

Twenty-second Sunday after Pentecost  
1 Timothy 6:17-19  
2 Samuel 6:12-15  
Romans 8:38-39

First United Church of Christ, Northfield  
Rev. Sandra K. Johnson  
October 28, 2007

### The Life that Really Is Life

The word for today is *celebrate!* We *celebrate* the Protestant Reformation, which holds so much of our religious heritage. We *celebrate* the children of our congregation, particularly those who received Bibles today. We *celebrate* the new life of the church brought to us by the people we welcomed into membership today. We *celebrate* our covenant together as minister and congregation, a covenant that grants me the next three months as a time of spiritual and intellectual refreshment. We *celebrate* with our ancestor David, who couldn't keep himself from dancing wildly in the street. Most dramatically and particularly, though, we *celebrate* that we have been given gifts in abundance, that we have seen the tasks that God has set before us, and that we have the *faith*, *vision*, and *will* to share our abundance with each other and with the whole world.

Once more our visual text comes from the German artist and Roman Catholic Priest Sieger Köder. The story of celebration it tells is the familiar one about the shepherd who leaves the 99 sheep of his flock to search and retrieve the one who has strayed. Let us follow our practice of taking a few moments just to look deeply at what the artist has given us. [pause]

It is hard to tell who is happiest in this scene; we see joy in all of the faces – sheep, shepherd, and community. They are sharing the “life that really is life,” as it says in the letter to Timothy. And what makes a life real? Here's the description in this ancient letter: “.. to do good, to be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share ...”

Look at the sharing that artist Köder shows us: The gift of music (violin and pipe), the gift of natural beauty (bouquet of flowers), the gifts of companionship and praise (the man on the right), the gift of resurrection (symbolized by the butterflies on the left), and even the gift of animal companionship (the dog). Whatever relationship may exist at other times for the people we see here, right now they are a community, and they are experiencing the life that really is life.

And what is the “life that really is life” for our faith community, here this morning? It is a life that rests in God – in God's love, mercy, and Shalom. It is a life that is lived for others, following the example of Jesus. It is a life that is filled with meaning and purpose. And it is, like the life of these wonderful characters on the wall, a life of joy.

It is from that well of joy that we recognize the gifts that have been lavished upon us: There are the obvious ones: the earth itself, our various human talents, the capacity for love, the kindness and affection of those around us. There are also the less obvious ones: the challenge of forgiveness, the work of reconciliation and peacemaking, the

lessons learned from suffering and disappointment. It is also from the well of joy that we recognize the tasks that we have been given: to worship God in spirit and in truth, to nurture the faith and pass it on, to care for one another in times of need, and to reach out and change the world.

To meet these tasks, we are called to gather and share our resources. This morning, in the midst of our many celebrations, we will pause to dedicate and consecrate our promises to support the mission and ministries of the congregation. We do not do this lightly, because these are serious promises. These are the promises with which we become doers, not just hearers, of the Word. These are the promises with which we commit ourselves to be a community of faith, not a civic organization or a social club or a spiritual refuge. These are the promises that make us a church.

It has been my practice each year at stewardship time, to tell you about my promise. I choose to tithe, so my pledge in 2007 has been \$6480. I do not tell you that to brag, nor to induce guilt. I tell you so that you will know that it can be done. It is possible to tithe 10% of your income and to have a rich and full life, without unreasonable debt or extraordinary sacrifice. I tell you so that you will stop and think about your own gift to the church, and consider again whether it really represents the value you place upon this faith community and its mission and ministries. I tell you so that you can share the joy of investing your resources in the *light*.

That brings us back, of course, to the *light* in our painting. Like the image of Abraham receiving the promises of God that we saw two weeks ago, and the image of Jesus washing Peter's feet that we saw last week, this work of art is suffused by light. . This light does not follow the laws of optics: it follows the law of love. It forms a halo around the head of the shepherd, and it beautifully and illogically illuminates every face and every hand that we see. If you squint, as we have for the last two weeks, you will see that the picture is all about the light.

Open your eyes, and find yourself in this celebration. Bring flowers, make music, embrace your neighbor, hold the lost sheep. And hear once more these great words of the faith:

I am convinced  
that neither death, nor life,

nor angels, nor rulers,  
nor things present, nor things to come,  
nor height, nor depth,  
nor anything else in all creation,  
will be able to separate us from the love of God  
in Christ Jesus our Lord.

This is the life that really is life. Amen.