

"Sacred Time in an Age of 'Likes,' 'Shares', and 'Retweets.'"

Acton Congregational Church (UCC)

02 May 2022

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Texts: Acts 9:36-43

John 10:22-30

"My sheep hear my voice."

- John 10:27

Prayer

**We are grateful, O God,
For this sacred day on our calendar that brings us together
To meditate on the ancient stories that shape our faith
And reorient our lives toward your love, grace and truth.
May the words of my mouth
And the reflection of our hearts be pleasing to you,
O God, our refuge and strength in troubled times. Amen.**

One of the greatest gifts religion offers humankind is the concept of sacralized time. Religious traditions, including Christianity, are built around Scriptures, rituals and practices that require special timekeeping to mark important feasts, sacred seasons and holy days. These sacred calendars punctuate the passing of time with occasions, days, and weeks that carve out a space for eternal truths within the very temporal and finite reality of human life. In our tradition, the sacred cycles of the Christian calendar set up a series of intentional moments for remembrance, celebration, reflection, confession, repentance and prayer that remind us, not only of the fleeting and broken nature of human life, but also of our God-given capacity to let the Divine revealed in Jesus Christ give us a whole new understanding of the meaning and purpose of time. Week after week, we come together on Sunday, the first day of the week, the day of the resurrection, to celebrate and remember the profound significance of the Easter faith for the way we count and live our days on Earth. Rather than conceiving of time as an inexorable race from birth toward death, the Christian calendar points to the sacramental dimension of our pilgrimage through this life. Our faith tradition affirms that in the birth of Jesus, God's Eternal Word came into human history, became flesh, and showed us how to live fully into human time. In the life of Jesus, we learn that our choices and actions have eternal repercussions. Jesus' violent death on the cross exposes the depth of human rage at God for denouncing humanity's use of time for injustice, violence and bloodshed and challenging the human race to imagine every moment as the right time for reconciliation, peace-making, community-building and new life. And the mystery of the resurrection grounds us in the hope that time cannot and will not be defined by the calendar of this cross-making, war-loving world but by the God of life working through people of faith who still dare to believe that the liturgical calendar of

the Church calls forth what is best in the human heart and mind because it makes us aware of what is life-giving, enduring, good and holy in human life and on our planet.

You may have never thought of our Sunday gatherings as a sacred hour with the potential to reconfigure your use of time and open your eyes to the inbreaking of the holy into the flow of the daily, but our worship service brings us together to do just that. Here, our liturgical timekeeping invites us to situate our lives in the story of God's revelation in Jesus Christ. As soon as we enter this place of worship, everything around us – the communion table, the candles, the cross, the baptismal font, the pulpit, the liturgical banners on the wall behind me, the stained glass windows, the music, the prayers, the words in the bulletin, the Scripture lessons, the sermon and the person next to you in the pew – everything tells us that we are standing on holy ground where a life-transforming encounter between the Divine and the human may happen if we keep our ears, hearts and minds attuned to God's Presence among us. This time on Sunday morning is sacred because we are here to listen to the voice of the Risen Christ. We are here to immerse ourselves in the holy stories that prepare, coax, stimulate and provoke us to be followers of Christ beyond this sacred moment. There is always the temptation to think of the Sunday service as a momentary escape from the other voices and calendars that constantly demand our attention and try to influence how we live our lives, prioritize what matters and schedule our time so, at least from one fixed hour, we may focus solely on the spiritual and eternal; but the fact is that we come here to let the voice of Christ inform us, shape our views, our concerns, our values and help us to give what is best in us to one another, to our society and to humankind.

Benedictine nun and author Joan Chittister said, ***“The liturgical year is an adventure in bringing the Christian life to fullness, the heart to alert, the soul to focus. It does not concern itself with the questions of how to make a living. It concerns itself with the questions of how to make a life.”***¹ Sunday morning, this gathering of faith, this time on our sacred calendar may well be the most significant day of the week for you and me because here, as hard as it may be for some to believe, two thousand years later, the voice of Christ still instructs us on how to make a life that is worth living at this complicated time in our country and in the world.

Our liturgical calendar says that it is still Easter time in the Church. We are still pondering and marveling over the Paschal mystery. Our liturgical banners capture the essence of this sacred season: ***“He is risen! Alleluia!”*** This Easter proclamation invites us to believe that for God nothing is impossible, to see new possibilities for life to flourish in a murderous and violent world, to seek to use our time well in ways that affirm the Great Commandment Jesus left for the Church, which is to love God with all our soul, heart, strength and mind and to love our neighbors as we love ourselves.² Today, on the Fourth Sunday of the Easter season, we can hear loud and clear Jesus' voice in the Gospel lesson – ***“My sheep hear my voice... and they follow me.”*** There is no doubt that listening to Jesus demands a response. We listen to his voice and follow. We celebrate Easter and take the Easter faith with us into the reality of our world where the Good News of the resurrection is not what is on the news, trending on Twitter, or being

shared on Facebook. There are other matters cluttering up the newsfeed, holding people's attention and shaping our time and it is not the resurrection!

