

“Gratitude and Growth”

Rev. Dr. Stephanie May

First Parish in Wayland

March 12, 2023

As we sit here in the fifth Meetinghouse of First Parish in Wayland, I invite you to imagine this southeast corner of Boston Post Road and Cochituate Road in March of 1814. According to records, the land then was a “sloping pasture overlooking the village.” I wonder if the pasture was still snow-covered or if the spring melt had begun to reveal patches of grassy meadow.

At the time, the congregation was still meeting in [the fourth Meetinghouse](#), which was across the intersection behind where Dr. Cooper’s office is still present today. Over the prior seven years, however, there had been debate about where to locate a new structure. As some of you know, Mill Brook runs beneath the intersection of Boston Post Road and Cochituate Road. Before modern paving and drainage, this brook divided the town. Residents on either side understandably preferred that *they* would not have to cross the brook to attend church.

At a town meeting in April 1813, the residents south of the brook offered to buy an acre of pasture from Mr. Wynn. The north residents accepted this and the site for a new building was determined. (Yes, this was a town decision as the separation of church and state was not entirely a ‘thing’ in Massachusetts until 1833.) More than a year later, on June 1, 1814, [construction began](#) as the men of the town raised the frame with teams of oxen. By fall the new Meetinghouse was finished.

At the same time that the congregation was working through issues of the politics of where to build and how to pay for a new building, we know that the Boston area was also becoming engaged in [theological controversy](#) between liberals and conservatives. Fifteen years after the decision to build a new church, that same [church would split](#) over theology as six women and three men left to form a congregation more aligned with their beliefs.

In recounting this bit of history, I want to convey the sense that we reside within a stream of people working together to sustain this congregation. This does not mean there was always agreement—as was the case of the building location or the theology. But ultimately, we are here because of the commitment of a group of people two hundred years ago to build where we now sit.

As the 1814 congregants anticipated the spring thaw and upcoming building project, I wonder if they reflected back to their Puritan ancestors who had built the first Meetinghouse. By that time, the congregation had been gathered together for nearly one hundred and seventy-five years. Did they consider those many years past . . . or the generations who might come after them to sit within the walls of the frame they raised that June day? Did they think of us? How often do *we* remember those whose actions created what we inherited? Or consider those who may yet gather within these walls?

Connecting the experience of receiving from others with a sense of gratitude, Unitarian Universalist minister, Galen Guengerich, writes,

Gratitude has its basis in our awareness of all the things that have come our way from the people and the world around us. We begin with this inescapable reality: we are contingent creatures.

Guengerich emphasizes the ways this contingency is true within the natural world—our need for air, water, food. And he underscores how this is also true of “*institutions of human civilization*” without which “*none of us would be able to realize our potential as human beings.*” Gratitude emerges from the awareness that we are recipients of so much that enables not just our survival, but also our experiences of meaningful living.

I appreciate that Guengerich includes institutions in his description of the gifts that shape our lives. From schools to governments to religious organizations, institutions provide structures that impact how we come to understand ourselves as well as the ways we interact with one another. Importantly, not all institutions have the same kinds of impact. One of the reasons we engage in social change is to change the shape and practices of institutions and their impacts on people’s lives. And one of the reasons we give of our time, our money, and our heart to some institutions is because we believe they are doing good in the world, that they enable meaningful living. We are *grateful* they exist.

So also, the institution of First Parish as we experience it today did not *have to* be. Perhaps if the residents north of Mill Brook had been better organized or had a more generous farmer offering an acre of land for sale cheap, then our Meetinghouse might not be *here*. Or perhaps if money given by long forgotten congregants had not been set aside into the East Sudbury Ministerial Fund, the Meetinghouse may not have been so well-cared for through two centuries of New England winters and paint-peeling sun? Or maybe, when the pews emptied out from the controversy surrounding First Parish member and Wayland teacher Anne Hale during the [Red Scare of the 1950’s](#), the congregation may not have survived into

the 1960's without the commitment to the congregation from the remaining members, including Mary Trageser, who remains a member today.

