

## *Controlled Chaos?*

Isaiah 55: 8-11 and Romans 4:17

These are troubling times, my friends, troubling times. We might even call them chaotic – terrorism, extremism, bigotry, hatred, attack and counter-attack. But still meals have to be prepared and the dishes have to be done. So let me share with you what I have seen from my kitchen window over the last few days – all the while pondering Scripture and the news of the week.

First, I look across the river at a neighbor's garden – rich in profusion, it seems a riot of colors and varieties of plant life – vegetables mixed in with flowers, seemingly randomly deposited, helter-skelter, but also artistically clumped. Swiss chard and kale and parsley amidst petunias, daisies, and geraniums. These beds don't whisper something soothing; rather, the whole yard cries out "Look at me!" Beautiful! Professionals tell me the term for this kind of landscaping is *controlled chaos*. *Controlled chaos!* I like that language and imagery. I understand it is also used in sports and for certain beauty products that will reduce "very bad hair days." *Controlled chaos!* It sort of describes my life at the moment, our life at FCC, our life as a nation. Trying desperately to manage things, establish some kind of order, make sense in the midst of muddiness and confusion. You get the picture? Maybe you are there too?

Again I look out the window and watch the tides of the river go in and out, in and out, twice a day. And as they do, they change the shoreline – little by little. A bit more sand here, a little less ground there. The waves call attention to the fact that something is changing. Things don't look the same as they did when we moved here 18 years ago. I liked it the way it was. I knew what to expect. But what say do I have in this matter? Many things are beyond my ability to control. That's the challenge – knowing where and when and how to accept my responsibility for being a moral agent.

And then, looking again, there is the bird sitting confidently on the top branch of a tree – an osprey overlooking its domain. And I am reminded of that Sufi story I wanted to tell you. Once upon a time, the old tale goes, there was a bird that sheltered in the withered branches of an old tree that stood in the middle of a vast deserted plain. One day a whirlwind uprooted the tree. The bird was bereft. What would he ever do now? Where could he go? Where? Alone and distraught, he flew and flew and flew hundreds of weary miles in search of sanctuary. Almost in despair and ready to give up, he suddenly saw it. There, over the last dune, was a forest of young trees full of fruit. And thus began a whole new life.

End of Sufi story... with no closing line that says, "and the bird lived happily ever after," which leaves us with the question that we might ask, "so, how long did this latest shelter last?" In fact, "how long does any security endure?" What can we truly count on? What is control all about? Where do we have security and where do we not?

Three images from my window – an unruly garden, the surging tides in a river, a bird sitting in a tree which won't last forever. *Control? Chaos?* And the Lord said:

*My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways...*

*My word that goes out from my mouth shall not return to me empty,*

*but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing*

*for which I sent it....[My words will] do the work I sent them to do, they'll complete*

*the assignment I gave them* (Isaiah 55:8-11 in the NRSV and the Message).

I tell you I t's hard to get the food on the table and the dishes done with so much to ponder. Because now I have to try to think theologically, to see these things through the lens of my faith, our faith, our understanding of how the *Immortal, Invisible God Only Wise* is working beyond our understanding. I consider *control* as I scrub away grease from the skillet.

*Control* - it seems so important to us. And it is. There is much in life for which we are responsible, need to make good decisions about, need to choose and need to avoid in order to have some security and well-being for ourselves, our families, our neighbors, our society. There is good and there is evil. No doubt about it, and we have to determine where we cast our lot. Control at some level is good and necessary, but the problem is we can get stuck in controlling and protecting what we own or value, be it our worldview or our affiliations, those things that identify us (our brand of religion, our politics, our membership in this or that group, our possessions or zip code). We can get tied down, have reduced options, spend time and energy in fear and clinging to things we want to control, which we believe will make us secure.

We can end up thinking that life is about us, rather than we are about finding Life, taking risks to find the abundant life that God in Jesus Christ intends for us, intends for all to have. Where do we have to give up, or limit, our sense of control in order to become really free to become more of what we are meant to be, as individuals and communities? What does God want us to let go of and what to take on so that God's word and work can be accomplished? How can we receive the new life that God offers us if we are holding on too tight to that which we think we have securely secured. Our faith urges us to let go, be transformed, be made new. That's what confession and pardon are all about. The issue about control is what and when to exercise control over our actions, being responsible and faithful, so that new life can flourish for us and for others? That's a harder, more far-reaching question than what to plant in my garden.

And then there is *chaos*. The dictionary synonyms for *chaos* are: *disorder, confusion, jumble, disorganization, abyss, void*. Add to that, *bedlam, anarchy, disarray, pandemonium* and you have got quite a mess, don't you? Now I know that physics and science have something to say about chaos theory making sense of the world, and the predictability of unpredictability, but I think most of us these days are more caught up in the sense of things in our lives and in our nation being out of control, confusing, threatening – and now we are coming to

Charlottesville and racism and white supremacy, and hatred and violence, and with their opposites - equity and justice. We'll get to that in just a minute - if you were wondering.

But first I want to remind us that however chaotic life seems to us these days, it is not random, disorganized, without purpose, in God's plan. The divine blueprint, if you will, is a movement toward healing, expansiveness, and the constant renewal of things (think of the waves creating new bits of beach, and new trees and unruly gardens). *In the beginning was the Word*, and the wind, the Spirit, swept over the void and the darkness, and brought forth creation *and it was good, very good*. All of it! And our hope is that the God who created us and who accompanies us into this present darkness will sustain us and lead us through what seems presently to us to be without form or direction. We believers are not without hope, condemned to live in chaos, which maybe isn't even *chaos* after all. Just life being life - in ways we can't get a long perspective on from our limited vantage point, but nevertheless the life of which we are a part. We have a place in God's salvation history, even if we don't always, or ever, understand God's ways.

