

## ***At Home and Away***

A Message for Sunday Morning Worship with Communion  
on SCHOLARSHIP SUNDAY

United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC

June 6, 2021

Text: Deuteronomy 6:4-9

Today is a joyful Sunday in our church! This is a day when we celebrate the young adult members of our family of faith here in this place even as we offer them a token of financial assistance for their journeys forward into their respective futures. We missed this celebration last year due to the pandemic when we were not even meeting together for worship so checks were just mailed out. We were thrilled, as we always are, to be able to provide this financial assistance but last year's gifts just felt so impersonal. And yet they bought the same amount of books or whatever they were spent on. They had the same desired impact as this year's checks will make but it just was not the same. We missed seeing the young people in all their youthful enthusiasm. We missed hearing their amazing stories. We missed the smiling, proud faces of parents. So, this year, this morning is all the sweeter!

The Deacons and I always enjoy Barbara Murano Scholarship season because we get to hear from these kids directly as they respond to whatever essay topic is chosen for the year. You will not be surprised to know that this year the applicants were asked to write about how their years were impacted by Covid. We had no idea of the extraordinary responses we would have the privilege of reading. The recipients will be sharing some of what they wrote in a few minutes so I will let them speak for themselves and share with you what they shared with the Deacons. Suffice to say we have some amazing kids here. But then, we knew that, didn't we?

This church takes seriously its responsibility to live into reality the promises we make at every baptism to "provide our love, support and care" to the one being baptized. True, we don't have huge programming for kids like some churches do, although there are fewer and fewer of those churches all the time as "church" takes a back seat to all the other options kids have for enriching their lives. The thing is, the numbers of kids and youth doing art projects in Sunday School or playing capture the flag in youth group means nothing when preparing children and youth for the life-

long task of living as a person of faith. Being around and working alongside faithful followers of Christ does that, and that, dear ones we have done in abundance in this amazing and vital church.

I chose this text from Deuteronomy this morning to comment on briefly because it is a foundational text for all three of the Abrahamic religions – Christianity, Judaism and Islam. It is specifically known as the foundational prayer of Judaism which all faithful Jews are to repeat each day. It is actually written on tiny scrolls which are then placed into tiny oblong boxes called mezuzahs. These mezuzahs are then nailed to the doorposts of the entry doors into Jewish homes. In Orthodox homes, they appear on every doorway, inside the home as well as on the entry door. Why? The text tells us:

*Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.*

Write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates. Why? So that every time you leave your home, you are reminded of this, the great commandment to love God with all that we are and all that we have. But it's not just repeating the words that matters. Anyone can parrot back words or write them down inside fancy little boxes. No, loving God in this way means loving God with your entire being for your entire life. What does this mean? That's the thing. This is a question each of us has to answer for ourselves, every day. Some days that is easy to do. Others, not so much. Some days it is easy to live as someone who loves God and shares that love with others, when life is good and sweet and life is going well. Other days, the ache of disappointment, the fear of the unknown, the worries of day to day life can drown out this commandment and we don't even realize it.

This is the really amazing thing about God. Even though this commandment comes from God's own self, God's own self understands and forgives all those moments when we forget, sidestep, overlook, leap-frog

over our relationship with God. God knows us so well, especially our failures and mistakes, our fragility and our best efforts, and its all okay. Because no matter what, God is there always at our going out and our coming in, every moment of every day. No matter where we find ourselves, God is already there. In our homes or a dorm room or apartment at college. There is no place, there is never a moment when God is not with us, loving us. There is never a moment when we are bereft of God.

That, dear ones, is the gift we give the children raised in this church. That is the gift we send these young people off to college with, whether they are heading out for the first time or the third time. They go with God's word's written on their hearts by God's own self. And all our prayers go with them and surround them every moment of every day.

So now, let's hear from them!

***NOTE:*** *The students all spoke without written notes so we are not able to include copies of their remarks here.*