

Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost
Twenty-Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time
PROVERBS 1:20-33
PSALM 19
JAMES 3:1-12
MARK 8:27-38
September 15, 2024

On this Rock!

If a building could talk, what would it say? If this building, this room, could talk, what would it have to say? For one hundred years, countless words, formally and informally, have been spoken and sung right here in this room, proclaimed to the glory of God in this sacred space we call a Sanctuary, “sanctuary” a word denoting the special nature of this hallowed hall, a place of reflection, retreat, respite, and ritual, this house of prayer where a particular, this local people of God, faithfully gather every Sunday to worship. Please do not call us peculiar, except that we very well might be, and in a sense, I might add, this label could, and probably would, be considered a good thing, a complement. In this holy setting, in the solitude and fellowship, the wonderful chatter from glowing faces warming this special room where we worship, where we do this liturgical dance, liturgy, derived from the Greek “leitourgia”, translated as, literally meaning “the work of the people”, congregations have sung countless hymns, a lot of untold anthems, numerous solos, duets, quartets, playing a variety of instrumental ensembles, led by piano and/or organ, accompanied by so many prayers, confessions, and litanies, and of course, buoyed by a whole host of sermons, some good, some bad, and, some, no doubt, some rather ugly! And yes, I have had the honor and privilege of this pulpit, contributing a few of my own brand of homiletical offerings! My weekly “w-e-e-k-l-y” gift that I hope and pray keeps on giving! After all, sermons do have a short shelf life! There has been so much praise and rejoicing lifted to the heavens in this room where we do our thing, hopefully God’s thing, voices carrying far beyond these rafters, a cacophony of echoes filling the void, reverberating like music right to the ears of the Divine. So much rejoicing and celebration, so much grief and so many tears, every emotion the human being can evoke. As we stop and mark in time this significant milestone

carved in perpetuity, etched on a cornerstone permanently located on the western façade of this magnificent building, marking the erection of this monumental structure, we can only imagine the pride that went into the construction, every building phase, of this great edifice. It is my hunch, that raising the funds, conceiving the architecture, and building the project was like a commercial (ADT) I saw this past week, a pipedream that became a dream come true! We can now only begin to imagine the beaming pride of all the saints who have passed and have passed before us, entering through the very same entryways, these same doors, at least on the west side, proud that after these one hundred full and productive years, that the First Congregational Church, now the First Congregational United Church of Christ is, much like the Energizer Bunny, still going, going strong, is alive and well, continuing as an influential, a vibrant and vital, relational and relevant, congregation.

When people ask you how big your church is, in turn ask them, “Do you mean in numbers or influence?” We stand on the shoulders of a rich heritage, an heirloom left by those who once sat in these pews, traversing these heavily walked and well-worn aisles on this very spot, every invisible footprint leaving a most wonderfully indelible legacy. The fruits of the labors of a great cloud of witnesses who bravely came together and chose to gather as one to build and serve, the “balcony people” as the late Baptist theologian Carlyle Marney called them, is a constant reminder of the accountability and responsibility placed on us in our time, the baton dutifully handed off to us, this unspoken but very much understood commitment not lost on any one of us as we continue to be and do church together. Yes, from the mystery of the eternal heavens, those who passed this way on their earthly journey are cheering us on as we continue to fight the good fight, the endless fight for justice, social justice, and to make the preaching and teaching of Jesus, his mission and ministry, real and realized all around us and in our world, ever seeking, striving, to become the best local missional congregation we can be as we seek to meet the high calling of our call. One of our goals, a major objective, indeed, a primary witness, is to ever become more graciously loving, an “extravagantly welcoming,” expansively inclusive, hospitably inviting, vulnerably Open and Affirming congregation. Yes, this is the first time I have used this phrase in a formal way, in an official capacity, in a sermon! Mark it as a significant inflection point! Cherish, yes, relish, the moment! What a hospitably welcoming

