

An ancient folk tale tells of the power of gathering our individual gifts to create community...



Stone Soup Newsletter

First Parish in Portland

A Unitarian Universalist Congregation

Winter 2017



Ramping Up Our Accessibility

The Accessibility Committee is excited and pleased to announce that the temporary ramp was installed to the door of the Parish House on November 17, 2017! The ramp was dedicated on November 19th by Rev. Christina. The whole congregation walked up the ramp together for the first time. The door to the Parish House will be replaced soon by a door wide enough to accommodate a wheel chair, to meet the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) requirements. Many thanks to everyone who generously donated to Phase 1.

Phase 2 has begun with many discussions about the final design for the new elevator, changing the stairs to be ADA compliant

and designing a new back wall for the church with a welcoming entrance. We hope to achieve a plan that will provide us with an efficient, attractive and accessible entrance to grace our church building for the next hundred years. Once we decide on the design, we'll hire a builder to provide us with estimates, engineers to ensure feasibility for our historic landmark building, and a certified architect to make the final drawings. Then we will begin the all-important capital campaign to make it all happen.

*By Louise Berlin,
Accessibility Committee Chair &
Past President of the Governing Board*

December Services &
Pageant Update

Page 2

Letter from the Minister
& Safety Update

Page 3

Letters from Staff

Page 4

Furniture Update

Page 8

December Services

December 3rd | 10am

Inner Wisdom

& New Member Ceremony

Rev. Christina Sillari

December 10th | 10am

Community of Seekers

Toben Cooney-Callnan

December 17th | 10am

Hymn Sing

Rev. Christina Sillari

& Scott Wheatley

December 17th | 5pm

Pageant of the Nativity

Rev. Christina Sillari

December 20th | 6:30pm

Winter Solstice Service

Rev. Christina Sillari

December 24th | 10am

The Light of Jesus

Rev. Christina Sillari

December 24th | 4pm

Christmas Eve Service

Jen Casswell

December 31st | 10am

New Year's Eve Service

Rev. Christina Sillari



First Parish to Host 91st Pageant of the Nativity

The 91st Pageant of the Nativity will take place on Sunday, December 17th at 5:00 pm. This re-telling of the birth of Jesus is not only a visually beautiful tableau of the nativity scene; it is also a time-honored tradition for First Parish. For nearly a century, parishioners and friends of First Parish have put on this vibrant production free of charge to community members.

First Parish's pageant may seem out of place in a Unitarian Universalist congregation, but what the Pageant is truly about is bringing people together, regardless of race, color or creed, to share in the warmth of the season on a cold December night.

It is meaningful to me personally because I have

been a part of the pageant as a cast member for several years, and am now helping behind the scenes this year. I am honored to be a part of the Pageant, and to share an interpretation of the nativity story with the audience. I always have had the sense that this night was a truly special one and that I was bringing joy to those in attendance, together with the rest of the cast.

I encourage everyone to mark their calendars for this memorable event, and to experience the radiant costumes, beautiful music and important story that is the Pageant of the Nativity.

*Lindsay Chard,
Pageant Committee*

Letter from the Minister

Dear Members and Friends of First Parish,

Seven and a half years ago I was called to First Parish. Each year I become more grounded in my ministry with you. Each year I feel my heart get bigger. You have helped me grow as a Unitarian Universalist, as a leader, and as a woman. I thank you! Through your commitment and love, your joys and sorrows, your shared ministry, your passion for justice, and your authenticity of spirit, we are manifesting our mission. I bow to you!

Our congregation is doing well. We have a great staff team who works well together. We have competent leaders who are dedicated to sustaining and growing our community. We have an excellent Religious Exploration program and youth who give us so much hope for the future. We are becoming more accessible and safe. We have money in the bank. We are doing the work of justice. We do our best to care for one another when we are in need. We have interesting and meaningful worship experiences. We have music that feeds our soul. We have newcomers every Sunday and we are slowly growing our membership. All of this and more makes us who we are. All seems well. What more could we want? What more can we be?

I keep asking myself who we are becoming. Why are we here and what makes our church relevant at a time when "church" is becoming less and less relevant? I keep asking myself...what is the purpose of my ministry, and what is the vision of First Parish? My initial call to ministry was a spiritual calling. Before entering the ministry, I was a spiritual leader, working with individuals and groups assisting them in their inner and outer transformation. My saying yes to ministry was my desire to engage in deeper and broader spiritual work. Parish ministry in a religion that is dear to my heart felt like the perfect setting.

