

## Blessing the Ties

September 10, 2023 at First Church in Cambridge, Congregational, UCC

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*Texts: Hebrews 11 (excerpted)*

Friends, today we begin again - a new season, a new programming cycle, a new year in our life together! Though Regathering Sunday is nowhere on the liturgical calendar of the big C Church, it's one of my favorite small traditions here at First Church, and by that, I mean a tradition that's at least somewhat unique to this congregation. Other churches call it Homecoming Sunday or Rally Sunday. Maybe they like sports more than we do - I don't know - but for as long as most here can remember, we've called it Regathering, and for good reason. Sure, it speaks for itself; many have been away for the summer, and it's good to be back and all! Yet I invite us to consider a deeper meaning as well, starting with some biblical foundation. As Rabbi Jesus said, wherever two or three are gathered, I am in the midst of them. And today, it's more like 200, counting those joining online. The Spirit resides within us all, and can't we sense it here, in the energy, prayer time, songs, and seeking?

This service isn't just another event on our already overpacked schedules! When we gather and regather here, we do so in a long line of spiritual ancestors and communities that have held the faith. Both of today's scriptures speak powerfully to this. In Psalm 145, you said it yourselves: "One generation shall laud God's works to another, and shall declare God's mighty acts!" In our worship and praise, we are doing just that: participating in and passing along a great conversation that started long before we were here and will continue long after we are gone. Then we heard a sampling of that robust "roll call of the saints" from the Epistle to the Hebrews, recounting how, by faith, our biblical and spiritual forebears have maintained that hope-filled assurance in things unseen, how they held onto their faith with unwavering courage and grace, facing the immense challenges of their day.

As we've heard, our theme for this Regathering Season is Blessing the Ties, which draws its inspiration from the old hymn: "Blest Be the Ties that Bind." In a world marked by loneliness, isolation, fragmentation, and polarization, what a gift and anchor it is to be gathered and regathered in community of friends and strangers that celebrates and strengthens our connections - to the land, to our ancestors, and descendants, and most importantly, to each other and to God, the source of love amidst it all.

Gathering, of course, is a biblical thing to do, with two or three or two hundred. That's part of it. It's also a theme that traces back to First Church's pre-colonial roots. John Field, one of our English Puritan ancestors in faith, wrote from a London prison in 1572, emphasizing the church's purpose as "a company...of the faithful called and gathered out of the world" to "strengthen and comfort one another" and to grow in faith. Our spiritual forebears took this idea of being "gathered from the world" super seriously, so much so that it is woven into the language of our founding covenant that we still read here on Joining Sundays today almost 400 years later. Our covenant reads: "We who are now brought together...promise and bind ourselves to walk in all our ways according to the rule of the Gospel and in mutual love and respect each to other, so near as God shall give us grace!" I find this old-school language deeply moving, enchanting even in its intentionality, for it speaks to the ancestral and interpersonal ties that have constituted this community of love and faith for almost 400 years.

L.A.-based Rabbi Harold Shulweiss articulates these ideas of covenantal connectedness, binding, and bonding in more contemporary terms. He writes, in a poem that some of you have heard here before, especially in small groups:

God is not in me  
nor in you  
but between us.  
..

God is known  
not alone  
but in relationship.

Not as a separate, lonely power  
but through our kinship,  
our friendship,  
through our healing and binding  
and raising up of each other.

To know God is to know others,  
to love God is to love others,  
to hear God is to hear others.

I seek God in connection,  
in the nexus of community.  
I pray and celebrate the betweenness  
which binds and holds us together.

God is in the betweenness. God is in those very ties and that loving energy connects us to each other and across generations. Far from being some new-age, quasi-spiritual spin, this profoundly Jewish understanding of community is as old as religion itself, older than the Puritans, older than Jesus! The very word religion - is from the Latin *ligare*, as in ligament. *Ligare* means 'to bind.' *Re-ligare* means 'to bind again!' Today, we do just that: we re-gather, re-bless these ties, re-bind ourselves to one another, and re-imagine how we connect here and now and with and for generations to come. Today, and every time we gather and re-gather, we participate in and re-constitute and celebrate a community that is bound together by a love, a between-ness, a God that spans generations and millennia, and that walks with God into the future.

