

Our Covid Story. April 3, 2022

Rev. Rebecca Dolch
Forest Home Chapel UMC

2 Corinthians 5:17—18

*¹⁷ Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come:
The old has gone, the new is here! ¹⁸ All this is from God...*

Everybody has Covid Story. So many of them are devastating — almost one million Americans have died, more have suffered long term illness as a result, children missed over a year of school, youth mental health issues from being separated from their peers have surfaced, businesses closed, people lost jobs and were financially ruined, blame placed everywhere... the stories are endless, and each of us has stories.

Forest Home Chapel has a Covid Story

For 20 out of the past 24 months we have not worshipped here in the Chapel. We have worshiped on Zoom. Ironically, with closed doors, our congregation has **grown** to include worshippers from Oregon, California, Alabama, Wisconsin, Massachusetts, England, and online visitors zooming from Hawaii, Vermont, New Hampshire, Kansas, Florida, Tennessee and Indiana and more places.

People have worshipped on zoom from home, cars, vacation spots, and sick beds and walking trails, and work.

We may not have been in the building, but the continuing faithfulness of our congregation has been *building* all of us up.

This is how God Works. when we put even some of our attention on the spiritual life — we have the amazing opportunity to be part of the flow of God. Following the spiritual path is like standing in front of a warm nourishing river that flows all of the time. We always have the choice to jump in and let that river take us to the next moment, insight, right choice, healing opportunity... Things work out that seem impossible, we not only survive but we often flourish in hardship. I think this is one interpretation of **“Anyone in Christ is a new creation, The old passes away,” and we are part of a new energy, a new flow.**

My desire is to look back on these past two years as a congregation and really **claim** how God has used this very difficult time of Covid to re—create us as a congregation. For one thing, when we are in the sanctuary, except for the musicians, readers, and speakers, we mostly see the backs of people. On Zoom we see each other's faces with our names right under us. The degree of intimacy and sharing has been profound, and it feels like we know one another much better. We feel safer and more open with our stories.

That is how community is made: sharing experiences, stories, joys, concerns, and prayers. This is all service. Spiritual community is also strengthened when we frame our work and our daily life as part of God's movement through us.

When I say the phrase "Anyone in Christ" — I invite you to say — "is a new creation."

Here is another part of our Covid Story

Basically, this little building has stood empty for almost two years, like a fallow field. A fallow field is a plot of land that usually grows crops, but in order to replenish the soil and keep crop production high, the field isn't planted every year.

During the time we weren't using the building, the building was being refurbished. All of the 100-year-old sanctuary/hallway counter-weight windows were taken out and totally rebuilt, repainted and put back in with tighter seals and strong ropes — by Alphonse Pieper, who does historic restorations.

An entirely new video streaming system was installed by Joseph Haefeli to accommodate a new way of worshiping — simultaneously in the Chapel and at home or on the road. Online worship is the newest form of evangelism — reaching out to people who are not part of a congregation.

While the building was lying fallow, we removed and rearranged pews to create greater accessibility and traffic flow.

The downstairs restroom was gutted, (we found animal skulls in the walls!) and all the plumbing, toilet and sink, floor, door and walls were replaced and rearranged to make it more accessible and attractive.

Baby-changing tables were installed upstairs and down.

The entire outsides of BOTH the Chapel and Parsonage were scraped and painted — thanks to the generosity of all who continued to support the church through the pandemic

I'll shift the scripture a little bit here and say — “Any thing in Christ” — Is a new creation.

In the back of the Chapel is a steep hill — Chad Novelli and his crew and our volunteers built a retaining wall and put in plantings to keep the hill from falling into the building. The gardens were meticulously maintained by Elizabeth Mount and her crew.

The trustees and our Building Manager Chad Novelli and others have worked the entire two years with historic building architects, contractors, finance team, Town zoning boards, and accessibility experts. They have created a comprehensive plan to rebuild our crumbling concrete steps, sidewalk and ramp, and build an appropriately designed porch roof at the top of the ramp, and a drainage system— that all tie together, meeting all codes. This is a crazy-complicated project!

Another adjustment in the scripture — “Any *project dedicated to Christ*” — is a new creation. In the process of working on projects, we are also recreated by working together, by investing in the future of the church and its mission.

While we were closed up and renovating everything, we created policies for how to open our doors to even more people. And today, starting at 12:30 a group of Christian families will be meeting in our Fellowship Hall three times a month, as they serve a specialized mission.