and inclusive testimony we now, as we have for the longest time, proudly proclaim, unbound, unshackled, and set free, owing a debt of gratitude to our predecessors, their open invitations paving the way for this glorious affirmation, September 8, 2024, now and forever marking a date that will live in the annals of the history of this congregation, a day to honor with pride! No pun intended! With the guidance of the holy and still speaking Spirit of God we continue to adapt and change, to develop and evolve, always in process, always on the journey, hoping and, of course praying, that we are on the right track. What and who we believe we are, what and who we think we are, believe in our heart of hearts ourselves to be, we are fully aware, but what and who we will be, what and who we will become as we live and move and have our being remains to be seen, our story never finished, only God perhaps knowing as the Holy One, the great Spirit of the universe, leads! What a joyful adventure we are experiencing together as a locally gathered church, beloved faith community all and always! And as always, being and doing church, as with every aspect of life and living, is always about the journey, the destination never on the radar, never on the horizon, but ever generating excited anticipation and expectation to each day dawning! Wow, what an introduction to a day that defies, that is beyond, all words! And yet, we know in our hearts and minds, that indeed, words are the best, the most, we have to offer in these sacred moments, in times like this! And so, I humbly offer some words in this homiletical reflection, hoping that a sermon can somewhat even remotely capture, can seize, every ounce of these amazingly celebratory moments we are enjoying together this morning.

To take some liberties and paraphrase from the wisdom literature in the book of Proverbs, this poetically gifted writer implores the reader, then and now, to accentuate the voice of reason above the fray spewed forth by untold simpletons who scoff at common sense as fools who hate knowledge. Yes, it is as if this ancient poet was composing a letter to all of us right here and right now in our contemporary, postmodern, setting, this global village in which we all are living, moving, and having being. This intuitive writer wonders why there are so many scoffers, as they are called, those who hate knowledge, who seem allergic to wisdom, who shun reason, failing to accept, to support, facts and truth that are now commonly accepted throughout the world as normative, everyday information. Yes, we strive to be, we are, the antithesis to such thickness, ever

delighted to embrace rational thinking! It is interesting the way that the writer of Proverbs pairs the hatred of knowledge with the fear of the Lord, these two images seemingly mutually inclusive in the mind of this writer. As I pondered this ten-carat diamond jubilee celebration we embrace and enjoy today, while reflecting on the texts chosen for worship on this Sunday, I was reminded of the many things we do as a congregation. In addition to our passion for mission and ministry, a sermon in and of itself, one of the many things for which we are becoming known, one of the major emphases that is emerging and I suppose evolving, is that we are a critically thinking, intellectually curious, bunch, that on this hallowed ground we are intentional, respecting new insights, discoveries that continue to enhance, to untap the unlimited potential of advancing the human cause, promoting the fairness and equity commensurate with an egalitarian society, to better illumine our understanding of the vastness of the universe, and perhaps creating a better awareness of the Holy. We are a covenant people who are not afraid and never shy away from a ready willingness to challenge perceived reality, status quo, willing to question every presumed precept, every traditional thought, every naive assumption! In our quest, our perpetual pursuit to expand our knowledge, we engage truth as we find it, as we discover it, as we learn of and from it, doing so without compromise, refusing to sacrifice our faith in the process, believing that faithfulness, that religion, i.e., spirituality, juxtaposed with the amazing abilities of the mind, can not only coexist, but that they go hand in hand as a blessed gift from the Holy, as divinely designed, yes, as intended from creation, complementary in every way imaginable. Faith and reason are never conflicted polarities to be managed, but opposites attracting, two sides of the same coin. As we all know full well, sadly it is not so, regrettably not that way, for so many in so many Christian climates, Christianity laced with millstones that stifle, suffocate the human spirit, sapping the soul, Christendom compromised with layer upon layer of way too much guilt and not enough grace. The faith has been hijacked and held hostage by many, subjected to a host of backward precedents, burdened from its foundational beginnings with the weighty oppression of way too much judgment and not enough tolerance, much less acceptance and affirmation, too much human-crafted dogmatic nonsense spun in the vernacular of religion-speak, the vocabulary of doctrine and creed, with never enough, all but, devoid of life-giving theological common sense. Yes, what we do here within these walls, and hopefully beyond, matters and matters a great deal. The book of Proverbs strongly

