

"Lessons Learned"

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October 26, 2008

Rev Stokstad was our pastor from late 2004 through October 2008, when she resigned to pursue a calling in jail ministry. This was her farewell sermon.

We are all on journeys to spiritual health and wholeness. We're all growing and becoming the people that God created us to be, but not one of us is there yet. I'd like to speak this morning about some of the lessons I've learned here in my years as Pastor at FCCSR. It's very hard to speak honestly and deeply, to speak the truth with love, especially when, as the Scripture says, we see only dimly. But I'm going to try, and let me be clear I'm speaking just for myself.

Perhaps the biggest lesson I've learned is that spiritual growth begins with gratitude. Gratitude is the golden key to the road to spiritual health. Paul, in all of the epistles, starts off with thanks. If we think about communion, the very first words Jesus said were to give God thanks. Jesus expressed gratitude to God over and over. The theme for last year's camp was gratitude. Many of us wrote each day in our gratitude journals. What it does is that shifts your perspective, it shifts it away from what's wrong and what I don't have, to the blessings that are showering upon us all the time, no matter where we are, no matter what is happening in our lives.

I am so grateful that you called me to this church. You cannot imagine how deeply precious all of you are to me. For the incredible personal growth that I have experienced here, I am so grateful for each one of you, for each one of you and all you bring. For letting me love you, for letting me love you as you are, and at the same time knowing, not knowing how it should be played out, but knowing that God has called each of you to more wholeness, to a fuller and richer life.

I am especially grateful for the last three months because we began to say things to each other that needed to be said. If we could all accept each other as we are, the world would really be a whole lot more peaceful and wonderful place. I am truly grateful for the healing that I have personally experienced, and I perceive has come to you as a church community.

The second lesson I've learned is to accept and love ourselves. I find it's much easier to see the gifts others have than my own gifts. I have learned the gifts others recognize in me are so much more about who I am than particular skills I've developed. The importance of the gift of presence is the one of the gifts we forget about. Don't forget how very important showing up is. Think about people that have made a difference in your lives by showing up, by saying a kind word just

when you needed it. Giving you nothing more than a smile, nothing more than a smile can make a whole difference in a life. What I've learned is that the greatest gift we have is the gift of our presence. And I've also learned, and this is very important, we can't fully be present until we've learned to love ourselves. With God's grace, if we decide we want to change ourselves, we will. But we need to love ourselves instead of beating ourselves up or other people up because they don't meet our expectations. I've learned that here in a new way, thanks particularly to one special person who has taught me that.

Giving and receiving is another lesson I've learned. With our gifts and what we have to share with each other. We need each other, because you know we just can't do it alone. What I've also learned, I don't know who said this, John Thomas said this at the recent ministers' retreat. It's just so much more blessed to give than to receive. Did your mother teach you that? It makes us more uncomfortable receiving than giving. I think I'm working on learning to receive. Receiving means that we have to be a little vulnerable. It means we're not in control, and we don't have all the power. If we want to only have the power we can't be in relationship because relationships are about equality.

One of the things I've done as a spiritual discipline during these last three months was to write down all feedback. It has been very, very difficult for me to actually receive this feedback. When you give me a criticism, I remember it very clearly. But for me to receive something good, I just can't remember it. I had no idea what people thought of me, but I wanted to be fully present, to receive whatever it was you had to give me. I really did not know. You see, my mother taught me; if you don't have anything good to say, don't say anything at all. And so, when I hear nothing I assume that people are being kind to me by not saying what it is that's really wrong. I cannot read your minds. I had no idea what you thought. So what I want to say to you, is if you care about somebody or something really matters to you, let him or her know how you feel because none of us can read minds. And so I hope that you will take this lesson from my experience to learn we must reach out to each other and let each other know what it is we are feeling.

The lesson is not only about giving feedback; it's about engagement with what really matters to me. It is about living your life in accordance with your values. The choices you make about how you spend your time reflects what is most important to you. Here in Marin, it's so easy to fall into busyness, and all we do can become a wall separating us from God. I have learned how much you really love this church, and I think the challenge will be to find ways to be connected and be involved, given the pressure of our modern life. Use email, use notes, and get things from the church on your calendar first so that you can show up. And sometimes you're going to have to not do something fun, or maybe think there's more fun at church, I don't know. I think many people don't pay attention to their real value of what they really care about, and so they keep God at arms length.

I think that with these coming hard times, there'll be a hidden blessing of church community. Because it will be very important for people to come back to church and realize that everything they ever really wanted was free and right here, freely given--God's love, acceptance, forgiveness--everything you needed is right here. And I think it will be up to you all to reach out to hurting people in the community and bring them back to church. Say, I know something that could help you a little bit now in this time, and bring people to this place. I think that's really important.

The best lesson I've learned is that God's grace is unbelievable. God's grace is more than we can imagine. The richness in any one of us is so great, and yet all the gifts we are, are all because of God. They flow through us. It's not about us. When we get down to it, most of us are pretty uncertain about grace. But let me tell you, believe it! God's grace is amazing! All you need to do is open your eyes. It's right here. If you can't see it right now, remember your baptism. And if you are one of those who can't remember your baptism, think about the most unimaginable blessing, and think about someone who loved you so much that they wanted you to have bounteous blessings. And if you can't remember that, go out next time it rains, and let the rain fall on your head, put your face up to the rain, and think of God as baptizing you again, blessing you, and remember that as grace.

But the most important lesson I've learned is that none of this is about me. This day isn't about me. It's about the church. It is about God and you. You and God! That's what it's all about. I've been a midwife, a facilitator. That's my job. It is really all about you and God. When you share gifts, you can't imagine what blessings you'll receive. The gifts that are here because of each of you are so amazing. Some of them are hidden, because our God is truly sneaky, but if you keep your eyes open, believe me you will see. Gifts are here. We need each other to be encouragers of each other, listeners to each other. We need each other to remind, to remind us of God's grace. All the gifts flow from God and we're called to love ourselves and love each other amazingly. And so, I invite you now to come forward with the flower you have been given as a symbol of one of the gifts you can share with this community. And as you will see, in this little church, the beauty and the abundance of gifts is much more than we can imagine. May you be truly grateful for the abundant gifts brought forth right here.

Amen.