

Ravens in the Wind
[Luke 12:24-28](#)
Rev. Abigail Henderson
June 30, 2019
Farewell Sermon

I can only begin with gratitude.

Thank you to everyone who helped organize and attended my Last Supper, otherwise known as my goodbye party, this past Wednesday.

Thank you to Pastor Todd for six years of shared ministry, support, collaboration, mentorship, and friendship. Our creative and professional connection has absolutely changed my life, and I can't imagine who I'd be without knowing you.

Thank you to Pastor Lauren for being here at such an important time in the life of First UCC, and my life as well. Your support has meant a great deal to me. You are such a talented pastor and I'm thrilled we got to be colleagues.

Thank you to the music staff and office staff of First UCC: you are such gifts to this church. I cannot express how much I've appreciated working with you, laughing with you, counting on you, and watching you do what you do best.

Thank you to Grace Muth for this beautiful handmade stole I'm wearing.

Thank you to all of you, those here in person and here in spirit, for the love and affirmation you have shown me since I announced the ending of my ministry at First UCC. I have been immersed in your kindness; your support; your tears; your laughter; your stories of our shared ministry, our mutual growth, our life together in this place.

Many times, I've found myself thinking back with great affection to the search committee that brought me here. It was chaired by Margit Johnson and included Will Haslett-Marroquin, Kaara Maki, Jerry Moerhig, Greg Muth, Bill Poehlmann, and Jami Reister, and of course Pastor Todd. What a great first impression of this church.

Truly, it was Bob Griggs who really planted the idea of First UCC in my mind, back in early 2013 when I still didn't completely grasp where Northfield was—and I thought my life was on a very different trajectory. We ran into each other at a Minnesota UCC

Conference event and he said, “You and this church might be a very good fit for each other. They’ve called a young, talented Senior Pastor and they’re seeking an Associate.”

Fateful words, Bob!

As some of you know, Bob and my late father were good at Harvard Divinity School in the 70s. My father was a UCC pastor—as is my mother—but my father died when I was twenty-four. I’ve often grieved that he never saw me in this role. But there’s such unexpected grace in knowing, decades later, there’s a person here besides my mother who knows, just a bit, about where I come from and who shaped me.

Unexpected grace. That phrase captures so much of my time here at First UCC.

Many of you have spoken in recent weeks of my ministries, especially my work around sexual health and support of LGBTQ youth. And I find myself mindful that this work was possible thanks to the support of Pastor Todd and the empowerment of this church, a church that had already done a great deal of work around its Open and Affirming identity. I give thanks for people like Ross Shoger and Dagmar Tisdale—members of this community who have joined the great Cloud of Witnesses.

They couldn’t have imagined *me*. They didn’t know I was coming. But out of their faith and their humanness and their sense of what church was supposed to be, they and others helped create the space into which I would step, years later, with my partner Will.

Unexpected grace.

I had ideas about who I was and what I was about when I came here. As is always the case, I didn’t know what I didn’t *know*. You all taught me so much. You all gave me your trust and your permission to try new things. You gave me affirmation. You challenged me. You occasionally gave me headaches, too, and I probably did the same for many of you. You helped me discover, day by day, week by week, year by year, the kind of minister and leader I could be. I promise I’ll keep striving as you have encouraged me.

I have no doubt that the reality of unexpected grace will carry First UCC through this transition; that in the wake of my ministry, even in the midst of grief and loss, you will find new possibilities, new paths, new gifts that will call forth the kind of deep gratitude that I am experiencing now. I have no doubt, in fact, that this is already happening.

Thank you.

And now for an actual sermon, about scripture and stuff! (Don't worry, it won't be too long.)

* * * * *

Will you pray with me? *May the words of my mouth, and the meditations of all of our hearts, be acceptable in your eyes, our rock and our redeemer, Amen.*

Listen to these words. They're the opening verses of Psalm 78.

