

## One Foot In, One Foot Out

May 26, 2024 at First Church in Cambridge, Congregational, UCC

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*Texts: Colossians 1: 3-14*

With only three Sundays to go, including today, and having shared 1:1 farewell meetings with many of you, my heart is full! It's overflowing, really, with gratitude for all the richness and relationships this church has offered me and with grief that this chapter in my life will soon be closing. I picked our scripture for today with this in mind, so let's start there.

In his letter to the church leaders at another FCC, the First Church in Colosse, Paul says: "In our prayers for you, we always give thanks for you to God for we have heard of your faith in Christ, your love for all the saints, and your hope for the future. Paul's next step is to recognize the spiritual growth that is happening among them. He references the image of a tree bearing fruit, as Jesus did when talking about those great vines of discipleship in John's gospel. The knowledge of God is growing in them! While so much of our growth is invisible to our naked eye, Paul sees it in them, and so he reminds them and us that we are constantly being reshaped, renewed, and reformed into more fully human beings as we grow into what he calls "the fullness of Christ." Finally, Paul adds a prayer for strength to these first verses: "May you be made strong with all the strength that comes from God's glorious power, and may you be prepared to endure everything with patience while joyfully giving thanks yourselves." Even in his thanking God for them, he implores them to thank God, who has enabled "their share in the inheritance of the saints."

This is more than some perfunctory thank you note that Paul's mom taught him to write whenever anyone did right by him. Instead, he is lifting up the spiritual practice of gratitude as part and parcel of what it means to be a Christian. What's more, check this out: the Greek word for power in this sentence, where he says, "may you have all the strength that comes from the power of God, so that you can endure and give thanks," the Greek word here is *dynamis* from which we get our word "dynamite." May you be made strong with the dynamite of God! I love that! Paul is inviting us to tap into some potent, lasting, impactful stuff, and it's just that "dynamis" or power of God that propels our gratitude at every turn. With that strength of God and faith in God, we can begin to see how we can endure and give thanks in *all* circumstances, including those both-and times when we are holding both grief and gratitude, anger and gratitude, anxiety and gratitude, disappointment and gratitude! This message is always timely, and perhaps especially now given horrendous headlines of unceasing war and ongoing threats to our democracy, let alone our transitions here.

For Paul, gratitude is a constant, all-the-time posture of genuine faith, like a thrumming bass line under or an enchanting descant that keeps us singing above our lamentations! This kind of gratitude is typical in Pauline communication. If you were to go home and read the first chapter of all of the letters attributed to Paul, you'd notice the striking similarities. "Grace and peace to you" or some similar salutation begins almost all of them! And unless he was really upset about something, he usually follows the greeting with some deeply gracious, encouraging and complimentary remarks to his readers, all couched in praise to God. These prayers of earnest thanksgiving speak to the depths of his care and passion for the health and well-being of early Christian churches, whether in Corinth, Ephesus, Rome or in this small, textile city called Colossae which is now southwest Turkey.

With his words in mind, I'm eager to return to *this* First Church and also to pick up where I left off in my third to last sermon which gave thanks to God for the profound gift of music here that I will so dearly miss. Today, I wish to give thanks for the equally profound gift of the community ministry that First Church is, and with special thanks to our staff and to our many community ministers. We will honor our community ministers in just a few minutes, yet I hope this message is for all of us.

I may be biased, but having worked in and with a few other congregations, and as I have talked to peers, some of whom are serving churches that are struggling and even dying, I can't help but wonder what is it about this place that keeps us thriving and bucking the trend of mainline church decline. We already talked about the music two weeks ago. That's part of it, no doubt. Another blessing is our proximity to so many theology schools, whether Harvard Divinity, Boston University, and until recently, Andover-Newton which moved to Yale a few years back. By the way, a big shout to our recent grads - Emma, Carla, and Ahmaad! Can we give it up for them and for their colleagues? We are thrilled for you and for us. Indeed, it's in the DNA of First Church, all the way back to our and Harvard's founding in 1636, to be a teaching congregation. Let's give thanks for that, too, and for the way it keeps us connected with ever-new and more inclusive streams of theology and congregational practice.

Since its earliest days, our congregation has also been a church with a mission for the common good, to create not only a new Church, or a new England, but a new civil society. And here, allow me to focus in on what it means to be a community ministry.