However, sometimes I feel we are a religious movement that no longer takes religion seriously.

I get it. Religion is weird. It was, in part, created to control people. Yet, our religion is not controlling; people are controlling. We cannot let controlling people, even me, the minister, lead us away from our religion.

Our religion is like a vast sea, open to the mystery with opportunities to go deep, if we have the right tools. Whatever tradition they may follow, people who are devoted to the life of the spirit are all diving into the sea of mystery. Like many other traditions, our religion, especially our Universalist heritage, is based on faith, hope and love. These values call us to move beyond our individualism, both personally and institutionally, towards a collective spirituality of welcoming all people. But welcoming people is not enough. I believe we exist to save people's lives.

When we enter into relationship with a congregation, we bring with us all of our stories, unhealed wounds, and family dysfunction. We come to church with the hope that we will be healed, released, and renewed from the pain and suffering of our past. We come to church to be nourished, moved, inspired, and comforted. We come to church because we are lonely. We come to church to connect with something greater than ourselves. We come to church for our families. We come to church to join with others to make a difference in the world.

We make a difference in the world beginning by cultivating the qualities of a religious or spiritual life. Humility, compassion, kindness, a sense of gratitude, a capacity to forgive, respect for all living things are what saves lives. These qualities are not gained through individualism, defensiveness, and self-centeredness. They manifest with other-centeredness, surrender, and a trust in life itself. Do we want our congregation to chiefly exist to meet the needs of the individual?

When we operate this way, we become insular and culturally stuck in our old wounds and

Continued on 7

Letters from the Staff

Playful Spirit

Toben Cooney-Callnan, DRE

My favorite thing about working with children is watching new concepts and ideas click in their amazing and beautiful spirits and minds. As I see it, the role of the Religious Exploration Program at First Parish is to offer as many “clicking moments” as possible. The lessons that we teach in RE generally have three components: story or concept, related creative project, and movement centered activity. These components help to ensure that we are meeting all types of learning styles.

As a result of developing ways to present different topics in lessons that feature all three components, I have been able to reconnect with my own excited, child-like spirit. As much as I am teaching the children about spiritual concepts, they are reminding me how to get messy and playful. *(continued next page)*

15 Years at First Parish

Moe Blanchard, Sexton

I was born in Portland in 1956, and have lived here most of my life. In the late 70's, I worked with a rock band for 5 years in Somerville, MA, doing lights, sound, and some singing. I moved back to Portland, got married, and had 3 daughters. I worked at Woodford's Congregational Church as Sexton for 17 years. Since 2002, you've had me as your Sexton-- 15 years!

As I look at my work life, I realize that I love helping people, working to make things good-- talking your ear off at times, or being a good listener. You can put your trust in me.

Here are a few things I would like to see happen at First Parish in the near future:

- Safe Congregation Team
- New floor in the basement
- More weddings and rentals

(continued next page)

Searching

Scott Wheatley, Music Director

All my life I felt different. Awkward, shy, lost. I didn't see things other people saw or hear things they heard. Others saw trees, and I saw the veins in the leaves. Others heard locusts, and I heard a symphony. Years later, I heard the Sondheim lyrics, “They hear drums, I hear music.” Music was the perfect fit for me. I could be alone at the piano. Beethoven didn't care about my lack of social skills. Brahms didn't mind that I was different. They just wanted me to feel something. That was never the problem...I always felt something, but never had a vehicle to express it.

Suddenly joy, sadness, melancholy, heartache and elation didn't make me look or feel awkward. I felt at home. I felt free. Then I felt bored. Playing the piano didn't seem like enough to *(continued next page)*

Safety at First Parish

Your staff is working on safety policies and procedures for our congregation. Sunday morning safety, fire drills, our gardens and parking area, conflict resolution, disruptive behavior, and sexual misconduct are all being addressed. For most of you, Sunday morning safety is your primary concern. It has been difficult to create a safety team for Sunday mornings as it requires specific skills and is a huge responsibility. Folks want to enjoy worship. Our beloved Sexton, Moe, has been providing us with security. Yet he is busy with many different tasks on Sunday morning. We are grateful to all the ushers and especially those head ushers. We know it is difficult for ushers to take responsibility for the safety of our congregation. After discussion with the staff and the the Governing Board, we have decided to hire a security guard on Sundays. They will be unarmed and present before, during, and after worship. The security guard will begin in mid-December. We hope you find comfort in knowing that the staff is doing everything we can to keep our community safe.

