

**Zion's UCC of Taborton**

**November 26, 2017**

**Rev. Patricia Raup**

**What Shall We Bring With Us? What Shall We Leave Behind?**

**Ezekiel 34: 11-15 & Matthew 25: 31-40**

I must confess I like the month of November. It's that time of year when the leaves fall and reveal the form of the land and the sculptural qualities of the trees. I like the fact that I can see into my surroundings, so it's no surprise that I enjoyed the ride up here this morning. The weather was perfect for a slow, contemplative ride.

I've also learned that come November, if I spend enough solitary quiet time I might even be able to see into myself and catch a glimpse of my deepest self. Now, that can be a good or bad thing depending on the past year.....

In many ways these days after Thanksgiving mark the real end of the year for me. It's an in-between time, a thin time, if you will. Thanksgiving, my favorite holiday of the year, has come and gone but the house still smells like roasting turkey and baking pies. Advent, the beginning of the Church year, when we prepare for the return of the Light of The World, is literally just around the corner.

As we all know, the days are noticeably shorter and darkness comes much sooner. Still, on a clear, crisp day I feel enlivened, gearing up for whatever will come in the not so far distant future. For me, part of that gearing up entails sifting and sorting through the Raup family belongings. Figuring out what we want or need to keep and what we can give away or let go of. When our two sons were still living with us they would quake when this time of year came around and stow away their current, most precious things. Konrad, however, has become used to me and at this point in our lives even participates in this sorting out process. Wait till he finds out what I have in mind for the coming week!

Seems to me that you folk here at Zion's United Church of Christ are in a similar spot in terms of your congregational life. I know that there have been a lot of upheavals in the last year. Unpleasant things have happened. I'll bet that there are things that need to be left in the past; things that need to be dealt with and resolved in the present; and, hopefully, lots of good things to look forward to.

My question to you as individuals and as a congregation is: What do you need to keep? What do you need to let go?

William Morris, a creative light in the Arts and Crafts Movement [and there are lots of Arts and Crafts cottages in this neck of the woods...], advised his readers to have nothing in their homes that they did not find to be either useful or beautiful. That was his criteria for sorting things out. Currently there is a Japanese organizational whiz who has made a million dollar business out of giving advice on how to declutter one's surroundings. She goes by the name of KonMari. One of the things that makes her stand

out is that her goal for her clients is not just to tidy up, but to tidy up with the goal of freeing oneself to move outward into a more satisfying life. Her criteria for de-cluttering is to ask: Does this object bring me joy? If it does, then it's a keeper; if it doesn't out it goes..... What will your criteria be? Usefulness? Beauty? Joy? Something else?

In today's Gospel Jesus is doing his own sifting and sorting amongst his followers and he definitely has a set of criteria by which he is assessing them. For Jesus the criteria are clear: Feeding the hungry; giving drink to the thirsty; welcoming the stranger; clothing the naked; taking care of the sick; visiting those in prison. All very practical, pretty much anyone can do them, tasks. They are all ways of showing love to one's neighbor. Just DO SOMETHING to demonstrate your love for your neighbor....and, yes, that includes the people sitting next to you or in front of you or behind you or across the aisle from you here in this congregation. It even includes the people who aren't here with us this morning. Jesus asks us to love as God has loved him and us.

In our first reading the prophet Ezekiel reminds us that God promises to search for us, his flock, when we go astray; to rescue us "from all the places where we were scattered during the time of clouds and thick darkness"; to gather and lead us; to bring us into fertile fields and fertile times; "to seek out the lost, bring back the strays, bind up the wounded and strengthen the weak." Such are God's promises and we would do well to put our hope in them this Advent, the time leading up to the celebration of Christmas.

Now, some of you may have noticed that I stopped my readings of the Bible passages a bit short of what many of you may be used to. I have a reason for doing so. Ezekiel 16a to 24 speaks at length about God separating the sheep from the goats, the fat from the lean and destroying those who are found wanting.

In Matthew 25:41 to 46 we are told that the King [who represents God] will do the same, heaping terrible things upon those found wanting, sending them into an unending fire, into eternal punishment.

I omitted these passages because they simply do not sound like the God or like the Jesus I have come to know in the course of my life. And, yes, sometimes our understanding of God and Jesus does need to change, no matter what some parts of scripture might have said in the past. An angry, vengeful, wrathful God is something that I have let go of and no longer carry forward in my life.

It is my belief that God wants us to have life to the fullest, to become human beings fully alive and that Jesus came to us to show us the way to do this – which basically boils down to love God, love your neighbor and love yourself. I also believe that Jesus came to show us how to die – to do it with trust in God's love and be open to whatever awaits us on the other side of death. Just what resurrection is, happens to be beyond me at this point in my life. But I do believe that it comes and that it comes for both individuals and communities, such as Zion's UCC here at Taberton. This is what I will be carrying forward into the New Year. What will you be carrying forward into the New Year?