infers, indicating to us that words do indeed matter and matter much! We desire to be passionate purveyors of wisdom! We long to be prophets of Sophia, bringing sanity and sobriety, pursuing as much light in the midst of darkness as we can muster, enlightening every conversation we carry and convey, illuminatingly informing everything we do as we fulfill our mission and carry out our ministries.

In our Witness from the Gospels in Mark today we read another abbreviated story that we also find in the other synoptic Gospels, Matthew and Luke, Mark being accurately described as the *Reader's Digest* version of the purported adventures accentuating the life and times of Jesus. As they traveled toward the villages of Caesarea Philippi, along the way Jesus supposedly asked his disciples an interesting question, a general, perhaps, seemingly hypothetical inquiry, "Who do people say that I am?" Well, as we might expect, the answers were varied, "John the Baptist; and others; Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets," perhaps even naming a few of the better-known ones from back in the day. Who knows? But then Jesus got down to business, brass tacks all around, cards on the table, asking them a pointed question, was it a trick question, an inquiry that was anything but hypothetical, "But who do you say that I am?" It was and is a question for the ages, for the rock of ages, if we take this historical man from Nazareth seriously. For if we claim to be followers of Jesus, faithful to Christ, then the way we answer this question will determine the way we follow, how we respond to the message he brings. As we all know, the Jesus story means different things, radically different things, to different people and thus the response to what they, we, read is vastly different. As they say, whoever they is, are, "It is what it is!" I wonder, something that a story never reveals, never tells, unless it does, was there a prolonged period of silence, some awkward staring into space, some nervous hesitation? Or was the astute, the intuitively correct answer provided by Peter, Peter ironically nicknamed the "Rock," who was at least sometimes a blockhead, was his response quick and decisive, immediate, his gut reaction taking away any suspense, quickly letting the air out of the proverbial tire as we are prone to say about such situations. "You are the Messiah!" And of course, Peter would immediately ruin the revelatory moment after having the audacity to correct Jesus this erstwhile peasant reformer suggested on more than one occasion that he was going to be killed because of more things than we can discuss here!

I give this backstory to set the stage for what the writer of the Gospel of Mark left out of this key narrative. The articulate affirmation offered by Peter that upon the faith he had just declared for all to hear, that, indeed, the Church would be built. Now I must, as always, give the reminder that this story, as with many embellished, exaggerated, stories about Jesus, all the hyperbole contained within the Gospels, was written long after Jesus' death, resurrection, and ascension, and thus it must be acknowledged that it was the early Church that, through its founders and early interpreters, put many of these words, inserting these phrases, directly into the mouth of the rabbi as if he had actually said them in the first place. Jesus was never about the business, had no inkling, not even the remotest, slightest, idea, of building, of creating, a Church, any manifestation of an ecclesial institution. Jesus was a traditional Jew seeking to reform the religion of his birth. The rabbi never converted to Christianity, a concept and conglomerate of which he, of course, would have known nothing, an impossibility, no crystal ball in his clairvoyant arsenal. There, I feel better! That disclaimer being said, an always necessary admission, it was out of, directly because of, the preaching and teaching of Jesus, expediently derived from his mission and ministry, that the Church was born, given life, emerging and evolving as a brand spanking new, freshly minted, religious expression, a necessary adaptation of the ancient faith spawned by a permanent split, ironically taking place thanks to a painful schism, with its Judaic forebears, adherents who followed the path of traditional Judaism. And from that one initial "Church", or set of churches, we find ourselves as the offspring, gifted with a rich legacy, a proud heritage, yes, including more than a few warts, our ecclesial history filled with the good, bad, and even a great amount, too much, ugly. **But here we are! Here we stand, to call forth our inner Martin Luther! And as we celebrate the birth of this building one hundred years ago, reveling in this grand occasion of this anniversary, this birthday celebration, we are reminded of the immense role we are all called to play in proclaiming, not only the name of Jesus, as good a name as it is, but more importantly, standing for all that this pied-piping peasant reformer sought to bring to his people and all people, yes, to the Near East and to the whole world. As I mentioned, there are a lot of mixed messages about Jesus, always have been, heresies and legitimate Christological musings, you decide, and broader theologies that span every angle, from the ridiculous to the sublime. Just like our predecessors, pick one! Pick your favorite!**

