

## **“Welfare Checks”**

Rev. Ken McGarry at The First Congregational Church in Stoneham, Massachusetts  
October 9, 2022 – Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost  
Jeremiah 29:1, 4-7; Luke 17:11-19

Here we are in the middle of October, and it's once again voting time! For whom will you be voting this election cycle? Getting your vote, perhaps, will be Holly, also known as Bear 435. Or maybe this year you'll be casting a ballot for good ol' 747, a bear whose gargantuan girth rivals the aircraft that shares his name. I am, of course, talking not about American politics, although it's just about time for us to cast votes in this realm as well, but about Fat Bear Week, a celebration of the brown bears of Alaska's Katmai National Park who have spent the last few months fattening up on salmon from Katmai's Brooks River. At noon today, the polls are open online for you to vote for 747 or Holly as they face off in a semi-final matchup in this annual contest to crown the bear who has fattened up the most. Tomorrow, you can vote in the other semi-final as Bear 901, who just yesterday beat last year's champion, the beloved elder Otis, as she takes on 128 Grazer, described by the Fat Bear Week website as "a large adult female with a long straight muzzle and conspicuously blond ears."

All of these bears, no matter who gets the most votes in this year's online contest, are winners of the game of survival. They have lived in the harsh Alaskan environment but have thrived in it as they feasted on fish and became the giants whose low-hanging guts we lift up in honor this week. There are many more brown bears, however, that are not being featured in this week's contest and will never receive a single vote for being the fattest bear. Some are too young to have a prominent place at the Brooks River; others are too elderly or just don't have the impressive size required to claim a prized angling spot or a day in the spotlight, and so they'll just go on doing their bear things without ever becoming champions or celebrities (and I'm pretty sure they're OK with that!).

I bring all this up this morning not only to encourage you to get out and vote, both in this contest, and in the much-more-important elections coming up on November 8, but to highlight how we human animals often make judgments about other people as we do about the brown bears of the Brooks River -- based on the size, shape, and ability of their bodies. Some bodies we valorize and

celebrate because of how they look or how skillfully they do things; other bodies, if they do not measure up to our societal ideals concerning aesthetics or ability, we ignore or disparage.

Here, on this Access Sunday, we celebrate all bodies, especially those that are not lifted up equally by our society because of disabilities. This is a Sunday that, along with many of the other 4,800 congregations of the United Church of Christ, we pay attention to our calling and commitment to offer an extravagant welcome to one another, no matter our appearance or ability, by taking special efforts to accommodate *every* body. To better live out this commitment, we've been working on changes to our facility that will enable us to be more welcoming of all, including the installation of a restroom on this floor, just down this hallway, that is accessible to all. We're just waiting on some final inspections to be completed before we can celebrate the restroom's completion with an inaugural flush, but we're getting close! I encourage you to take a look at (but not yet use!) the restroom after the service.

We're also taking some positive steps forward in allowing more people to access and participate in our worship services. By capturing live video of our services and broadcasting this through livestreams on our website, YouTube, Facebook, and Zoom and via cable television on StonehamTV, we are welcoming those who are unable to be with us in person, for whatever reason, to worship with us and so actively participate in the life of our church family. One wonderful feature of our livestreams is that they feature captions so that those who have impaired hearing or are unable to hear can read live all of the words that we offer to God and one another in our services.

I am happy to point out that today we are taking another step forward in our efforts to better welcome those with impaired hearing as we have just installed an assisted listening system in the sanctuary. We are now sending out into the sanctuary a radio signal from our sound system that can be picked up and amplified by four receivers with headsets that can be worn over existing hearing aids. These will be sanitized and ready for use each Sunday and can be picked up at the deacons' table in the Narthex on your way into worship.

And to better accommodate those with impaired vision, we also now have available at the deacons' table extra-large bulletins. If you find that there is

anything that we can do that would better enable you or those you love to participate in our worship services, please let me or the deacons know.

These are just a couple of steps we've recently taken to be more welcoming of one another, but these are by no means our final steps. I am especially concerned about how we continue to take steps forward in making our space not only more accessible but safer for all bodies. This is why we have our windows open here in the sanctuary, even when it's cold out, because we've learned over the course of the last couple of years, just how essential it is to everyone's health and well-being to breathe clean, uninfected air. This is why we have recently installed air filtration systems with HEPA filters in all of our classrooms and offices, and this is why we are looking at long-term options for providing clean air to those gathering in the sanctuary and Fellowship Hall that are not as chilly as keeping windows open. None of these options are cheap, by the way, unlike opening window, which is free and requires the installation of no special equipment, and so I ask for your patience as continue bundling up while discerning the best path forward. Whatever this is, it will be considered with our welcoming values in the forefronts of our hearts and minds.

And how can we do less as followers of one who was wholly dedicated to increasing wholeness and well-being in the lives of all people? As we read in today's gospel lesson, Jesus cared deeply about the well-being of those who were unwelcome to fully participate in the life of society because of a skin disease. And so he healed a group of ten of them when they called out to him, seeking mercy. We read that one of those who was healed that day was a Samaritan, and for someone with leprosy who was a Samaritan and already marginalized in Jewish society because of his religious and ethnic identity, the gift of healing provided life-giving wholeness that moved him away from being doubly marginalized and closer to the center of society.

Jesus was concerned about the well-being of the ten people with leprosy, including the foreign Samaritan, as he followed in the tradition of the prophets and healers of Israel who came before him and who were likewise concerned about the well-being of all. In today's first scripture lesson, we read of God, through the prophet Jeremiah, instructing the people of Judah, who were then living as exiles the foreign land of Babylon, to live full lives there and to seek the

welfare of their neighbors, even though it was the armies of their neighbors that had conquered them and forced them into captivity, for in the welfare of all, the children of Israel would find their own welfare.

We, too, will find our own welfare in the growth of the welfare of all in our community. We will find growth in ourselves when our environment is healthier for all. We will find more healing and wholeness in ourselves when we make the spaces where we gather ones where more of us and our neighbors are welcome to gather to find healing, growth, and wholeness. We will find ourselves coming closer to the center of God's grace as we welcome in those who live at society's margins because of who they are or because of their abilities.

So let us continue to check on the welfare of one another and let us check on the well-being of our neighbors. And may this household of faith be full of wellness and life as, in person and online, more of our bodies are able to gather together to celebrate God's many blessings. Amen.