

## “Links to Understanding”

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### Readings

Luke 18:15-17

from the Revised Standard Bible

Now they were bringing even infants to him that he might touch them; and when the disciples saw it they rebuked them. But Jesus called them to him saying, “Let the children come to me, and do not hinder them; for to such belongs the kingdom of God. Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it.

from Mark Nepo’s new book *Surviving Storms*

In truth, the heartwork we each do matters more than ever. For with each act of presence and authenticity, we are keeping the literacy of the heart alive. And every time we listen and care for others, we are stitching the fabric of humanity. For holding, listening, the life of questions, and story are the barely seeable threads that keep the world together. Every time you hold or are held, every time you ask a question or tell a story, every time you truly listen to a question or a story, you are weaving or repairing the threads that keep the world together.

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As I begin this morning, I first want to acknowledge the deep gratitude both Bill and I feel to you all for your willingness after twenty-two years since we first became your ministers (we’re now in our eighth decade of life!) to welcome us back into these precious roles with you for the next months as we all await our new minister. We cherish the opportunities. As we continue to expand our (post-pandemic) opportunities to be outside the confines of our homes, part of our task is to discover and be aware of what greets us, what no longer exists, what is broken or has been dismantled, what is new that now needs to be explored or created. It is time to pay attention to broad strokes as well as to some fine details that might have links to our everyday lives. Today we will explore several of the links regarding how we understand and experience life itself, identify love, and enter into ways of behavior-covenants while pursuing Christianity as a way of life. Before I begin this exploration, I want to share a bit about what and how I try to bring forth something of value for us to ponder during the times I am in the pulpit.

For thirty-six straight months at the end of my teenage years, literally day and night, I studied how to become a nurse. I began with reading the books, studying the materials and procedures, taking tests; next came observing, practicing, engaging with what I was learning; then finally beginning to trust my own knowledge and intuition, especially when having to make instant decisions. All this was necessary as I learned how to interact with whatever was before me. As most of you know, I put my primary efforts into obstetrics, becoming a labor and delivery room nurse as well as one of the instructors of obstetrics to student nurses. I did that work in nine hospitals in three states as we moved west. I still hold a valid California registered nurse license, and I serve as your faith community nurse, working with the wonderful Nurture team here.

When our first-born twins were in high school, I left the nursing field, looking to change my career direction. I seriously entertained studying to become a doctor, lawyer, or teacher, but decided instead to enter seminary to explore the question of whether there was a future for me through that doorway. There too I engaged in three years of intense study and exploration of texts, in which I learned to both see past sexism and patriarchy and “write myself and women” into the God language being used. I was part of many student focus groups, where I learned about the expectations made of an ordained minister, and I became one in the fall of 1979. Our twins and I both celebrated graduations that year.

All that said, I see the world primarily through the lenses both of one’s state of health and the daily presence of the Holy Spirit, especially in the lives of those facing big decisions, survival, pain, loss, dying, death. It’s what I bring to interpreting texts, the life of Jesus, and current realities, as well as the challenges both ancient and new before us, the people of God. I try to pay attention to the roles that religion plays (intentionally or not) in politics, and to the application of power, which has far-reaching, often disastrous ramifications.

Where I want to focus our thoughts and insights this morning is to expand on the notion David introduced a couple weeks ago, of us being in a *global transition time* as we seek to understand and perhaps help create the world opening up again. This, my friends, is a monumental task taking place that affects us all emotionally, physically, spiritually, mentally, politically. The work before us that needs our attention is both highly personal as well as global. So let’s go back to some of those basic links to our understandings that might help us in this journey forward, help us to understand life, to experience love, and to enter into relationships/covenants/promises.

Ponder a minute if you will: How do you define *life* on this planet particularly human life? Your answers to this question have come from somewhere, and it’s important for you to recognize whether they are based on medical, psychological, mythical, or religious definitions. This information is important today because it relates directly to how the politics in our society uses religion to promote particular definitions of life and when it begins. What my OB years convinced me is that life as we know it begins at *birth*. We know a fetus grows inside the pregnant woman and that it is totally dependent on her agreement to let it take its nourishment entirely from her body until it matures enough to being able to sustain its own existence outside the mother’s body. This process of evolving from growing cells floating in a warm water environment for nine months comes to a launching point. We know for a fact that it takes three things to constitute the medical definition of life occurring at

birth, the moment the baby leaves that total immersion and becomes a different being, now with *a fully developed beating heart, a functional brain, and lungs that can expand and contract so breathing life-sustaining air is established*. Without any one of these three, whatever was growing never makes it into life. In hospitals when one of these requirements for life was absent, instead of a birth or death certificate being issued, a stillborn record was recorded.

