

Nov 6, 2016  
Philippians 4:4-9  
First Parish UCC, Brunswick, ME  
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## *Listening to Life*

### INTRO to SCRIPTURE

Today's reading comes from a letter written in the time of the early church. It comes from the Apostle Paul during a time when he was imprisoned for his beliefs. Despite his tenuous circumstances, Paul gives thanks for God's presence and for life itself.

### SERMON

On this All Saint's Sunday, we remember the people of our congregation who have died this last year. There are many family and friends here today who have come with tender hearts as they remember the people we named earlier. We are grateful for the ways you supported and cared for those who died and for the ways you continue to support one another.

One of the privileges of my work is getting to talk with people about the things that matter in their lives. Over the years I have learned a lot about life from listening to those who are dying. Today, I want share some reflections on what people have taught me.

First, it's important to remember that the one who is dying is still alive. People often avoid ill people because they don't know what to say. Just talk to them about the things you would have talked about before. People want opportunities to talk about something other than their illness. Sometimes they just want to talk

about ordinary things – the ball game, politics (or maybe not this year), their family, about life when they were children.

On the other hand, many people also need opportunities to talk about death and the process of dying. This is particularly true with people they know well. They need to share what they imagine death to be like. They need to share their fears as well as their faith. When we shut down these conversations because we are afraid, it simply makes the one who is dying feel even more alone. So, have courage and let them talk. Be not afraid.

Don't wait to say "goodbye." I've been struck by how many times people put off saying what is on their hearts because they think it isn't time yet. It is always time to tell people that they are important to you. I have come to the point where I often tell people way ahead of time that when the time comes I will miss them and am glad to have known them. Remember "goodbye" simply means "God be with you," which is always an appropriate blessing.

Can we love the dying person enough to do what is best for them? Can we see them as a person – not primarily our parent or our spouse or our child or our friend – but as a person of God.

We can't assume we know what the person wants or needs. We must ask them and then have the courage to listen to their

answer. Do they want more medical treatments or have they had enough? Do they understand what their choices are?

Do they trust that we will support them in what is best for them? This is particularly hard. We get caught up in our own emotions. We may not be ready for the other person to let go of life, but that may be exactly what the person needs to do. Be not afraid.

One of the essential spiritual practices in life is letting go – letting go of possessions, letting go of prejudices, letting go of possibilities that will no longer be. We will have to let go of loved ones and eventually we will have to let go of life itself. Be not afraid.

Life is an ongoing process of hellos and goodbyes. That is true in families and also in congregations. When you step back it is impossible to tell where one individual life begins and another takes up the journey in a faith community. The life of First Parish Church is woven together like a tapestry. All the people we named this morning are woven into our cloud of witnesses.

As a new grandparent, I find myself with a passion for looking to the future. So today let us not only look back on folk to whom we have had to say goodbye but also let us look forward to people we will welcome into our life together. There may be visitors among us this morning looking for a community into which to be woven. So, at the end of worship be sure to greet those sitting around you if you haven't already done so.

And if you go to coffee hour, remember as someone said to me recently, "No visitor

goes to coffee hour for the coffee." People are looking for connection. They are looking for a place where people are listening to life and are rejoicing at God's presence in our midst.

Every day we are at a crossroads in our own journeys and in our common journey. This week our country is at a particular crossroads that we come to every four years. We are making decisions about our future.

The political process in recent weeks and months has been painful and discouraging - tearing at the fabric of our common life. There has been

- vicious name calling and threats
- increasing awareness of the economic injustices among us
- incredible amounts of money spent on politics
- racial, gender and religious demonizing
- and the lack of conversation about environmental concerns is stunning and appalling. All of this is tearing at the fabric of our democracy and our common future.

These challenges will not be over on Tuesday. In the days, weeks, and months ahead may we truly listen to life and to our life together. May we make decisions not only for the present but also with an eye to the generations that will come long after we are gone. As we come closer to the beginning of our 300<sup>th</sup> year as a congregation, I have begun to imagine not only the people of 300 years ago but also the people who will be here 300 years from now, when we will be part of their cloud of witnesses. When they look back, how will they think of us?