

SANKOFA



Go Back and Get It

Colossians 3:1-11

A sermon in Dialogue:

A New Way, a New Day

Rev Erica Avena and Nedelka Prescod

Erica: We have asked Nedelka Prescod to preach for us this summer and she invited me to do a dialogue sermon with her today. We'd like to invite you to listen in on some of our conversations we have been having, working together while Larissa Forsythe is on sabbatical. Nedelka will continue to be available for pastoral care during the month of August. You should come in and chat!

It is a particular blessing to have you here, Nedelka, at a time in our nation when many communities are struggling with division. I have appreciated your strong convictions, and your willingness to learn. I know you well enough to know that your life reflects deep faith – and at the same time, you've been honest about your own questions about faith and personal growth. The Bible invites us into lifelong learning and reflection as much as getting out in the world and making a difference.

This scripture reflects the highs and lows of a Christian life. In the letter to the Colossians, we are encouraged to raise our sights above the problems which are loose in the world. The text calls it out for us:

“put to death, therefore, whatever in you is earthly: fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed (which is idolatry)...these are the ways you also once followed, when you were living that life. But now you must get rid of all such things – anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive language from your mouth.”

It's encouraging us to recognize when our gaze and our actions have fallen beneath us. And to make a change. We need to make personal changes.

And many of us have been watching the Jan 6 hearings, the news about climate change – where so many people around the world are at risk, policing issues around the nation, the new covid-19 variant, and monkeypox now. These issues are heavy to bear.

Question from NP to EA: How is the polarization of national dialogue affecting things at South Church?

The transition team, which works with me to support the congregation's transition, hosted a series of cottage meetings during Lent of this year. It was a great effort. 26 cottage meetings were held – hosted in homes and on zoom, and facilitated by members of the Transition Team. Most of the gatherings were a welcome opportunity for folks to connect again. Yet there were a few surprises: The problems in our nation are also problems in our community and congregation. Since things had been shut down during the pandemic, many people just weren't out being together. We discussed the findings in June at a gathering after church. Some of the questions we are living with are: what is the best way to express our open and affirming commitment in today's world? How do we create a welcoming environment for all of our people across the political spectrum? And I am always curious about how we balance what we stand for in terms of our christian beliefs, yet maintain a sacred space where people can bring their honest doubts, questions, and share their authentic selves.

I remember when we interviewed you, you had questions for me also. One of the questions you asked me was whether the South Glastonbury community was safe. I admired your courage to ask that, and I hesitated to answer that question because I have learned, through very disappointing personal experience – not here, but elsewhere – that people whom I am safe in the presence of, are not always safe for everyone to be around. Because of my own experience working with colleagues of color who find themselves struggling with someone who has racist views – someone who'd never been a problem for me. What I said to you in that interview was that I believe that the South Glastonbury community is a safe one – without unchecked racial problems, but I am not in your skin, and I cannot absolutely know for certain. I would like to guarantee your personal safety, but I can't. What I can do, what we all can do, is strengthen the community fabric, get to know our neighbors, and learn how to get along. I want your partnership in that, but at the same time, I do not want to put you at risk.

Question from EA to NP: about that accountability for personal discipline which the text describes... How do we lovingly challenge each other?

This morning's scripture speaks of accountability, to self and one to another. There are personal disciplines we should hold for ourselves that help us navigate our "earthly nature". And then there are the disciplines that bring us into right relationship with others; disciplines that help us to rise above our earthly nature and become more as we are designed to be... the creation of God, made in God's image.

May I also suggest that there are additional disciplines we learn to take on as reasoning beings. Our ability to use language to converse with one another. Discipline as in, sometimes those earthly nature behaviors can impede our ability to have the tough conversations. To reference our first conversation, I felt it necessary to ask you direct questions and sincerely appreciated your willingness to have a real and open conversation with me. Sometimes the voicing of our concerns and ideas bring out those very responses listed in verse 8.

It's the unknown spaces that we can't account for that make us want to protect our ways of being and knowing that may feel threatened by something or someone new or unfamiliar. So, even a question can trigger an angry response. Yet, we are challenged in those moments to consider others, new perspectives, what we've not been able to see in the normal flow of our lives with others of similar backgrounds and who we tend to commune with me. But I believe it's possible to rise above the challenges and discomfort of disruptions in our usual and familiar ways of knowing and being. It's when we raise our sights above our selves and consider our larger shared experiences.

A strong focus for me is that we ALL, including plants, animals, the earth and the universe..., are part of God's creation. And perhaps if we are able to raise our sights and view the totality of our existence, we'll view our responsibility to one another differently and strive to protect and maintain it knowing that as we help our shared condition, we are helping ourselves.

