

A Sermon by Nada Sellers, preached at First Church, Branford CT on 9-11-16

“Walking in the Spirit”

Isaiah 60:1-4 & John 14:14-17, 25-26

According to some of the leading researchers of our time, “a brisk walk each day for a minimum of 20 minutes could lead to considerable health benefits, especially for people who are physically inactive.” The 2015 study lead by medical experts at the University of Cambridge noted that a sedentary lifestyle is responsible for twice as many deaths as obesity, and that with just a small amount of daily physical activity, there are major health benefits. (MRC Epidemiology Unit, Univ. of Cambridge, Ulf Ekelund, lead author at www.huffingtonpost.ca/2015/01/16/walking-benefits)

The American Diabetes Association says walking lowers your blood sugar levels and your overall risk for diabetes. Researchers have also found that regular walking lowered blood pressure by as much as 11 points and may reduce the risk of stroke by 20 to 40%! And in one of the most cited studies on walking and health, published in the *New England Journal of Medicine* in 2002, findings indicated that those who walked enough to meet basic physical activity guidelines, “had a 30% lower risk of cardiovascular disease, compared with those who did not walk regularly.” Yes, walking does really good things for your health. And not just your physical health...

When you become a regular walker you establish a regular routine – and when you have a routine, you are more likely to continue with the activity and take on new healthy behaviors. “I firmly believe that walking regularly can help you to accomplish other goals you set your mind to,” says personal trainer Kim Evans. If you spend a little more time researching the benefits of walking on the internet, you’ll discover all sorts of things, among them keeping your legs looking great, and becoming more “regular” with your GI mobility... Amazing!
(<http://www.prevention.com/fitness/benefits-walking-every-day>)

Walking... When I moved into my Stony Creek dwelling last November, shortly after being asked to be your Bridge pastor for a short yet still to be determined period of time, I was thrilled to discover what a great neighborhood for walking I’d moved into. Even with my bike available in the early spring as the weather improved, walking afforded me the chance to notice all sorts of things about my part of town: birds nests becoming re-occupied or newly built; the first snow-drops appearing, hidden under leaves and just barely visible; the way the sweet peas started their upward travel, twining their way through whatever stood in their way; the haunts and patterns of neighborhood pets; and the unfurling tapestry of garden borders – bulbs peeking out, tips and then buds, and then colors, perennials rebuilding and coming into their glory. Zipping by on my bike, my eyes were focused on cars and people and the road ahead; walking allowed time to notice on more subtle and revealing levels.

Walking...Albert Einstein himself explained, “Life is like riding a bicycle. To keep you balance you must keep moving.” Whether this is actual physical movement or some of the other sorts of movements experienced in life, the moving we do when we walk offers many metaphors for spiritual insight as well. Writing in 1967, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. nominated the Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh for the Noble Peace Prize: “I do not personally know of anyone more worthy of this prize than this gentle monk from Vietnam. He is an Apostle of Peace and Nonviolence. His ideas for peace, if applied, would build a monument to ecumenism, to

world brotherhood, to humanity.” (As cited by M. Mitchell at <http://www.charterforcompassion.org/index.php/practicing-peace/thich-nhat-hanh-and-martin-luther-king>)

This remarkable peace activist, scholar, teacher and spiritual leader is renowned for his writing on mindfulness, Buddhist spiritual practices and nonviolent witness. And amongst his basic teachings is the importance of walking meditation:

When we walk like (we are rushing), we print anxiety and sorrow on the earth. We have to walk in a way that we only print peace and serenity on the earth. Be aware of the contact between your feet and the earth. Walk as if you are kissing the earth with your feet.

This master points out that there is contact between your feet and the earth as you walk, in fact, at any speed, walkers have **one foot on the ground at all times**, whereas runners are entirely airborne during some part of their every stride...” (“Walking: Your steps to health,” *Harvard Men’s Health Watch*, August, 2009) Here’s another thought from Thich Nhat Hanh:

People sacrifice the present for the future. But life is available only in the present. That is why we should **walk in such a way that every step can bring us to the here and the now.**

Our ability as a congregation, over the past several years, to focus on being grounded in the things of God and the ministries the Spirit calls us to in Jesus’ name was overtaken by a series of events we are still trying to come to terms with. Sometimes it has seemed as if putting one foot in front of another, day in and day out, was all that many of you had energy for, as the issues and decisions before this church brought so many things to a standstill. Major areas of our life together became harder to organize and energize and celebrate. The changes in church culture, in our wider world, in the demographics of our region, and in the nature of our church, all point to challenges in rebuilding this congregation, and yet there remains this encouragement from words of Jesus in John 14:

I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth... You know him, because he abides with you and he will be in you...I have said these things to you while I am still with you. But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit...will teach you everything, and remind you of all I have said to you...

