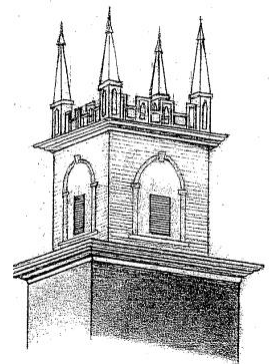


+ **N.E.W.S. CONNECTION**
Pittsford Congregational Church
United Church of Christ
121 Village Green
PO Box 570
Pittsford, VT 05763



Vol. 24 No.2

February 2024

Message from the Pastor

Growing with good books.



When we were both in our mid-thirties, my childhood friend, the late Rev. John Perry, asked me, “Do you remember the year that my grandmother came to the United States?” “1917,” I replied, “Don’t you remember how she said she saw German submarines surfacing near the ship?” John said, “You are obsessed with chronology.” Perhaps. That’s how my brain likes to organize data. Accordingly, I note that this is my fiftieth monthly message to you! In January 2020, Tony Whitehair, church trustee, asked me if I were willing to write a short message each month for the newsletter. One way I can quantify what has happened over the last few years is to compare and contrast what I thought was sufficient bookshelf space for my church preparation each week. Above left is a photo of the “church shelf” from February of 2021; at right, what just three shelves in our office now looks like. These are the collected works that are at eye-level from my desk. (And this says nothing about the 29 built-in bookshelves that we have added to house during the last year!)

Notable additions to the collection include a twelve-volume collection called *Feasting on the Word*. In this set, a variety of scholars, both pastors and professors, have written short essays for the Old and New Testament readings and Psalms in the three-year lectionary cycle. These explorations of the texts always expand my horizons on what I am about to preach on Sunday. Looking at the top shelf, stacked up horizontally on the left is a favorite series of New Testament commentaries from the late Rev. Dr. William Barclay whose brilliant insights into the world of Jesus were always sprinkled with other examples from literature and a lifetime of experiences in the pulpit. For expanded spiritual reading that is insightful and accessible for everyone, George and I highly recommend the works of Barbara Brown Taylor. Her published sermons can be read and treasured

each time. The deeper I delve into scripture I realize there is so much more for me to learn. At the same time, I shudder at those who hurl Bible verses from the Old Testament like thunderbolts.

Books in our personal library ground me in my understanding of scripture and history, and the historian is me remains at the forefront of interpreting sacred texts. In a recent interview with Barbara Brown Taylor, accessed on You Tube, she stated the Bible should be considered more as a **library** than as **single unerring book**. Some passages of the Old Testament record the violent history of ancient Israel and its neighbors. For example, in 1 Samuel 15:2–3, the text reads, “Thus says the Lord of hosts, I will punish what Amalek did to Israel in opposing them on the way, when they came up out of Egypt. Now go and smite Amalek, and utterly destroy all they have; do not spare them, but kill both man and woman, infant and suckling, ox and sheep, camel and ass.”

Sound familiar? Yes, this particular passage has been resurrected for as justification for retaliatory violence. Some passages from Psalms also drip with vengeance: For example, 137:8–9, “O daughter of Babylon, you devastator. Happy shall he be who requites you with what you have done to us! Happy shall be he who takes your little ones and dashes them against the rocks.”

We need the foundation of the Old Testament to understand the world from which Jesus came. These books represent how authors sought to put in their own terms God’s relationship with His chosen people, at times showing them at their best and at their worst. We should never separate and lift out singleton verses without understanding their original context. Moreover, today, whenever we hear what some have named as “clobber verses” from the Bible, we need to ascertain the motivations of those who would like to justify their moral superiority.

Throughout history, Christians have sometimes incited violence through their interpretation of God’s word. If we get distracted by the stridency of those who claim they are following a version of Christianity that is uninclusive rather than inclusive, let us pose these two questions: “What would Jesus say? What would Jesus do?”

“A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.”

—John 13:34–35

With shared faith,

Michael F. Dwyer, Pastor