**The Congregational Church of Hollis, NH, UCC**

**Rev Bob Macfarlane, Interim Minister**

**Sermon, November 17, 2013**

**“Coffee Anyone?”**

**Philippians 1: 1-11**

A signature piece of my Interim Ministry in these last five years after my so-called “retirement,” has so often been the opportunity to have the time to listen. I can remember past ministries, settled ministries of long duration, where so much time was given to taking care of the details, and to rushing from place to place, activity to activity, that the very people themselves whom we are called to serve, sometimes get lost in the shuffle.

And as I hear other colleagues in ministry talk about their OWN ministries, I hear the same mantra over and over again. “You know, Bob, I’m just worn out, by so much that gets in the way of really being PASTORAL to my people.” And I say to myself, “Yes, this is a major sign of burnout. Clergy burnout.” This is such a major concern for clergy these days, that studies are being conducted, and strategies are being created to combat the rampant burnout by clergy. It doesn’t seem to matter the denomination. Clergy burnout is rampant, and it needs to be a major consideration by Search Committees, and by Pastoral Care Committees of local churches.

Studies have shown that a great percentage of seminary graduates leave the ministry before their fifth year in settled ministry. Leave the ministry all together! That’s an astounding figure! And it is a very critical statistic, because I believe that the very vitality, the very strength and vigor of the Ordained Ministry, hangs in the balance. These younger, exuberant, eager ministers, often find the daily detail tasks confining, the demands of committee work eating up precious time they could be with their people.

For as we all know and understand, there are only so many hours in the day, and yet each and every minister worth his or her salt, knows that at the end of each day, when the car is shut off, the door is closed, and the light is finally out, there are still many things that lay on the table unfinished, and unattended to. That is the frustratingly true nature of ministry. We are never, ever, able to put a period at the end of a day. Only that proverbial comma! Yes, “God is still speaking.” And yes, “The Church is still speaking,” as well. And personally, I wouldn’t have it any other way.

But if my own experience of over 40 years of ministry helps you, as you begin your search for your settled Pastor, remember that, as a partnership of pastor and people in the ministries and missions of the Congregational Church of Hollis, you and your new pastor need to be extremely careful to make sure that ministry does not become a treadmill of tiresome workouts leading to clergy burnout.

Rather, envision that your partnership of caring for one another, allows instead, for ministry to be JOYFUL and FUN, to be a developing conversation of going deeper into your faith, and extending outward, like ripples on a calm pond, an extravagant welcome to all who seek an inviting and accepting - yes even an open and affirming - spiritual home.

And that brings me to this COFFEE MUG sitting here on the pulpit. Actually, ALL these coffee mugs you see displayed on the Communion Table. Over time in my ministry, the coffee mug has come to symbolize my relationship with the people I have been called to serve. For you see, it symbolizes time spent in conversation, moments of give and take, opportunities to listen and to talk.

Did you know that one of the most important things you can do in your families, in your work, in your daily interactions, is to be sure that those who wish to speak to you, are actually HEARD! And to be heard, means we have to work hard at what some call “the art of active listening.” Perhaps you heard the term “active listening” as well. And the coffee mug is a symbol for me, of sitting down, looking someone in the eye, and concentrating on what the other person has to say.

Listening is one of the greatest gifts a parent can give to a child, a spouse to a partner, an employer to an employee, a teacher to a student, a friend to a friend. Listening is a powerful and valued gift.

Just think of how Jesus himself was a powerful listener, deeply observant of the needs of others. He was always focused on the deepest need of the hearts of those who came to him. And I believe, that in the listening, came the healing that Jesus performs, that we read so much about in the Bible. Like a laser, Jesus was intense, as he took to heart the concerns of those who came to him.

Not unlike Jesus, St. Paul was the same way. He loved his people so much, he listened to their needs deeply, he was patient with their foibles, and he was confident that faith overcomes all things. He too, LISTENED to the cries of the wounded and broken, the hungry and the homeless. Paul addresses his friends at the Church at Philippi, not unlike he addressed many of the people in the churches he established. He says: “I thank my God every time I remember you, constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you, because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now.”

I thank my God every time I remember you. I thank my God every time I sit with you and listen. I thank my God every time I pick up the phone to inquire about how you are doing. I thank my God every time I drop by to say hello. I thank my God that we had that cup of coffee, because it may well have made someone’s day.

So as we begin our Interim journey together, as we start to move into your new future, please, PLEASE, don’t hesitate to phone me, or text me, face book me, or email me, and say, “Bob, I’d like to have a cup of coffee with you.”

Now I have to tell you a little story. There was a young man in the church I served as Interim in Charleston, SC, who desperately wanted to have a conversation, but he had a problem. He spoke to me one Sunday morning, and said, “Reverend, I’d certainly like to have one of those conversations with you, but I’ve got a problem.” And of course I asked him, “What’s the problem? I’m sure we can work something out to find a time.”

“Well,” he told me, “it’s like this. I don’t drink coffee! So I’m afraid that perhaps we can’t meet.” And so I said to him, “That’s actually OK, because I’ll tell you, by noontime, I’m often coffeed out, so for lunch I sometimes have a coke. I’d be GLAD to sit down with you over a coke!” And so we did.

Remember how last Sunday I asked you to think about what your passion might be - what you might be passionate about your church, or what your hopes and dreams for the future might be, or for what your soul thirsts. Paul continues in his letter, “This is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight, to help you to determine what is best.”

Insight comes with listening, and listening comes by paying attention to the deep longings of one another’s souls.

Coffee anyone? Call me!

Amen.