In the crisis brewing amongst the Jewish Christians of the fourth evangelists’ community, our writer’s concern is to prepare this community of Jesus’ followers for life without Jesus. Jesus’ death has prompted the deep turmoil of trying to figure out how to continue living in the revelation provided by Jesus as a human being – the incarnate God – the mediator to God through whom first generation believers came to know God. Jesus’ death and return to God marks the end of this reality, and now, what happens when Jesus is gone? Does the revelation of Jesus have a future and if so, how can this be? The writer of John presents the Spirit, the Paraclete, as the solution to this crisis. Here, in what is called the Farewell Discourse, there are five separate passages concerning the nature and work of the Holy Spirit; Bill and I read from the first two which are both in chapter 14. Here we are introduced to the Paraclete, the one who will continue the work of Jesus after he is gone. (NIB vol 9, John, pp774-776)

The Greek noun *parakletos* has a wide range of meanings that derive from the verb *parakaleo* which means “to exhort and encourage,” “to comfort and console,” “to call upon for help,” and “to appeal.” As a noun, the Parakletos is one who exhorts, comforts, helps, and makes appeal on one’s behalf. It’s difficult to capture all these in the titles of our English translations and so various nouns used for the Spirit are “Comforter,” “Advocate,” and “Counselor.” What’s clear, however, is Jesus’ reassurance that the Paraclete keeps his truth present in the world and accessible to the faith community of Jesus’ followers. (p. 747)

This is the Spirit sent to the early church in that Upper Room in Jerusalem during Pentecost; this is the power and presence of God in Christ, brought in the absence of the man, Jesus, to gift the continuing community of Christian believers throughout the world, with all they need to dwell in the presence of Jesus and his love. Wow! (p776) There are many realities about this Spirit which we will want to learn more about in the coming weeks. We have chosen to organize our Christian year around the experience of “Walking in the Spirit.” *Walking*, not running or wandering aimlessly; *in the Spirit*, who now guides the community of believers, keeping the words and teachings of Jesus alive, and providing the energy and power to bear witness to the reign of God in our lives and our world. It is through the Spirit that you and I make sense of the church’s place in a changing world, because this Spirit of truth vivifies the historical ministry of Jesus while also challenging contemporary communities like us, to interpret that ministry, in order to keep the presence of God and God’s ways before the world today.

Together, as we seek to “walk in the Spirit,” this year, we are retelling the story of Jesus and his call to discipleship – for those who follow this Teacher and Savior. This story will be shared again and again as we seek to be intentional in discerning what steps we need to take toward the purposes God would have us claim as a congregation. This process is already underway with today’s opening sessions of Sunday activities for children, offered under the name “God Squad.” Here stories, and activities, music and reenactments bring open-ended possibilities for learning and growing in the ways of Jesus, which point us to God.

How this happens is the focus for the coming months – but I have a clear sense of how important it will be to be sharing the narratives of our experiences as church, thus far, with each other. Next Sunday is a chance for church leaders to tell you their story as a Board or Committee, and for those of you who are curious about how things happen around here, or who have interests and ideas you’d like to share... Be there after worship for our Council Fair in Pilgrim Hall.

We are also planning a variety of settings in which to share stories about our ministries, our perspectives and our hopes as a congregation: We will introduce a twice a month mid-week gathering called “**Walking on Wednesdays**” – or WOW nights - which will meet on the 2nd and 4th Weds of each month for a shared meal at 6pm followed by an event from 6:45 to 8pm. From discussion groups, to presentations about congregational life, bible studies or explorations of current events, these will be nights for enrichment with activities for all ages. Plan on being there when you can, because to walk in the Spirit is to walk in community with other believers; that’s where the Spirit is on the move!

In the “here and now” of our walking together, I urge you to examine your own priorities for contributing to the life of this congregation; to deepen your own Christian walk so that we might together welcome fresh experiences of the Spirit and of God’s grace. This grounds us in Jesus and the things of God; this intentional “walking with,” gives us opportunities to grow in love and service. And when we set aside our own way for the chance to learn the things of the Spirit, there will be more and more chances to reach out and share our faith with those around us, because that’s what the Paraclete does on behalf of the Son. That’s what “Walking in the Spirit” is all about! Amen.

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