often in the Psalms people cry out for vengeance. People call out for God to smite others, to eradicate our enemies. And yet what Brueggemann wants us to notice is that every time in the Psalms we get our anger, our frustration, and then we leave it to God's justice, never daring to trust our own.

One last image I want to leave you with as we undertake this, because it's an image that won't leave me. Bishop Michael Curry says this, that we need to learn how to stand and kneel at the exact same time. We need to stand because we have to stand for something. Because in this world to remain silent is still to take a stand. And instead, Curry says we must take a stand for goodness and abundance, even at risk to ourselves. But Curry says while we take that stand, we have to kneel at the same time. Kneel in humility of the reach of our own understanding. Kneel, yes, in humility before God, but kneel in humility before each other, remembering that even those we disagree with are also God's children. And remembering that true justice only comes when there is right and full relationship.

Friends, if not us, who? If not now, when? I have no doubt we will make mistakes. But we also need to move. We will engage our own flaws even as we tackle the world's, so that some time, some day, somehow, we will not just see God's perfection more clearly, but we will actually become it. And the world will not just see us in action, but look right past us to the perfect love of God. And maybe even then, like way back there in the Sermon on the Mount, they will leave astounded, wanting more. Amen.