Most of the country is still holding its breath, waiting nervously, even anxiously to see what the richest man in the world will do with Twitter. Someone wrote wishfully that if the major big change to the social media platform is that it ends up being used to increase the number of electric vehicles on the roads and solar panels on rooftops, it will not be the worst outcome of the takeover,³ but the self-described free-speech absolutist that now owns Twitter may have other plans than to use social media as a boon to life in community and democracy.

We barely had enough time to digest the jarring news of Twitter's acquisition when the bombshell leak of a Supreme Court's draft majority opinion on *Roe v. Wade* stunned just about everyone on the political Right, Left and Middle. Several of my colleagues immediately posted memes on Facebook stating their pro-choice stance while others celebrated cautiously the possibility that the pro-life movement might finally see the demise of the constitutional right to an abortion. Progressive Evangelical social activist Shane Claiborne took to social media to express his hope that if SCOTUS votes to end the protection for abortion rights, a new kind of pro-life movement will take root in America. ***"Too often 'pro-life' has come to mean anti-abortion,"*** Shane Claiborne wrote, ***"[but] it's not enough just to be born – we also need to support the babies, the kids, the youth. And that means making sure everyone has the things they need to thrive – education, food, health care, housing, and all such things. Wouldn't it be beautiful to have a pro-life movement that stood against abortion, but also stood just as passionately against the death penalty, gun violence, militarism and war, the degradation of creation, police brutality, and all other things that destroy life? That would truly be a pro-life movement. To be pro-life is not only about protecting the unborn, but also about supporting folks after they are born."***⁴ Rev. James Ross II, Minister for Diversity, Equity and Inclusion in the Southern New England Conference of the United Church of Christ, our Conference, lamented the news in an article posted on the Conference website and noted that rolling back the right to abortion would be an attack on women's reproductive rights and affect disproportionately women of color, poor women and other women unable to travel to places where they might obtain abortion care legally.⁵

While the world of social media has been abuzz with posts and tweets in favor and against abortion rights, last Wednesday, the news that the U.S. surpassed the staggering milestone of one million COVID deaths did not seem to have shocked the nation so much. Hundreds of American families are mourning the loss of loved ones at a time when most of the country is eager to go on living as if the virus were no longer a risk to public health. With our time and attention snatched away from us by the war in Ukraine, high inflation, the Supreme Court and social media, we cannot help but wonder if one million deaths have made all of us who are still alive and healthy a little more indifferent to the sacredness of human life.

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How do we talk about Easter to people who are exhausted, overwhelmed, infuriated, confused and divided by the news cycle? As a close friend told me recently, the last four weeks in Eastertide have not given people much hope for new life. We spend a great deal of our time consuming the latest news, checking our twitter feed, sharing posts on Facebook, and managing our presence on social media, but we have unlearned the sacred practice of nurturing life in community. We cannot even recognize or agree on what is true about ourselves or our world anymore. We listen to different voices, trust completely different news sources, and inhabit drastically different ideological echo chambers. Loving our neighbors is much more difficult when social media makes us talk at each other but never with each other and gives us an easy-way-out by offering the simple options of unfollowing, unfriending or blocking people who do not share our views, values and opinions. How do we talk about making a life that is worth living with people who cannot bear to hear each other's voices?

Social psychologist Jonathan Haidt claimed, in an article published in the Atlantic,⁶ that something went terribly wrong in our society in 2009 when Facebook introduced the "like" button, which allowed users to publicly like posts with just one click. In that same year, Twitter added the "retweet" button giving people not only the ability to publicly endorse a Tweet but also to share it with all their followers. Soon after that, Facebook copied the innovation by creating its own "share" option. These new technological developments began to produce data about what people like, what we look at, what we retweet, what posts motivate us to leave comments, and which ones hold our attention longer. Using the behavioral data collected from all of us their willing users, social media platforms developed algorithms to bring each one of us the content most likely to generate some interaction, a post "like" or a "share" or a "retweet." From that point on, Haidt says that social media became a new game. Research showed that posts that trigger strong emotions, especially anger at people on the other side of an issue, are the most likely to be shared and go viral. A whole new business model was created to keep people locked on social media as long and as often as possible. By grabbing our data and using our emotions and responses to posts as raw material for capitalism, social media platforms became the most influential and wealthiest companies in human history. And to keep making money and shaping our time, the big tech companies designed the best platforms to bring out the worst in us. They became a medium for the explosive and virulent spread of anger, hateful speech, conspiracy theories and disinformation. They encouraged the innate human tendency toward tribalism and mob dynamics that makes us less tolerant of people who have different opinions and worldviews. They amplified polarization and weakened our trust in institutions that hold together our shared stories and calendars. In his article, Haidt pointed out that social media platforms give power and voice to extremists while reducing the power and voice of the moderate majority and this business model of enhanced rage and high virality fragments our society and fosters a culture without accountability, justice, inclusion, kindness, forgiveness, reconciliation and truth. Unfortunately, Jonathan Haidt believes that the polarization and fragmentation caused by social media are likely to get worse if we do not do anything about it.

