

Sermon September 26 2021 Brent

SCRIPTURE: Romans 8:1-2, 31-39

There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. ²For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death.

³¹What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? ³²He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else? ³³Who will bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. ³⁴Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us. ³⁵Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? ³⁶As it is written, "For your sake we are being killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered." ³⁷No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. ³⁸For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, ³⁹nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

SERMON: "Remembering in Gratitude" The Rev. Brent Damrow

Friends, it is so good to be with you. I am grateful for so many things. As I thought about what I would say this morning and wrote it all down, there was that temptation to think about all the amazing things that you folks have done: the meals at the Grange, the backpacks, the Giving Trees, the Bible studies, the caring for one another when no one's noticing, the showing up. There are so many to list.

I didn't quite know what I would find when I came to this place. Truth be told, my ideas about the Berkshires was a bit influenced by my beloved husband. And his version of Stockbridge may have been influenced by his upbringing in Otis. So what to expect from Stockbridgians?

I'll never forget the night before I met most of you. Right down Church Street here, I met some of you in Michelle and Chuck Gillett's home. And whatever I expected from this place called Stockbridge -- this beautiful church, you amazing people -- was transformed in an instant by meeting some of you that evening.

There was then candidating weekend and the first thing that I blame you for -- all the food! It's really not your fault, it's mine, but it's nice to have someone to blame. And what became clear in the question and answer session was how much you cared about so many things. I remember the last question was asked by Max Stackhouse, who said, "We talked about many things, but you haven't said anything about education. Do you actually think education is important?" Well, I didn't know Max at that time, but there was no doubt of what he thought about that question.

Here's what I want to express my gratitude for. You have let me be me, and you have let yourselves be you. I have never been part of a church like this. One of the things I lament about Covid is that we are a church that is vulnerable to each other, and Covid has kept us somewhat

apart. Whatever I thought about Stockbridge or the formality of this town before I knew the truth, what I see now is a community who engages faith in vulnerability. I miss the Prayers of the People, where on any given Sunday in the sanctuary people would share from the depths of their lives, knowing they were sharing with family, and maybe even more than family. What I'm so thankful to all of you for is not necessarily the *what* we do or even *how* we do it, but the *why* we do it. Opening our lives to one another, opening our lives to God, opening ourselves to the fact that we don't know everything yet, and the best is yet to come, and that God's love is just ready to pour out.

One of the reasons I love worship and creativity is that – oh my goodness – in those moments of my life where I thought I had God pegged in, God broke out and said you ain't seen nothin' yet. And what I love about this church, and what I'm so deeply grateful to you for, is the willingness -- no matter where you are on the orthodoxy, the orthopraxy, the theological continuum -- that together we show up. Together we care for each other.

And your gift of being here today is what's going to let me go and simply rest for a while on my sabbatical. Because I'm a little tired. So I'm thankful for you, sometimes for the ways that you respond to what I ask of you, but more often because you simply respond as each of you.

I used to really detest Paul, in part because I read all the judgment. And it took a professor to turn me around and start opening me up. And the more I read Paul, the more I love it. He's not perfect and neither am I, and sorry, you aren't either. And what I love is that he recognized us as a work in progress. I do pull up those rhyming Words of Welcome often when we have a guest. Do you know how I always end them? That we are a work in progress as a congregation.

I want to read you a passage this morning, the one that I picked out for you. And at the risk of offending some, I've changed it. So if you need to read the passage as it is in the Bible, it's printed in your bulletin. It's from 1 Thessalonians 1:1-10. But as I read what Paul was thanking his people for, I decided that I wanted to put some of my own words in there. So I'm going to read you what I think my passage would be to you this morning.

SCRIPTURE: Based on 1 Thessalonians 1:1-10, revised by Brent

I, Brent, send greetings to the church at Stockbridge, Christians assembled by God our loving Parent, and by Jesus Christ himself. Friends, may God's amazing, unending grace be with you! May God's peace break forth on you in waterfalls of tenderness! Every time I think of you, I thank God for you. Day and night you're in my prayers as I call to mind your work of faith, your labor of love, and your patience of hope in following the One we know as Jesus. I know this: It is clear that God loves you very much, but also God has put God's hand on you for something special. When the Message that I and others try to preach comes to you, it isn't just words. Something happens in church. Something happens in you. The Holy Spirit comes and puts steel in your convictions. I'm grateful that you paid careful attention to the examples of the faithful, to Scripture and study, to the costs and joys of discipleship, and that you have determined to live that way yourselves. In doing so, you have followed the Way. Although great trouble sometimes accompanies the Word, you are able to take joy from the Spirit, taking the trouble with the joy, the joy with the trouble. Do you know that many in the Berkshires look up to you? The word has

gotten around. Your lives are echoing the Word not only in Stockbridge but all over the place. The news of your faith in God is out. I don't have to say anything anymore, because you, *you* are the message! I thank God for you. Amen.