**Message**

**Ingathering and Water Ceremony**

**September 13, 2015**

How many of you have recently learned to swim…or are starting to learn?

How many of you remember learning, perhaps many years ago?

 A few years ago, our daughter, who is now seven, started taking swimming lessons at the Y. She learned how to use a kickboard. She learned how to doggie paddle with the help of some floats around her waist. But it took her a long time to learn to feel comfortable putting her face in the water.

We took it slow. No reason to push her. And now, on her own timetable, she’s finally comfortable jumping into the deep end and swimming underwater without floatation to the shallow end where she can stand. She’s more comfortable swimming under water than on the surface, I suspect because she likes the feeling of buoyancy – of being pushed up – more than she likes the feeling of sinking down.

But there’s one thing with which she’s really not comfortable at all yet: floating on her back. Right now, it’s just about the scariest thing she can imagine doing in the pool. Every once in a while, at my urging, she’ll try, with me holding her, but she immediately tenses up and folds in the middle like a jackknife and starts sinking.

Do you remember having a similar experience when you were learning?

I can understand it. It makes all the sense in the world to me. When we’re nervous or anxious or unsure, our inclination – for many of us – our instinct – is to curl up into a ball, like an armadillo, or a hedgehog or a potato bug. When we feel vulnerable, we, too, want to protect ours-soft-selves. It is counter-intuitive to lie back and open wide and relax our defenses when we feel threatened by the circumstances of our lives…even when that is exactly what is most likely to save us.

So again, with our daughter, we’re taking it slow. No reason to push her. She’ll get there. I trust that she will. I’ve seen it happen before.

She is not the first being that I’ve tried to teach to swim…

My dog Spenser, a Labrador retriever who is now 13 years old, needed some help, too, when he was young. By the end of his first year, he still showed absolutely no desire whatsoever to swim, and I was concerned that I might be the only person in the world with a water dog that was afraid of the water.

But then one weekend, while visiting some friends on a lake, I finally had a chance to actually get in the water with him. And I held him – one hand on either side of his belly – and gently eased him into deeper and deeper water until his feet no longer could reach the sandy, but solid ground.

And I held him there, gently but firmly through his first moments of panic – just held him – until he stopped thrashing and started paddling – just held him, didn’t push him – until he realized he wasn’t going to sink after all. And the rest of that afternoon he swam and swam with a big canine grin on his face until he was too tired to swim anymore.

So, you see, I trust that our daughter will learn to trust the water to hold her up because I saw our dog learn to trust it. I saw him be transformed from a land-bound dog who stood fearfully on the brink into a water dog who was filled with joy and zest. I’ve seen it happen.

Sometimes what we need in order to learn to trust is simply to be held, gently and patiently, by someone else who has already learned to trust. You might say that this is largely what interim ministry is about. And yet it is not ministers alone who do the holding. We hold one another.

As a congregation, you, too, are called to hold - to be a community that holds. Perhaps you don’t always do it as well as you would like. You’re a human community. Sometimes, I imagine, you make human mistakes, like the rest of us. But from what I know of you, you are a community that supports its members and friends through fear and challenge and transition. That is among the promises that we make to one another in religious community: To be a community of people who hold one another, as we each learn to trust more deeply…

And boy, in these times, do we ever need such communities. It is especially hard to trust in times of uncertainty or anticipated change, during periods of interim ministry and staff transition, for example, but also during times of cultural uncertainty and anxiety. It can feel not only counterintuitive, but also countercultural to stay open these days, when so many voices around us keep telling us to be afraid, to close our borders and our hearts, to pull away instead of reaching out. Philip Booth’s poem speaks to these times. In the words of one of my colleagues,

The poet speaks to our lives, to those times when we lie awake at night, unable to sleep, our minds racing over a mental list of “to dos,” our spirits parched and dried, our lives ruled by agendas, plans and tasks, our hearts cramped by fear. The poet speaks to our lives, to those times we are driving along…our minds not on where we are going but worrying about a mental list of “what ifs,” our hearts cramped by fear. And when we are most tense and anxious and our hearts cramped by fear in a post September 11th world, the poet takes us to the depths of our spiritual knowing. “Remember,” says the poet, “when fear cramps your heart what I told you: lie gently and wide to the light-year stars, lie back and the sea will hold you.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

The question before us this morning is not whether difficult things might happen to us tomorrow, but how we will choose to live today. Things will inevitably occur that will no doubt challenge our capacity for trust. But that doesn’t mean we’ll be better off if we choose to live in fear instead. As another minister once said, “You may be deceived if you trust too much, but you will live in torment if you do not trust enough.”[[2]](#footnote-2) …

As M. Scott Peck has written, “There can be no vulnerability without risk; there can be no community without vulnerability; there can be no peace, and ultimately no life, without community.”

As we begin this year together, we stand at the brink of something new, in the space between what was and what is yet to be. In the words of our chalice lighting, “All that we have ever loved and all that we have ever been stands with us on the brink of all that we aspire to create…”

As we prepare ourselves to step forward, may we find the courage to step through the air boldly, and to patiently and gently hold one another until we find ourselves once again on solid ground.

So may it be!

1. From “Lie Back,” a sermon by Rev. Jan K. Nielson, September 7, 2003. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Frank Crane, Presbyterian minister and columnist, early 20th century [↑](#footnote-ref-2)