

May 15, 2016  
Mark 6:6b-13  
First Parish UCC, Brunswick, ME  
Mary E. Beard

## *Journey*

### BLESSING OF LABYRINTH IN THE WOODS In Honor of Susan Fitzgerald

For those of you who haven't experienced a labyrinth it is a meditative winding path that takes you to the center of the labyrinth and then you follow the same path out. It is not a maze. There are no decisions to be made as to which turn to take. This releases the mind, making room for the work of the Spirit.

I first encountered a labyrinth at the Franciscan Renewal Center in Phoenix, AZ, about 20 years ago. I used to take my confirmation classes there. It was clear to me right from the beginning that outdoor labyrinth walking integrates body, mind, spirit, creation all in one practice. It is a powerful tool of spiritual practice. I have particularly appreciated walking outdoor labyrinths over the years.

So when many years ago Susan Fitzgerald, who directed our labyrinth ministry and who just died this last January, told me of her dream of an outdoor labyrinth I was in. As with many dreams it took some time to figure out how and where it could happen, but we are very grateful to the Brunswick-Topsham Land Trust for their partnership in creating the Labyrinth in the Woods on Land Trust land off Baribeau Drive near the Community Gardens.

Thank you again to all of you who contributed financially to make this ministry

possible. We have raised enough money to pay for the labyrinth and for its upkeep in the years to come. Bless you.

Yesterday we had an Open House for the Grand Opening of the Labyrinth. Today I invite you to share in a Blessing for the Labyrinth.

As we give thanks for the life and ministry of Susan Fitzgerald,  
**Walk with us, O God.**

As we have created space in the woods for a meditative path,  
**Walk with us, O God.**

As we bring our own journeys to the labyrinth's path,  
**Walk with us, O God.**

As we share the spiritual practice of the labyrinth with others,  
**Walk with us, O God.**

May God's blessing be on the Labyrinth in the Woods and on our ministries of Spiritual Care and Earth Care.  
**Walk with us, O God. AMEN.**

### INTRO to SCRIPTURE

Today as we share a Blessing for the new Labyrinth in the Woods in honor of Susan Fitzgerald we are mindful of the image of faith as a journey – a journey with many twists and turns – yet a journey

nevertheless that we seek to center in spirit living.

Our scripture reading today from the gospel of Mark describes Jesus sending the disciples out on a faith journey. As you will hear he advises them to travel light.

## SERMON

Several years ago Ron and I traveled to Iona, a small island off the west coast of Scotland with a world-renowned spiritual retreat center. We each took one suitcase of fairly good size. I thought we had been discriminating in our packing. However after making the journey there, which involved a bus, a plane, a taxi, a train, a ferry, another bus, and another ferry, I began to realize the folly of our luggage. We had too much stuff. I suspect that might be said about many aspects of our lives – we have too much stuff.

Along the way one of the suitcase zippers broke, so, while we were there, we made the decision to reduce to one suitcase. There were some things we could just throw out but many items we left in the rummage pile they have on the island. It turns out that one of the spiritual awakenings for many visitors is the need to lighten their load. At the end of the summer the locals have a lot of stuff from which to choose.

In the years since that journey, I have learned to travel lighter; although I have not gotten to the extreme of Jesus' advice to the disciples in today's story to not even take an extra tunic.

Jesus' advice to the disciples about their physical accoutrements reflects his

commissioning of them to help others lighten their spiritual load through healing. I suspect we are all carrying somethings in our hearts, minds, and bodies today that we would like to release. The grip we have on our spiritual load can be like a grip of steel.

On Iona we practiced not only lightening our physical load but also our spiritual load. With daily worship, prayer, and conversation we explored the journey of faith. But we also moved our bodies. In particular the pilgrimage walk around the island functions like a very large outdoor labyrinth and brings you back to the center of the island's life – the abbey.

Labyrinth walking is an ancient spiritual practice of pilgrimage that is designed to help us lighten our spiritual load. I'm not quite sure why the practice of meditative walking can be so powerful an experience of release and healing but many people give testimony to just such experiences. Maybe the movement of the body is just enough to distract the mind, making room for the work of the Spirit.

I have had deep experiences of insight and comfort from labyrinth walking, in particular outdoor labyrinth walking. Outdoor labyrinths ground us in the earth. They remind us of our connection to all creation, which puts lots of things in perspective. We are one in the Spirit with all that is. Walking the labyrinth in the woods reflects our spiritual calling to live with integrity with all creation, to lighten the load on creation itself. We humans have just too much stuff, which is stressing the earth. As today's reading suggests we are to share what we have and lighten the load.

Susan and her family were and are deeply grateful for our honoring of Susan in this ministry. As many of you know, Susan had an opportunity to walk the labyrinth when it was first completed last November. She was deeply moved. Recently just as Susan and John's granddaughter, Ella Sue, was being born at MidCoast Hospital, John was walking the new labyrinth in the woods. He was there when they called him with the news. Somehow that just seems right.