*1 Give ear, O my people, to my teaching;
incline your ears to the words of my mouth.
2 I will open my mouth in a parable;
I will utter dark sayings from of old,
3 things that we have heard and known,
that our ancestors have told us.
4 We will not hide them from their children;
we will tell to the coming generation
the glorious deeds of the Lord, and God's might,
and the wonders that God has done.*

“Dark sayings”—I absolutely love that. “Dark sayings that our parents have told us, sayings that we will not hide from our children.” In my mind, this is the point of church, when we're doing it right. To tell the truth about the world; the world as it was, the world as it is, and—*this part is crucial*—the world as it *could* be, when we discover and live out God's vision for us. And we tell that truth to our young people, and encourage them to do the same: even truths that are complicated, mysterious, hard to hear. The dark sayings.

The verses from Luke that Will read? I think they are among the “dark sayings” of our ancestors. Now, if you were in worship last week, we heard Matthew's version of this very famous teaching by Jesus. I wondered if it was overkill to hear it again, but hey, this is my farewell sermon, I can do what I want!

You might wonder what's so heavy, so challenging, so *enigmatic* about the passage we heard, this encouragement to refrain from worry, to exist in the present moment, to trust in God's care.

Well. I'll tell you why I would count these words among the most difficult and important that Jesus left us. I struggle with them all the time, push back *against* them, feel moved to *argue* with them; yet they *speak* to me too, especially at times like this, when reality is pivoting and anxiety is heightened.

As a younger person, I couldn't hear this passage without imagining how they might sound to the most vulnerable among us: people without adequate clothes or food or shelter. They seem almost insulting. "Don't worry about where your next meal will come from? *What?*"

Indeed, Jesus' statement—*how much more value are you than the birds!*—strikes me as more than a little ironic in the harsh light of today's news, when concern for human life has become so distorted, so myopic, so merciless. For example: what are we, as a people, saying about the value of human life when nine states pass legislation severely criminalizing women who seek abortions, doctors who perform abortions, and women who miscarry their pregnancies?

And how do we reconcile those laws with the reality of living, breathing immigrant children in detention centers on American soil, or with the drowning deaths of Óscar Alberto Martínez Ramírez and his 23-month-old daughter, Valeria, on the banks of the Rio Grande?

We can't reconcile these things, I would argue. And the incongruence, the dissonance—of what we, as a society, *say* we care about and what actually *happens*—it's driving us up the wall, I think. Many of us know that something is deeply wrong, and we're so disturbed. In our minds, in our hearts, in our souls. As the Indian philosopher Jiddu Krishnamurti is often quoted as saying, "It is no measure of health to be well-adjusted to a profoundly sick society."

And here's the thing: I suspect this is the worry to which Jesus really speaks. Because *Jesus?* Jesus saw the same kinds of incongruences, the same dissonances. He saw extreme wealth and extreme poverty. He saw sick people marginalized, as if illness was a personal, moral failure. He saw how quickly people hoarded resources, seduced into believing there would never be enough to go around. He saw how fear of difference led to death. He saw how easily people in power abused it. He saw how people without power, like women and children and foreigners in the land, had wisdom about God that others, sometimes even Jesus himself, needed to hear.

And into this reality, Jesus told the truth. Sometimes he told it directly, boldly, harshly. And other times, he told it in weird, roundabout, indirect ways, so that people who didn't want to listen might catch it anyways.

I think today's words from Luke are an example of the second kind of truth-telling. The more I live with these words, the older I get, the more life I experience, the more I believe in the subversive power of this passage. This is not a "don't worry, be happy" kind of teaching. This is not an invitation to easy living, or a simple assurance that God will take care of you. That kind of reading assumes a happy-go-lucky Jesus, a blissfully oblivious Jesus. A Jesus that is not clued into the way that oppression and greed lead to suffering.

That's not my Jesus. I bet it's not yours either.

And neither is it the tone of the Jesus of the Gospels - Jesus of Nazareth, a Jew who had the words of the prophet Isaiah written across his heart, who was crucified because he wouldn't stop talking about justice and mercy.