First, a confession that most of you haven't heard before! Several years ago, maybe even a decade ago, I was spending far more time than I do now with the Greater Boston Interfaith Organization. I was crossing the river almost daily for early morning Executive Team meetings in Newton, regular meetings at Boston City Hall or the Statehouse, and God knows how many meetings in church basements in Roxbury, Dorchester, or Mattapan. At some point, I was struck with a bout of guilt and anxiety! I thought to myself if First Church only knew how much of my time I was spending outside of the church and Cambridge, they would surely think I was stepping out on them! My guilt was compounded by the fact that I was coming to genuinely love the individual lay leaders and clergy from other churches, synagogues, and mosques with whom I was working. I was getting to know and love many of them as individuals as much as I love you! "Uh oh," I thought! Am I being unfaithful? Do I need a couple's counselor (another one that is!)? If there weren't at least a few of you there with me to keep me honest – like Alice and Dave Kidder in the early days – I worried that I was somehow cheating on you all. And then I thought some more about it. With profound gratitude for our extremely hard-working and collaborative staff and students who often made that stepping out possible, and with some regular assurance that I wasn't dropping too many balls here on the home front, I stumbled upon a reframe for my work in the broader community. After all, I thought to myself, was it really so awful to have one foot in and one foot out – that is, one foot in the local church and one foot out in the wider community? Isn't that maybe what Jesus had in mind when he commissioned us to go into the world to love and serve? Maybe the one foot in/one foot out approach to ministry *wasn't* a bad model. Granted I was working too much to begin with, far too many 80 plus hours a week, so I could justify doing what needed to be done here and still mixing it up out there! And of course, all the while, it was my wife and family that I should have been thanking for their often endless patience and understanding. But here's the real confession. When I first reframed and learned to claim this one-foot in, one-foot-out approach, I foolishly thought I should be doing ministry as a model for you. What it took me a bit longer to learn was that First Church had already been modeling it for me at every turn!

What do I mean? From our Puritan forebears who came to (and stole) this land with their divinely inspired yet humanly flawed aspirations of creating not just a church but a city on a hill, right through to our recent ministers and ministries, this church has always been a one-foot-in, one foot-out community ministry, thanks be to God! I've come to wonder if churches that are struggling now aren't thriving because their people are *too* both-feet-in, too set in their parochial ways, too engaged in closed-door conversations amidst a few, too enmeshed in the church dramas and small-itics of their unchanging ways, and not open enough to the world and wider politics around them or the opportunities to engage the wider community! In contrast, consider how open door this place is, even the ways we've learned to use our building! It's a genuine community center that hops every day, with our ministries and those of countless partners and friends who use our space. Some of our most impactful ministries have ebbed for a time, like our Mental Health and Spirituality ministry, our Palestine Israel Task team, or our Cambridge Interfaith Sanctuary Coalition, yet only to create room and bandwidth for others like our thriving work with GBIO, our Shelter and Friday Cafe ministries to the unhoused, our Refugee Welcome Centers, and so much more. Know it or not, you all were already modeling the one-foot-in, one-foot-out approach!

Even our staff alone! Our staff was already modeling with their tireless commitment here and beyond! Consider Peter, and his tripartite weekly life playing here and teaching local students, then going to the University of Michigan most Wednesdays and Thursdays, then to Julliard in Manhattan most Friday and Saturdays, all to teach and create a global network of organists and harpsichord to share beauty with the world! Or consider Kirsten, our unflappable Director of Operations by day, and a beautiful singer/songwriter by night and weekends, or Karen McArthur, who serves this church (and 38 others!) while finding time to play in a local orchestra and on an all-ages soccer team! Or Sarah, who teaches our kids, creates colorful life-sized Puppets, and our wondrous communications all while being a Town Meeting member and super involved in Lexington politics and beyond! Or Kate Layzer, who pours her life into the Friday Cafe and fills her cup in part with bird watching, something I aspire to do more of on the Cape! There are many more examples!

A relative First Church newcomer recently checked out with me a personal observation he had about our Sunday services. He said with a genuine curiosity that he thinks they tend towards offering comfort! I took umbrage at this at first, remembering William Sloane Coffin's admonition that preachers should "comfort the afflicted" and "afflict the comfortable!" Have I been falling down on the job, I wondered? Have I grown softer with age? But then I found myself asking him to try setting our Sunday mornings in the context of what so many here do the rest of the week! I shared my observation that most of you here are pretty good at afflicting yourselves with challenges to be Christ's disciples in the world, and that you may not need much further affliction! If you come here on Sundays for some comfort and nourishment, or some wider perspective on those headlines, if you come for genuine care and feeding of your souls to support your going forth and show up in the wider world, well, I say, that's more power and dynamite from God to ya!

