

“Thanksgiving and Grace” notes for Ken Rockwell’s sermon at FCC, May 26, 2019
[Draft text, actual words spoken varied a bit]

Deacons needed a substitute for Marijke and I volunteered.

This is somewhat outside my comfort zone...

We all have at least one good sermon inside us, even if just the story of one’s life in relation to this church. Here’s mine:

Thanksgiving 1989... new in town, had no plans, but saw a notice in the paper and bicycled out to First Congregational Church for dinner.

Then in 1993, Cathy and I, a newly married couple, had no plans and no invites, so I mentioned my 1989 experience, and we came for both meal and service. The historical theme appealed to me as a genealogist, as I have many New England ancestors, including in early Plymouth.

We returned for Christmas Eve, and Cathy expressed interest in coming more often. So we did. This came at a time of change inside—inner turmoil, a time of doubt about the path I’d been on. What do you do when you find you just don’t agree with some “infallible” teachings? Or when “steadfastness” in faith is an ideal, and you just keep coming up with more questions? It was eating me up inside, and I’d thought there were no options but “believe” or have nothing. So it was surprising that over the coming winter months leading up to Easter, I started feeling a change inside, started feeling like I might be a better fit here than in my old way.

A turning point after Easter: Rev. Bob Coates gave a sermon on Thomas the doubter—in a more positive, sympathetic light than we usually see for that figure. There’s a place for the questioners, too. Thomas was a man of action, not one who would just take other’s word for it but needed to prove it to himself or have it shown him. He was nobody’s fool. Some excerpts from the sermon:

“Thomas comes across as an independent, non-conformist. Independents and Non-conformists, by the way, were among the first names applied in a rather disparaging way to the early Congregationalists. Thomas would probably find a welcoming home in many Congregational churches even today.”

“Is Thomas a man of little faith? I don’t think so. He has the courage to ask questions of others and of himself.... Not afraid to ask questions. More than a bit skeptical. Thomas was not, however, self-satisfied with what he already knew. ... He sought new information—he just needed to garner new information directly. [He didn’t] just go through the motions of asking questions and then continuing on as usual. He took in new information. And he grew, he changed because of it. [When] he saw the risen Christ, Thomas believed.”

“This is a place where it is OK to ask questions. It is a place where it is OK to question matters of faith. It is a place where we seek to encourage and affirm persons on their own individual spiritual journeys. It is a place where we attempt collectively to facilitate faith development.”

I really appreciated this message. As time passed, it stayed with me, and I kept meditating on it. It occurred to me: Jesus knew what kind of man Thomas was, yet He chose him to be a disciple. Maybe, I thought, maybe He'd choose me too. This was a vision of Grace!

My “Forty days in the Wilderness”... of Washington D.C. Worked on a special project at the Library of Congress.

In my free hours, I not only visited monuments and museums, but also spent times in parks and other places where I could meditate on my changing feelings and consider my future. Among my favorite places was a church near my residence... and not just any church. It was actually the ruins of an Episcopal church sanctuary that had burned in 1970. It sat there still, looking like some medieval ruins from old Europe. But it was strangely peaceful. In the adjacent building I learned the story: The congregation got plenty of insurance money and could have rebuilt the sanctuary, but instead they moved into the adjacent social hall and have held their worship services there, while the money went to start a charitable project that was still going strong. An inspiring example.

And get this: the church's name was... St. Thomas.

So I made my decision, there in the wilderness of D.C., with St. Thomas standing by as my witness. I returned to Salt Lake, I made my break from my old community, and Cathy and I continued to come to FCC, eventually joining in November 1994. I had come home to the faith of my forebears.

Journal entry from that November:

“What is in store for this wandering soul? Who but God can say? I may be way off base on some of the ideas I currently favor, just as I presently think I was wrong about some previously adopted views. Absolute certainty is not to be found in this world. In its place we must find faith in a vision, a meaningful story, a purposeful Way. For me, the simple faith which I have found within me centers on the God of Grace, Who can be known through the life and teachings of Jesus the Christ. This is not the exclusive and narrow faith of some Christians, but an open faith which allows for others' spiritual choices and for God's grace to encompass them as well. I am but a pilgrim among a world of seekers. But now I have found a company of fellow travelers with whom to join in fellowship along the Road: the heirs of Plymouth's Pilgrims here in First Congregational Church of Salt Lake City. Long may this union of fellowship endure, and may I continue to grow in the

Spirit and find new ways of service in my new community of faith.”

Summary: This journey of mine began with Thanksgiving, and culminated with a vision of grace. And speaking of which... There's a good song about grace; why don't we sing it now!

[Theresa had been cued and immediately struck up the opening strains of “Amazing Grace,” which had been chosen without my knowledge but with perfect placement. A little working of the Spirit, perhaps?]