

The Congregational Church in South Glastonbury  
Sermon – October 30, 2005  
“God’s Word at Work in Us”

Reformation Sunday and New Member Sunday  
Matthew 23: 1-12, I Thessalonians 2: 9-13  
Lynne M. Dolan

South Glastonbury, CT

Sometimes we need to remind each other who we are. Perhaps that’s one of the reasons we belong in community: to remind one another who we are and of who we are called to be and of how we are to live. Perhaps that is the deepest call beneath what we “do” in church and as the church. In the teaching, in the preaching of the gospel, in the singing of hymns, in the breaking of bread and sharing the cup, we remember that God’s hand not only shaped us, but shapes us still. God is still at work in the world through us. What better day to remember and remind ourselves of who we are than Reformation and New Member Sunday? The documents that shape our faith; our church’s covenant, the denomination’s statement of faith, our open and affirming statement remind us who we are, who we are called to be, and how we are to live. Today, as we receive new members, we celebrate the gifts they bring, the new perspectives they share and the opportunities God provides us to build and strengthen our community.

Welcoming and receiving new members is like a baptism. Whenever we share our covenant, we recommit ourselves to this community to faith. We remember those who have gone before us and celebrate the continued movement of the Spirit today. We pause, to reflect, to be still and to wonder. Where is God at work in us today? We are profoundly grateful that in a time when community and care are hard to find, South Church is a place where we are welcomed and loved. Paul teaches the church then and now that, just as he has cared for them as a parent would, we must also care tenderly for each other. Paul invites us to follow his example, to not only share the gospel with others, but our whole selves, urging and encouraging and pleading with each other to live a life “worthy of God,” worthy of our calling.

What does such a life look like? In a world that pulls us in so many directions, where so many different people demand so much, how might we live a life worthy of God, worthy of *our* calling? In order to answer that question you might first have to figure out what is your calling. What gifts has God given you and how might you use them? That is the first step in living a life worthy of God. First, we

must resist the temptation to dismiss the power in this process of discernment. We need to get beyond the twinge of regret we might feel for having left something undone or half done. God will forgive us for having fallen short of God's expectations. This process of discernment or *examen*, is a spiritual practice centuries old. It is essential for God's word to be at work in us. A process of examination, confession and forgiveness keeps our spiritual muscles taught and strong. As we engage God in this process we will receive from God the gift of grace. No matter what we have done or left undone, God will forgive us.

This morning, as we receive new members into the fellowship of South Church, we share a covenant. A covenant is many things. It is a bond, a pact, a treaty, a promise, or even a contract. It is a special and sacred arrangement. It is not simply a promise or commitment we make with each other. It is both a promise and commitment we make with and to God. We declare with great conviction that *we are God's people and stand within the covenant which God has made fully known to us through our Lord, Jesus Christ*. Last week I invited us to consider what makes what the church does different. If many people do good works and seek to meet the needs of their neighbors, what makes what we do different? What we do is different because we are witnesses to the saving work of Jesus Christ, who is alive and at work in and through us in the world. We are partners in his ministry. We should not be afraid to say that, boldly and confidently.

We live our life in Christ as both individuals and as members of a community. However, we are never alone. We work together as *we pray for the presence of the Holy Spirit to lead and empower our lives*. We seek, we crave, we anticipate God's word, God's guidance, indeed God's support and encouragement in all that we do. Sometimes we seek the will of God through a process of personal prayer and discernment. This takes many and various forms. Just as prayer can take many forms, discerning God's will takes various forms. God may speak to you on your daily walk. You may hear God's word through a friend or on the evening news (as unlikely as that seems.) God speaks to us in a variety of ways when we expect to hear from God. God's word is at work in us when we are receptive to that word, when we anticipate that God continues to speak even to us.

It has been said that God's church doesn't have a mission, but God's mission has a church. Indeed! We are the body of Christ, not so The Congregational Church in South Glastonbury may live on, but so the mission and ministry of Christ may continue to transform lives. What we experience here on Sunday morning propels us into the world, ready to do battle with the forces that tear our communities and families apart, ready to show mercy and kindness to those who are struggling.

