

I never promised you a rose garden

First Congregational Church Branford, UCC
January 26, 2020; 1 Corinthians 1:10-18
Annual Meeting Sunday
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In Paul's first letter to the Corinthian churches, he says:

Now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose. For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there are quarrels among you, my brothers and sisters. What I mean is that each of you says, "I belong to Paul," or "I belong to Apollos," or "I belong to Cephas," or "I belong to Christ." Has Christ been divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul? I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius, so that no one can say that you were baptized in my name. (I did baptize also the household of Stephanas; beyond that, I do not know whether I baptized anyone else.) For Christ did not send me to baptize but to proclaim the gospel, and not with eloquent wisdom, so that the cross of Christ might not be emptied of its power. For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.

This is the word of God for the people of God.

When I was 10 years old in 1970, country music singer Lynn Anderson, with her poufy blonde hair, recorded a song called.... "I never promised you a rose garden." I really loved this song, and I asked my mom to buy me the 45 single and I played it over and over and over on my record player, much to my 2 brothers' and sister's dismay over my obsessive music choices. I didn't know what the song meant, but you have to admit for those who know the song, it's a pretty catchy tune.

The main words are:

I beg your pardon
I never promised you a rose garden...
Along with the sunshine...
there's gotta be a little rain some time.

For the longest time, even into my 20's I remember thinking "Life isn't fair!" I guess I thought life had promised me a rose garden. Where's my rose garden?! Where's my knight in shining armor?!

My mother had lived like she was always waiting for one or the other. I surmised that I was supposed to get one! When it didn't come, I started thinking that life wasn't fair! Nobody ever tapped me on the shoulder to say, *no, child, it isn't... And, won't ever be.*

Oh, for a parent to teach a child, maybe even as early as 1 year old: "hey... hey you, life's going to be hard. Real hard! You need to get used to that. You need to toughen up and prepare yourself for it, some real hardship is gonna be out there. Lotts things you're not going to like. You're going to struggle, child of mine."

I think many people didn't get this memo!

We act so shocked when struggle comes our way! We act so surprised and get so upset when people say or do things we don't expect. And, there's God, "I never promised you a rose garden. Anywhere in my bible does it say that your life is going to run smoothly? No. It says that I won't abandon you, I'll be there. I'll help. But, life, yes, m'am, it's going to be a struggle." I told some folks recently that I think God likes the struggle. If there were no struggle, we probably wouldn't talk with him, *and* there probably wouldn't be friends. There wouldn't be the kind of support that takes place between human beings in the midst of struggle. God seems to like that we're going to have to put one hand in God's, and the other hand in Jesus's, or a friend's. Yes, God seems to like that.

I guess you have to remember that even if you do get a rose garden, what do roses come with?... Yes, *thorns!* In other words, there's no perfect. There's no perfect.

The song recently came to me because Abe's first semester at Bryant University was *so hard*, in many ways. Long story short, throughout his 5 week break we weren't sure he was going to go back. Once the decision had been made that he would, I talked with him a great deal about the reality of struggle, that he can expect college to be hard, and not to his liking. That it's about growing up. *And, here's the most important part for parents to say, that he can handle it... you can handle whatever comes your way, my child.* I reminded him of all the tools he has to carry him through. First semester is a big adjustment for kids who've had the privileges of a fairly cushy home life. Abe just wanted to be a kid again without responsibilities. But, what Paul tells those Corinthian churches a little further in his letter, *When I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways.* Time to grow up.

About this letter.

As I always say to churches who are struggling and believing they're the only ones who are, and just how *hard* church is, I point them to Paul's letters to churches - where division was evident in the earliest of church writings, his letters.

From the beginning we see that God never promised the church would be a rose garden! The church is made up of imperfect and broken human beings trying to live together...

I came upon this little prayer you might like: Thank you, God, for our divisions. They liven things up and make us realize that we are alive, not yet *resting in peace*. Help keep us together while we struggle to be blessed by one another.

An exciting thing about Paul's letter is that it shows a growing church - just struggling with new ways. *New beginnings are often tangled in difficulties*. I think about that with our new governance structure which you voted for in October. Our North Haven UCC church has been using this structure for 7 years. Our new CE Coordinator, a member there, told us in her interview that it was hard at the beginning for everyone to get used to, but in time it all really worked out and now it's just their way of life. She said, "I'm a huge supporter of the shift. It just takes a change in mindset. It's so worth it in this changing climate of churches." (- in a time when we're seeing a decrease in membership and attendance and willingness to serve on boards and committees) A great many churches have moved to the team structure.

What I also want to lift out of the letter is Paul says that factions have aligned themselves around key personalities and *their* teachings. I guess without Jesus Christ standing right here, we can be tempted to identify with a leader or one of *their* causes. The problem is... any devotion to a leader that compromises the believer's identification *with Jesus Christ*. When we identify and align with some leader rather than *with Christ*.

Here's what's happened at FCCB. When things are rough, a congregation looks back to earlier days, when it seemed there was more ease, and more people, and they long for that again, and they talk a lot about a prior minister - we had the best minister of all! He did so many things for us! - and may even hope that the next one will be like the one *they* liked. The problem is... parishioners have become overly identified with a pastor rather than with Christ *and one another in the church*. At FCCB we routinely hear comparisons between: Roger Manners, Gary Smith, Susan Murtha, John Heeckt, Nada Sellers, Theresa Borchetta, Susan Power Trucksess, Rev. Suz. Just pastors - doing the best they can to represent Christ. But, they are not Christ. They can only point to Christ. **And**, when they baptize!, they're not doing the baptizing, the Holy Spirit and the people of God are doing it! Pastors are simply a guide, who point to the divine, to Christ.

As I said in my annual report, the way forward for FCCB is to let go of all of its ministers so you can enter a new relationship freely, unencumbered by the past, and enjoy the new flavor someone new brings, and how *they* point to Christ.

..... Please let go of Gary and Linda Smith. Please let go of Gary and Linda Smith. Please let go of Gary and Linda Smith. Chances are, even if you got a minister like Gary and a spouse like Linda, it wouldn't work *in this time and place*. That was for *that* time and place. *There's a time and a purpose for every matter under heaven.*

God is doing a new thing. Apart from any minister who has come before. Something radically new - so that you can be *a new creation* - in... Christ.
[Always in Christ. Not the minister.]

Beloved, how does a church come together? When it remembers that *Jesus* has brought them together - when they have *him* in common. When they talk about what *he* does for them. People say they go to a church for a minister or for the music, and I really can't tell you how misguided that is. Because this is Jesus' church. We survive because of *this One* right here... His life, his struggle, his message that a light shines in the darkness and the darkness does not overcome it.

He says, *I can't promise you a rose garden, but there is light in the darkness. Take my hand.*

Pass it on that *he* is the greatest of all. Amen.

Sing: *Pass It On*