Apart from completely redesigning the big techs' business model or lobbying the government to have greater oversight over social media platforms, it doesn't seem that people like you and me who come together on Sunday mornings to reflect on sacred stories steeped in miracles of resurrection and new life have much to offer to our anxious, exhausted, angry and divided society. Still the passage from the Book of Acts shows that life-affirming relationships begin when we hear one another. Peter says, **"Tabitha, get up!"** And upon hearing him, **"she opened her eyes, and seeing Peter, she sat up."** The miracle of new life in the story began with hearing and responding with trust.

In his article, Jonathan Haidt acknowledges that we cannot expect the government and the tech companies will save us. **"We must change ourselves and our communities. Most Americans are beginning to see that social media is having a negative impact on the country, and are becoming more aware of its damaging effects on children."**⁷ People are a bit more inclined to listen to new ways of building community where ideas can be exchanged, and different opinions voiced and disagreements can be aired without viral rancor and virtual punishment. As followers of Christ who understand how listening mindfully to one another can raise us to a whole new life and reintegrate people into the life of the community, we do have something to say about the life-saving power of hearing and trusting one another. It doesn't seem much, but reminding people of the sacred practice of listening, connecting with friends and strangers to deepen our understanding of each other's most cherished beliefs, dreams and hopes may prove to be the best way to live out our Christian faith in our society in these troubled times.

And since today is Mother's Day on our national calendar, I thought I would end my sermon with a bit of motherly wisdom for our days. When I was a young adult, I was fascinated by my cousin's wife's approach to conflict management between their two children. Any time the kids got into an occasional spat or fight, Marcia, their mother, would have them sit down facing each other until they came up with a mutually agreed plan to settle their differences. As soon as the kids started bickering, fighting, arguing, or doing hurtful things to each other, Marcia would step in and ask, **"How are you going to resolve this and make peace?"** From early on, my cousin's kids had to learn how to listen to each other, compromise, handle disharmony constructively, resolve their disagreements together, let go of past grudges and interact in a loving and caring manner. They still did get into those usual sibling fights, but as they grew older it was encouraging to hear them tell each other that rather than going on fighting, they had to figure out a way to resolve their dispute and make peace before their mother made them sit down to do it.

Friends, social media platforms are monetizing our attention, our time, our emotions to sustain a business strategy that brings out the worst in us, but in this sacred time, the voice of Christ insists on calling forth the very best in our humanity and bids us to go out and encourage other people to give what is best in them to the world. In this age of "likes," "shares" and "retweets," being intentional about encouraging each other

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to sit up, listen, respond positively and make a life in community is one of the greatest gifts people who live by sacred calendars can offer our society. May you and I have the courage to continue to allow Christ to call forth what is best in our minds and hearts and inspire us to sit down with each other to make peace.

May it be so. Amen.

¹ Joan Chittister in The Liturgical Year, locations 255-257 [Kindle Edition].

² Luke 10:27.

³ By Benjamin J. Dueholm in Under Elon Musk's authority, Opinion, The Christian Century, 03 May 2022 [https://www.christiancentury.org/article/opinion/under-elon-musk-s-authority?utm_source=Christian+Century+Newsletter&utm_campaign=321655f706-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_EdPicks_2022-05-03&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_b00cd618da-321655f706-86220759].

⁴ Posted on Shane Claiborne's Facebook page on 2 May 2022 [http://consistent-life.org/blog/index.php/2017/02/14/new-pro-life-movement/?fbclid=IwAR3nbhtd7abk0OAOnEoddNeE94moPaOQu97Rf9jKxIAiluOfYUJ4wWchgYo].

⁵ By James D. Moss II in Responding to the Potential Overturn of Roe v. Wade, 04 May 2022 [https://www.sneucc.org/newsdetail/responding-to-the-potential-overturn-of-ro-v-wade-16487439].

⁶ By Jonathan Haidt in Why The Past 10 Years of American Life Have Been Uniquely Stupid, The Atlantic, 11 April 2022 [https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2022/05/social-media-democracy-trust-babel/629369/?utm_source=ActiveCampaign&utm_medium=email&utm_content=Cross+Bearing+%3E+Culture+Warring&utm_campaign=Moore+to+the+Point+NL+-+04-14-22].

⁷ Ibid.