What we do here on Sunday morning fills our spiritual wells, settles our troubled souls, calms our anxious spirits. What we experience here on Sunday morning reminds us that God is still at work in the world through those amazing people who show up on our door step with a meal or a prayer shawl. We come to church to be in the presence of the Holy Spirit, the one who heals, comforts, encourages and loves us into a new way of being. We go back into the world trusting in the Holy Spirit to accompany us.

That church in Thessalonica was struggling; to find itself, to have the courage to be bold disciples, to trust in the power of the Holy Spirit in a world that was not yet ready to receive its witness. I think there are times when we feel like that church. It is not always easy to be the church in this post Modern world. At times we feel as though we have to shout above a cacophony of other voices in order to be heard. Other times, we feel that when we talk, no one is listening. Today is different. Today we rejoice as we recommit ourselves to God's mission and ministry in this place. Today we celebrate and give thanks to God for new friends who are excited to continue their journey among us.

Some people wonder today what is the business of the church? Perhaps that should be obvious. I submit to you that the church is still in the business of transforming lives. In and through that work we receive God's word. That word may not always make us feel content or comfortable. It may however, transform your life in the life and likeness of Jesus. As disciples, we live love, we speak love, we seek love, we become love. God's church doesn't have a mission, but God's mission has a church.

As disciples, we need each other. We need a place to call home, a place to find solace, a place to rejoice, and a place to grow. We need the church, a community of believers. *As a community of faith, we acknowledge our continuing need of God's grace and our dependence upon one another in the fulfillment of this covenant.* Community is a beautiful thing. This is a place where we hold one another accountable, where we challenge each other to be our best selves. This is where we share our deepest longings and receive with loving care God's tender mercy.

Paul warns the church that when they are faithful to God's calling, they may suffer. Like that church in Thessalonica, when we are faithful to our covenant, we may suffer too. When we speak a truth that is difficult to hear, we may suffer. When we hold one another accountable to the will of God, we may suffer. When we risk boldly for the sake of the gospel, we may suffer. God does not promise that we

will not suffer. God does promise however, to be with us in our suffering, to help us to be our best selves, to speak a word that will sustain us through the dark and difficult times. God promises that our suffering will never be in vain.

The life of faith is not always easy. What is it your mother taught you? Nothing worth doing is ever easy. I remember a scene in one of my favorite movies, *A League of Their Own*. The movie is about female major league baseball teams in the 1940s. In this scene, the star catcher of the Rockford Peaches threatens to quit. She complains that the game is “too hard.” Her manager tries to talk her out of quitting. “Baseball’s supposed to be hard,” he snaps. “if it wasn’t hard, everyone would do it. Hard is what makes it great.” Paul never watered down the commitment of a real faith, but instead encouraged believers to rise to the challenge and call of the gospel. God’s word is at work in us, wherever and whenever we have the courage to embody our church’s covenant. God’s word is at work in our Bible studies, in our executive board meetings, in our Wednesday School classrooms. God’s word is at work as we gather to fix a member’s roof or serve the meal at Peter’s Retreat or walk a mile for Church World Service. God’s word is at work in your life and my life in ways we have yet to imagine.

God’s word is at work in the lives of our children, encouraging us to share “pennies from heaven.” What a powerful witness they make. What a wonder ministry, putting to work worn, neglected, discarded coins. Our 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade church school class says, Come, bring those old, neglected pennies and God will make something new and shiny from them. Come, they say, bring your old, neglected self and God will make something new and shiny of you. Come, share, give, and through the power of the Holy Spirit, we will be transformed. Might we all be pennies from heaven, signs of God’s goodness, generosity and wonder at work in the world. All things are possible when we seek the will of God, when we take courage and allow God’s word to be at work in our lives! May it be so.  
Amen