In a country where civic institutions are in decline, we can't underestimate the power of this counter-cultural, voluntary move to choose to be connected to one another in a community like this. We and our world need spaces like this that draw us out of ourselves, out of our work, out of our phones, out of our distractions, so we can resist our culture's rampant individualism, amnesia, and presentism, let alone a rising tide of Christian nationalism (which is a sermon for another day). As we face the challenges of rising authoritarianism and the climate crisis, we know we can't go it alone; we need to double down and do everything we can to strengthen communities and connections that provide resources of wisdom, strength, and resilience and examples and elders and ancestors who were grounded in compassion, justice, dignity, and love.

At some level, we know all this; otherwise, we wouldn't be here, but how can we be more intentional about being the church in these times? Rabbi Shulweeis says he "prays and celebrates the betweenness which binds and holds us together." There's an idea! This Regathering is a Sunday and a good start, a time to raise up, celebrate, and bless the ties that bind! Yet it requires ongoing awareness and intention, for these ties are unseen things! Though they are with us all the time to help orient, ground and comfort us, how quickly can we forget to honor them and act out of the obligations they place on us?

Last fall, I participated in a course at Harvard Divinity School co-led by two remarkable students, Morgan Curtis and Emma Thomas. I'm thrilled to say that you'll all be meeting Emma soon. She'll be joining us here as our Ministerial Intern in two weeks! The course was called "Ancestors and Money." It was designed to support white participants in learning more about their ancestral lineages and connecting that to their work towards healing, reckoning, and repair in the world. Far from disavowing or disowning our ancestors - the enslavers, colonizers, and all the rest - the course invited us to 'draw closer to them by learning about and telling the truth of their times' and by committing to transform the harm they may have endured and caused. Ultimately, the course was about doing what we can to ensure that wealth inequality, racial violence, and climate chaos won't be the final chapters of our legacies. To this end, at one of the early sessions, we were each invited to set intentions for the semester into three buckets of goals. There were Ancestor Goals, Money Goals, and Mystery Goals, and each had to be specific, measurable, and attainable. Ancestor Goals were related to choosing particular areas of research doing deeper dives toward uncovering, discovering, or sharing our individual ancestral stories. Money Goals involved choosing and charting out steps, however large or small, towards some form of reparative wealth redistribution by virtue of legacy planning, for example, or plans to support divestment, re-investment, or fundraising for groups harmed by historical patterns of inequity. And finally, Mystery Goals! Here, we needed to choose some embodied exploration or expression to keep us grounded in this work. We could reclaim a spiritual practice that connected us to ancestral roots, take a pilgrimage to some site discovered in our research, or write a letter to a great, great grandmother or an unborn descendant. We shared these goals with the group, checked in periodically, and held each other accountable throughout the semester.

I raise all this by way of example. What are some intentions you bring? What intentions are we being invited to name and share as we regather today? We've already been working on some ancestor and money goals here at First Church, learning about, honoring, and reckoning with our ancestors, saints, and sinners alike, and we'll continue that this fall. We've also been working hard on plans for our long-term financial sustainability as a church, laying the groundwork for a fifth century of our life together. Imagine that? Providing a space of connection for future generations, a place of shelter and sanctuary, practical and spiritual, for whatever storms loom on our horizon. I wonder, though, what might be a *mystery goal* for you and us? What's a new intention, tradition, or spiritual practice that can strengthen and bless the ties and make us ever more mindful of the ties that bind us together in this community? For some of you, it may be a simple commitment to attend services more regularly. For others, maybe it's a deeper dive into a small group or some of our shared learning experiences or service opportunities. For others still, maybe there's a piece of individual grief work or joy work that we support you in as you deepen your understanding of what it means to be connected to a community like this, one that spans generations! How can you and we make space for more mystery to infuse and energize our lives? It may only take two or three to gather and get it started and to ask the question, what is the Spirit doing in our midst? How can we give Her more time and space to lead the way, day to day, week to

week, season to season? Please do think about it in the coming days and see if you can set down a mystery goal for yourselves in the coming days and see where it leads.

Right now, and to close, here's one for us all! Let's pause, eyes open and looking around or closed, whichever you prefer, and give God thanks, thanks, and praise for our ancestors who by faith passed on this place and tradition of gathering and regathering, for our descendants still to come, for the land and creation, for God's enduring grace and beauty, for all the ties that bind us together in a capital L love which abides. May God bless these ties today and always. Amen.

