

*Rev. Mary Ann Short's first sermon to HCC on October 5, 2014*

## GETTING TO KNOW YOU

“Getting to know you, getting to know all about you. Getting to like you, getting to hope you like me.” (It was difficult not to break out in song speaking those words.)

Most of us heard these words in music from “The King and I” years ago. And, still may hear them from time to time today. Deborah Kerr still causes me to pause when I hear this piece of music and the story that goes with it. The one thing Jesus did continually as he walked among those he loved and cared for was he got to know them. He did not heal or love or embrace strangers. He knew who he was with as he wandered from village to village showing the love of God to all who could hear and listen and receive. Jesus needs to be the model for ministers especially in today’s world. Jesus came to show us how to live and how to love.

The image of Jesus is revealed as Deborah Kerr sings of a true and honest thought that if one becomes a teacher, pastor, physician, s/he will be taught by the pupil, the congregant, the patient. And so I come to you at the beginning of this month to be taught by you and with you. I come to listen to your story, which may include your dreams, imaginations, your joys and your sorrows. I wish to know your faith story. How did you become a member of the United Church of Christ, yes, Howland Community Church, by baptism as an infant or an adult? What has your confirmation meant to you? The story of how we were introduced to our faith is important, is it the faith of our fathers and mothers, or is it our faith, one that has developed over time with God.

Perhaps you are not affiliated with Howland Community Church as a member but love worshipping here as you have created friends with those who are already here. There is always a reason regarding whether we are members of a church or not a member. My hope is that you will share your journey of faith when I come to visit with you. We are all on a journey of faith. Visitation in your home,

in the hospital, in the nursing home, or even on the sidewalk of our community, wherever it is that you and I meet, will be a focus of my time with you, a time to get to know you.

The story behind today's sermon comes from a biographical story by Anna Leonowens who was a school teacher in the early 1860's. Anna was a strong-willed widowed school teacher and arrived in Bangkok from Wales with her young son, Louis, after being summoned to tutor the many children of the King of Siam and his many wives. Anna reluctantly accepted the King's urging for her to live in the Royal Palace, which was not the original plan. She was to have her own home with her son. But the King persisted, insisted she live in the Royal Palace. She reluctantly began teaching the children about the virtues of home, which irritated the King. He wanted truth and he wonders why the world has become complicated with different cultures, saying different things about different subjects. Perhaps it is very similar to what we are experiencing in today's world. Anna shows the children a modern map. England is even smaller than Siam at this time. Anna starts to form a relationship with the children as getting to know people is her favorite thing to teach. Such as the lesson that created disorder when the children refuse to believe in snow. Eventually, the King orders the children to believe in Anna. And so they do.

My primary mission as your interim pastor in the coming months is to get to know you. I wish to get to know you in relationship to your faith. What do you remember about your baptism, or stories your parents and godparents may have told you about your baptism. Some of you were probably baptized as infants, others may have been immersed as a young adult, or older adult.

When a pastor is true and honest in thought and message, it will be the congregants who will teach him/her. It is lovely to abide by this ancient saying about truth and honesty when one shares how God has affected one's life. It can be a lovely gift primarily to one's self as s/he allows their heart to speak, rather than perhaps one's head or what one thinks is appropriate or expected. When was God significant in your life that cannot easily be explained because it seemed so unreal at the time? Was

there a time when Jesus became more personal to you in your daily life? It may have been almost a surprise to you, as the children in Siam learned about snow.

Tell me about the place you were born and what kept you here in Warren or what brought you here to Warren from that other place, your hometown. Most everyone loves his/her hometown, even when they become disappointed in how it changed through the years. Class reunions cause us to pause about what might have been had we stayed as well as how life did change in our leaving those very familiar streets and neighborhoods that once brought safety and security. I say all this glowingly about one's "hometown" while knowing that not all hometowns have been places of love and support and nurturing. So much happens to us in life and it often relates back to the place of our birth.

What was the best time in your life? A day that you would love to live again? Perhaps it is the day you were married, or the day you became a parent? How about that day you grasped that diploma and heard clapping from one section of the auditorium or stadium, where family and friends were cheering for you? Are they still cheering for you in this lovely, and yet sometimes lonely place in your life?

Do you have a favorite author? And the name of the book s/he wrote that affected your faith? It transformed some part of your being and you began to think and feel differently about some thing or some one?

You are an expert on the subject of who God is for you, as you have traveled the journey that only you have traveled, sometimes with another, sometimes alone. It will be lovely to be with you, as we get to know each other. There will be a freedom and ease that comes forth. In the humor and in the tears, you will know what to share, as every story is sacred. The marriage that was full of hope and happiness and didn't last, ending in divorce perhaps eventually gave you ease in your dis-ease. The loss of a spouse through death that was never anticipated and yet, that love remains with you in spirit and God's grace. Remember your first experience of loss. It was probably frightening, a grandparent that

you loved and who loved you back, or maybe that dog or kitten that didn't make it across the street in time and you saw it killed. Such significantly sad things happen in our lives, as well some very joyous things, and they are all sacred and it is important to respect them as sacred, no matter what another might say to trivialize the loss.

When learning these sacred truths about you, such beauty cannot be measured or compared to any other gift. There is nothing like sharing our story in a way that is heard only to be stored in the heart and mind of the listener, not to be shared with another, only to be treasured as a gift that God holds with you for eternity. You will have the joy of sharing how God has been your God, after you experienced the sorrows and the joys in your life. How has God been your God when you came upon those decisions in life that cause us all to pause as we look up, and out, and down and in. Those are days we can later call holy, but in the moment, not so much. We will learn together how your God has walked and talked with you in relationship to your family, your friends, and your faith.

In our time together perhaps we will become bright and breezy as we get to know one another. At the end of the movie Anna received an unfinished letter from the King that states his gratitude and respect for her. She goes to his bedside in tears just before she sails back to Wales, as he is dying. Matthew writes to us that 'God's Kingdom will be handed over to a people who will live out a kingdom life'. That is you, my friends. This is your church and from this place where I am standing and where I have been sitting and standing since Wednesday morning, you have revealed a kingdom life at Howland Community Church.

My primary mission as your interim pastor is to get to know you, hear your story and listen to your heart speak the words they contain about **your** life and **your** faith. With Deborah Kerr I say, "Getting to know you, putting it my way, but nicely, you are surely to be precisely my cup of tea."

Jesus died for your sins and your pain. Lift your heads from shame to grace.  
May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing,  
So that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope. Amen.