***Playful Spirit**, continued from previous page*

I have found that I am very mind centered. I spend a lot of time pondering ideas, trying to understand the mysterious ways of the Universe. Left alone for too long, I run the risk of driving myself crazy with existential dilemmas.

When I am running a Children's Chapel or Youth Group discussion, however, I am forced out of that mind bubble. I'm kept on my spiritual toes by the wild and beautifully playful spirits of First Parish's many wonderful children. It's incredibly difficult to drift off into deep, existential thought when my hands are full of glue and glitter from an art project, or when I'm playing musical chairs with thirty children. I, for one, need those moments of fully present spirit, quiet mind, and full heart to really experience a spiritual "clicking moment."

Toben Cooney-Callnan, Director of Religious Exploration

***15 Years at First Parish**, continued from previous page*

In 9 years, the Pageant will celebrate it's 100th anniversary, and I will be 70 years old. I hope to be there, either working, or watching from a pew with my walker.

First Parish has seen much change over the years. Since I've been here, I've noticed that the community always finds ways to work together, even though there are many differing opinions. We are lucky to have great volunteers, leaders, and Board members.

I love working at First Parish. You are all like family to me.

Your Sexton, Moe Blanchard

***Searching**, continued from previous page*

express everything I had inside me. So I did the logical thing for an awkward, shy, moody teenager... I became a singer. A really, truly bad singer. Hours were spent alone singing. No one thought this was a good idea, but somewhere, down deep in my soul, I knew it was my destiny. My journey to getting there was a long one and not very interesting but, happily, it led me here.

This is a special and magical place. Longfellow once said, "Music is the universal language of mankind." First Parish is the perfect embodiment of this sentiment. Here we can be different. We can believe different things. We are all on a personal and collective journey, and music is one of the unifying and soul nurturing things we all share. We are all musicians at heart, whether active or passive. Music feeds our souls in some profound way.

"Music expresses that which cannot be said and on which it is impossible to be silent."

--Victor Hugo

During a game of "describe me in one word", a friend once called me "searching". At the time, I was horribly offended. That's the best word to describe me? In hindsight, that's the perfect word to describe me. I'm proud to be searching. I hope I never find whatever I'm looking for. Thank you all for searching with me.

Scott Wheatley, Music Director

New Members to First Parish

Please join us in welcoming this great group of New Members to our community!

Annie Blanchard
Emily Bolt
Kayte Bridgewater
Mae Gagnon

Arlene Jaangard
Scott Krasner
Anna Ndayishimiye
Jenna Nunziato

Christine Snow Samuelson
Danielle Tardy
Francesca 'Cesca' Galluccio-Steele
John Tiedie

Letters from the Staff, *continued*

Thoughtful Efficiency

Sheila Sullivan, Office Administrator

My vision for First Parish, through the lens of the Office, centers around the concept of *thoughtful efficiency*. We are a large organization, with over 300 members, and more than 60 people serving in leadership roles. That is a lot of people looking for ways to connect with each other for a wide variety of reasons-- volunteer needs, committee work, stewardship, pastoral care, personal connections, etc. We need efficient systems to consolidate all our information, and we need to be thoughtful about how we educate our members and friends on how to access, update and use the systems (i.e., the website, membership database, etc.) This will make our leaders' jobs much easier, and hopefully lead to more engagement overall.

I'm faced with another aspect of thoughtful efficiency on a daily basis-- how to balance the basic administrative tasks of this job (including bookkeeping, answering the phone and email, and publishing the Order of Service and Bulletin) with ongoing staff projects, daily emergencies, and long term projects. Capable volunteers can help with some of the basic administrative tasks, which could free me up for larger, long-term projects. I can also envision a part-time secretarial position in the near future for First Parish.

Efficiency on its own can be sharp and lacking heart. Thoughtful efficiency requires me to think about the people involved, and how they might be affected by the systems we put in place through the Office. I am honored to be given this opportunity to serve the First Parish community in the hub of much of the action. I look forward to working with you, and hope you find the First Parish Office both a thoughtful and efficient place.

Respectfully,
Sheila Sullivan



Meet Our New Membership Coordinator: Tina Smith

I grew up in Portland and am a graduate of the University of Southern Maine with a degree in Studio Art and Entrepreneurial Studies. After graduating college, I spent a few years in Boston, only to decide I belonged with my first love: Portland, Maine. My work history includes working in child development, sales, marketing, and fine arts. In my free time, I enjoy painting, reading, traveling, and spending time with my many nieces and nephews.

