

## A NEW CHAPTER

I love to read. I always have two or three books going at once, to suit the mood I happen to be in at the time. And for me, nothing beats the feeling of having finished a book I was reading, and getting to decide which new book I want to begin.

I read both non-fiction and fiction books. By fiction I mean novels. And the best novels I've read have one thing in common: each chapter builds upon the previous ones, moving the story forward and leading it to its inevitable, final conclusion.

Sometimes when I read a really good book, and the story is chugging along and I'm enjoying the journey the author is taking me on, I'm tempted. I want to skip ahead and see how the story ends. I've never done that—although I know people who have. In fact, one person I know never reads a book without reading the last fifteen or twenty pages, his reasoning being that if he doesn't like the ending of the book he doesn't want to waste his time reading the whole thing.

But in my mind, taking a peak at the end of the story before you actually finish the book is cheating. There's no way around that. To genuinely experience a book—in my mind, at least—you need to read each chapter in order and let the suspense build by waiting for the end of the story until you get to the end. That way you can be surprised or delighted or yes, even disappointed in the way the story turned out when you finish reading it.

Why am I going on and on about books and stories and no sneaking a peak at the final chapter? Because I think it can serve as a metaphor for life. When you think about it, we're all the characters in our own personal stories. And in a way, our lives can be divided into different chapters. The chapter having to do with our birth. The chapters that tell the story of our growing up; of our going to school; of our career path; of the time we met the love of our life; of our marriage and our experiences as parents.

All of those experiences can be considered the chapters of our lives. And all of them are unique to only us. Your chapters are different than anyone else's chapters. And you have at least a partial say in how those chapters are written.

Because you are the co-author of the chapters of your lives.

Did you notice that I said co-author? You're not writing the book of your life alone, you know. There's another author involved. God. Sometimes, you see, the story of our lives is out of our hands. We want the story to go one way, but for whatever reason the story goes in a completely different—and sometimes undesirable—direction. And that's where God comes in. I'm not saying that God writes into your life the bad stuff that happens. God doesn't say, "In this chapter, I'm going to write that the main character gets cancer or loses a loved one or their house burns down from a terrible fire." No, that's not how God writes the story of our lives.

God's authorship is more like a wise, caring editor who is there with us as the story of our life is written, and has suggestions about how the story might go. "Why are you writing that? The story of your life would be much better if you took the character in this direction.

Now, all these things I've just said about our lives being like a book, with each chapter being co-written by us and God, are also true about our church. Our church's history is like a book, with we, the members, and Christ, the founder, writing the story of the First Congregational Church of Scarborough together. Our church's book, with all the chapters God and its members have written about it, stretches out 290 years in the past. In those years there have been, if I remember correctly, four different buildings here in Scarborough. And who knows how many pastors and thousands of members have added various words to the story of its history. And all along the way, God has been there, writing along with them, and us.

We're entering a new chapter in the life of the First Congregational Church of Scarborough, my friends. No one but God knows what the future will bring for us in the weeks, months and years ahead. But the good news is, whatever the future brings, good or bad, God will be there with us, helping to write and edit and guide the story. And I believe we can trust the main author and editor of our church's chapters to come up with a satisfying ending. And here's why I believe that.

In this morning's gospel reading about Christ clearing out the Temple, when an angry Jesus began turning over the tables of the moneychangers and using a whip to drive everyone out of the Temple—and what a sight that must have been!—when Jesus cleared his Father's house of all those people, cattle, goats and birds, I don't believe for a second that his intention was to destroy the place. No, destruction wasn't Jesus' end game, because the Gospels make it clear that Jesus' entire ministry was about healing, rebuilding and resurrection.

In John's Gospel, right after Jesus' angry tirade, when the religious leaders

asked Jesus to give them a sign that he had authority to disrupt such an important religious ritual, Jesus responded, “Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days.”

Jesus was referring to his resurrection, of course, but I believe there’s much more to his declaration than that. It tells us that our God is a God of hope. A God of new life. A God of renewal. A God of resurrection. You see, Jesus turned over the tables and cleared the Temple, not to destroy it but to teach it. To transform it. To make it better. And I think that same concept applies to this church today.

We’re in a time of transition, my friends. Our church isn’t the same as it used to be years ago. Our church is older and smaller. We have financial challenges to face and renovations to make—and perhaps even some difficult and undesirable choices to make. As a minister of the Gospel, the Good News, I have to believe that maybe Jesus turning over our tables and doing a little clearing out of this congregation, not to destroy us, but to teach us, to transform us and make us better; with the ultimate goal of resurrecting us. It’s not easy, to see those tables being overturned. So maybe the thing to do is ask ourselves, “What is the Lord trying to say to us through that?” And a related question is, “What does the lord want us to do about it?”

As we ponder those questions, it’s important not to give up on the chief author and editor of our church’s story. Whatever you may think about what our church’s future has in store, I hope you will believe this: we should never lose hope, because God hasn’t given up on us. We know that all things are possible with God, and it’s very much in God’s power to take something that has been sick and heal it; to take something that has been broken and rebuild it; and even to take something that had died and resurrect it. “Destroy this temple,” Jesus declared, “and I will raise it again in three days.” Those are powerful, hopeful words for the Christian church in general. And for this church in particular.

Today, on this Stewardship Sunday, the pledge cards you have filled out and brought here with you represent tangible expressions of your faith in God, your hope for the future of our congregation, and the optimism you feel about the new chapter for our church that we and God will be writing together in the weeks, months and years to come. Yes, we have some overturned tables in our church, to be sure. We have problems to face, significant challenges to overcome and important ministry to perform.

But we also have God’s love to share, wrongs in our world to help make right and injustices in our society to strive to change. There are strangers to witness to and show loving care toward so we can let them see how a church

like ours can be an important part of their lives. We have Sunday School and Youth Group programs to rebuild and make vibrant again; mission programs to support; and the good News of Jesus Christ to proclaim. I believe God intends for all those things and more to be written in the new chapter of our church's life. Our dedication and our love for this faith community is a very powerful force, and God can bless and use that force and whatever else we're able to offer in support of our faith community and raise us up.

It's time for us to start writing a new chapter in our church's history, the ending of which is unknown. But with God as our co-author, the ending is going to be a satisfying one. I just know it.

So, now that we have prayed fervently and thought deeply about what our pledges of financial support to our church for 2018 will be, let's turn the page, and start writing our future with faith, hope, and confidence. And, God willing, the pledges of financial support we make this morning will mark the beginning of that resurrection. Thanks be to the Lord. Amen.