



Person
to
Person

Lenten Devotional 2012

First Congregational Church of Western Springs

**Introduction to
PERSON TO PERSON
Lenten Devotional 2012**
written by and for members of the First Congregational Church of Western Springs

February 22, 2012

Piglet sidled up to Pooh from behind. "Pooh?" he whispered.

"Yes, Piglet?"

"Nothing," said Piglet, taking Pooh's hand.

"I just wanted to be sure of you."

~A.A. Milne

We need each other. In times of joy and sorrow, hope and despair, celebration and tedium, the going is made easier by another's active, open-hearted presence. In this presence, one can sometimes feel the hand of God at work.

On the pages that follow, your fellow church members share stories about relationships and faith. You'll read about the powerful kindness of an acquaintance, the unlikely camaraderie of strangers, and the faithfulness of a lifelong friend.

You'll also hear of struggles. Relationships aren't always easy, and often the most difficult to navigate are those dearest to us. For those we cherish, commit to and are bound to by blood, we must at times pull out the full arsenal – patience, kindness, humility, forgiveness and endurance.

We thank all who wrote for their honesty and for their willingness to share.

It is our sincere hope that in learning *about* one another we may learn *from* one another and, in the process, strengthen our relationships in this holy family of faith.

Wishing you a blessed Lenten journey.

Paula Benson and Clare Kralovec
Church Members

SPECIAL THANKS TO:

Rev. Paul Stiffler for inspiration and guidance; Marie Murrell for original artwork; Julie Skoda for cover design and production; and Meg Heinz and Mary Jo McKeag for production and transmittal.

February 23, 2012

A few years ago George and I visited Morro Bay State Park near San Louis Obispo, California. When we arrived we saw a group of orange clad prisoners repairing a fence under the supervision of their guards. I was observing the group but did not feel connected to them; and although not afraid I did not want to make eye contact. I wanted to stay separate from them. We proceeded to go on a short hike and were joined by our friend who lives in San Louis.

When we returned to the area where the prisoners were working we were delighted to observe sea otters dining. They were on their backs in the water with rocks on their tummies. They were cracking open oysters on the rocks. We began oohing and aahing and were soon joined by the group of prisoners and guards. We stood there, shoulder to shoulder, tourists, locals, prisoners and guards. We all had smiles on our faces and pointed out particularly endearing behaviors to each other. We had become a community as we stood in awe of God's marvelous creation. I could feel His love surrounding all of us.

Kathy Fauth
Church Member



February 24, 2012

In years past, when I have read the Lenten devotionals, I have been both awed and humbled by the people who had the talent and courage to write and share their hearts. I did not feel or believe that I had anything very special to share. But when I saw the call for people to share this year, I realized that it is the very Grace that I have been given that allows me the courage to express the gratitude I awake with every day and how profoundly humbled I am by the presence of God in most every waking moment. I did not have a near death experience, or almost lose a loved one....I do not know what exactly changed in my life that brought me to the place that I am. I only know how I feel and that I am most appreciatively blessed. Perhaps it is aging that allows me to take the risk of putting in writing how small I feel (in a very good way) in the whole scheme of things.....and how in that smallness, such all encompassing miracles show themselves daily. I understand and feel absolutely pure, unconditional love and I say to God, "I get it. Thank you!" And many days, many times in those days, all I can say is "Amen".

Nancy Orr-Depner
Church Member

February 25, 2012

It began in the second grade. Roy lived across the street – Eight Street in the southwest area of Akron, Ohio. We attended the same grade school, the same high school and the same church. Roy became a best friend. When we met at the preacher's house, in the summer, we found a reason to take each other down and messed up the grass wrestling in the side yard. We would take our bikes and go to an open and empty lot near the railroad tracks which, because it was near industries and the RR yard, numbered eight tracks across. It was there that we gave vent to our angers and frustrations.

When Elsie and I were married in 1950 Roy borrowed his father's truck to help move furniture which my mother had given us to start our life. The narrow highways with RR crossings made the 400-mile trip from Akron to Naperville tiresome and seemingly unending. But Roy pushed on, as he does to this day. He was the best man at our wedding.

Roy married soon after graduation while I went on to college. Eleanor was a beautiful young woman. She and Roy brought forth four wonderful children. Eleanor was ill for most of their married life, Roy all the while giving her tender and loving care until she died after a long illness. Roy then became a deacon in the Catholic Church but left when he met Peg whom he married. Recently she passed away also. Again the same kind and loving care was given.

I am proud of Roy who always worked in various ways for the church of which he became a member. Now part of the United Church of Christ he continues to find ways to serve the Lord. While we were in Florida I received a prayer card indicating that the Men's Prayer Group had included me in their prayers.

Roy helps me remember the power of a long, non-stop friendship which always included as a basic foundation our trust and belief in God. Ever faithful, ever trusting, ever helping-all the marks of serving and loving God who gives us comfort and joy.

Rev. Paul Stiffler

Minister of Pastoral Care, First Congregational Church of Western Springs

February 26, 2012

Friendship

One day my friends influenced me in a negative and positive way. We climbed on a roof and I fell and landed on a pile of bricks but they never left my side, until their parents had to pick them up, but later they inspired me in a positive way to not do it again. I have gotten on roofs but I have been more careful and it wasn't over bricks!

Anonymous
8th Grade Church Member

Over the summer, I went to another country. When we were walking to our hotel from the airport, I stepped out of the way for someone on a narrow sidewalk, and she thanked me in her native language, thinking I was from there. That really made me feel welcome in the country.

Anonymous
8th Grade Church Member

Confidence

Confidence is the key to everything in life
I have confidence in my team,
we worked together like we've been a team for years
but it was only our first tournament
teamwork, dedication, and hard work, and pride
drove our team to victory,
and to be undefeatable.
I learned to never get down if you're losing the game,
and never say never
because your team is like your family
they always support you
in whatever you decide to do
in the game

Anonymous
8th Grade Church Member

Relationships with your friends will come and go, but it's up to you to decide if you want to keep them going. In my mind friends are always good to have no matter who they are. So forgive and forget and have fun with those you have now.

Anonymous
8th Grade Church Member

Dear Genevieve,

On Christmas Eve, in between hours of cooking and the big pageant, I took a break from my work to give you and your sister baths. We have our system down pat: you wait patiently in your chair while I start with Juliette, and then we set your baby tub on the bathtub so she can keep you company while I bathe you. I didn't used to like giving baths, and I still sometimes complain about the ache that settles in my lower back when I do. But I treasure washing you up. You gaze at me while I scrub and sing and try to make you smile. You are such a gazer, your big brown eyes all calm and bemused.

During your Christmas Eve bath, as I squeezed the warm water over your belly, I thought about how I was going to baptize you the next morning. I thought about how natural it seems for the same one who birthed you and nurses you and listens for your breath and immerses you in soapy water would be the same one to touch your forehead and speak words of blessing.

But then, everything about you seems natural. I told your father the other day that my love for you is uncomplicated, while my love for your sister was complicated when she was a baby. Don't you (or Juliette) ever think one was better or worse than the other; your Mama's love is fierce and good with or without complications. The fact of the matter is this: you were born into a family with a redemption story, and you showed up after the hard part. We will try our best to let you become who you are to become, but for now we can't help but think of you as our sweet and fairly unexpected gift. You delight us, and we all love taking turns delighting you.

On Christmas morning, we dressed you in a silver brocade dress that was just enough alike - and just enough different - from your sister's gold brocade dress. You won't remember anything about your first Christmas, but you will have a few snapshots, and stories from your sister, and a keepsake dress. And you will have a whole community of faith reminding you of your baptism, and teaching you what it means.

Genevieve Laverne, I baptized you in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. I called you what you are: a child of God, disciple of Christ, and member of the church. I kissed your cheek and set you back in the arms of your father, filled with wonder and humility and grace upon grace.

Your life is now the subject of a sacred covenant, one you will have an opportunity to confirm when you are older. I can tell you from personal experience that it is always a gift and sometimes a challenge to live in sacred covenant, and that I wouldn't want it any other way.

Genevieve Laverne, my daughter, my sister in Christ.

Love,
Mama

Rev. Katherine Willis Pershey
Associate Minister, First Congregational Church of Western Springs

February 28, 2012

I have a wonderful friend. She has been my friend since I moved to Western Springs.

This friend exudes joy wherever she goes.

Children love her. Adults of all ages are drawn to her.

She is constantly looking for ways to help people.

She is a joyful presence.

You know when she comes into a room because the energy volume goes up.

She has touched my life with her generous spirit.

If you are sick or shut in, she will probably be one to volunteer to bring you a food gift.

I am grateful that she has shown me faith and trust through a hard time in my life. When I was at my lowest, she came to visit me, and assured me of her constancy and support. That act of kindness gave me courage and determination to continue my path of renewal and reconciliation.

I say now, is she not the God spirit among us?

May God bless you, my dear friend Sharon Bachmann.

Mary Jo Mulcahy
Church Member

February 29, 2012

Happy Birthday!

I sometimes have a problem with my birthday. And it has nothing to do with age.

Managing expectations is something that (for me) comes with birthdays. Maybe it stems from childhood years when I could never decide what my favorite day was – Halloween or November 1st, my birthday. That’s a double header for a kid. As an adult I believe I shouldn’t need any special words or treatment from any one else to be happy. Yet apparently there are certain days that belief can still be a challenge for me.

This year was one of those years. My morning was a little bland but I was looking forward to a call from my daughter who sweetly calls regularly, birthdays or not. She called about noon and we chatted for a few minutes during which time there was no mention of the day. After the first few minutes I realized she had forgotten but I said nothing. We finished the conversation a short time later. When we hung up I was disappointed and honestly a little hurt. I wallowed in self pity for a few minutes, shed a few tears, and then went on about my business. Gratefully, she called 5 minutes later and apologized profusely that she had forgotten my birthday when she first called.

