

GOOD NEWS, GOOD WORK AND GOOD BYE

A Phyllis Mullins Retirement Sermon on Luke 9:57-62—Rev. Adam E. Eckhart
June 26, 2016—First United Church of Christ (Congregational), Milford, CT

When the shooting took place 2 weeks ago at the Pulse Night Club in Orlando, Florida, killing mostly young Latina people from the LGBTQ community, so many of us experienced once again immense feelings of helplessness and hopelessness. But the Connecticut Conference of the United Church of Christ didn't say, "We'll just grieve here from afar and let somebody else engage the community down there." No, instead, having experience from responding to the Sandy Hook shootings 3 ½ years ago, the Connecticut Conference sent five clergy to Orlando just two days after the shooting to be a pastoral presence for those mourning. One of the pastors, Jack Davidson, was a youth at Old Greenwich Congregational Church when Ashley served there; another, Emily Heath, was a high school classmate of mine at Winter Park High School, just outside of Orlando. While in Orlando, the pastors mostly listened, gave and received hugs, and by their presence let the LGBTQ community know that there are Christians of faith who stand with them.¹

In the same way, when news unfolded by Sunday afternoon of what had transpired, Jamie Rude and Rev. Christian and others didn't come up with excuses to hold back our community leadership and news of God's love for all people. No, instead, they organized a vigil for all people, including our Muslim and Jewish friends, to participate in, to share the common belief that God's kingdom is based on peace and not violence. We didn't wait, we knew that people were hurting, that we were hurting, that the need for Good News

was immediate, just as it was in the wake of Sandy Hook and Maren Sanchez's death.

These Christian leaders acted as they did in part to fulfill Jesus' commands to not look back, to not just live in the past but to proclaim God's Kingdom to people in a world that always needs Good News.

Many Christians have long believed that Jesus' ministry reveals God's unifying and reconciling will for the world, and that Jesus' resurrection declares that God's love is stronger than death. Jesus' life, death and resurrection define us as God's beloved children, ONE family, forgiven, set free from our past divisions to embrace our siblings in love.

This is just one way to describe the Good News of Jesus Christ. But regardless of how you describe it, this news has a universal and foundational quality to it. God's favor for all people, God's claim on us and God's forgiveness of us. This news, if taken to be true, takes precedence over all other news, because it applies to us all and defines us all.

This news then has both an urgency to it on the one hand and a staying power to it on the other. There are people right now who could receive this news and be transformed by its hope in the face of their crises; and yet there will always be people whose lives make them question God's love and who will be open to hearing it. The work of offering Good News never stops as long as people are around.

I'm not suggesting that we all have to then find a street corner to preach such Good

News. As Francis of Assisi may have said, "Preach the Gospel or Good News always; if necessary, use words." What the clergy in Orlando and the people outside our Sanctuary were doing was largely non-verbal preaching.

But as long as despair, hatred, doubt, and violence continue, there is room for our actions and our words to sow hope, love, faith and peace, the crops of the Kingdom.

Phyllis Mullins, our retiring Office Administrator, may not appear to be a Good News first responder, but much of what she was called to do does actually qualify as preaching Good News. Good News on the home front.

"Yes, this is the number for the Emma Davis Medical Equipment Ministry...yes, we loan out medical equipment for free. I'll put you in their voicemail and later today a volunteer will pick up the message and call you back." Telling people in urgent need of medical equipment that this church may be able to help? Timely Good News out of Phyllis' mouth!

Greeting a couple who can't get married in the church they were raised because one or both of them is divorced and telling them that we're open to marrying them here, or taking information from a sleep-deprived new mother that we have nursery care during our Sanctuary worship and that a pastor would be happy to meet them about having their child baptized here, or letting a parent of a youth know that we have active groups for middle and high schoolers to engage in faithful community and service. Phyllis proclaiming Good News of the Kingdom right in the moment!

Or speaking with a parishioner whose loved one is hospitalized or diagnosed with cancer, and telling them that if they choose, we can put that person on our prayer list so that the whole congregation prays for them. That's just a little immediate Good News when it is so sorely needed, provided by Phyllis.

As Phyllis can attest to, the Office Administrator at First Church is pulled in so many directions, with many distractions and competing priorities, but it's mostly engaging in the good work of Good News, not when it's convenient but right then and there.

Phyllis, unlike the rest of the staff here, has nowhere to rest her head, no private space just for her. Her office is the office of the whole church.

Moreover, Phyllis has spent many an evening in that church office beyond her appointed hours seeking to finish ASAP the good work of sharing Good News in the form of newsletter preparation, annual reports, and the like. Even while preparing for her son's wedding or trying to help check in on her parents and later to bury them, Phyllis remained diligent in her ministry on the front line of our church's Good News mission.

But now, it's time for Phyllis to retire. She has put it off for a while now to help the church make it through the multiple staff transitions we've gone through in recent years. She has worked in church offices for a cumulative 20 years or so. We have kept her away from relaxing evenings with her husband Jack for a while now. We have been gifted with her good work in good news, we now say good bye.

As Dan Brownell quipped a couple weeks ago I've been on a run of etymological references in my sermons, and here's today's. The phrase Good bye is an evolution of the longer, original phrase: God be with you.

Jesus says that he, the Son of Man, has nowhere to rest his head because when all the world belongs to you, you have no "home" to rest, and when your mission is to bring the kingdom to this earth by being and sharing the good news, you never get the time to rest your head.

ⁱ "Conference sends team to Orlando to offer support, witness" by Tiffany Vail, accessed on June 17, 2016 at www.ctucc.org/news/20160614_orlando_teams.html

So we can say to you, Good bye, or God will be with you because even in your retirement, Christ will continue to work in the world and work through you. There is no rest from ministry, but there is retirement from church office administrating. So, the good news today is that with a record of such good work we know God shall continue to be with you and all of us to preach in body, spirit and Word in the name of Jesus Christ. Thanks be to God. Amen.