Just consider our fabulous community ministers, all 18 of them who are currently listed on our web page and others, too! Mary Robinson, faithful former Moderator who for decades was the Director of Chaplaincy at Children's Hospital caring for sick and dying children and their families! Or trauma therapist extraordinaire Jenny Stuart, or our many hospital and hospice and university chaplains and educators and spiritual directors, like Mary Marth Theil, Beth Loomis, Krysia Burnham, Kerry Maloney, Stephane Paulsell, Laura Tuach, Henry Schoenfield, Heather Stanford, Alex Steirnert Evoy. Our in-

house rabbi and text study leader Brent Coffin, and small group leaders and counselors like Carter West and Duncan Hollomon. Or artists and singers and caregivers like Henry Gates, Beth Spaulding, and Phil Lafollette, or global ecumenical and social justice prophets like Monica Maher, Renate Rose and Ken Ziebell, or the recently though never really retired local church pastors, like Liz Simons and Norm Bendroth! Their depth and range of ministry is extraordinary, and we will soon give God thanks for all of their one-foot-in, one-foot-out ministries of love, healing, care and justice!

And much the same can be said of each of you who labor throughout your days, weeks and lives to make the world a better place, whether as full-time parents, nurses, doctors, lawyers, educators, business and non-profit leaders, artists, architects, researchers, scholars, and stalwart volunteers. As my predecessor, Mary Luti would say, the word volunteer is nowhere in the bible! The word disciple is, though, as is the word, Saint! For this community and communion of Saints, for all of our community ministries and community ministers, and for the genuine Community Ministry that is First Church, I stand in line with the Apostle Paul and say thanks be to God for you! And like Paul, we should be praying this gratitude without ceasing!

I wonder if this *is* making any of you uncomfortable! If so, I have two things to say. First, make sure you aren't taking for granted your own gifts for and examples of community ministry, or your life circumstances that lead us all to ebb and flow in seasons of labor and rest, of ministry and self-care and healing! You may well be already afflicting yourself plenty! Second, if you are still feeling unsure, then by all means, consider how you might yet have one foot deeply rooted, firmly planted in this place, and how you might yet put one foot out - using your God-given gifts in your jobs, vocations, families, and with others here to make the world a better place. The invitation is before us all, and there's room for all. Know that you are always welcome to join in this stunning First Church hokey-pokey, and keep turning yourselves around, for that's what it all about! I wanted to share this one-foot-in, one-foot-out message with all because I think it's what makes this place, this Household of God, this outpost of the kin-dom so very special, and I hope you will remember this always and as you discern new leadership and new directions for First Church!

In closing, take a look around. Take a moment, now in the days and weeks to come, and give God thanks for each other, even for the person you don't know yet. Imagine doing that always, and imagine having someone do that for you, always, and now imagine adding to that thanksgiving a prayer that you and your neighbor continue to find the strength, energy, and passion that comes from that glorious dynamite of God's Spirit within and around us. Amen!

And now it's time to do something which I've been meaning to do for years! Let's bless those Community Ministers, ordained and trained clergy and counselors who consider this place their home even as many work tirelessly throughout the week and weekends! We do this now because it's long overdue and because you are in for a treat since many of them have offered to preach this summer and share their gifts of leadership and pastoral care in this transition time. Personally, many have been my go-to's, rocks of collegial support, discretion, and professional consultation sharing their wisdom, and expertise, and companionship with me over the years through extremely challenging moments, only some of which y'all know about, and I and we can't thank them enough! Would the community ministers in our midst please come forward now? Several told me they are away but would be watching online!

Beloved friends and colleagues,  
Community Ministers at First Church in Cambridge,  
you each have been blessed with a vocation, a calling,  
to love and serve within and beyond First Church!  
And you have been and are a true blessing to this community.  
You have shared both in our covenant,  
And in covenants that contain  
your beautiful ministries of care in the wider world!  
We pray for ongoing grace and courage  
to hold every comfort and every challenge!  
We thank you for the abundant gifts you share!  
We thank you for being extraordinary models  
to us all of Christ's mercy, love and justice!  
We earnestly pray and ongoing blessing  
for your good and faithful work!  
May you know God's dynamic strength in all you do!  
May you know God's rest, delight and joy,  
in solitude and in community.  
We pray that this congregation continues to be  
A church of community ministers  
and a church of community ministry!  
These things we ask in the name of Jesus!  
Amen!