Well I couldn’t quite get myself out of *the funk of my own doing*. So I asked God for help – “please God release these thoughts for me; I don’t want them and can’t seem to get rid of them on my own.” Within a very short time the fog was lifted. I could feel space opening in my heart. My prayer was being answered and relief was coming.

I decided to do something different to shake up the day and went to an evening class at the gym. I rarely go in the evening so I don’t know any of the staff at that time of day. I walked in, gave a clerk I had never seen my membership number and then headed back to wait for the class. A few minutes later the girl I gave my number to walked up to me and said: “Happy Birthday”. I was so shocked and surprised that I just looked at her dumbfounded. “You are Karen aren’t you?” “Yes,” I said, “thank you!” In that instant, all of the disappointed feelings of my day morphed into a sense of peace so deep I was blown away.

So what’s the big deal you might ask? For me it was a magical moment; one frozen in time. As relationships go it was momentary – someone I did not know happened to notice my Date of Birth when she checked me in. But the magic of it for me was: **God** acted through her and was wishing me a Happy Birthday, no question. It was a palpable feeling. God let me know that He did not forget my birthday and that I am special (just as all His children are).

Best Birthday Ever!

Anonymous
Church Member

March 1, 2012

I was far from home with no friends, a husband who traveled, a low serotonin count and a one-year-old. Loved that baby, but I was beginning to disappear from lack of validation. Being just one, my daughter assigned no grades, wrote no performance reviews, gave no referrals. How was I to know how I was doing...or if I even existed?

One sunny afternoon, as they all were in California in July, my daughter and I found ourselves sitting in a strip mall watching the world go by. More precisely, sitting on the sidewalk watching ants. They looked so busy, so purposeful marching along that crack to goodness knew where. While my daughter traced their progress with her index finger, I wondered who their supervisor was and if he praised their work. This was a particularly big job – a muffin transport operation, if I wasn't mistaken – and even if their superiors didn't recognize them, surely completing a task of this magnitude would provide them with a sense of accomplishment.

As my mind trailed down the ant appreciation path, I sensed another's presence and looked up to find Santa standing beside us. Without the suit. He was clothed, of course, but in a California way. His beard was in bad need of a trim.

"You're a good mother," he said.

"Really?" I replied. "Why do you say that?"

"Because you're letting that child play in the dirt and you're not rushing her," he said.

"Isn't that what you're supposed to do?" I asked the total stranger.

"Yes," he said, "but you'd be surprised how many people don't."

I looked back at my daughter, who had begun rounding up scattered crumbs and stacking them in such a way as to streamline the ants' delivery process. Earnestly attempting, it appeared, to help her fellow creatures. Our square of cement was at that moment her entire universe, while she was mine.

It was enough.

I looked up to thank the man with the beard, but he was gone.

Paula Benson
Church Member

March 2, 2012

Soul Relatives

It seems to me that God gives us “relatives” to fill empty places in our souls. I am fortunate to have several soul sisters who take the place of the ones my parents could not give me. I also have a soul daughter who just dropped into my life.

Soul sisters are more than good friends. I am blessed with a lot of good friends but with soul sisters there is an undefined connection that was immediate when we met. We recognized and accepted it. The connection is different with each “sister”, what we share is different. All of my soul sisters know each other but we don’t often all gather for the same activity, and they probably have other soul sisters.

The advantage of these soul sisters is that I did not grow up with them so there is no sibling rivalry. We can share concerns and comments and know that they will go no further. We do not judge each other. We do not have to defend what we think. We are each other’s sounding board. We glory in any successes and laugh or cry over failures. We do not live in each other’s pocket but know that when we need to talk, we can at any time. When we need to offer support, it is there unconditionally.

Having a soul daughter is very different than having a birth daughter. I did not have to suffer through the rejection years. I am admired and loved just as I am, misguided as that may be. My suggestions are considered, not laughed off. My advice is requested. And she provided me with a son-in-law and a goddaughter both of whom I really enjoy.

Did God have a hand in these relationships? Oh, I really do think so because He knew that my life would be so much enhanced by the relatives He provided.

Sue Ryan
Church Member

March 3, 2012

Accepting Change – Asking God to Make Lemonade out of Lemons

In 2007 I discovered how poorly prepared I was for the Empty Nest Adventure. As I spiraled into a pity party of loss and despair, I filled the emptiness with every activity and project I could to push away the ache in my heart. Never mind trying to convince me that this would pass, or that I'd see my girls again – *like, in two weeks*.....I was certain I would not see the sun shine in the foreseeable future. It was grief, disguised as anger, panic and abandonment. The girls didn't need me anymore.

After a few months, with the guidance of a clinical social worker, I was able to put things in perspective. During this experience I also started thinking more about my faith and allowed myself to develop a closer relationship with God through prayer. I dug deeper into Jesus' teachings. I was thirsty.

The darkness began to give way to dawn. The girls showed up again, long enough to reassure me they would continue to be a part of our family. I found new interests; set goals. I wonder if I would have gotten closer to God without experiencing the change of the Empty Nest Adventure. The adventure conjured the old expression, "When life gives you lemons, make lemonade."

Five years have passed. It is now Christmas, 2011 and we are faced with our first holiday without our girls. **Big Change! Lemons!! Call 911!** Leslie was staying in New York, and Rachel had to work Christmas Day at the Chicago Canine Rescue. She mentioned they would be short-staffed, so I volunteered to help. (If she couldn't come home, I'd go where she was if the shelter would allow). *Lemonade!*

But, there was that dark cloud on the horizon again....this time I was ready. I prayed and gave thanks for the most incredible Thanksgiving, ever – everyone was home. THAT was our Christmas. I prayed to find the joy in each day of the season. I gave thanks for what beautiful young women our girls had grown to be, living healthy, vibrant lives of their own, in spite of their parents.....

The cloud was moving closer. I knew Brian was struggling too. Rachel called and asked us to come to her place on the 23rd for dinner and gifts. She had to work the whole weekend and it was the only time she had. We had a wonderful, beautiful evening together. It wasn't Christmas Eve, but it seemed like it. Thank you, God! *More lemonade!*

On Christmas morning, I met her and her peers at the shelter at 8:00 a.m. For the next four hours, I cleaned crates and kennels, washed mountains of dirty bedding, swept floors. (I thanked God numerous times for the invention of rubber gloves.) *I have to say, this was a huge basket of lemons!*

Seriously, I received the best gift, ever - a new connection with Rachel. Since Christmas Day, she has called to discuss "stuff" going on at the shelter, asking for my perspective – or just for me to listen – she knows I "get it." The phone calls and texts are less stilted, more relaxed. What better gift?

I truly believe that through my "change" journey, and seeking God's guiding presence through prayer, I was able to discover a new relationship with Rachel, as well as to have the most unique, memorable Christmas, without a single dime spent or gift box under the tree.

I'm not sure there's a big enough pitcher to hold all of that **lemonade**.

Gratefully,
Zada Clarke
Church Member

March 4, 2012

In volleyball my teammate gave me advice when I tried and tried again but couldn't get my serve over. She really encouraged me to help others and it makes me feel good every time I try to encourage someone just like her.

Ali Sisk
5th Grade Church Member

F orever I will love my friends
R elationships will stay strong
I am truthful to my friends
E ternal friendship
N ever make them feel unwanted
D estiny brought us together
S tay true to those who care.

Emily Dickett
5th Grade Church Member

Last year this kid on my soccer team was really bad and let a ton of goals in and everyone was down on him and then he quit the next day. Then the coach helped him.

Anonymous
7th Grade Church Member

Whenever my family eats we pray together and one kid does a prayer by themselves. Then we eat and stay at the table till everyone is finished.

Anonymous
5th Grade Church Member

In gymnastics our coach tells us to never give up or always believe in yourself. She is very kind and she says the right things at the right time. It gives us courage.

Kesley Van Dahm
5th grade Church Member

Whenever my friend and I do anything together he goes out of his way to help other people. I think that this is how everybody should act towards others.

Anonymous
5th Grade Church Member ►

March 4 continued

As I lie down in my bed,
Just after my mother said,
I think of a prayer,
As I stare and stare,
Then feel better thinking of
my cousin Ted.

Emerson Rounds
5th Grade Church Member

Once this person was feeling sad cause all these kids were bullying them. I walked up and said it will be ok. Just forget about what they said about you and have fun. If they say anything else then just ignore them.

Anonymous
6th Grade Church Member



March 5, 2012

Initially, I felt a little awkward sitting next to this fifty-year-old homeless African-American man wearing torn and wrinkled clothing. I did not realize that this man, and the next sixty minutes I would spend conversing with him, would change my life.

My junior year in high school, while I was working in a homeless shelter on Work Tour, I met Kenneth. He told me his life story, and without meaning to, significantly reshaped my priorities.

Previously, Kenneth held a decent-paying job and owned a house. However, his life changed dramatically the day he was hit by a truck and hospitalized with a broken hip bone and other injuries. During his extended stay in the hospital, he was unable to pay his bills and consequently evicted from his home and fired from his job. He had recently moved to Atlanta, Georgia, where I met him, to stay with the last of his extended family. For various reasons, he could no longer stay with them, and he was left homeless.

After hearing his story, I was filled with compassion and even pity for Kenneth. However, the moment he realized my feelings, Kenneth insisted I not feel badly for him, because his situation could always be worse. After enduring these hardships, one might be tempted to give up, but not Kenneth. His inspiringly positive outlook was made clear through all the stories he told us. He explained that although he wasn't living in ideal conditions, there are many others out there who suffer more. He considered himself lucky. His life was filled with happiness, not the happiness of having everything, but simple happiness. Even though he had few resources, he loved helping others in any way possible. For example, he volunteered as a coach for a homeless children's basketball team at a nearby church. He told me he did this not only because he loves the sport of basketball, but he also wanted to help children experience the joy of playing the game. I asked why he would give so much when he had almost nothing, and he wisely responded that life isn't about how much money you have; instead, it is about who you are inside. ►

March 5 continued

In this moment, I questioned everything I had once believed. I realized I truly wanted to give more to others and make a difference. I had taken so much for granted – a house, clothes, food, a solid education – while Kenneth had only the clothes on his back, a razor, and his cane. Yet he had given me so much. Thanks to this man, I now understand that life is about more than material objects. It is about finding joy through helping others in doing the things you love.