This basic understanding of “what life is and where it begins” links directly to other current challenges regarding the right of women to make their own covenants with the yet unborn, to let it exist and grow from inside her. You all know the many challenges being faced today by all involved in those difficult decisions and their outcomes. Unfortunately, religion gets wrapped up in this personal situation when any of the patriarchal religious entities insists on their interpretation of when “life” begins and creates punishable outcomes attached to each woman’s ability to exercise free choice as it relates to her own body. Part of this situation involves the difference between sexes: men cannot and do not have the ability to know the same personal experience of intentionally letting something grow inside them that can become a new life-person.

Moving from delivery room learnings about life, I want to spend the rest of the message this morning talking about some basic understandings regarding how that newborn life can be nurtured by those who care for it. To do this, I am going to use a personal current snapshot of an ordinary four generational family—ours. The players in this little drama are mother Rena, grandmother Becky, and two children, George and Margot. We are the fourth generation, not shown, but we were able to observe and celebrate these actions. This short phone camera video captured a couple of significant gestures. First, please note that the children are playing in the hallway of their home and are supported with the mother at one end and the grandmother at the other, both cheering the action of the children going on between them. Second, note that Margot began taking steps toward independence in order to push her own little cart. Third came George’s delight as Margot began to move. Lastly, did you catch Margot’s look to George for his reaction to her new steps? She got a pat on the back, a smile of approval, and then she turns in delight to venture on with George hopping alongside, cheering her.

Let’s pause for a minute. What do those pictures provoke in you? What is the importance of it? Here’s what I see. These children are loved and they know it. They feel safe to venture into the unknown. While Margot does not yet know how to talk or walk on her own, she is learning how to express what she is feeling and needing. George as her primary mentor is learning how to support her efforts without interfering. With the praise and appreciation of her mother and grandmother, she repeats her exploration of being on her own two feet again and again. Perhaps something else present but not immediately seen here in this picture is the result of several covenants made by her parents who discovered they love each other, got married, made a mutual decision to have a family, and are determined to support both children every day, every way they can. The parents know that expressing love daily is how they can best nurture the children becoming who they are. Another aspect to this snapshot is that both children are being equally supported and encouraged to love and rely on each other. What you don’t see is that things here are not quite normal. It was discovered when Margot was a couple months old, that she has a significant hole in her heart. Somehow she made it into life with

that hindrance. She is scheduled for open heart surgery in January. She is a little behind in her growth and activity achievements, but as much as possible, she is being treated as a normally developing fifteen-month-old child. There is immense love from family and lots of friends surrounding this little family, supporting them through these difficult days approaching the surgery that will hopefully be able to repair the hole, and allow Margot to experience a long, healthy, happy life.

This picture, my friends, depicts our collective call from God, to be open to and engaged in daily realities before us as we learn to express our kindness, compassion, love and patience, especially when caring for one another in both the good and not so good times. The textual relationship I draw on today is Jesus pointing out to his disciples to let the teachings of children and who they are becoming serve as lifelong lessons for each of us.

Ways of being exemplified by the life experiences of Jesus provide stories and examples of when and why it is paramount to approach one another with love and openness, to build relationships, to offer comfort to the anxious and suffering, and to show them empathy, compassion and presence. These are truly the most wonderful gifts we can give. In today's reading, author Mark Nepo reminds us to open our hearts and meet everything with care.

Finally, I will offer that some of our basic understandings, from the definitions of life and who has the ultimate "right" to choose what will grow inside us, to how the birthed child gets nurtured to adulthood, to how the family is supported as they help shape what kind of adults each child becomes is the continual work of the church, whether we are parents or grandparents, have never been parents, or are just good neighbors and friends. Children and their families coming out of nearly three years of isolation and fear are continuing in some way to struggle with new realities as they seek healthy ways forward in an unstable world.

As our church and our search committee continue the work of trying to discern directions for our immediate future, the health and welfare of children, teens and their families are some of the challenges that exist outside our walls. Yet there are numerous opportunities we individually and collectively as an open and affirming congregation could explore in order to find ways to engage and support these folks, even if they don't become church members.

In closing, I will borrow Mark Nepo's words:

Unending love will lead us to drink from the mystery without leaving the world, for love awakens everything. And care erases the walls we keep building between us.

Did you notice how the six young people who came last week to celebrate their tap dance teacher Tripp moved about in this room of strangers as a group? They gave us a snapshot of how vitally important relationships with peers is at this moment for students of all ages as they recover from the isolation caused by the pandemic. The uncertainties we all face in our lives, especially in these transitioning times, serve to challenge us to be ever attentive of one another's basic needs for support, love and compassion.

Amen