What inspired me to become part of FPUU was its focus and drive to better serve the community as a whole. As Membership Coordinator, I am excited to help members and friends of FPUU find their home and smaller community within the Parish, and additionally let them see how we all are connected and benefit the entirety of First Parish.

Lastly, as an extrovert, I love introducing people and helping them build bridges and bonds with each other. As Membership Coordinator, I get the pleasure to do this every day. If we haven't met already, I hope to meet you soon.

Sincerely,
Tina Smith

Letter from the Minister, *continued*

stories, individually and collectively. Then we do not grow or save any lives, including our own. What if our church existed for the sake of those people who are not in it?

I am wondering how we can be stronger and bolder in our love. Becoming a really powerful amazing church has little to do with our external manifestation. Our power as a people of faith comes from our open hearts and open minds. Our power as a beloved community comes from how we are in relationship with one another. We are a diverse group of people. Our diversity is not seen on the outside as much as it is known on the inside. We are diverse socio-economically, theologically, educationally, politically, and culturally. We are diverse in sexual orientation, gender, age, and ability. We all share a yearning for spiritual growth, for community, and for a more just and sustainable world. Church is a place where these longings can be fulfilled.

Yet we must be in right relationship with one another to save lives. And relationships are tricky, especially in large communities. We are not going to like everyone or agree with everyone or want to work or be friends with everyone. Often, we find our people and pretty much try to stay close to them. Typically, they are people who are more similar than different than us.

Our community will thrive, will save lives, when we see each person as a mirror into our own mystery and our entire community as a spiritual playground. Perhaps even playing with each other and laughing at ourselves. For us to save lives, we must love the people who are different from us and the ones we do not like and even those who have caused us pain. Because the truth is that we are all doing the best we can, and we would not be here if we did not care. We must develop our spiritual toolbox, find practices that allow us to greet each person in our community, whether we have known

them forever, or are seeing them for the first time, as someone who may save our lives or someone who we may save. When we come to church or to a meeting or a chalice group or a justice event, we have an opportunity to be our best spiritual selves.

Congregational life can be an amazing spiritual journey, if we continuously look into the deep sea of our own hearts and actually practice our religion.

Deep peace of the running wave to you.
 Deep peace of the flowing air to you.
 Deep peace of the quiet earth to you.
 Deep peace of the shining stars to you.
 Deep peace of the gentle night to you.
 Moon and stars pour their healing light on you.

With all my love,
 Reverend Christina

THE GUEST HOUSE

by Jelaluddin Rumi

This being human is a guest house.
 Every morning a new arrival.

A joy, a depression, a meanness,
 some momentary awareness comes
 as an unexpected visitor.

Welcome and entertain them all!
 Even if they are a crowd of sorrows,
 who violently sweep your house
 empty of its furniture,
 still, treat each guest honorably.
 He may be clearing you out
 for some new delight.

The dark thought, the shame, the malice,
 meet them at the door laughing and invite them in.

Be grateful for whatever comes.
 because each has been sent
 as a guide from beyond.

Parish Hall Furniture Update

Our Parish Hall is a hard-working space! Coffee hour, committee meetings, feasts and fairs, receptions and trainings, social justice gatherings, the library, and rentals: users from babies through elders. Over the last few years, the Collections Committee has been working to make the space more functional, comfortable, and inviting for everyone.

The furnishings of the Parish House are owned by the trust. The last refurnishing of the Hall took place in the 70s, when generous members donated items that decorated the space as a Victorian parlor, in keeping with the vintage of the building. Those things served us well for decades, but the Victorian sofas had long outlived their useful life. All agreed that what we needed was new furniture that would enable flexible seating groups and would serve the many users of the space. The Committee put together a furnishing proposal, and has found a buyer for a number of items that are no longer serving our needs. The Trustees have voted to finance the remainder of the furnishing budget.

A lot has gone into making decisions about what to sell, what to donate, what to repair, what to keep, and what to purchase. We met with members and staff representing the committees and stakeholders who use the Parish House to determine their needs. With the generous professional expertise of interior designer Jeanne Handy, we have selected attractive furniture that will both honor the historic nature of the building and serve us well as we look towards the future.

We hope to unveil the new look in January. In the meantime, if you have any questions please ask Janet Puistonen, Lynne Beasley, or Linda Blue. We'd be happy to talk about it--and for the truly curious, Janet even has pictures of some of the items on her phone!

Janet Puistonen, Trustee



First Parish in Portland

A Unitarian Universalist Congregation

**425 Congress St.
Portland, ME 04101**