Jess Kralovec-Kirchherr
Church Member



March 6, 2012

Finding God at the Dog Park

As a steward of four dogs, I have the pleasure of their company each morning at Katherine Legge Memorial Park. Three of my canine friends join me, often at dawn in a 30 minute brisk walk around the beautiful local park. It's great for them, and great for me too in some surprising ways. The dogs get a combination of free running over a large area with the release of pent-up energy. That's good for them in every way. For me, our morning communion is often the best chance I have to seek and be present with God. I discovered a long time ago that my "best moments" in my private faith often come in the silence of nature. Whether in the valley below Wyoming's Grand Tetons, in the vast beauty of the Boundary Waters of Northern Minnesota, or in the emerging dawn of southern Hinsdale - my ability to feel God is most intense when I am outside and alone. A long-deceased family member often joked that he attended church "on the golf course". I never really agreed with him when he made that periodic quip, but I have come to appreciate the truth of his sentiment more and more. God gave me a world in which to experience presence in all kinds of ways, but no more intensely that when I am immersed in the splendor of our natural world. I have come to see more similarity in what I share in common with a dog, or tree, or even a rock - than the difference. The gift of being, living in the alertness of the moment, is the strongest and most direct manifestation of my connection to God. What is really wonderful is that communion in natural spaces has also become a means for me to share God with my family and friends, with whom I have shared many moments in "wide open spaces".

Mark Berry
Church Member

March 7, 2012

Although most frequently heard at weddings, these words were written by the Apostle Paul not as a model for marriage, but rather in response to a letter from the church in Corinth, a church he had helped establish. We can only surmise what Paul was responding to, but it was clear that there was trouble in this fledgling church. Paul's beautiful words for how a community should live with one another can be read as instructions for making God present among us. They are as relevant now as they were almost 2,000 years ago. When you read this passage today, try substituting the word "friendship" for "love" and see how this might deepen or broaden its meaning for you and all your relationships.

Love is patient and kind;
love does not envy or boast;
it is not arrogant or rude.
It does not insist on its own way;
it is not irritable or resentful;
it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth.
Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.
Love never ends.

1 Corinthians 13:4-8 ESV

March 8, 2012

Marriage is hard. The minister that conducted our pre-marriage counseling sort of hinted at that. But when you're madly in love "hard" sounds impossible - how hard can it be? Doesn't love conquer all? But our marriage has been hard. We've struggled with our own baggage that we brought with us into the marriage. We've struggled financially. We've struggled to agree on how to parent. Ironically, sometimes it has felt very lonely. It's been hard for over 20 years now.

Now, before you stop reading and think wow, what a "Debbie downer" this is, that's not to say there haven't been great times of joy. The birth and rearing of our children have certainly been among the most poignant and beautiful moments together. There has been much laughter. We have held one another close when the rest of the world couldn't possibly understand what we were going through...And even though it's been hard, we are still in love and we are still together and we would still do anything to help the other and we are still committed to one another and our family and committed to continue to work to make this marriage a good one.

So, where is God in this relationship? God was there from the moment our relationship began. We chose to be married in a church, vowing before God that we would love one another until death do us part. And we were blessed in that ceremony, asking for God's presence and help as we became husband and wife. And in the hard times, it has been God that has sustained us. Our prayers have been answered when the only prayer we could seem to muster is "God Help Us!" It has been our vows and the covenant we made before God that sometimes is the only thing that has gotten us through. And on some days getting through is enough, trusting that with God's help there are better days ahead. Often, it has been worshipping together on Sunday mornings that has been a powerful reminder to put aside the pettiness and remember what is truly important in life. It has been holding hands in worship and knowing that we were both praying for God to bless our marriage.

So, yes, our marriage has been hard. But it has also been joy-filled, rich with blessings and sustained through prayer. Thanks be to God.

Anonymous
Church Member

March 9, 2012

The following devotion was presented to Woman's Society October 16, 1986.

The Woman's Society of the First Congregational Church of Western Springs is many things. It gives its members an additional formal opportunity to worship; it provides avenues to increase a member's outreach to those who need help close at hand, or far away. But, for most of us, our society means fellowship and friendship.

In the New Testament, fellowship is the bond among Christians created by their common confession that Jesus is Lord. In Paul's letters this fellowship is marked by spiritual oneness. It is shown by the gathered community at the Lord's Supper, and characterized above all by self-giving love.

I also found in the *Harper's Bible Dictionary* that "friendship is a relationship of mutual trust and congeniality." Many biblical writers acknowledge that friendship enriches human life. The writer of Deuteronomy characterizes a friend as "a person who is as your own soul."

The benefits and requirements of friendship are among the subjects addressed by Israel's wise men, especially in Proverbs. Loyalty and steadfastness are marks of a true friend: "A friend loves at all times." To be Jesus' friend is to love one another, John 15:12.

No wonder it makes us feel so good to have a friend and to be a friend. Is the Woman's Society an idea whose time has come and gone? I think not, when we consider the laughs and the tears we have shared over each other's joys and sorrows. How about the tired backs and the sore feet, to say nothing of the burnt fingers we've earned together?

What about the times we've met in each other's homes and shared mutual preferences in decorating, or cooking, or collecting? Let us count the opportunities for mutual growth and understanding — that we came to like, even love each other as we knew each other better.

What a rare opportunity the Woman's Society gives us to reach up to those a little older than we, to respect them and to value them. At the same time each chapter can nurture the younger members, reach through the years to empathize with them and treasure them.

As we celebrate our Centennial Church year, let us thank God for the infinite wisdom of Mrs. Ida Scranton and her friends. She was president of the Woman's Society in 1888. Let us pray:

Dear Heavenly Father,

Please bless our fellowship and strengthen our friendships. Please grant that all may know that "to be a friend is to have a friend." May each of us know the warm hand and the understanding heart of another member. And, as has been our heritage, may we pass it on!

Amen.

Jo Means
Church Member

March 10, 2012

A friend is someone who knows the song in your heart and can sing it back to you when you have forgotten the words.
- Bernard Meltzer

A couple of years ago, I forgot the words. While I am typically annoyingly optimistic, serving as chief caregiver and cheerleader for a young adult 'child' with a chronic illness resulted in a couple of set-backs that threatened to send me into the deep end of the pity pool and destroy my faith. Church was a chore where other people had normal lives, God didn't seem to be listening to my pleas to clue me into what I was supposed to learn from this, and the challenges didn't seem to have any end in sight. I felt abandoned by long-time friends who didn't understand, and weary of burdening a family that could only do so much. My supportive husband did his best, but I struggled with my anger and fear and couldn't seem to get back on track.

I never really gave much thought to the phrase "faithful friends" until I began thinking about how God must have heard my despair and pulled me back from the abyss. Oddly, it wasn't a single person, or a single event, but several random interactions with a diverse group of women that gave me a new lease on life and restored my faith. Two are from our church family, two are devout Catholics who have an unshakable belief that I admire, and one is a trusted work colleague. For some mysterious reason, God whispered to me to reach out — and whispered to them to listen. Through their non-judgmental ears, endless compassion and humor, and even a psalm when I was looking for something deeper, I slowly began to pull myself out of my hole of despair. As we shared texts, e-mails, and conversations, a miraculous thing happened—I slowly began to remember the words to the song in my heart. We formed a remarkable group that nourished each others' souls. And, all of a sudden, "I'm praying for you" had greater significance. Not only are we all praying for and supporting each other, but I know God is listening. And I am grateful.

Anonymous
Church Member

March 11, 2012

My grandpa has taught me a lot over the years, from ways to eat to ways to live your life. But the most important thing he taught me was about family. He would always say no matter how much you fight with your brother, you two are family for life and nothing can change that. Which teaches me there is no point in yelling at family, because friends come and go but family stays forever.

Anonymous
8th Grade Church Member

The relationship I had with my dad was indescribable. What he taught me about how to live life with an open spirit towards people you encounter and things you do truly inspired me to be the person I am today. I wasn't really in full realization of the number of people my dad had touched before he died. So many people he knew and loved attended the funeral. It made me truly appreciate the brilliant man he was and I savored the last moments I had with him. It also made me appreciate the relationship I had with my father even more than I did before. If we had not had the strong bond that we did, the memories I have of him wouldn't be something to hold on to. So God bless that.

Ryan Byrne
8th Grade Church Member

My older sister always helps me make the right decisions about school and friends. Without my sister, I wouldn't be where I am now. She's not just my sister but my best friend.

Anonymous
8th Grade Church Member

March 12, 2012

A LIFE IN A BOX

One cannot summarily describe
 Or somehow securely contain
 The enormous complexity
 Of the human mind and spirit;
 Cannot package the soaring joy
 Of childhood's carefree years;
 Or box up the uncomfortable pleasure
 Of puberty's confusing fruition;
 Or the joys of learning and growing;
 Of successful loving and marriage;
 The dazzling functioning of
 An expectant mother's body;
 And all the small vital routines
 That make up a satisfying life.
 Certainly one cannot for the living---

My sister is dead. At her funeral
 We gathered around the remains
 And in loving celebration of her life
 We recounted the joys of her company,
 Admiration for her truly impressive
 Personal and professional attainments;
 Anecdotes of her gentle kindness;
 The lovable quirks and family jokes.

Our pastor blessed and prayed
 And committed my departed sister
 To eternal safety and love.

As we mourners sadly departed
 I reached out and touched all that remained
 Of the rich vibrant life and times
 Of this beautiful, charming, beloved
 Thoroughly human woman
 Now contained in a burial carton
 About the size of a gallon of milk.
 I knew I understood little
 About our deity.
 But I felt completely assured
 That the two of them were together
 Like part of our family.