Grace in the text exists, but I must note that it comes with a responsibility. We sometimes behave as if we believe we can continue doing what we've been doing and God will bless it and/or us. The grace we receive is the possibility of a new day... when we put away with the things of our earthly nature. There is an action we must take that thwarts the wrath of God upon us. There are actions we must take for ourselves and for others that in so doing, bring us into a new day. A new day where our human labels and boxes no longer exist. How liberating is that? I believe it's possible to hold our beautiful distinctions that make us the myriad expressions of God while at the same time releasing those things that keep us bound and away from love and peace. The grace that the text speaks of us is love. God's love for us and our love for one another. And perhaps we'll be able to love ourselves more truly.

Question from NP to EA: what is the new day that the transition work is working towards?

Just this last week at the church council meeting we were discussing the church's purpose statement, which says in part:

...It is our purpose to study scripture and to translate that Living Word into deeds of compassion for the sake of the earth, the human community, and all of God's creation. It is our purpose to be an inclusive community of faith honoring the diversity of Gods' handiwork and reflecting Christ's radical welcome.

The fact that we sometimes struggle with these very things, how to include young families in today's world, the best way to communicate our Open and Affirming status today, creating a welcoming sacred space in the community where we can find both comfort and challenge. How do we say it? "Whoever you are, wherever you are on life's journey, you are welcome here..." It's reiterated in the purpose statement for a reason – it's not easy to do, but we agree it needs to be done. How we do that can be messy sometimes. But that was also true for Jesus and his disciples. At times, they caused offense. 31 years ago this church was among the first to

become open and affirming which, I understand, was not an easy process. We have come so far in this country and in this community since then, but there's still so far to go.

While the last thing I want to do is invite conflict, yet a certain amount of friction is necessary. Mostly I want people to know that the church isn't broken. God isn't broken. You can come here as you are, for community, for comfort, and to be challenged by the gospel.

Jesus promises where two or three gather and agree together in prayer, there he is among them.

EA to NP What is the "new day" from your perspective? What does it look like? Have you seen it somewhere? Is there a community doing it? How do you live into that?

Sankofa is a Ghanaian word that means to retrieve, to go back and get, before moving forward. There are some things that I personally don't believe we should bring with us as we move forward. In my own community there are ways of being and thinking that have harmed next generations. A saying that was popular when I was a child was "children should be seen and not heard". My generation decided that is one to put away as many of us are healing from various abuses of children that were kept silent, and the children told to be silent, that we are now dealing with as adults. But remembering the ways of respect we were taught for our elders is one we should keep. Knowing how to hold respect for our elders can open up a necessary line of communication that makes it possible for us to learn traditional ways of gardening, that keep beloved family recipes, teaches us history where we become keepers of knowledge. It is important to know where you've come from so that you may go forward... perhaps so that we don't make the same human errors, learn from our past, and make better decisions... and mistakes.

I know the sankofa way because I had the blessing of living in a home with my parents and my grandparents, and I had a great-grandmother until I was 20. Living with them was the equivalent to living in four different eras at the same time, including mine. It provided me with context and a depth of understanding that I didn't recognize in my younger years, yet I worked with and from it. This included toxic and dysfunctional ways that I have and am learning to sift through keeping what is healthy for myself and for my communal walk on this earth and releasing those things that burden me and make it impossible for me to live into the call on my life and actions as written about in Colossians 3.

Many of us have lived sankofa experiences. It is now our responsibility to interrogate what we've learned and received, weighing against scripture to see if we are measuring up to God's highest ideals for us as we seek to move forward. There are things right now that I have to give up that I don't want to. Some of it removes comfort in my having to learn a new way. Some of it removes my feeling of being safe as I have to embrace the unfamiliar. Some of it removes the feeling of being right, the first one, the only one, the best one. And as I think about it, I agree with you Erica, some of it exposes laziness in my want to simply stay where and how I am. I don't believe we have that luxury. Right now we have an undeniable shared experience and responsibility...it's called living on planet earth. I tend to believe that our distinctions, individual and collective, are wonderful intentions of God that if we can retrieve our beautiful healing traditions and combine them at our shared table, we will see a new day we can't see when we walk in the lower aspects of our earthly nature.

Following this sermon we invited questions and comments from the congregation.

For personal consideration: what is the new day that God is bringing into your life today? What partners in dialogue do you have and do you need?

© Reverend Erica Avena & Nedelka Prescod 2022

Congregational Church in South Glastonbury

949 Main St.

South Glastonbury, CT 06073