So what might Jesus mean here?

Perhaps he's trying to get us to loosen our grip. To hold everything a little more loosely—even the things we need, even that which we care very deeply about.

It's counterintuitive!

I don't know about you, but in times like these, it's tempting to hold onto life like a white-knuckled driver clutching the steering wheel in bumper-to-bumper traffic. Car horns are blaring all around, there's an accident ahead and police siren in the rearview mirror, all the other drivers are jerks, NPR is on the radio and it's just a Litany of Ruin, and I just want to get home.

I may have carried that metaphor too far, but you get the idea: when we are apprehensive, or stressed, or traumatized, often one of our instincts is *to hold on tight. With all our might.* Hold on to that which is familiar, that which is easy, that which is like us, that which gives us the feeling of security. I think we hold on more tightly to different things, depending on who we are: some of us hold on tightly to people; some of us hold on tightly to money; some to stuff; some to power; some to ideologies; some to roles; some to places.

And into this swamp of rising cortisol and anxiety, Jesus says: none of those things will actually save you in the end. No, Jesus, says: here is the real truth: *God* is here, and God—only God—can and will take care of you, in ways that are beyond your imagining at this present moment. So breathe, and trust, that you can loosen your grip.

All of this is very related, of course, to the Buddhist concept of renunciation. Saying good-bye. Losing. Forsaking. Letting go. Giving up our profound desire for safety and certainty.

The Buddhist nun Pema Chödrön has spoken at length about renunciation, and one of the images she uses to help our understanding is, believe it or not, ravens. She's observed ravens at Cape Breton, Nova Scotia, the site of the monastery where she lives and teaches.

Chödrön [said](#),

The animals and the plants here on Cape Breton are hardy and fearless and playful and joyful. The wilder the weather is, the more the ravens love it. They have the time of their lives in the winter, when the wind gets much stronger and there's lots of ice and snow. They challenge the wind. They get up on the tops of the trees and hold on with their claws and then they grab on with their beaks as well. At some point they just let go into the wind and let it blow them away. Then they play on it, float in it. After a while, they'll go back to the tree and start over. It's a game. Once I saw them in an incredible hurricane-velocity wind, grabbing each other's feet and dropping and then letting go and flying out. It was like a circus act. They have had to develop a zest for challenge and for life. As you can see, it adds up to tremendous beauty and inspiration. The same goes for us.

The journey of awakening—the classical journey of the mythical hero or heroine—is one of continually coming up against big challenges and then learning how to soften and open. In other words, the paralyzed quality seems to be hardening and refusing, and the letting go or the renunciation of that attitude is simply feeling the whole thing in your heart, letting it touch your heart. You soften and feel compassion for your predicament and for the whole human condition. You soften so that you can actually sit there with those troubling feelings and let them soften you more.

The whole journey of renunciation, or starting to say yes to life, is realizing first of all that you've come up against your edge, that everything in you is saying no, and then at that

point, softening. This is yet another opportunity to develop loving-kindness for yourself, which results in playfulness—learning to play like a raven in the wind.

I don't think this is a one-time teaching of Pema Chödrön, or Jesus, for that matter. Religion is something you *practice*, for a reason. This kind of surrender, this softening, doesn't come naturally to most of us. We need to be reminded to do it, again and again, and we need opportunities to try it, over and over. Very few of us, I think, fully embrace "dark sayings" of our ancestors and our wise elders in our lifetimes.

Even ravens, I learned, are not the carefree creatures that Jesus describes when he says they have neither storehouse nor barn. Turns out those clever little beasts do cache their food, stockpiling and hiding resources from other creatures, just like humans.

Life is messy and imperfect, and we are always caught in this strange and beautiful tension between holding on and letting go. So thanks be to God for the unexpected and grace-filled moments of playing in the wind.

May we find ourselves in one of those times.

Amen.