Lee Snare
 Church Member

March 13, 2012

Ed arrived on the Iowa State College campus in the fall of 1954 from his small Iowa hometown of West Liberty. Winner of an athletic scholarship for football, he was unsophisticated, warm and outgoing, talented, intelligent, and eager to be out in the world and to learn all the social skills he knew he lacked, welcoming his independence, ready to prove to himself and to the world that he could be all he dreamed of becoming. I arrived in the fall of 1955 from my Illinois suburban hometown of Western Springs. I, too, was intelligent and talented, but not at all sure I was up to being so far from home, of meeting so many new people, of making my way without the daily, loving support of my family that I had always taken so for granted until that fall. Besides, the day my dad delivered me to the Ames campus it was a 108 degree day in August, and the flies were ridiculously huge and swarming everywhere. Perhaps I had made a mistake....

Why did we come to this place? Although an outstanding high school athlete, Ed had always wanted to study vocal music at Northwestern University. An uncle, a wealthy Iowa farmer, had agreed to help him finance just that, but during Ed's senior year, that uncle died, and the dream was gone. Three of the local athletic supporters who understood his family situation and his need for help from adults who cared, his football coach, a local insurance agency owner, and an attorney, helped him get an athletic scholarship. He was offered scholarships at Auburn University, Syracuse University, the University of Iowa, and Iowa State College in Ames. Outfitted by his three supporters with some new, appropriate clothes and a new suitcase, he chose Iowa State. Why? He always said it was because he couldn't afford to travel far, the University was too close to home, and Iowa State looked like a college should look. Reasons he gave himself. I came because Iowa State had an outstanding degree program in Child Development, and I thought at the time I wanted to teach preschoolers. I had an academic scholarship offer at Smith College, but didn't want to go to a "snooty" girl's school, didn't want to stay in Illinois, and thought Ames was my best choice. Reasons I gave myself. I really had no idea why I picked ISC. I had never been to Iowa, had seen only a few pictures of the campus, and knew almost nothing about the school.

Fifty-seven years later I know why we both were there. The reason would never have occurred to either of us, nor could we have articulated it if it had. We came because of the whisperings in our hearts. Without even being aware of them, we listened, and we came. And so it began..... ►

March 13 continued

The ensuing four years told the story of a tumultuous relationship. There were many dates that first year, and, to be honest, there was much that was appealing about that handsome, intelligent young man. But I thought he drank too much beer, and he thought my dislike of beer was completely unreasonable. He thought I studied too much, and I found his casual attitude toward attending class irritating, especially since he came to rely on my history notes and eventually didn't bother ever attending history or government classes. Oh, he'd meet me after class to get the notes and play a few hands of bridge! The relationship sputtered along for years, but it was always more of a friendship than a romance. Other pin mates came and went, Ed always wanting more from our relationship than I was prepared to offer. He eventually gave up, and the frequent late night phone calls, the bridge games, the persistent urging that we date, and even the friendship drifted off into nothingness. And then, on a crisp October Saturday after Ed had graduated and was teaching and coaching in a small town near Mason City, he came to campus to take my roommate to the Homecoming game and out to dinner. Something remarkable and strange and confounding happened as I watched his approach from the window of my sorority house room. I fell in love! Deeply, excruciatingly, painfully, astonishingly, gloriously in love! Brushing past my roommate, I ran down to meet him, and heard myself abruptly asking him to come home with me for Thanksgiving. *Where* did *that* question come from? That sure wasn't part of any of my plans! I felt like I was receiving some mystical message from a Master Puppeteer who seemed to have my voice and my life and my dreams in his hands, and I was dancing at the ends of his strings! For four years I had been callous, aloof, and seemingly self-assured. Looking back now, I think I had just been afraid of the powerful emotions inherent in Ed's insistence. I hadn't listened. But that day, inexplicably, I listened to the whispers I had assiduously ignored for so long. Once again, it began.....

And it goes on..... And I am so grateful that God never gave up on me.....on us..... I have learned to listen as God continues to whisper. His steadfast love guides me in all my relationships, sometimes in quiet whispers, sometimes with gentle nudges, and sometimes, because I am his beloved child, he just has to take over.....again.....

Ellie Roberts
Church Member



March 14, 2012

I remember it well - The first time in my life when I thought to myself, "Oh, so that's the Holy Spirit!" Of all places, it was on a bus! A bus full of my college choir, about to sing in a Choral Competition in the south of France. We were about to exit the bus and enter the concert hall where we would perform. We stood as best as we were able and held hands in a circle - in the aisle, over the seats, but we were joined in a circle. And we sung the Lord's Prayer. God was in our midst. The director said afterward, "If any of you ever wondered if there was a God, did you feel God in that music? Only God could create such miraculous music." (Probably not a politically correct thing to say in a "school" setting but I had to agree with him!) I felt God in the beauty of the music that day. But more than in the music, I felt God in the community that was singing that music. The energy that flowed between our clasped hands...the grace that floated through the air as the last note seemed to linger...my heart was full in a way I had never known before. I felt God's presence in the circle of friends that day - that circle that could only make that kind of music together - not alone and not without God's blessing.

Meredith Onion
Pastoral Seminary Associate, First Congregational Church of Western Springs

March 15, 2012

The text that follows is from a reflection delivered to the congregation by Anna Doten, a high school senior, on Youth Sunday, November 6, 2011.

Good morning, my name is Anna Doten and I am a senior in high school at LT. My parents have been active members of the church for as long as I can remember. When I was younger, I was a terrible listener during church. I am not proud of this, but one time I wrote SpongeBob Squarepants' name and information in the red pew books. As I grew up, I began to realize how easy and rewarding it could be to become involved with the church. I was a member of the bell choir, helped out during the rummage sale, taught Sunday school, and joined PF. Since then, I have been trying to understand my concept of faith.

Although I had been involved with church and in PF, I had many unanswered questions about my faith and myself. I put off answering these questions because I assumed I would figure it out later when I was older. The summer after my sophomore year I went on an Outward Bound course to the Pacific Northwest. I kayaked in the San Juan Islands and mountaineered in the Cascade Mountains for 2 ½ weeks. I learned new kayaking skills, how to use an ice axe, and how to camp in the snow. This experience was the most challenging and rewarding thing I have ever done. I realized that all the distractions in my life were not helping me find out who I was. Our final challenge for the course was the solo. I had to find a suitable campground, build a trench in the snow, set up my shelter, and live for the next two days completely alone. I was excited to be able to sleep because it seemed like we were on the move for two weeks straight. I have to admit, I was terrified of mountain lions and avalanches. When I would start to be scared I would try to distract myself and think about all of the natural beauty of the mountainside and how incredible it was that I got to experience a blizzard in June. Although these things were obvious and didn't seem Godlike or prestigious, I had found a part of my faith. While we were on our solo, we had one task, which was to write our letter to ourselves to be sent to our houses in 6 months. Mine read: "Hey Anna, how's school? A little boring? Yes well what are you going to do? I am sitting here shivering in my sleeping bag because I am sleeping on top of snow! How ridiculous is that. I just wanted to remind you how amazing this trip is. Remember how you felt God's presence every day during the two-week course. I am setting a goal for you right now to continue to find something every single day where you feel God's presence. That probably means going outside more often and simplifying your life a little bit. Remember the importance of PF. Look for the good in the world. Remember the Pacific Ocean Sunrises. Remember to love openly." I have this note posted in my room and I try to make my Outward Bound self proud because that person knew who she was and her simple encounters with God. ►

March 15 continued

I tried to take the simplicity of my faith to Georgia on the work tour later that year in March. My fellow PFers and I were painting and doing small home repairs in a house while listening to upbeat music. Towards the end of the day, a few of my PF friends and I needed to wash our hands and clean some paint brushes. The project manager told us we could do this back at the base house. We were surprised when he directed us to a mansion. We were instantly welcomed inside by Amy and cleaned up. We then were curious about the organization we were helping so I asked Amy to tell us about the houses. She told us that this was an organization for women who were looking for God's help because they had hit rock bottom and had a problem with drugs or alcohol. This caught the other PFers and me off guard but Amy continued to show us around the gorgeous house. There was beautiful artwork on the walls and the house looked like it could be in *Home and Garden* magazine. Amy continued to tell us that we had not seen the best part of the house. She then escorted me and three other PFers into a small room with pale blue walls with only a cross on the wall and a Bible on a table in the middle. We were confused by this simple room in contrast to the rest of the house but commented on how beautiful the room was because we felt like we had to. There was another woman who continued to tell us that in this small room was where she felt God, and that when she recovers she is going to be the mother her kids deserve. Then it clicked. Tears rolled down our cheeks because the strong conviction of their faith moved us. This room was amazing because the women felt closest to God, and this is where they felt the encouragement to turn their lives around.

In both of these instances I came across God in simpler ways, but my faith journey so far has been more meaningful than I thought possible. I used to think that I was not experienced enough to truly understand faith, but for me God was simply the beauty of nature and the will to better yourself.

Anna Doten
Church Member

March 16, 2012

It was a few days after Christmas. We'd had a wonderful Christmas with all of my siblings and my mother at the Lake – a boisterous group of nine sibling families and 19 grandkids. The little boys ninja-ed their way through the annual Christmas play, we cleared a large ice skating rink on the lake and we skied and sledged in the picture perfect snow. My mother had the time of her life. She sat in her comfy chair, laughed and was moved by her grandchildren's rendition of the Christmas story, held the babies while we tended to our older ones, helped smooth over irritations, and quietly took in the wonderful buzz of the family she had created.