*My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways,  
says the Lord, [who according to our second lesson} brings the dead to life  
and calls into being what does not exist – yet (emphasis mine).*

Do not let go of hope, my friends, even in the face of the real seeming chaos in our lives today. Which brings us to the current challenge of racism, ugliness, sinfulness, complicity, - hatred and our role (conscious or unconscious) in perpetuating racism and other "isms" – and, and the challenge of what is a faithful response to such hatred.

I think there is no need to go into the details of the tragedies which occurred in Charlottesville last week and the fall-out, the implications and consequences of those events. They are all too familiar and too graphic. They are etched in our minds and in our souls. White robes, burning crosses, swastikas, murderous cars. Justifications, accusations and acclamations. Bad theology (or just plain prejudice and ignorance, cast in Biblical terms). Too much, too ugly, too divisive. Too much wrong, too much evil. It is all out there. You know it already, don't you?

Nor is it necessary to go through the Bible book by book to see where God stands in these matters. And where we are called to come down or stand up (whichever way you want to put it). That is unequivocally clear. *Do we believe that Jesus Christ died for all? Do we believe in the ethic of love rather than hatred?* If we declare that in Christ there is no Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male or female (Gal.3:28), then surely the color of one's skin, the faith one proclaims, the accent with which one speaks – none of these can matter to God. *If we seek to follow the ways of Jesus, who stood with the oppressed, spoke out against political and religious powers, and courageously embodied a just word for all as he sought to create it* (UCC pastoral letter of 8/15/17), then there can be no doubt about where and who we ought to be and do.

The valid question is what is within our control, within our power to act on, in this contemporary *chaos*. How shall we choose to resist hatred and violence? Where are we to be agents of truth and light. We Christians and people of other faiths or no faith cannot keep silent, but to meet violence with violence is counter-productive and breeds more violence. The Gospel calls for rehabilitative justice, love and reconciliation, not vindictive punishment and retaliation. So what are we as the Church of Jesus Christ called to do and be? What are we as the First Congregational Church in Branford called to do and be? What are you and I as individual believers called to do and be?

Our local UCC conference has urged some actions. You can read them in full on our website. They involve acknowledging our own complicity in the structures of racism (sound like part of our Morning Prayer?), being true solidarity partners with those who march in the streets, including going out there and walking with others. Being prophetic and agitating, discombobulating, ourselves. Oh, we'd much rather enjoy peace. How we love peace when it means not disturbing our ease, our security, our established patterns. But how about stepping out of our comfort zone to offer support, compassion and even justice and redress, to those who have been discriminated against?

How to do that? I have copied some very prescient points from a document called *10 Ways to Fight Hate: A Community Response Guide*, put out by the Southern Poverty Law Committee, a group which has long been railing against and educating about intolerance, bigotry, extremism. It outlines actions like dealing with the media and informing yourself. It offers practical advice, like don't go to a protest, don't confront hate groups, rather offer alternatives. Hold vigils or protests in another location. Meet every act of hate with an act of love and unity.

Take one of these fliers; they're available around the church. Take two, and pass the other along. We can print more, and again you can go on line for a fuller document. Take it, read it, and pray over it. See where you are led.

There are a lot of choices we can make and a lot of actions we can take. And I am hoping, I am trusting that we will. I believe we at FCC will be talking to ministers and leaders in other churches in town, and other local groups, about what we can do as a community to address this and related issues which go far beyond Charlottesville to the deepest soul of America. There will be vigils, forums, petitions, prayers, study groups, outreach, inreach, soul searching, giving up, taking on. We will not be silent. And some of it will begin with speaking to ourselves, and honestly to our God.

As citizens, but particularly as Christians, as followers of Jesus who showed us the way, do not give up hope in the wild and wonderful plan of God. We might not see it clearly now, but what does not yet exist in fullness is coming into being. It is not lost in what we consider irredeemable chaos. Friends, be essentially hope-filled, remembering that life is not about us, it is God's story; and we are God's people, creatures of the Infinite whose ways are beyond our knowing, *in light inaccessible hid from our eyes*. The Creator God creating still, and we

are part of God's movement in history, partners in building a world of meaning and hope, healing, expansiveness, renewal.

*Controlled chaos?* Or faithful participation in the Kin-dom on earth as it is in heaven. Let us bring all that we are into alignment with that plan and purpose. Let us show the world that we, followers of Jesus, are here. It is possible to use our influence and power and faith to create islands of sanity in the midst of turbulent chaotic times and trends. Not only possible, but urgent.

Hmmmm. This is a lot to be seen through a few panes of glass. Gardens, waves, birds - and calls to love, peacemaking and justice. I wonder what the sights from your own windows and wanderings will reveal and what they will call you to. God is still speaking and beckoning and hoping and investing a lot in us.

Let me close with a petition from St. Francis' prayer: *Make us instruments of thy Peace, O Wise and Holy One.*

May it be so. Amen and amen.

Sermon preached by Susan Power Trucksess

First Congregational Church in Branford

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Thoughts, insights and quotations from:

The UCC Pastoral Letter of August 15, 2017, available at [ucc.org/news](http://ucc.org/news)

The Yale Divinity School News, *Dean Sterling on Charlottesville, 8/14/17.*

Joan Chittister's *Between the Dark and the Daylight* (New York, Image, 2015).

*Ten Ways to Fight Hate*, a guide published by the Southern Poverty Law Center.