

Wednesday, March 8
Lenten Service
Sheri Sweitzer

I don't want to say that Rebecca tricked me into doing this; however, she did call me to say that she was retiring and then – when I was in a shocked and weakened state -- she asked if I would speak at this Lenten Service. I'm still not sure why I said yes! Anyway, I am quite nervous. I don't think I've done anything this like this since my Methodist Youth Fellowship days in the early 60's!!

I guess beginning at the beginning is the way to go. I was born in McDonald, Ohio, a small steel mill town of about 3,000. My parents were born and raised there as were my grandparents and everyone worked in the mill. I'm actually from a mixed marriage – my Dad was a Baptist and my Mom was a Methodist. Today, that doesn't seem very "mixed" but back in the 40's it was serious!! I think the only reason my Grandpa Charlie allowed the wedding to take place was because my father had just returned from the war --- he had been a prisoner of war and well, when your son has been a prisoner of war, marrying a Methodist doesn't seem like the worst thing in the world.

My family was active Methodists. We went to Sunday School and church; attended church dinners and picnics, -- all the activities. My Dad was a lay minister and my Mom

served in the Ladies Guild. When I went away to Ohio State, I continued to go to church – and since I'm here in church, and Rebecca is looking over my shoulder, I think I should admit that my attendance had more than a little something to do with the fact that Jerry Lucas and John Havlicek, star Ohio State basketball players, went to the same church.

After college and for many years, my religious involvement was sketchy at best. I was young. I was busy. Other things took up my time.

My career has been working for the government. First for the Speaker of the Ohio House of Representatives in Columbus, Ohio. Then on to Washington DC and 23 years with Senator Howard Metzenbaum, then into the Clinton White House, then the Justice Department and then finally, back to the Senate where I retired from Senator John Glenn's office. There wasn't much "church" during that time, but I honestly felt that – as my Jewish friends so wisely say – I was working for the repair of the world. I believe in our government and our hard work to keep the people of this country free and cared for. It was good work.

In 1987, my husband, Don, and I adopted a sweet little baby girl from South Korea. There's nothing like a baby to put religion and faith back in your life, front and center. We joined a lovely Methodist church with a wonderful music

program in Alexandria, Virginia. In our hectic and chaotic Washington life, we both viewed our time in church as a guaranteed hour of good thoughts, peace and beautiful music. We were members there until Don's career brought us to Rhode Island.

Off and on, we looked for a church here, but couldn't find the right fit. It was a funeral for one of your beloved church members, Scott Gordon, that brought me to Central. Don was out of town and unable to attend, but I went home afterwards, and Don will testify to this – I said to him, "I found our church." We started here the very next Sunday.

So that's my biography but not very much about my faith. I don't talk about my faith with anyone – maybe just Don and my sister. I guess I always feel it's personal – it's something I hold close inside. But preparing these remarks, I've had to take it outside, roll it around, think deep thoughts and try to figure out just what my faith is.

I've decided that my faith is based in service. It's why I chose the scripture that I did – "whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did to me." It's most likely why I chose the career that I did. I believe that God watches us and wants us to take care of our neighbors. I think He's saying, "you have more, you can give more, you can help, you can hold someone close and say I understand your pain." It isn't always about money or

material things that we can give, it's about you, your person, your ability and willingness to share yourself. In our 20+ years in Rhode Island, I've volunteered and served on many Boards; Moses Brown (I volunteered there for more years than our daughter attended that school – finally Don said, it was time for MY graduation!) I serve for 16 years as Chair of the Board of Phoenix House. I think there is no greater Calling than helping those who cannot help themselves. The plague of addiction demands everyone's attention – it has for years and yet, despite so much hard work and so many dedicated souls, it continues to claim life after life. Serving on the Board of Teach for America is exciting and daunting work trying to improve our city schools. I've recently joined the Board at the Miriam Hospital and realize that we will bear the cost of covid for many years to come. But Board work isn't for everyone, and it certainly isn't the only way to serve our community. Volunteering at Amos House, giving rides to cancer patients who have no other way of getting to treatment, writing a card to a lonely friend, visiting the sick – all are God's Calling.

And I believe in God. I believe he created heaven and earth. I believe he created man in his image. But my faith in him is not without question. War. Horrible natural disasters. Incurable diseases. My belief in God was nearly destroyed after the Sandy Hook killings. I question Him – how can a loving God allow these things to happen!?!? Sometimes I am weak and doubt him. I know I am not as

strong as He would want me to be. But even in the darkness, there's always a glimmer of light and of faith and belief that makes me believe that God is still here. Then sun rising and setting. The look in my grandbabies eyes. My sister surviving breast cancer. I still have questions. I still get angry. But I still know He's there.

When my Dad was dying from cancer, he received so so many cards and letter from friends around the country who said, "How can this happen to someone like you?" I was thinking that. But my Dad, whose belief never failed, would often refer to this little poem:

God hath not promised
Skies always blue,
Flower strewn pathways,
All our lives through;
God has not promised
Sun without rain,
Joy without sorrow,
Peace without pain.

God hath not promised
We shall not know
Toil and temptation,
Trouble and woe;
He hath not told us
We shall not bear
Many a burden,

Many a care.
God hath not promised
Smooth roads and wide,
Swift easy travel,
Needing no guide;
Never a mountain,
Rocky and steep,
Never a river
Turbid and deep:

But God hath promised
Strength for the day,
Rest for the labor,
Light for the way,
Grace for the trials,
Help from above,
Unfailing sympathy,
Undying love.

I believe that is true. And in the end, -- I do believe.

I don't think I'm very good at praying. But years ago, I ran across a little book, in fact, it's called, Say a Little Prayer. I'd like to end my talk with this prayer:

Dear God:
I pray for those who are homeless to find shelter,
Those who are depressed to discover joy,
Those who are addicted to find release,

Those who are lonely to find a friend,
Those who are confused or lost to find a path,
Those who are heartbroken to know that it will pass,
Those who are sick to find healing,
Those who live in darkness to be covered in light,
Those who are dying to know that they have lived,
I pray today for peace where there is unrest and
For love to prevail over all.