After returning home, my normally stoic mother admitted that she had been feeling flu-ish for a few days. We knew her cancer had spread and that the time the doctors had given her was almost up, but we kept up hope that her current symptoms were not cancer related. Around 9:00 or 10:00 one night, just before the snow started to fall for the 1999 blizzard, my sister called to tell me my mom wasn't doing well. I hurried over to their home. We quickly realized we couldn't get her to the hospital ourselves and called 911. As my sister and I watched the ambulance, lights flashing and siren sounding in the night, pull away from the house taking our dear mother away from us, tears streamed down our faces. Our "she's only got the flu" reassurances to one another started to sound a false note.

In the ER, the doctors quickly determined that my mother's appendix was either about to or had already ruptured. She would need surgery immediately. The surgeon came to us at my mother's bedside and explained what he would do. As they put up the rails on her bed to wheel her away from us, the doctor asked if he could pray. I don't remember if he was Catholic or Protestant, if I agreed with the "theology" of his prayer, or even what he said. I only remember that he prayed – prayed words to a God we all shared – prayed for God's guidance and presence in that moment. My semi-conscious mother looked at us and smiled as they wheeled her away.

There is no miraculous "happy" ending to this story. The doctor's prayer and his surgery didn't "heal" my mother. Six weeks later she died peacefully at home, with her children surrounding and caring for her. I continue to feel gratitude for this kind doctor, who likely knew that there would be no "happy" ending to my mother's journey, but knew what we and he needed – to be reminded that God was with us and would not abandon us to the loneliness and despair of that long night.

Clare Kralovec
Church Member

March 17, 2012

The Ripple Effect When God Is In Our Relationships

In my mid-thirties, I found myself in a spiritual desert of sorts. I had certainly been there more than “40 days and 40 nights” and I feared remaining in that place. I had struggled through years of infertility and so wanted to have a second child. I was sitting in church one Sunday during that time when a member of my parish got up in the pulpit and invited women to a weekend retreat with the theme of *Christ Renews His Parish*. The women assured those of us being encouraged to attend that it would be a life-changing experience. No information beyond that was given. I was so craving something to soothe my heart and ignite a spark in my soul that I decided to register to attend that very morning. The retreat was given by 20 women of the parish. As I now realize is often the case, **God surprised me BIG-TIME!** **I was surprised** with overwhelming hospitality. From the moment of arrival and throughout the weekend each of us attending was greeted and cared for with the undivided attention of our hosts. The hosts attended to our every need. They cooked for us, served us, pampered us and presented the content of the retreat with a genuine attitude of being there to serve. Their demeanor was a visible attitude of a great desire to provide first and foremost for our comfort and well-being and to do so in the name of Christ. There was non-judgment and unconditional love in their hospitality. **I was surprised** with the willingness of our hosts to become vulnerable to us in offering verbal testimony to us of God’s unfailing love by sharing the joys, their life’s betrayals, and the struggles of their faith journeys with us. Hearing their stories and how their faith was challenged and renewed through good and bad times renewed my spirit and my faith. I felt the brush of the Holy Spirit throughout that entire weekend. **I was surprised** that at the end of the weekend I and 17 other women committed to participate in 12- weeks of a spiritual formation curriculum to foster our growth and to prepare us to present the next retreat to a whole new group of women. **I was surprised** that as each woman extended herself in love and hospitality, each of us was changed growing a stronger faith. With each group that put forth effort in faith formation and hosting the next retreat (2 times per year and a total of 30 retreats over several years) the faith community was renewed and strengthened. **I was surprised that** God finally sent that second child along to me in His time after I had grown a bit more personally and spiritually through my *Christ Renews His Parish* experience.

Deb Stankiewicz
Parish Nurse

March 18, 2012

I was being bullied and I was with my close friends and they all pitched in to help me feel better by making jokes and making silly faces. They made me smile and laugh. They are the best friends in the world.

Anonymous
6th Grade Church Member

Last basketball practice my friend helped me get a new free throw shot because I'm not great at them. I'm much better at it now and I'm really thankful.

Anonymous
7th Grade Church Member

F orever their
R elationships are true
I love them
E verything we do is fun
N ever lie
D eserve friendship

Amanda Parus
5th Grade Church Member

T alking
E nthusiastic
A pologetic
M erry

Anonymous
7th Grade Church Member

I have a great relationship with the people that I play tennis with because they always tell me that I can do something and they always encourage me.

Anonymous
5th Grade Church Member ►

March 18 continued

Live by God

In every good or bad situation, you can always find God

Feel good about yourself

Everyone is equal even if they're rich or poor

Melanie Parus

7th Grade Church Member

My teacher always says that if you get bullied stand up for yourself and don't let them keep bullying you. Maybe you could ask a friend to help you but NEVER let them keep bullying you!

Anonymous

6th Grade Church Member

When my mom was pregnant with me her due date was June 21 1999. That day my Aunt had my cousin, and six days later I was born on June 27 1999. For four years my cousin and I were best friends. Then her dad got a job in Milwaukee Wisconsin, and I only see her once a year. It's really hard that she moved away because we were like twins, we got matching dresses for Christmas, we went to kindermusic together (we got kicked out of kindermusic together). It's hard to forgive my Aunt and Uncle for moving, but in ways, being away from each other makes us even happier when we are together.

Anonymous

7th Grade Church Member

† † † † †

March 19, 2012

I have this pinned up on my kitchen bulletin board.

"Live simply, Love generously, Care deeply,
Speak kindly and leave the rest to God."

The paper has 52 pin holes in it. I know because I counted them all. 52 times I have stuck something over it. 52 times a coupon from the car wash, a haircut appointment reminder or a recipe for Chicken Apple Sausage and Rice Stuffed Peppers has been more important than considering that message.

This is what I think. It is easy to let the clutter of life take you over. It is easy to forget to love your neighbor, to care about something greater than yourself. It is easy to speak unkindly about someone else.

I believe that God is present in every good and kind thing you do. But also in every childish and hurtful thing you do. His hand is your hand at work in the world. His voice is your voice as you speak to your friends, your loved ones and those who cross your path in life. The care you show in all things is his care, is his love.

I have uncovered the saying. I thought about framing it but decided that it is exactly where it should be. Sometimes buried under other things but always present. And I leave the rest to God.

Laurel Seidelman

Church Member

March 20, 2012

The text that follows is from a reflection delivered to the congregation by Tiernan Murrell, a high school senior, on Youth Sunday, November 6, 2011.

Hi everyone. My name's Tiernan, and I'm the Devotional Officer of PF. I'm sure some of you recognize my face, but it's probably pretty rare that you've seen me actually in the sanctuary. When I got elected to the Devotional Office, I was pretty excited, and I came home and told my family. My mom laughed out loud, and for the entire summer, she'd tell people and joke about how "Tiernan's not religious." She's wrong - it's not that I'm not religious. Sure, I don't walk around with a Bible under my arm, quoting Paul or writing Facebook statuses about Him. Not even close. I'm plenty religious, it's just that I keep it to myself. I certainly act on my religion, although most people (including myself sometimes) are more likely to categorize it as "being nice." The reason you know me is from my involvement in the church. I've been hanging around here for years. But not so often in services or Sunday School. My religion has always led me to the Bell Choir and the Steel Drum band, to Plymouth Fellowship, to JRneys - the middle school youth group, to working in the Nursery on Sunday mornings. Although there are certainly services that I wish I could see, I end up putting in my energy behind the scenes.

Just Friday night, I was giving a friend of mine a ride home, and we'd been talking about PF. He turned to me and asked "are you like, really religious?" Six months ago, I wouldn't have had an answer for him, but over the summer, I had an epiphany. And it was absolutely horrible. It was eleven thirty at night, I was lying on the futon in my grandma's basement, and the next morning I was scheduled for my first airplane ride alone. I'll be honest: all I wanted was to sleep. But something incredible happened. I'm lying in bed, and all of a sudden, I can't help but think about my faith. It's not that I hadn't been religious before and was finding god for the first time, but in this moment, words started coming to articulate my faith in a way I'd never been able to define. So I get up, and open up my computer and start writing everything down. To quote what I started my Word document with that night, "it seems that these revelations always come at the worst times." But it was that night that means that I was able to answer my friend on Friday, and that I'm able to share my feelings with you right now.

I believe in science. I'm driven by logic, and if you can't prove it, I don't tend to believe it. So as you can imagine, god was very hard for me to grasp. There's no proof that there is a bearded man in the sky. I was always the child to question god - what if god is a woman? What if god isn't white, but black, Hispanic, Indian? Why can't god be a child? Maybe Morgan Freeman is god? But that night, I realized that god is more of an abstraction, a spirit, a feeling. To me, god is part of human nature. God is in the kindness, the caring, the acceptance, the openness, the selflessness, the giving, and the love. In essence, god is the good in people.

For some, faith is believing in a god that they cannot see, a god that seems to bring bad things along with the good, a god that seems to ignore some prayers while fulfilling others. My faith is different. It stems from trusting that god is in others, that although I cannot always see it, other people will behave in a godly way. And my faith has come from proof. I see god in some way every day, through small acts of kindness or friendship. God is in my locker buddy as she helps me un-jam my locker for the umpteenth time. God is in those holding hands outside of Kelli's funeral. God was in my friend from Friday, who was very kind about being the only boy at our tea party. ►

March 20 continued

Now as a little kid, my view on the Bible was that it was all a good story. I hated the thought that there were people who believed everything it said, just because it said so. I've never really grown out of that, but I've come to understand my own views a bit better. All little-me knew was that the stuff in the Bible couldn't have happened. There was no way that Jesus could have taken a fish and a loaf of bread and used it to feed hundreds of people. That just doesn't work. Well looking at the Bible today, it seems to me that it's more of a book of guidelines. The stories are not to be taken literally, but for the meaning at their core. So in a way, the Bible is just a collection of stories where it's the moral that counts, and you can ignore the fact that the details don't always quite add up.