We all do! As Roger Wolsey notes in the September 5, 2024, edition of “Progressing Spirit: Explorations in Theology, Spirituality, and the News,” in part of his question by a reader, “In what ways do progressive Christians view Jesus?”, observes that “For many progressive Christians, the focus is really about the message of Jesus.” Quoting an unnamed source, Wolsey adds, **“Jesus and his message are about living in love, loving-kindness, compassion, and grace. Jesus and his message are counter-cultural and subversive to all of the worldly powers that be.** Following Jesus is about nonviolently resisting imperialism. Following Jesus is about pursuing God’s vision for restorative and distributive justice instead of human tendencies for retributive justice. Following Jesus is about trusting in the wisdom and blessedness of the ways that he taught that seem counter-intuitive according to the ways of the world. Following Jesus is about liberating humanity from the myth of redemptive violence and bringing us toward the reality of redemptive nonviolence. Following Jesus is about seeking to manifest the beloved community, the empire/kingdom [I would say “realm] of God, ‘on earth as it is in heaven.’ Following Jesus is to be familiar with the scriptures that informed and inspired Jesus to help inspire, embolden, and empower us as we follow this radical and challenging Way together in community with kindred spirits.” **“Progressive Christians rightfully honor and celebrate Jesus as a unique and fully incarnate (poetically speaking) manifestation of God. We are devoted to him, we cherish him, we revere him, we are endeared to him. And we pray to the God Jesus prayed to. Being a Christian is putting our trust and reliance (having faith) in the way, teachings, and example of Jesus (that was informed and inspired by the Hebrew prophets before him) and to live with holy boldness as we seek loving and just right relations with ourselves, our neighbors (near and far), all of Creation, and with God.”**¹ **It is up to us, each and every one of us, to uphold the loving message that was and is at the heart, the very core, of the Jesus story, that God is love and love, the very essence of love, embraces, surrounds, the likes of every person, an idea, a notion, yes, an essence, that unfortunately seems far beyond the grasp of way too many who claim to follow in the precious footsteps of the rabbi. One of our many jobs is simply to turn what has become, if not always has been, a negative, a way too derogatorily negative, into a positive, a positively alluring and seductively passionate desire. The circle should never be closed, never broken for that matter, just like the Gospel Song sings, but the circle**

¹ProgressiveChristianity.Org; contact@progressingspirit.com.

always must be widened, a concentric ring around the earth ever expanded, exactly the way Jesus envisioned and intended, hospitable welcome and inclusion, unbound, unbridled, invitation, the driving force, a foundational tradition that was and is at the root of his movement from its very beginning. Our challenge is always to continue, in the words of the prophet Isaiah, to “look to the rock from which you were hewn, and to the quarry from which you were dug,” and in our case, for our purposes, to lean on that rock that is our faith, our faith in the one we desperately seek to follow, diligently following in the very large footprints of the humble man of Nazareth, Jesus, rabbi, mentor, brother, and friend! On this rock, this rock of ages, the Church was built! On this rock, the rock of ages, this church was built! Gloria Dei! Glory to God!

In the name of the One who creates, redeems, and sustains, who has blessed us richly and whose blessing we pray will be ours for the next one hundred years and counting. Amen and amen!