

“Coming Together, Embracing Possibility”

Sermon by Rev. Duffy Peet

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As I began preparing what I am about to share with you this morning, I thought about the two components in the title of today’s service. The first component is coming together. As we all recognize, coming together, especially coming together in person, has become considerably more challenging since the COVID virus arrived in Montana in early 2020. Today there are far more issues to think about and plan for when coming together in-person than pre-COVID. So as we come together and spend time in one another’s physical presence today, I want to recognize those who put in so much time and energy to plan and organizing this gathering. First, I want to recognize, I want us all to recognize, the retreat planning team. As I mention your name, I invite you to raise your hand or stand so everyone can see you. The team consists of, in alphabetical order, Diane Knipfer, Sandra Oldendorf, Neil Schwarzwald, Adrienne Wallace, Heather Watson and Carolyn Widman. Let’s give them a round of applause to let them know how much we appreciate them. And I also want to recognize everyone who volunteered to assist with any aspect of our gathering today. That includes program leaders, lunch preparers, service leaders and participants, set-up and clean-up crew and any other task I may have missed. I would ask all of you who played a part, large or small, in making this retreat and service possible, to raise your hand or stand so everyone can see you. Look around. This is what coming together takes. Again, let’s give these folks a round of applause. Thank you all for embracing the possibility of holding a UUFB retreat today and making that possibility a reality.

Which brings me to the second component of today’s service title, embracing possibility. As I believe we would all agree, the arrival of the COVID virus led many of us to reassess and limit what had previously been safe and appropriate possibilities in many aspects of our lives. But COVID hasn’t been the only factor that has reduced what we consider to be safe and appropriate possibilities of late. This summer’s heat wave, drought, and smoke-filled air, all related to and exaggerated by human caused global climate change, were other limiting factors. During the past 18 months many of us have been considerably more cautious about embracing possibilities that we would previously have been very comfortable with. In the past 18 months we have had to explore and discover new possibilities for doing all manner of things. For example, we may have changed how and/or how often we buy groceries, how we connect with friends and family, or the number and/or range of in-person activities we attend. There are many other examples of areas where we have adopted alternative possibilities for how we live our daily lives.

I know I have struggled, like many of you, with finding safe and appropriate possibilities for some situations. I have heard from many of you that some of the changes you have felt forced to make have been, at the least, less than satisfying or unpleasant, and at times very difficult and even painful. Having to think of and explore possibilities, often on our own without the ability to come together in person, compounds the difficulties we find ourselves facing. This is true for us as individuals, and it is also true for us collectively. I think it is safe to say that we would all wish the threat posed by the COVID virus to be a thing of the past. All of us want to again feel safe gathering, in-person, with friends, family and even people we don’t know.

I am sorry to say that we are not yet at that point. I will go a step farther and say that I have no idea when we will reach that point. But I believe that in the not-too-distant future it will again be safe to gather together, in-person, in settings large and small. I remind myself of this possibility as a way of countering a tendency to focus on the limitations we are having to deal with. I remind myself every day that in order to navigate these challenging times it is important to hold onto hope. As we heard in our earlier reading by Howard Zinn:

To be hopeful in bad times is not just foolishly romantic. It is based on the fact that human history is a history not only of cruelty, but also of compassion, sacrifice, courage, kindness.

Clearly we are in the midst of what Zinn refers to as “bad times.” Bad times call us all to hold onto hope. Now is a time when we must face and respond to the reality of the situation we are in. In order to face and respond to the situation we are in, it would be beneficial for us do our best to discover the possibilities that exist related to each limitation we encounter.

We may not always find or be able to embrace a possibility for action that we would prefer. It is quite likely that this has been the case more lately than in times past. If we are honest with ourselves, however, I believe we will find that on many occasions throughout the course of our lives we have had to choose from possibilities that were not the ones we would have preferred.

We are all facing challenges that we had not imagined two years ago. We are all seeking answers to questions that arise from those challenges, just as the villagers in our Story for All Ages this morning sought answers. We all look somewhere to find the answers we are seeking. At times we look within ourselves. At times we look outside of ourselves. There may be times when we look to the mountains, as the villagers did. If we look to the mountain at the southern entrance to Bridger Canyon, we don't see a “no,” or a “yes,” or even there is more than one answer. What we see is a big “M.” With a little imagination that “M” could represent maybe, which is a synonym for possibly. Or it could represent a sound that a person might make as they are thinking about possibilities, “hmmmm.”

As we continue to face the challenges associated with COVID, global climate change and any number of other issues, may we seek to discover the possibilities that exist in each day—the possibilities that can assist us in finding our way through the difficulties we encounter. May we seek, and take advantage of, opportunities to come together, whether in person, over the internet, via the phone, or even through letters. And may we hold onto hope for a better day to come. Hope can help us imagine and discover possibilities that we might otherwise not have been able to. May hope provide each of us with the attributes mentioned in the reading by Howard Zinn, namely compassion, sacrifice, courage and kindness. With hope and these attributes, the possibilities of making it through these bad times, or any bad times, increase considerably. And as I close my sharing with you this morning, I want us to hear again the closing sentence of our reading. “The future is an infinite succession of presents, and to live now as we think human beings should live, in defiance of all that is bad around us, is itself a marvelous victory.

So it is and so may it be.