PF has been an enormous part of my faith journey. Without PF, I know I would not be here talking to you, and there are far too many reasons to mention all of them right now. PF has provided a lot of things for me, one of the most significant being a safe community. Last Sunday, I was helping lead a discussion on the recent events with Kelli, and it hit me that I was standing in front of a group of maybe 60 to 70 high-schoolers, some of whom I'd never met, talking about my feelings. Now believe it or not, I was shy all the way through eighth grade. But from PF, I've learned that people will accept me for who I am, and it's given me a great deal of confidence that has spread to all areas of my life. God, at least in my interpretation, is very present in PF. And paradoxically, PF doesn't dwell on god in the way a lot of youth groups do. PF is exactly as religious as you want it to be. One thing that first drew me into the group was that PF always gives you the option to explore religion, but you only have to go as far as you're comfortable with. As an example, for my first two years of PF, I let my religion simmer on the back burner while I focused on making friends and trying to make a difference through our service projects.

Because of PF, the giving and the selflessness has become a bigger and bigger part of god and religion for me. My experiences from helping with JRneys meetings to going on Work Tour, have showed me that the more I give, the more I *want* to give. It feels good to share that little bit of god that's inside me, and I know that I'll spend the rest of my life looking for opportunities to do so.

So real quick, I really appreciate that you all are such an understanding congregation that has supported me through my questions and has allowed me to explore my faith on my own terms. Thank you for everything.

Tiernan Murrell
Church Member

March 21, 2012

On January 24th, 2008, two little girls were born. Juliette was born in the United States, the daughter of a pastor and a social worker. Sendline was born in Haiti, the daughter of farm laborers. Beginning on their fourth birthday, these two little girls will have an opportunity to begin a relationship. As a gift to both Juliette and her new Haitian pen pal, our family will begin sponsoring Sendline through World Vision, a Christian humanitarian organization dedicated to working with children, families, and their communities worldwide to reach their full potential by tackling the causes of poverty and injustice. According to the information we received from World Vision, Sendline lives in an area that has been devastated by AIDS.

I don't know exactly how this relationship will unfold. My own childhood attempts at maintaining a pen pal never went very well, and our daughter is only just learning to write her name. But it's important to me that we don't just make the commitment to send off our monthly donation. I don't want Juliette to grow up blind to the fact of suffering in the world, and neither do I want her to believe that people who are less fortunate are less valuable. If at all possible, I want Juliette to get to know this girl through exchanges of drawings and, eventually, letters to be read in translation. I want Juliette to have Sendline's picture in a frame by her bedside, and I want Sendline to see the face of my daughter, too. As Juliette grows older, this relationship will also become an opportunity for her to learn the art of stewardship. She'll receive an allowance, but she will be taught to set aside a portion of her money to help her friend.

I pray that this relationship will be a blessing to both girls. I pray that they can transcend their differences and become friends. I pray that our small sacrifice becomes a drop in an ocean of faithful generosity and advocacy for people in need. I pray that one day Juliette will be delighted to discover that everything she has done for Sendline, she has done for Christ himself.

And I pray that Juliette and Sendline will be wishing one another a happy birthday for many, many years to come.

Rev. Katherine Willis Pershey
Associate Minister, First Congregational Church of Western Springs



March 22, 2012

What leads you to the person that you marry? Dumb luck? Right place at the right time? Stars in the right alignment? Or, as I prefer to believe, divine direction. My less religious husband will probably say otherwise, but then tolerating each other's ideas is one reason why our marriage has lasted 46 years.

Our first meeting was the result of a series of coincidences which is another reason why I think that God has a sense of humor. Why be direct when you can take them through a maze. In the end, the Catholic and the Southern Baptist got married while their dismayed parents and friends witnessed the event thinking "This won't last". Wrong.

We are blessed because we both believe in the commitment that we made to each other before God and uphold it still. If I were asked to offer advice to newlyweds it is that love, tolerance and a sense of humor go a long way toward making a lasting marriage.

Sue Ryan
Church Member

March 23, 2012

How much difference can one individual make? Let me tell you.

About eight years ago, there was a knock on my front door. It was my neighbor down the street returning a book to me. She came in, and as we were chatting she excitedly told me of an experience that she and her husband had in a recent trip to Antigua, Guatemala while they were on vacation there. She told me about meeting a woman from the U.S. in the hotel at which they were staying. When she asked this woman why she was in Antigua, the woman related that she was visiting her college-aged daughter, who was helping an organization called Common Hope. When my friend showed interest, the woman invited them to accompany her to the compound, and they received a tour of the place. During the tour, they realized that this organization was doing meaningful work in enabling the children of that area to continue with their education and to help their families with housing and health care needs. She went on to tell me that her husband had spent some time investigating the business end of this organization, and concluded that it was strictly organized, well budgeted, and was worthy of support. My friend was excited and motivated about what she had seen. My interest was aroused.

Not long after that conversation, I was invited to a meeting at our church. My friend had not only told me about her experience, but she had shared her story with many others. The end result of the meeting I attended was the formation of a Vision Team to go on a work tour to Common Hope's two Guatemalan sites in March of 2004.

The group that landed in Guatemala City was diverse, not only in interests, but in age. Some of us barely knew each other. We ranged in age from Rev. Catherine Price, the youngest, to Ingeborg Smith, who was 82 years old. There were two men, Gary Doten and Murray Johnson, and ten women, including my friend. As we progressed through the week, we melded into a cohesive group of caring individuals, worked side by side doing various tasks, and had many interactions with the Guatemalans.

My most memorable experience was my personal meeting with the child that I had just signed up to sponsor the week before we left. I recall driving in a van to a small village, knocking on the tall wooden locked gate, being met by a short, dark-haired woman (the mother), and walking up the dirt path to a very small house made of cornhusks. This was the home of a family of eight, the Common Hope social worker informed me. My twelve year old sponsored girl, Marta, wearing an apron over her dress, shyly greeted me. She and her mother set up folding chairs outside the area between the kitchen building and the one room sleeping house. We began to converse with the help of the social worker from Common Hope translating. My God child brought out her school spiral notebook and showed me her work. She had no textbooks, just the written lessons that she had copied from the chalk board. I made compliments, and was impressed with her very neat handwriting and her artistic work that accompanied some of her science lessons. I noticed that she was feeling much more comfortable with me, and after a few minutes, we were giggling together. The younger sisters of Marta were very curious about me. Soon I asked if they would like to play a game. We ended up playing catch, "London Bridge", doing the "Hokey Pokey" and laughing. After I snapped a few photos, the social worker said it was time to leave. They all walked us down to the big gate, and I parted with tears in my eyes as the church gong sounded the hour.

Every night after supper we convened for our routine evening sharing session. As each of us expressed our feelings of what we had seen and heard, and our reactions to these, there were murmured assents of support, and several of us shed some tears. It was evident that each of us had been making comparisons, assessments of our lifestyle versus their lifestyle, and making some adjustments to our basic values. ►

March 23 continued

Often we were privileged to hear the stories of different staff members of Common Hope. We frequently shook our heads in disbelief, as they told of the struggles of these folks and their resilience and perseverance.

On the last day of our tour, our group stood within the four walls of the small house that we had finished building. The family members, who had also labored on the house, were part of our circle. Murray had his arms around one of the little boys. As Catherine read her words of dedication of the house and prayed for the family, God's presence touched each one of us.

Since 2004, there have been at least three other work tours to Antigua, numerous people in our congregation and village have become sponsors of Guatemalan children, and many dollars have been contributed to Common Hope. Our Gary Doten now serves on the Board of Common Hope, which is based in St. Paul, MN. (www.commonhope.org) and his family takes an annual trip at Thanksgiving to Antigua to work at the site. All of this has occurred because of one person's interest and determination to act for a cause in which she believed.

Surely God has guided my friend Jan Struckman in this journey. She and her husband, Bruce, planted the seed, a tree has grown, has blossomed, and it is bearing beautiful fruit.

I thank God for putting these dear people in my path.

Mary Jo Mulcahy
Church Member

March 24, 2012

My dad got sick; I prayed for him to get better . . . he died. I QUESTIONED MY FAITH
 I went through panic attacks; I prayed for calm . . . I QUESTIONED MY FAITH
 My mom got sick; I prayed that she would get better . . . she died. I QUESTIONED MY FAITH
 My marriage fell apart after 23 years; I prayed for reconciliation . . . we divorced. I QUESTIONED MY FAITH
 My best friend had a brain aneurism; I prayed for her health . . . she died. I QUESTIONED MY FAITH
 My cousin was diagnosed with cancer; I prayed for a miracle . . . she died. I QUESTIONED MY FAITH
 I pray daily to become more Christ like; hard work . . . I QUESTION MY FAITH

I look back at every situation where I questioned my faith and realize that God gave me the strength to handle all my trials and tribulations and I know that my faith is intact.

Anonymous
 Friend of the Church



March 25, 2012

What in the world was I thinking to open up to a casual acquaintance about this issue that had been troubling me! Of course, if I hadn't I would never have learned about the resources that can help me.

There I was standing at this holiday party with a large group of people, most of whom I know only by name or sight, when across the room I saw this person that I know better than some, and we acknowledged each other. Something told me that I had to talk to this person. So, I went over and started . . . How are the kids? All home for the holidays? How's the spouse? Etc., etc. Then my worry over this issue came pouring out of my mouth. In less than a minute, the person recommended a book on the subject, an organization that offered support and a contact person.

Answer to a prayer? Oh, yes, to many prayers, and the start of a real friendship with a casual acquaintance.

Anonymous
 Church Member

March 26, 2012

How has a relationship affected my faith? How has my faith impacted a relationship? Well, God seems to be present in every relationship, both good and bad.

When a sibling violated the trust of our entire family through some selfish acts, it initially shook my faith in humankind. I thought that if someone who I had known and loved so long could do these things then why would anyone else be any different. God was somehow in that relationship because the situation made my nuclear family stronger. My wife and my children all amazed me with their compassion and support as I attempted to sort out the details. They could have been angry too and gone in another direction but they didn't. Thank you family, and thank you God.