In addition, Cornell Protestant Campus ministries Board meets here, and Girl Scouts, and Forest Home Improvement Association, and weddings and funerals for members of the Forest Home Community who are not usually part of the Church have happened here.

Another tweak on the scripture — “Anyone in Christ *together serving others*” — is a new creation.

Behind the scenes here at the Chapel during the past two years when we were closed, Jan Hammond and Susan Spear and others completely replaced and updated our website. Sally Grubb, Jackie Nock, the Finance Team and our paid bookkeeper Valerie, reworked our financial recordkeeping and reporting system and created the opportunity for online donations.

Jackie Nock sent out Sunday school materials via email every single week — that is over 100 times!

Sue Reid is in the process of updating all of our membership records from a 3x5 card metal filing box we found in a bottom drawer — to permanent records.

And dozens of people participated in sending cards to people and making gifts for the whole congregation for Christmas and Epiphany.

“Anyone in Christ *behind the scenes*” is a new creation, and they make new creations for all of us so that our life together has integrity and appropriate systems of accountability and helpfulness.

During these two years, we have rarely passed the collection plate, and yet people have continued to support the church and its ministries with generous giving — It is amazing.

“Any money given in the name of Christ”— is a new creation — when it is dedicated to the ministry of Christ, Money is transformed into the energy of love.

During these two years while the church has been closed, people have been growing in their understanding of scripture and spiritual life. Book study students and Bible students have created deep bonds through conversation and sharing and learning together online. And our lay preachers — Sara Haefeli, Carol Hockett, Susan Spear and Joe Faló have developed tremendous skills as Christian leaders. For example, Sara and Carol now each preach once per month in the Varna United Methodist Church down the road.

This June I will have been a pastor for 45 years, and my greatest achievement has been simply creating a space for collaborative ministry such as this one — a ministry that thrives on everybody's leadership, not just the pastor's leadership or personality.

“Anyone *who leads us to Christ*” — is a new creation — and helps all of us become new creations as well.

During these two years while we have been closed, of course we have continued to support missions: food security ministries, elementary school clothing, Ithaca Sanctuary Alliance, Open Doors English and substantial donations to special projects through the United Methodist Church, especially during disasters.

“Anyone *who reaches out to strangers in Christ*” — is a new creation.

While we were closed for most of the past two years, we truly missed the choir — our own volunteer singers and the Ithaca College Students who sang with us and received small scholarships for doing so.

But we have been inspired and held together by our musicians who gave themselves through zoom, particularly Kristy Shuck, Maria Rabbia, and Elena Nezhdanova. Their music has been spiritual glue for our worshipping community. Through them and other gifted musical members and friends of the Chapel, we have been inspired by music, which touches our souls when words can't.

“Anyone who makes music for Christ” — is a new creation.

Mirror Neurons

And finally, all of you who have participated. Do you know about mirror neurons? They are some of the most powerful brain cells in the body. They cause the body and mind of human beings to do what they see other people doing. It has been part of human survival since our beginnings. We know that babies learn how to interact, eat, dress, act, speak, protect themselves, get attention, walk, hold their posture — facial expressions — everything — by watching the people around them. Grownups do the same.

Some brain scientists say that we particularly imitate the 5 people we are around the most. We act and react, hoard or share, stay calm or blow up, eat and drink and practice hygiene, take care of nature, respond to children — react emotionally — just like the 5 people that you are around the most — without necessarily knowing it.

So the best thing you can do for your life is to be around people who are living examples of the values and actions that you hold precious and important. Brain scientists who have studied the brain's reaction to screen time, say that the brain doesn't differentiate between in—person and on—screen when it comes to being influenced.

And that is why, whether the building is open or closed, we want to be influenced by the stories and teachings and songs and spirit and energy of Jesus Christ. Christian Community gives us the opportunity to be with people who seek the spiritual path/ spiritual fruits. We are strengthened when we jump into that River together: the River of love, joy, patience, peace, compassion, humility, wisdom, discernment, advocacy, kindness, inclusion— and all the Divine attributes that we invite in as a Spiritual community.

“Anyone whose mirror neurons are imitating Christ” — is a new creation.

That is the good news of the Gospel, here on our first Sunday back in person, and on zoom at the same time, seeing one another and realizing that we are on this journey together as new creations.