

Dear Friends of the Region, My husband James, and I, lived in Grand Rapids, MI for the first 18 years of our marriage. During that time, I came to love Lake Michigan. It has a different personality than Lake Ontario. Lake Michigan has great rolling waves, is clean, has beautiful sandy beaches and is super fun to swim in. And...there is a strong undertow.

One beautiful summer day, after attending a workshop on *Children in Worship* at Western Seminary in Holland, Michigan, I met some friends at the Lake. I was in professional clothes, but the lake drew me in. I had dress in hand as I waded into the beautiful cool lake waters. I was intently focused on my new watch, a simple Timex, that I loved. Picture if you will, this woman wading in the water, watch-arm stretched high above head, dress tucked into the other fist. I was thoroughly enjoying myself, focused intently on the water and my watch. I am sure you have already guessed, that a huge wave came and knocked me flat on my backside in the water. The undertow snatched my prescription sunglasses off my face. They were never to be found again, at least, not by me or my friends (probably washed up on some beach in Chicago.) So, intent I was on my watch and dress, I lost my vision.

I have been remembering this story for the lesson I learned. Undertow teaches us about the strong pull on our lives, our focus...our hopes...our faith. We live in a time of real chaos, in all directions. Fear and hate are encouraged around us. We, as human beings, are living *mean*. Anne Lamott in her recent book, Almost Everything, Notes on Hope, says we live between the beauty-love of this human life and knowledge of our own doom.

The subject of our focus is important. More important than we sometimes remember. What is drawing our attention, our energy? Are we coming together as communities of faith to encourage and build each other up in courage and love? Are we stopping in our daily rush to hear the Still, Small Voice, of the One who promises presence and peace? Are we countering the *mean* with compassion?

Daily I struggle with our present undertow. It's hard work, that's the point of coming together so we don't lose hope...or faith. Not to be trite or sentimental, we are only going to get through this life if we are willing to hold hands, offer a shoulder or cry on one. Jesus knew one thing for sure, everyone gets by only with a little help from friends. We need each other for real sight.

With you on this journey, I am,

*Joanne Gilbert-Cannon*

Interim Executive Minister