Feeling somewhat overwhelmed by these circumstances, I turned to God and asked for guidance. The pastoral care which I received gave me a sense of calm and renewed my faith. I had new energy to face the future and new hope for tomorrow. Thank you dear reverends, and thank you God.

My closest friends became aware of this ordeal. I didn't feel comfortable talking about it too much but, when I did, they listened. There were many sincere gestures of friendship offered. I felt loved and cared for by these people. My faith was renewed again. Thank you friends, and thank you God.

Dave Onion
Church Member

† † † † †

March 27, 2012

Help Comes from Relationships

One of my many faults is that I am a "control freak". I decide what I think God wants for me, and I stubbornly dig in my heels and make that happen. Many times in my life, what I earmarked as God's will was really my will. It took quite a while for me to learn that God speaks to me through people who he brings into my life to guide me. I had to learn over and over again to pray for guidance that it's not MY will but THY will be done, open my eyes wide to see and understand that way.

When I graduated from college, I got a job in Maywood, teaching junior high in a rough neighborhood. I was thrilled as I had grown up in that racially integrated area, and was proud of the multicultural background it afforded me. I went the University of Iowa in Iowa City majoring in Education, and did my student teaching in Marion IA, "thriving metropolis of the Midwest". - That is a joke. I was the minority in Marion, because I didn't have blonde hair or blue eyes and am full-blooded Italian. I was wildly successful with those students, parents and teachers, and couldn't wait to go back to my home community and "educate the less privileged youth of America". (I was a child of the 60/70's, and maybe a "hippy".)

My first assignment was 6th grade in an over crowded K-8th grade, neighborhood school on Ninth Avenue, just north of the Eisenhower Expressway. I had visions of relating to these kids and reasoning with them, showing them that I was their friend and would help them grow to be a contributing member of the world. Well, they ran all over me! It was like a sitcom. The kids would go to their very seasoned and talented Black math, language arts, and science teachers and be well behaved and productive. When they got to my class... ►

March 27 continued

woo hoo... they were wild! They'd throw crayons, shoot rubber bands, and shout jokes and disrespect at one another. The kids weren't really "bad" kids. They were just kids that saw an inexperienced idealistic, gullible, "White" girl, and they wanted to have fun. It had nothing to do with race and everything to do with my ideology and lack of experience.

My principal, who I really respected, recognized my attachment to this community, but needed to maintain order and respect in all of his classrooms. These students needed good class management and instruction. Observations of my performance as a teacher were less than stellar. Other teachers had given up on me too. By November, I knew I was going to quit. I was downtrodden from the struggle to maintain order, and I took everything the students did personally. I drove home every day exhausted and defeated, eyes filled with tears. I was counting the days till I could leave teaching for a job announcing the blue light specials at K-mart. (Full-time K-mart employees were paid more money than I was making as a teacher in Maywood.) I was convinced it was better for the students if I wasn't there. "I get it, God, I'm out of here!"

One of my co-workers, Arlene, a beautiful, Southern Methodist, Black woman got the calling to be my angel, and I am thankful to God for the very important role she played in my life. She exemplified Christianity to me and to all those she encountered. She talked to parents about living as a Christian example for their children, to girls about saving themselves for marriage before they start having babies, and to boys about growing to be responsible fathers and not drug dealers or pimps. As knowledgeable as she was, I couldn't understand how she could see in me, that which I couldn't see myself. She was sure God put me on this earth to teach there. She went in and begged the principal to give me another year of probation. Some days it really made me mad, because she put these doubts in my already-made-up-mind to quit. Every day she would be with me on the playground or come in my classroom to point out something specific she had noticed that day exemplary of a good teacher. Sometimes it was just, "Robert never comes and talks to me on the playground. He feels comfortable telling YOU his problems." Or "I was watching some students do their essays and I can tell you have really encouraged them to think for themselves." I knew she was humoring me and though I appreciated her efforts, I wanted out. She believed in me when I didn't believe in myself, but most importantly, she never gave up on me when I, and most of my co-workers, had. She preached to me and lived the example, as God did, that in life sometimes you suffer. She and her young son had very serious episodes with sickle cell anemia. "Not MY will, but THY will be done," was always her prayer.

I stayed and grew as a teacher, but it wasn't an easy ride. I'd open my eyes wide to look for signs and sometimes I got them from other teachers, kids, parents, and even administrators. I wasn't always sure I wanted to stay, but I was convinced that this was God's will. I grew to love my job. I was rewarded over and over again. The last 14 years in Maywood I spent as a teacher mentor. I got to teach lessons in the classrooms and teach the teachers too. I know that God made my journey rough so I could share my acquired wisdom to help the new teachers that would come along, that they might see the rewards and commit to these kids also.

The lesson I try to teach those people I love most is to always be prayerful and look for the signs of God's will in your life. He will send them through relationships with Godly people who will touch your life in some way. You probably have heard it said that God puts people in your life for a reason, a season, or forever. Yes, many times we have the power over our destiny, we can get into trouble when we seize the power without seeking direction through prayer, and looking for those spiritual relationships to guide our lives. Open your eyes wide to possibilities and seek the signs. Don't fight God's will, and embrace the wisdom you get from prayer. (Sounds easy, but it's not. ;-) @

Alberta Mytys
Church Member

March 28, 2012

In preparation for my 50th reunion from boarding school, I was responding to questions on our class survey when I came to the following: Have you lived your life in accordance with the school motto? [*To minister not to be ministered unto*] and how? I proudly answered, "YES, but not every day!" As glib as it might have seemed, it was true. Then in the true fashion of my school, I realized that this was not a question but a gentle reminder. Something that I heard every day for four years.

I realized at that moment how important that school was to my being. When I say "that school", I don't mean the bricks and mortar and playing fields but the teachers and students...each and every one of them. That motto is my core. That motto requires you to be on the field and not on the sidelines. That motto requires much of those who live by it.

When I look at the biographies of my class mates, we are a pretty impressive bunch of guys when it comes to that motto. We have all taken that thought into our respective spheres of influence and made positive change, rolled up our sleeves and made it happen. We have not sought recognition but satisfaction. That satisfaction is in the doing, the hand shake, the hug, the nail driven, the listening.

Recently, when I walked around the Gifts of Hope, I saw church members standing beside their beliefs: Back Bay Mission, Common Hope, B.E.D.S., and so many more. What I saw was Every Member in Mission, my boarding school motto in motion. And I was proud of all of us.

God bless us all.

Marty Keller
Church Member

March 29, 2012

Dear Juliette,

On the day of your baptism, you woke up knowing that it was Christmas morning, and that Santa might have been by and maybe might have even brought you those roller skates you so consistently requested whenever asked. And yet, you didn't leap out of bed and down the stairs. You snuggled with Genevieve for so long we had to encourage you to get a move on. You opened your skates, pure delight, and delighted just as much in watching the rest of us open our little gifts.

And then it was time to slip into your beautiful gold brocade dress, and leave behind all the rest of those enticing presents for later. Lucky for all of us, it isn't hard to convince you to go to church. It continues to be your favorite place: safe and fun and filled with people you know and love.

We decided to invite two people you *really* know and love to be your baptismal sponsors. You adore them and their children so much. As soon as the Lloyd family arrived at church, you dashed out of your pew and into theirs, and spent most of the service drawing on attendance papers and bulletins with your dearest neighbor/church friends. I think we all had a moment where we thought: oh, shouldn't she sit with her family? But we all concurred that you were just right where you belonged. Quite the confirmation that we selected an appropriate family to sponsor you and your sister.

When it was time to come forward for the sacrament, I held my breath a bit, worried you might have one of your rare but strong moments of bashfulness. But you were fine. At one point, while Rev. Stiffler was talking about Jesus welcoming the little children, you peeked your head around the baptistry and waved to your friends in the front pew.

After promises were made and prayers lifted, I lifted you onto my hip and dipped my hand in the font. I glanced at your face before I touched the water to your forehead. Your brow was furrowed. I think you were concerned about how wet you were going to get, and accordingly, I shook off the excess water into the font before I proceeded.

But it dawns on me now: you looked just like I did in the picture taken during my ordination, when my community was laying its hands on me and calling upon the power of the Holy Spirit. My brow was furrowed, too. I remember thinking I didn't really know what I was getting into, or whether I would experience what I was supposed to experience, or if I was really worthy of the honor bestowed on me that day. I was, in my own way, concerned about how wet I was going to get.

Juliette Louise, I baptized you in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. I called you what you are: a child of God, disciple of Christ, and member of the church. I kissed your cheek and set you down again, filled with wonder and humility and grace upon grace.

Your life is now the subject of a sacred covenant, one you will have an opportunity to confirm when you are older. I can tell you from personal experience that it is always a gift and sometimes a challenge to live in sacred covenant, and that I wouldn't want it any other way.

Juliette Louise, my daughter, my sister in Christ.

Love,
Mama

Rev. Katherine Willis Pershey
Associate Minister, First Congregational Church of Western Springs

March 30, 2012

DECEMBER 26

Whew, I can't believe that the Christmas Season is behind us. It was busy with all the shopping, the wonderful church services, and just getting together with people. I also appreciated the church's buying gifts for those children that are less fortunate than me. It was amazing that the church was so packed for all the services during Christmas. What a wonderful time of year!

Now that this season is over, we have the winter time to contend with. There will not be a Holiday until May. The church has again decreased in participation, and I can find a seat when I arrive late. Those wonderful decorations and songs are gone from the service. I won't even think about those kids that I bought gifts for until next year. I don't do much special for all the people remembered in my cards or gifts.

I am reminded of the Scripture: "For God so loved the world, that he gave His only Son to die for us." Was this not the child born at Christmas that all the recent fuss was about? Is Christ not the reason we call ourselves Christians? What is the impact of all the things that we learn in Church on my life?