First Parish, like any institution, does not just *happen* to exist. Institutions are contingent upon the continued actions and engagement of successive generations.

Whether in our institutional life or in our personal lives, it can be good to pause and to remember just how much we receive from people and the world around us. It can be good to pause and to name all that did not *have to be*, but which we are so grateful that we do in fact have as part of our lives and our experiences. The people whom we love. The places that ground us. The experiences that have comforted us or expanded our sense of who we are. What is on your gratitude list?

The giggle of a grandchild or the wiggle of a puppy. A sun beam streaming in a window...the pleasure of a cat stretched out in its fleeting warmth. The smile of recognition in hearing a beloved tune. The sudden flower or fruit that appears on the vine. The sigh at the end of day well-lived. The satisfaction of achieving that long-sought end. And, always, always, the memory and experience of the love you have felt—given and received—with those dearest to you.

Gratitude is the awareness of all we have received from people and the world around us. Certainly, there are hard days when gratitude feels more distant and when the struggle feels more present than the gifts. It can be easy to stop noticing and naming the wonder of all that is *good* . . . of the gifts that remain.

But to remember is itself a gift. When we pause to cultivate awareness of all we receive, we not only feel a sense of gratitude, we also reconnect with that larger current of Life which pulses from generation to generation. Aware of our place within this ever-moving current of Life, we are reminded of the connection between gratitude and contingency. We recognize how even as we have received so much, we are also entrusted to pass on a world and institutions that may perhaps not only sustain survival, but also enable meaningful living. Pausing to be aware of all we receive not only fosters a sense of gratitude; it can also inspire how we chose to impact the living of the next generation.

We live out these themes of gratitude and fostering life each year at First Parish. On Flower Sunday, we end each program year by placing our 'flowers' of gratitude on the tree. And we begin each fall on Water Sunday by naming what we will bring to help 'water' the roots of the tree and foster a living, growing community. Again and again, we move through

currents of Life pulsing through this institution and each of our experience of being a part of this community.

Do you remember this first time you came here? Each of us, at some point first entered this building or logged-on and began to receive the gifts of this community. None of us started this institution; all of us receive it as a gift. So also, none of us singly sustains the congregation. Not me as minister and not any one volunteer, leader, attendee, or donor. As a community and as an institution, we only exist and thrive *together*.

That *togetherness* is, I suspect, even what many of us find most valuable about being here. Yes, the Meetinghouse is historic and beautiful, but as someone who spent a lot of time in an empty building in 2020, I assure you that a large part of the beauty emerges from its function as a place to be *together*. Even online, we've been intentional to preserve a Zoom meeting format so that when you log-on you are digitally present with others. And, if you're watching this as a recording on YouTube, please know that you too are in our minds today.

Together we inherit the gifts of this congregation. And together we will shape what comes next. Every generation faces questions and controversies about the path forward. In 1814, they were struggling with the issues of a new Meetinghouse, a north-south divide in town, and a brewing theological storm. In April of 1954, First Parish member Anne Hale faced a School Committee for her affiliation with the Community party. Today we are recovering from a global pandemic and wrestling with responses to racism as well as attacks on women's reproductive rights, transgender persons, and democracy itself—all within a context of declining religious affiliation, especially within younger generations.

And so, we must ask ourselves, what congregation and institution do we want to leave for those yet to arrive? When you consider your gifts of time, of money, and of heart to First Parish, my hope is that we consider all of this. Not just what particular gifts we individually receive, but also to what degree it matters to us that First Parish will be here as a vibrant religious community for the next person or family that enters through our doors or clicks to join online?

This place, this institution, is contingent, just like so much of life. We can make a difference in helping it to survive and thrive. Together *we* are the congregation and the institution. May our gratitude for what we have received be the fuel for our gifts to help First Parish continue to grow into the vision of who we want to be and what we can offer to others seeking meaning, a caring community, and a better world.

So may it be. Amen.