

Thank you to Leigh Bak who coordinated today's Worship Service for our annual Laity Sunday.

Regrets to those who came to this Service expecting to hear Pastor Brian, although if you come back next week, you will not be disappointed.

Please pray with me:

Know that the Lord is God. It is He that made us, we belong to God.

O Lord when I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers,
the moon and stars that you have established,
what are human beings that you are mindful of them,
mortals that you care for them?

You call us together into this community for a purpose, individually and collectively.

Open our minds and hearts to your yearning to draw us close.

In the name of Jesus the Christ and our Redeemer. Amen.

When Leigh asked me a month ago to deliver the message for Laity Sunday, I reacted. I reacted with a thanks, but no thanks. I have too much going on in my life at the moment.

Well, not really in the moment, more like too much going on in the past 11 months.

Too much on my mind, too much stress, too much of life. How could I ever set myself apart and allow myself to be a channel for a message from God.

Have you ever reacted in such a way when called upon? A type of Jonah reaction when God asked him to go to Nineveh and Noah immediately headed as far in the opposite direction he could go.

After some minutes, I reconsidered the invitation. I responded in the affirmative.

Very often, my reaction is based on my limited understanding. However, if I take time to reflect on what is before me and allow God's spirit to intervene, my response can be quite different.

Human reaction vs . An inspired response.

That type of dynamic often comes into play when living a Christian life. We become faced with circumstances which are difficult and challenging. We react. sometimes not as we would like in retrospect. But the reaction is related to our human condition wiring.

Yet, our spiritual side is wired differently. That is, our mind, body, and spirit, which come from God and open to the prompting of the Holy Spirit.

Allowing your light for God's love to shine can emanate in many forms. Our expressions can be misunderstood by people around you as we heard in the Epistle reading from 1st Peter today.

- Praying at the table in a restaurant before a meal
- Referring to a bible or book of prayer at your desk at work

are just a couple examples of witnessing your faith.

I had been a member of this church for a short time yet became very active quickly in ministries, committees, and bible study. I was quite visible to members of the congregation making announcements before Worship service on Sundays. Another church member was talking to some newcomers and suggested they talk to me. The newcomers responded that they were not comfortable talking with holy rollers. Upon hearing this, my heart sank with sadness, realizing that my enthusiasm for the Lord was perceived to be exclusive or unapproachable.

This is a good reminder to the laity leaders of the church that there are people of varying degrees of involvement and to be conscious of others who need to be inspired and shepherded within the community.

I pray that this community of faith is always open and approachable. This was certainly the case for Beverly and I when we first came to Mary Taylor.

In April of 1995, I was looking for a church where I could start a new 12-step group meeting. The pastor at First UCC church was out of town. Then I noticed the church with the pink doors (actually, raffaele rose). I called the Mary Taylor church office and left a message. A day later I got a call back asking if I could meet with the Pastor. In the meeting we talked and made arrangements for my weekly meeting to start. Before leaving, Pastor Linda invited me to come to services on Sunday. It just so happened that my wife and I were church shopping at the time. Bev asked me to go alone the first week to be sure it was "safe", she came with me the following week.

Everyone was warm, friendly, and welcoming. I thought it was too good to be true. The church was preparing for its annual Fair on the Green. This was a good way to REALLY get to know these people – rub elbows with them, work side-by-side, maybe they will let their guard down, and see if they are really so nice.

So I worked the Fair. Two whole days! I was tired to the bone and the Mary Taylor people were just as nice. Their light and salt, their witness and service was genuine.

That sealed the deal for me. I was staying. Bev and I "visited" for several months. No pressure to join, no tap on the shoulder about our financial giving. Just an atmosphere of caring and sharing. We joined in the fall of 1995 and a wonderful journey began.

What's your story of being connected to this place? Have you shared it with a newcomer or someone outside the church?

Don't hide your light under a bushel.

