

## ***Starting Over***

A Sermon for Sunday Morning Worship  
United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT  
October 25, 2015  
Text: Genesis 12:1-5

“ ‘Live the faith we profess!’ thanks for this nugget Ruth.” Thus was the entry to my brief moment of Facebook fame this past Thursday when my comment in the heat of a conversation with clergy colleagues got posted to Facebook in the moment and bounced around the RI Conference and who knows where else almost as soon as the words came out of my mouth. This has never happened to me before, and may never happen again but for a few brief moments the rest of Thursday and even most of my day off on Friday, I basked in the glow that my colleagues in ministry thought I had something profound.

In all candor, I didn't really think I had said anything that extraordinary. Living the faith we profess is so basic. It is what we should be doing every day, and yet we so seldom actually pull it off. But, honestly, this was post worthy from the middle of a clergy gathering? On some level, that was surprising to me. At least it was until Friday evening when I got the first phone call in what evolved into a 36 hour ordeal of reckoning with every pastor's nightmare – a crazy person harassing members of the church by phone and email. Some of you who are on the church's email listserv are aware that we had a rash of suspicious phone

calls and a few emails sent out to some members of the congregation from a young man telling outlandish stories for what real purpose we don't know. Honestly, what he said is only a small part of what was so disturbing about this whole incident. What upset me the most was the thought that someone obviously "a few fries short of a Happy Meal as my husband would say," was targeting not only myself, but also some members of my congregation with weird and upsetting phone calls and emails. Nothing threatening but definitely very, very strange. Strange enough that I called the Stonington Police on Friday evening and ended up driving down and spending almost three hours at the police station, talking with officers and waiting while they ran some things down while we waited.

What really got me though was one simple question my son asked me as Peter and I were driving home from the police station late Friday night. "What are you going to do if the guy shows up on Sunday, Mom?" my son asked. This was a legitimate question since one of the young man's last voice mail messages to me indicated he was planning on coming to worship today, a thought which I found frightening given the phone calls and emails I knew had been happening. "What are you going to do if the guy shows up, Mom?" rang in my ears. I tried to deafen the clamor in my head by checking my Facebook page looking for a happy, mindless thought. "Live the faith we profess! Thanks for this nugget, Ruth"

popped up on the screen of my phone, promptly bringing me up short. How was I supposed to live the faith I profess, a faith of radical welcome for all when I was terrified that this one guy just might show up today. That's when I realized I had to preach on this today, even if that young guy was here.

How are we supposed to live the faith we profess in today's world, a world in which faith communities of all sorts have become targets for crazy people? How are we supposed to trust people enough to welcome them into the church when the world's craziness knocks right on our own front doors? How are we supposed to find the courage to reach out to the stranger, the homeless person, the wayward youth, those very people who need us most when they are the people we're most afraid of? How can we be the people of God, open and welcoming and loving, when we have to put so much energy and thought into making sure we're safe when we're here in God's house? When did it happen that we even had to wonder about such questions? How did we get here, stuck between Christ's call to welcome the stranger and our own fears of who that stranger might be and why he or she is here? Do we really have to judge people by how they look, and how they act when it's so different from what we're used to? Where is God in all these questions? Where is God in the world today and what is God expecting of us?

“Live the faith we profess.” That sounded so simple when I said it to my colleagues on Thursday. And it sounds so impossible today. But the thing is, it can’t be impossible. It just can’t be because if it is, dear friends, all hope is lost and that I just do not, WILL NOT accept. We must live the faith we profess *especially* when it’s most difficult, most frightening, most seemingly impossible to do. We must respond with love in a frightening world because that’s what Jesus says we are to do. And he is not ambiguous about it all. Love your enemies, he says. Do good to those who hurt you, he says. Even when you do it for the least of these you do it for me, he says. The least of these. Our theme from last Sunday’s Mission Trip service surfaces once again. The least of these – the very people we most want to avoid, to pretend aren’t there – the crazy people who make creepy phone calls and send outlandish emails – these *are* the least of these Jesus is talking about! Whether we like it or not. Whether we want to deal with it or not. That is our reality if we are to live the faith we profess and that, dear friends, is our call in this moment. We are to live our faith even more fully, more vibrantly, in the face of our fears reaching beyond them as we do. Dear friends, we must live the faith we profess because if we don’t then what we say we believe is a lie. And you know, and I know, it’s not.

