

Hamburger Buns

First Congregational Church, Branford
June 30, 2019; Matthew 10:40-42

Just prior to the scripture reading, Jesus had summoned his 12 disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to cure every disease and every sickness. He then sent them out to proclaim the good news, and he advised that - if they're welcomed, that's great, and if they're not, shake the dust from their feet - just move on - there's always be someone who'll want what you have. And, then we take up here, where Jesus says:

“Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. Whoever welcomes a prophet in the name of a prophet will receive a prophet’s reward; and whoever welcomes a righteous person in the name of a righteous person will receive the reward of the righteous; and whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple—truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward.”

With the 4th this week, I do want to say that it’s not easy being the *United States of America*; however, I believe, that one day, somehow, we will be. Speaking of politics, because you’re in a search for a settled minister, I want to speak to politics a little. You probably realize that church members everywhere complain if a minister gets too political. This has always interested me because Jesus was extremely political. So, what’s a minister to do? They do often choose to speak the word and risk the centuries old stone-throwing, driving them out of town. This does happen ALL of the time. For instance, our Asylum Hill Congregational Church in Hartford lost its Senior Pastor over a political divide in the congregation. The Sunday following the Presidential Inauguration Day in January 2017, Rev. Matthew Laney offered a blunt prayer from the pulpit - and some members had voted for Donald Trump... But, the truth is, heat had been building around Rev. Laney for the 5 years he served there. When he resigned five months after that prayer he said, “I need to find a place where I can be my full, authentic self in ministry, practicing and proclaiming my understanding of the gospel, especially in these days when so much is at stake.”

Your church, along with most churches, is a blend of liberal to conservative politics. I think the pastor who is called to this church will need to be mindful of that, and find a way to balance it with their own politics. When does the preacher speak up on racism, gender identity, sexuality, other religions, immigration, war? What would Jesus do? What would he say? What would he say today? Jesus was always confronting injustice - but, I hear ya, he was killed at 33, so maybe a

preacher has to hold back a little... If they want to remain in their church for a time, they have to patiently make small inroads. I also think a congregation has to decide if they're willing to be upset occasionally by the preacher's interpretation of the Gospel. That's why I wrote this as part of a new member ceremony: *Welcome. We're so glad that you made the decision to join this community. It is hoped that you will be comfortable here, and a little uncomfortable, too, for the Gospel confronts us as well as comforts us.* If you're never mad at the preacher, they're probably *not* doing their job!

It's for your Pastoral Search Committee to discern, but as I've said here before, I suspect that what will work at FCC is a pastor who can find more things that unite you than divide you. But, they will need to speak to justice issues. It's about balance, isn't it? If a preacher goes after it hard one Sunday, then the next Sunday they need to offer a warm and comforting side of Jesus. Balance.

I know a wonderful pastor who has been at their church for 15 years who is a member of Alcoholics Anonymous, but has never felt safe to reveal that to the church. Would you really want your pastor to hide this huge part of who they are, to hide a program that offers such rich healing? Wounded healers are the best kind...

Anyway, in honor of July 4th, what *particularly* unites us all, is *hamburger buns!* Am I right? And, patriotic songs, and fireworks!

And, if you're a Christian American, what unites us is Jesus's call to welcome one another. Whoever you are, wherever you are on life's journey, liberal or conservative, Jesus says you are welcome here. Whatever is going on in the country, in the world, in the town, in the church, Welcome. When you welcome someone, you welcome Jesus. Isn't that just so great - when you welcome anyone, you're welcoming Christ. *I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me. I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink. Whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple—truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward."*

Christ lives in your church *because* of your deep welcome of one another. One thing I love about you that I haven't witnessed in another church is how the flowers a member offers on Sunday don't go to the giver. You want them to go to others. I, or the deacons determine who they should go to that Sunday. That is awesome. Sometimes I try to give the flowers to the giver, and they just refuse them. They're like, *no, no, no.* They really want them to welcome someone else. You're so unselfish, First Congregational. Thank you.