One of my first experiences of letting God's love shine through me came unexpected. I had just finished plowing my driveway after a heavy snowstorm. Without realizing it, I had pushed some snow from the bottom of the driveway across the street, up against the row of mailboxes. Apparently my neighbor across the street saw what I had done and was not happy. As I sat inside my house after plowing, I looked out and watched as my neighbor shoveled snow, burying my mailbox. I was furious. As I sat stewing and plotting my revenge, God spoke to me:

"Paul... look your neighbor's mailbox still has snow in front of it. Go shovel the snow out and make his mailbox more accessible."

WHAT? WHAT?

As I allowed God's grace to change me, the toxicity of anger washed from my soul as I stood up and put on my boots and gloves. A powerful experience of God's extravagant grace and love.

It is interesting how through service, God ministers to our needs. The more one gives in service, the more one receives in return. Service has its benefits.

Dave Bak and I teach Sunday School for High Schoolers here at Mary Taylor. We recently had a interesting class where we offered the students an opportunity to debate whether God exists or not. Of course, those who choose to decide there is no God want proof of God's existence. The youth were very creative and honest in their approach to the exercise, on both sides of the argument. In the end, in terms of proving God's existence, I reminded them of the meaning of faith. From the book of Hebrews, Chapter 11: "Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen."

We are having a very rich experience in Sunday school, sharing in part of the spiritual development of our youth is extremely edifying for me in my relationship to God.

From the internet resource Wiktionary I looked up the definition of a Vow: 1.A solemn promise to perform some act, or behave in a specified manner, especially a promise to live and act in accordance with the rules of a religious order. 2.A declaration or assertion.

I brought an example of a vow with me today, it is an excerpt from my wedding vows which we have hanging in our house

"I need to know you, need to feel my arms around you, to feel my arms surround you, like a sea around a shore. I pray in hope that I might find you, because hearts can do no more."

Words from song writer and performer, Cat Stevens and a good reminder for me of my love and commitment to my wife and marriage.

As United Methodist, we also took a vow. When a person joins the church, there is an order of Service and words which are recited. In 2008, these words were updated. Let's see if you can identify the word or words which were added

As we affirm our vows as members of the United Methodist Church, we promise "to be loyal to Christ through The United Methodist Church and do all in our power to strengthen its ministries; to faithfully participate in its ministries by our prayers, our presence, our gifts, our service, and our witness."

Yes, the word witness was added to our promise as United Methodists.

Each of us is a witness. We witness all the time with our words, actions, and checkbook. The things we believe in, fans of, and priorities. Some us are a little reluctant witnessing our faith aloud.

Some of us may be shy. some may think it is too personal, some are intimidated. But let me assure you, you are capable. You cannot do a bad job of telling your faith story. Now, I am not suggesting you go about espousing bad theology.

There is a bible passage where the disciples complain to Jesus about some people who are not "one of them" healing in the name of Jesus. He told them not to be concerned, as it will be used for God's purpose. Telling your own personal story of what God has done in your life will be used to glorify God.

Sometimes we hold back from becoming engaged in Christian service, again, insecure or intimidated. Several years ago I was asked to Chair the Stewardship Committee. I barely had experience attending church on Sunday, let alone leading a committee. The Pastor assured me I would have support to learn the ropes.

What took place was nothing less than miraculous. Every step of the way, it was as if God had laid a plan in place, just waiting for me to take the cues and follow through. We had one of the most successful Stewardship campaigns in years. I learned first hand how God provides and empowers.

There is another side to this coin, however. In the materials to help prepare for Laity Sunday, there was a very specific qualifier. I want to read it to you so I don't leave anything out and you receive its full affect:

“Warning! Remember that serving God in the church does not mean that we are to neglect our family and friends due to the busyness of church life!
Serving God includes caring for those relationships that God has given us.
Serving God through the church should not keep us so busy that we do not have time to be in relationship with God through prayer, meditation, searching Scripture, and worship!”

I hope everyone takes that simple message to heart. I am a doer and it is a constant struggle for me to keep a healthy balance of tasks and priorities.

Fulfilling our vows to serve and witness need not be a burden or something to fear. It is a great privilege and a great responsibility as we claim our inheritance as followers of Jesus and work to bring about his kingdom. We are to be disciples who work to transform the world through our service and our witness.

We are here for one another, to be spiritual food and companionship for the journey.

Praise be to God. Amen.