But what does that mean for us now? Do we throw caution to the winds? Do we open wide the doors 24 hours a day and trust

blindly that God will keep all ill and evil from our doors? No. God does not ever want us to be foolish. God always expects us to use our brains as much as we do our hearts. So we must be prudent and vigilant. We must involve the police as we think we need to do, and do so without feeling guilty. We must act proactively to make sure our staff is safe when they are here alone in the building during the week. We must continue to be wary of strangers ringing the doorbell whatever the reason and not be afraid to say, “no, I can’t let you in but I can tell you the places nearby that I think might be able to help you.” We must treat everyone who comes our way as though they are the Risen Christ in our midst, but mindful as well that evil too walks among us.

So, I guess what I’m saying is that we must continue to live the faith we profess – a faith which calls us to radical welcome, to loving kindness for the friend and stranger alike, to trust and be trusted. AND we must not be afraid to be wary of the dark hearts and troubled minds of those very people God calls us to minister to. God gave us intuition and it’s usually a pretty good barometer. Not always. But usually it is. When you sense something isn’t right, it probably isn’t. That’s your built in safety warning from God. The challenge is to do both – to welcome the stranger with love and respect and be wary that all may not be as it seems at the same time. Once again, proof positive that living the Christian is not for the faint of heart. Or, as my dad was fond of saying, if it

was easy, anybody could do it. The truth is, so few of us really can. But, we can try. We must try. Because the alternative is to be stuck in a reality where fear rules, where God's incredible beauty made manifest in all sorts of people is obscured behind veils of suspicion and anger toward the stranger.

So, where do we go from here as a congregation? How do we move on from this oddly disturbing and more than a little unnerving weekend of weird phone calls and emails from a strange stranger? Enter the story of Abraham and Sarah – a story I selected for this Sunday over 8 weeks ago, by the way. God does have a sense of humor, not to mention incredible irony. This story is a long one and we only read the very beginning this morning. God tells Abraham and Sarah that it's time to get moving, time to leave behind everything and everyone they know and move on to a new land God will reveal to them. "I will make of you a great nation," God tells them. "I will bless you ... so that you will be a blessing," God promises them. "In you all the families of the earth shall be blessed," God reassures them. But first you have to leave. Right now. And I don't want to hear any excuses, like you're too old. Plenty of people start over in the second half of life. And I don't want to hear anything about family obligations. Take your family with you! But go. Go now, God says. Trust me and go. Start over and everything will be amazing, in spite of all the reasons you can think of that it won't be. Trust

me and go. Dare to be the blessing I am telling you that you are, God said to Abraham and Sarah. And God says that to us too.

Did you notice something odd in this story? Did you pick up on the fact that Abraham and Sarah have different names in this story? They do – Abram and Sarai. Close, but not quite the same thing. They do not receive their new names from God – Abraham and Sarah – until much later in their journey, when God promised this couple, now in their nineties, that they would finally have a child! New names for a new life! New names for starting over! New names to embody their new reality of living the faith they profess in spite of everything that had encouraged them not to.

The truth is, dear friends, God is always inviting us to be Abraham and Sarah. God is always inviting us to start over, to begin again, to set aside our fears and our worries and reach for the life we've always wanted. God is always encouraging us to be the people we want to be, living the lives we imagine for ourselves, trusting with every fiber of our beings that with God all things are possible. But – and here's the catch – God *expects* us to be the people God *needs* us to be – people who live into reality the compassionate mercy of God by loving the unlovable, believing the improbable and forgiving the unforgivable knowing that we'll always fall short because that's what people do. What matters to God is the trying. What matters to God is what God told Abram and Sarai he wanted for them – to be a blessing to all the families

of the earth. A blessing! To all the families of the earth! Now that is something worth aspiring to. That is something to invest your heart and mind and soul into doing. Being a blessing by living the faith you profess!