

Congregational Church of Pinehurst  
United Church of Christ  
November 29, 2015  
Advent1C

Jeremiah 33:14-16  
Romans 13:11-14

### ***Hope is God Stretching***

Like the word hope stretching off the edges of the page  
in Linda's soul-full artwork on our bulletin cover,  
to begin the day with stretching seems almost intuitive.

The awakening body wants to stretch.

First thing each morning

I observe Buddy, Brady, and Bacon (our fearless canine trio)  
going through the routine of getting their bodies flexible  
pushing outward this way and that  
to be ready to respond with agility  
to the events of the coming day.

Our dogs remind me

to listen to my body's own natural urge to stretch.

They remind me to take the time to lean and bend,  
and gently push and pull,  
to loosen my body for what lies ahead.

I notice that I feel better through the day  
when I take time to heed my body's urging  
to stretch before launching out beyond the dawn.

And of course stretching our minds

is equally important if we are to be agile  
as we respond and relate and initiate.

Stretching our minds beyond what we currently know  
is part of what keeps us up open to new ideas  
that are different from what we've always thought,  
and open to people who are different from those  
we've always related to in the past.

And stretching our hearts  
is also part of being a responsible  
and response-able human being.  
Paying attention to the welling up of compassion within us  
and an openness to respond  
sometimes stretches us beyond where we are  
to new possibilities of connection and love and justice.

It would seem to me that stretching  
is certainly good for human beings.  
But just because stretching our horizons is good,  
does not make it easy!  
Driving to Florida to visit family over Thanksgiving,  
I could not help but laugh  
when we passed an industrial park just south of Jacksonville  
whose signage proudly proclaimed  
“Traditions Center for Innovation.”  
Really!? Traditions Center for Innovation.  
That seems like an oxymoron to me---  
as impossible as jumbo shrimp.  
And amidst my laughter,  
it reminded me of just how difficult it is to innovate  
and allow change in our lives.  
We want things to be different,  
but we don't want to do anything differently.  
That's too scary!!

But we know deep down inside that it's also true!  
Because as the humorous maxim suggests to us---  
and as our experience also tells us---  
the definition of insanity really is  
doing the same thing over and over again  
and expecting a different outcome.

And certainly the world is crying out  
for an outcome that is different  
from the individualistic, materialistic,  
wealth-oriented, violent, spirit-killing culture  
that we have come to experience as normal.  
There is no hope when there is no stretching  
beyond established boundaries.  
And so stretch we must!

But if stretching is crucial for human beings, how about for God?  
There are those for whom this is an unwelcome thought.  
Many of us were taught that God is complete as God is,  
and to suggest that God might need stretching  
is to suggest that God might change.  
And we want something in our lives that does not change.  
Things are uncertain enough  
without God being part of the change, too.

Yet I don't know about you,  
but I am ready for God to do something differently.  
I am ready for God to stretch God's self  
in such a way that God is more able to respond  
in ever more novel ways to our situation.  
Oh, I experience God's love as constant,  
but I want God's responding to constantly take account  
of what's going on around here.  
For me there is no hope to be found in an unchanging God,  
doing what God has been doing for centuries on end.  
Rather, I find hope in the notion that  
as we respond to God,  
God is constantly responding to us  
in ways that deepen our relationships  
and our ability to listen with compassion  
to live in love,  
and to act with justice.

A while back I read a book about spiritual discernment called  
**Decision Making & Spiritual Discernment:  
The Sacred Art of Finding Your Way.**

Its author is Nancy Bieber  
who teaches spirituality at Lancaster Seminary,  
one of our own UCC schools.

This paragraph of hers really hit home with me:

*Sometimes people understand “God’s will” or “God’s plan”  
as something imposed on us by God,  
something we must discover and decipher.  
I understand it differently.  
I feel that God’s path for our lives  
is constantly being developed.  
It rises within us and is something we develop  
in partnership with God  
as we learn to see and understand more clearly.  
With this seeing and understanding,  
we find the courage to step into the future.<sup>1</sup>*

I love this idea that Beiber articulates  
of being in partnership with God to shape the future.

A partnership in which I would suggest  
that both we *and* God impact one another.

A partnership in which both we *and* God  
learn to see and understand more clearly.

It’s like the iconic Michelangelo painting “The Creation of Adam”,  
with God reaching out to Adam and Adam back to God.

It is akin to the notion of God stretching  
in ever new ways to reach out to us,  
and us stretching to reach out to God,  
and something completely new happening in the connection.

For me Christmas is the celebration  
of God's capacity and willingness to stretch---  
to stretch beyond current patterns and ways of being  
to more fully take account  
of the ever-evolving needs of creation.  
And, in the same way,  
Christmas is the divine invitation to humanity  
to stretch like God---  
to become more flexible and open to receiving newness,  
and more responsive to the grace-filled movement  
of the Spirit in our lives.  
God's stretching toward us and our stretching toward God.  
For me, that is the dance of Incarnation  
and the unfolding of the coming of the kin-dom.  
That is the holy dance,  
and the divine unfolding  
that I experience in the birth of a baby  
in whom we experience the life of God.

Birthing is always a stretching,  
both literally and metaphorically,  
for everyone involved.  
For me this season of Advent  
is about our expanding our willingness  
to join in this dance.  
Advent is the invitation to a season of possibility,  
that begins by saying "yes"  
to God's invitation to try a new step.

I love the way Sarah lined out the phrases in her poem on Hope.

*Hope is a blue that scrolls  
beyond the page  
extends the edges  
recognizes no boundary.*

*It is not shackled to limits,  
to walls, to edges.  
Hope is God stretching  
harmony into a future  
we cannot contain in words.*

I like the playful ambiguity created  
by breaking up the sentences in the way that Sarah did.  
Is hope God stretching harmony into a future?  
Or is hope simply the act of God stretching?<sup>2</sup>

For me, hope *is* God stretching,  
and our stretching back  
in an endless evolving rhythm,  
moving both God and creation to wholeness.

As Sarah has suggested,  
it is a future we cannot contain in words.  
And so for now I will stop trying,  
and will instead invite you and me  
to join in the dance.

Amen.

Rev. Brent A. Bissette

<sup>1</sup>Nancy L. Bieber, Decision Making & Spiritual Discernment: The Sacred Art of Finding Your Way, Woodstock, VT: Skylight Paths Publishing, 2010, pg. 5.

<sup>2</sup>An unpublished poem (2013) by the Rev. Sarah Edwards, the poem inspired my sermon title and my reflections here on the God-human relationship.