

## Rev Rita Message July 18 2021

A few years ago, I had the privilege of spending a week with retreat leader Margaret Silf. Baptized a Methodist when she was a baby, she was confirmed in the Anglican Church at 15, and was received into the Roman Catholic faith at 20. Now in her late seventies, she calls herself a “boundary dweller”, no longer belonging to a particular Christian denomination and more at home outside the institutional church than within. Formerly a technical writer for the computer industry, Silf took early retirement to devote more of her time to creative forms of writing, accompanying others in their prayer journeys, and leading retreats. Her writing springs from personal prayer and is an expression of her own transformative journey with God. She believes that stories can help connect us to deep truths and inspire us to explore what it means to be human and what it means to a person of faith.

When I read today’s scripture reading about how faith can transform our lives, I was reminded of a story called Stepping Stones that Margaret wrote...So.... Once upon a time.... As all good stories begin....

“The “woman of the woods”, as she was known by the folk who lived nearby, had lived since what seem like forever in her cozy little cottage by the river. No one rightly knew how old she was, or when she had first come to live by the riverside. Everyone got on well with her and respected her age and her wisdom. But she herself had a restless soul. She knew – perhaps she had really always known—that there was something important she had still to discover. The more she pondered this mystery, the more she realized that she must follow the direction in which her soul was drawing her, wherever it might lead. And the more she pondered this “beckoning”, the more she realized that it was drawing her to the other side of the river.

The river was wide. It was deep. It was turbulent. You couldn’t wade across it. You couldn’t swim across it. There was no bridge across it. Yet, she became more and more convinced that she must cross it and that whatever it was that her heart most desired lay on the other side.

The day dawned when she went down to the water’s edge, and put her mind to the problem of how to cross. As she stood there, a young man came up beside her. In his arms, he carried a big stone, and he set it down in the river at her feet, inviting her to use it as a stepping stone. Trusting him entirely, she did so. And there she stood all day, perched on her stepping stone. The next day he came again, and the next, and the next, each time bringing another stepping stone, until, after a while, she had already walked halfway out into the river.

Then one morning he didn't come. With a rising sense of panic, she looked round to see what had happened to him. He was a bit late that morning, and it was then that she saw, for the first time, where he was getting the stepping stones. He was systematically deconstructing her cozy little cottage on the riverbank to create the means for her to cross the river.

To embrace her future, she realized, she must relinquish the securities of her past. And yet the past that she so cherished was essential to the making of the pathway to the future. The end.

The fourteenth-century Christian mystic Meister Eckhart once observed, "The spiritual life is not a process of addition, but rather of subtraction." Like the woman in the Stepping Stones story, sometimes we need to let go of what is holding us back in order to move forward with the life that God is calling us to live.

What we subtract in our lives depends, of course, on what initially fills it –ambition, addiction, suffering, even our misgivings and grudges. Sometimes life circumstances and personal setbacks can haunt and prevent us from seeing our true potential and recognizing new opportunities.

In the face of all of our trials and tribulations, Paul reminds us in this morning's reading that transformation is possible when we invite Christ into our lives and trusting his help to make us a new creation from the inside out, subtracting our anxieties, doubts, and fears.

As Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 5:1 "So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away: see, everything has become new!"

Author Brennan Manning knew from personal experience that what Paul talking about was true. In his books such as the Ragamuffin Gospel, he often reflected upon what he described as his patched-up life..... that included a life long struggle with alcoholism..... could only have happened because of the unconditional love of God and the relentless tenderness of Jesus.

He also observed that in everyone's spiritual journey there is that first moment when we believe, when we stand before a congregation, or privately before God, and profess our faith.

But that is only the first step, says, Manning, because in the spiritual life there is always a second step, when we come to trust God walks beside us through all the peaks and valleys of our lives.

The hymn... Trust and Obey is about the stepping stones to faith. It was inspired in 1886 when the composer of the music Daniel B. Towner was the music leader for one of Dwight L. Moody's famous revivals.

Dwight Lyman Moody, also known as D.L. Moody, was an American evangelist and publisher connected with what was known then as the Holiness Movement. At the time, he was a popular preacher who filled churches and halls because of his practical message that the Christian life was about taking one step at a time towards God and that as we did that God would help us to live a life filled with purpose and satisfaction following the teachings of Jesus.

Towner says that one night during a series of 1886 meetings in Brockton Massachusetts, a young man rose in a testimony and said, "I am not quite sure... but I am going to trust, and I am going to obey." I just jotted that sentence down, and sent it with the little story to the Rev. J. H. Sammis, a Presbyterian minister. He wrote the hymn, and the tune was born.

God is near to us as our very breath... inviting us to take one step at a time.... Towards him and towards a life of following of Jesus. My prayer this day is that each day we will continue to trust that God is with us as we make our journey through life.

Thanks be to God. Amen.