At this time of Lent, I want to reflect on what it means to be Christian, without all the trappings of the Christmas Season. Christ cautions us, as He did his disciples in the garden of Gethsemane: "Couldn't you watch with me even one hour? Keep watch and pray, so that you will not give in to temptation. For the Spirit is willing, but the body is weak. (Matt. 27: 40-41)"

Let me continue to demonstrate a concern and love for others. Let me continue to reflect on the teachings of Christ, and model those for others. To somewhat paraphrase: "God so loved the world that He gave His son" so that all who believe in Him would....(you fill in the blank).

Werner Kiuntke
Church Member



March 31, 2012

Maybe it was Bonhoeffer who wrote that Christ is in community. So, we are the real, fleshy body of Christ. Our church community is Christ's presence in this world, our hands his hands when we pray together and comfort and heal each other. This theology of embodiment has deeply impacted my own theology. Once I was sitting having tea with Reverend Pershey and she mentioned that her Christianity is about relationship building - or something along those lines. It made me stop and really pay attention to what I believe my ultimate "goal" is as a Christian. I want to build relationships. That takes courage, commitment and patience. These are things that I don't always have but I know Christ wants me to have. His words are so clear about those risks of loving one another he wants us to take. Christ wants us all to set a table where a meal of welcome, forgiveness and eternal love are shared - not just with our family and friends but with the stranger, the poor and the ones who don't look or think like us. Christianity is about relationship building. It's about breaking bread, bearing one another's burdens and sharing in each other's joys. Thank God. The alternative would be so terribly lonely.

Kathryn Price Bronson
Church Member

Keep Singing

I go to church
But...
I do not feel
"Religious"
Yet...
I am drawn there,
Want to be there.
Listening to
What is said
I hear the words,
"God loves you."
Honestly,
I do not feel it
(As I know others faithfully do)
Even though
I want to.
Still,
Something pushes me
To go there
And to try
To be better,
Even after
I fail
To do
What is right
(In my mind.)
I go to church
Mostly to sing!
I love to sing
It brings me back
There.
The music
Speaks to me
And I wonder...

Maybe
It is God's way
Of knowing
It is our
Connection,
Our private
Space.
Our personal
Understanding
Of grace.
He knows
I am not
"Religious"
I do not have to say
"God loves me."
I just have to
Keep singing!
Keep lifting
My voice
To Him.

Gail Avgeris
Church Member

April 2, 2012

ANYONE CAN BE A TEACHER

My relationship with God has gone through several changes over the years, which I'm sure is true for almost everyone. When I was young I pictured God on a cloud with a beard, sort of like a puppeteer. When I was in junior high and high school I didn't really think about God much until my mom died. At that moment my vision took a dramatic turn. I began to think of God as a creator and destroyer. It became very black and white to me, very simplistic. And with that simplistic view came a distrust and dislike of church in general. Outside of youth group, I had no room for faith in my world. I loved volunteering, but was disillusioned with any connection that had to a life of faith. Thus began a roughly decade-long non-relationship with my faith, filled with more anger than I care to remember.

Of course, as I continued to experience life, my relationship with the church changed and my life of faith began to resurface. My view of God as a creator/destroyer started to fade and a new vision of God emerged. My vision is now of a God that is seen in the faces of volunteers, in the smiles of those who receive a fresh coat of paint on their home, in the silence of the boundary waters and in the incomprehensible chaos created by a youth group. It was a realization or understanding that God is all around us...always. But this isn't something my mom or dad taught me, not something Kirch or anyone at church taught me, this was something taught to me by an unexpected source, members of the high school youth group.

There was a PF'er, representative of the whole group, who shaped my current vision of God. They didn't know they were influencing me at the time, nor were they trying to, but they spoke so eloquently and with such passion that they made me think. They made me wonder why my view of God was so simple, HOW could it be so simple? For quite some time now I have felt blessed to be able to do what I do, to work with young people so full of energy, hope and a willingness to explore their own faith. Yet it wasn't until my encounter with this one particular PF'er that I realized how important it was for me to listen AND hear what the young people of this congregation and community were saying. I didn't expect it, but now my experiences with young people are exponentially more meaningful and a career choice has become a calling.

Never would I have thought that a PF'er would have an impact on my relationship with God or influence my life of faith. In the moment, you always think your vision of God is real and powerful and sometimes even unwavering. But in reality a person's vision of God is probably never "real" or "powerful" or "unwavering". What it is in reality is yours. It's not for anyone else to judge. But perhaps the most important thing to realize is that you MUST be willing to stop and hear what others are saying. In a world of busy, busy people, of all ages, this can be a challenging request. However, you'll never know who might influence your vision and quite often it may be someone or something you never expected, at a time or place you never would have anticipated. In the end, anyone...young, old, friend, stranger...absolutely anyone can be your teacher.

Mike Tilden

Director of Youth Ministries, First Congregational Church of Western Springs

April 3, 2012

Some of my most fulfilling relationships are with people whose names I always forget. I'm pretty sure most of them can't recall mine, either.

We gather Wednesday mornings in Peggy Taylor's watercolor class here at church. When we're together, we have more important things on our minds than names, ages, histories, politics and chit-chat. We're struggling with perspective, seeking balance, expressing nuance – and wondering why Marie just put green in that guy's face (yes, we do all know Marie's name, and her answer is "because it makes the red look better").

While the composition of the group remains fluid, a core of stalwarts shows regularly and the energy remains consistent. Somewhere between the last painter's arrival and Peggy's call to share work comes a period of "letting go" that to me feels like prayer. And because so many of us are gathered in this pursuit – of art, of transcendence – the energy is multiplied. To be clear, this is no silent meditation. Conversation ebbs and flows but always takes a back seat to the creative buzz.

One day at the end of sharing, Peggy said she knew we had all come to class with our own private burdens, and she was happy that, at least for a time, we were able to lay those burdens down and paint. To me, and I'm sure to others, what we're doing feels like much more.

In the most memorable theological discussion of my childhood, my mother explained to me that God was like the circus – so amazing, everybody eventually finds a way there. But we don't all take the same path.

On Wednesday mornings, I believe Peggy's artists are traveling a path together. Together, we're painting our way to the circus.

Paula Benson
Church Member

April 4, 2012

*A faithful friend is the elixir of life,
found only by those who love the Lord.
The one who loves the Lord
keeps his friendships in repair,
for he treats his neighbor as himself.
– Ecclesiasticus / Sirach - Chapter 6*

A friend once wrote that Emerson said in a chaotic world, friendship is the most elegant and most lasting way to be useful. In my mind, one of the most beautiful and faithful visions of friendship is found in E.B. White's book *Charlotte's Web*.

I know – this is a peculiar friendship, between Wilbur the pig and Charlotte the spider. In the closing pages there is a statement from Charlotte about why one responds to a friend in need. Charlotte's words to Wilbur have, I think, something to say to Christians and the church.

Wilbur asks why Charlotte has helped him by spinning her webs – and, if you remember, she spun those wonderful phrases such as "SOME PIG" and "TERRIFIC." Charlotte responds it is because "You have been my friend. That in itself is a tremendous thing. I wove my webs for you because I liked you. After all, what's a life, anyway? We're born, we live a little, we die...By helping you, perhaps I was trying to lift up my life a trifle. Heaven knows anyone's life can stand a little of that."

Heaven knows, indeed, that in God's gift of friendship, you bring a little goodness into a friend's life – and lift your own life just a trifle. Most of us can always stand a little lifting. Friendship is, like a living faith, about being other-centered, about considering the needs of someone else before you consider your own needs. What better model for a Christian life than that?

Rev. Rich Kirchherr
Senior Minister, First Congregational Church of Western Springs

April 5, 2012

Prayer for Tethering

Let it be such that when you call
 I can call too
 Let it be such that when you are running
 I am powered
 Let it be such that when you search
 I am found
 And when I search, you are found
 I run and you are powered
 And we call and call to one another
 Amen. Amen.

Ben Pershey
 Church Member

† † † † †

April 6, 2012

It was a beautiful Easter morning at Congo; sun was streaming through the stained glass windows and I was seated toward the front of the church in a pew with Steve, Grant, Gracie and Sally surrounding me. It was like every Easter filled with fragrant spring flowers at the altar, special musical treats and the story of rebirth, but it didn't feel like other Easters had for me. My relationship with God was on shaky ground since my husband's diagnosis and my life had been drastically reshaped since then. It has always been our family's tradition to attend Easter services together but this past year had been particularly arduous for our family and I was hoping for an Easter miracle. As I sat listening to the message, I was praying for some relief from the heavy burdens I had been carrying. The relationship I have had with church members had buoyed me in the weeks since the diagnosis and I felt supported and loved in that relationship yet distanced from God. As the Hallelujah chorus began I felt immediate relief. Since we were seated near the front, I heard the voices of my entire church family singing behind me and the choir singing so beautifully in front of me. It was a divine sandwich of sound and at that moment I realized that my church family, the relationships I had been a part of for so many years at Congo, would help me get through this difficult time; that our family would be "ok". God and my church family relationships were made clear in that moment. God's touch was keenly sensed and I felt part of an Easter miracle. My faith and resolve grew stronger that day knowing that we wouldn't be facing this alone and I feel blessed that our church family continues to support us.

Suzy Glowiak
 Church Member

April 7, 2012

Benediction

God go with you,
May He walk where you walk,
Guide where you must make choices,
Comfort where you hurt,
And surprise you by His continued love for you
and what you are and what you do.
Amen.

Rev. Bob Kemper
1935-2010
Former Senior Minister, First Congregational Church of Western Springs

† † † † †

April 8, 2012

Lord, you live! Alleluia! Alleluia! What have we to fear? Your resurrecting love has overcome the darkest night. You are alive! May the light of this news shine from every cell in our body, in every thought of our mind, in every breath of our spirit. You are alive, and we exalt You with joy!

Rev. Catherine Price
1963-2008
Former Associate Minister, First Congregational Church of Western Springs
Composed for Easter Sunday, 2008