Speaking of welcome, in my last church, the deacons discussed how members, friends, and visitors can feel as they sit in church - that there's a perception that everyone around them has a perfect faith. The person thinks, *that's not where I am*. It can feel like you don't fit in - like you *have* to believe a certain way. We discussed how no one in the church has a perfect faith, or a perfect life, and how we all have baggage. Bring your baggage right in here and set it down with the rest of all of ours. And, together we'll try to help heal one another where we can, and ask God to heal the rest. *Whoever you are, wherever you are, you are welcome here*. Whatever you have going on. I said to the deacons, we're all just here trying to find our way. We're all just plain ole hamburger buns! **But**, and here's the great part.... when those buns unite... we become bread for one another.

It's not about who has the greatest faith, who has been healed the most, it's about saying, if you're hurting, let me help you, brother. Sister, I see you. You all belong together. To something greater than yourselves. Take and eat.

Right?

And now, hamburger buns and Annette Wilson. Ten years ago when I was serving The First Congregational Church of West Haven, a member asked me to lift up prayers for a Westie, as they call themselves, a 32 year old wife, mother of 4 year old triplets, a teenage stepdaughter, and, she was a teacher... who was diagnosed with brain cancer - and given 3 months to live. One Sunday after worship, a member pulled me aside and said that Annette had been told by her doctors that there was nothing more they could do and they sent her home to die, and Annette wanted to see *me*. I gave her a call and she said she wanted to pray and to have communion - she asked if we could do this weekly. The next day I went to Annette, who was in her living room on a hospital bed, her body extremely swollen, but a smile and a spirit that were large - probably why she was still around 8 months after she was supposed to die. But, it wasn't a good day for her. She asked if I could come the next week.

I did, and beforehand, I went into the church kitchen to find grape juice and bread - there were none, which was okay - because I believe it's about the communing, the sharing, the remembering - that you can use any elements. So, I poured some cherry kool-aid into my communion kit bottle. I saw Tostitos on the counter, but decided to look in the freezer since I knew the deacons kept bread there to give visitors. There were frozen pound cakes, but underneath them were 2 bags of... hamburger buns! I took one of the buns and smashed it down in my kit.

When I arrived, Annette's fireman husband was washing his truck while the 4 year old triplets were nearby playing. They asked me who I was and I said I was the minister. "What's that?" "Well, I'm the leader of a church, and I'm here to talk with your mom." They pointed to my kit, "what's that?" "It's something special for your mom". I moved to go inside and their dad told them to stay outside. I went in, and Annette and I proceeded to have a very intimate conversation, which led into communion. I didn't apologize for our odd, ordinary meal. I simply broke the bread, quartered the bun, and I split one of the quarters in two for Annette and me – which left 3 quarters... which caused a lightbulb moment - later I asked if I could give communion to the children. She said yes. Even though Annette was religious, I sensed that the children had no or a limited understanding of God, of Jesus, of the church, so I thought this could be an interesting introduction; and I wanted it to be meaningful and just right for them. *For them.* Welcome them.

I told Annette I'd see her next week, and I went out the screen door and made my communion invitation, "Who would like a yummy meal", as I held up the little communion cups of kool-aid. "I do, I do!" As they drank this consecrated element, I felt such warmth, love and joy, because while they may not have known what they were doing, Jesus surely did, and Jesus was meeting them in that meal. And I said, "that's God's love for you." Then I gave them each the warm, soft bread, and they took and ate and I told them it was the bread of life. I told them again how much God loves them, and that he loves their mother, too. I made the sign of the cross on their innocent little foreheads, and told them to be good children for their mommy. "Oh, yes, we will," just happy to have had a snack.

Whoever gives even a cup of cold water, or kool-aid and a hamburger bun, to one of these little ones in my name, will have their reward.

They were my reward. And, so are you. Amen.

