First Congregational UCC
October 11, 2026
Pastor Katherine Willis Pershey
"Stewards of Grace"; 1 Peter 4:8-11

Sometimes – oftentimes – the message people get in church is that they should be good people. Nice. Generous. Unselfish. Etcetera. It makes sense, after all. It's nice to be nice, especially in a culture that seems to have lost the plot on civility. But you could start to think that being a good person is actually what the Christian faith is all about.

To be clear, the life of discipleship asks something of us. If a person has decided to follow Jesus, we hope that decision will be reflected in the shape of his or her life. We like to sing "they will know we are Christians by our love." We hope that we will become Christlike. But the instructions for *how to live as Christians* can get unhitched from the *grace that makes the Christian life possible*.

If you were only ever reminded what you should do and not reminded of what God has done and is doing in our midst, we'd be making a real mess of the gospel. If your calendar and heart are full of the kinds of things good people do, you might walk away thinking what a good person you are. If your calendar and heart are not full of the kinds of things good people do, you might walk away thinking what a good person you are not. Either way, you'd be walking away thinking about you, not God. And you would probably be walking away bored. Because few things are more boring than sermons that include the word "should" too many times.

But this elegant little excerpt from the first letter to Peter gives us instructions for how to live as Christians that are fully hitched to the grace of God. The grace of God which is the foundation of our lives as Christians. God loves us in our brokenness, our weakness. Jesus was frustrated by people who were determined to prove their own moral perfection and had compassion for people who found themselves tangled up in storylines of sin and shame. And he poured out his life for us, stretching out his arms of love on the hard wood of the cross so that everyone might come within the reach of his saving embrace.[1]

All of the things we do as disciples – follow, serve, love, care, advocate, befriend, resist, worship, surrender, defend – we do in response to that saving embrace. Everything we do as disciples is in response to the goodness and grace of God. We do not do these things to earn God's grace. We do not love God and share our time, talent, and treasure for the sake of

[1] Paraphrase from the *Book of Common Prayer*

being good people. We do not practice hospitality and serve one another to avoid being bad people. Teachings like the ones we encounter in this letter are holy invitations, welcoming us to choose a Jesus-shaped way of life out of devotion, not obligation.

And in this letter, we're invited into something remarkable – to become stewards of grace. Good stewards of the manifold grace of God. I think this means we are invited to get in on what God is doing – participate in the ways the Holy Spirit is moving – to be the hands and feet of Christ. This might sound daunting. It's one thing to bake cookies to bring to the fellowship event; it's another thing altogether to bake cookies as if the hands shaping the dough are the hands of Christ. But that's what it means to be the Church. All of the ways we serve – the ways that are seen and noticed, and the ways that are often forgotten – are ordinary on the surface. But we are stewards of God's grace through our cookies and our kindnesses. We are stewards of God's grace by being good listeners and patient Sunday School teachers and making sure the church building is safe.

We are stewards of God's grace when we advocate for our neighbors and reject hatred and pray for our enemies. We are stewards of God's grace when we retell our sacred story about sacrificial love, radical forgiveness, and the triumph of life over death.

This letter tells us that whoever speaks must speak the words of God; whoever serves must serve with God's strength. That *does* sound daunting. Enough to shut your mouth. Enough to cap your pen when it is time to sign up and sit on your hand instead of raising it high. Who dares speak the words or act with the strength of God? But this, this is what it means to be the church – to be a community empowered by the Holy Spirit. We're not on our own. We're buoyed by something greater. We receive so many gifts from God – so many varied and abundant gifts.

It takes a lifetime to discover all of the unique gifts that God gives each of us. And at the end of the day, everything we do as followers of Christ – and everything we do as Christ's church – is for the glory of God. It was never about being good people or not being good people. We are free of that burden. Thank God. So, serve courageously. To God belongs the power and glory forever. Amen!

Charge to the Church
Sarah Wilterdink Installation
October 11, 2026

What a blessed and auspicious day to gather as a church to Install Sarah Wilterdink as our Pastor for Children, Youth and Intergenerational Ministries. It is my privilege to give the charge to church and to you. Likewise, I am grateful for the ministry we share.

One of my first mentors advised me to be careful using words like “friends” or “family” when addressing the church. He said “Your church members, are not simply your friends. They are God’s people and you are a prophet in their midst. Be careful of familial language because it invites every family pattern into the life of the church - and some will not benefit God’s kingdom.”

He was right: every family brings their helpful and hurtful patterns. But part of me stiffens hearing these things. I still say “friends,” and I still believe we are a form of family and together are the living body of the Risen Christ. But, in speaking about friends and family, Jesus did say: Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet’s hometown.”

The Apostle Paul gives an even more intimate image to consider. Paul said God equips us all of us in certain ways to build up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ. So, it is with the image of the living Body of Christ, closer than friend or family, that we promote the health and growth of our whole body, by building each other up through love.

So, knowing Sarah has long been a kind of friend, and we a kind of faith family, how will we covenant and love one another with deep mutual intimacy cultivating our maturation in Christ?

As a church we will promise to provide for you and your family by fulfilling our financial commitments. We will ask you to observe your sabbath both weekly and yearly.
We will care for you by seeing you as a beloved child of God; one who brings an array of skills, education, and experience. But we will not expect you to be all things to all people; for we all limited and believe only our Creator is infinite. We will understand the covenant being made here today is holy and full of profound, blessed possibilities.

We will recognize that Sarah's leadership comes to us through an unlikely path: from within our own midst. And heading Jesus words, we promise not to confuse Sarah with the Pioneer and Perfector of faith, Jesus the Christ. We will work with her God-given talents. We will invite the Holy Spirit to transform our understating of one another from simple friendships, into the mutual calling of Pastor and Congregation. We do this because trust and love are what built up the body of Christ here at First Congregational UCC. Trust and Love is what has brought us together, and that is what will carry us forward.

Friends, once again, the fertile grounds of First Congregational have yielded another rare harvest: one of our own being licensed into service as a Pastor to our church. And speaking from my own experience I have found this church quite capable of the unusual and enriching blessing of supporting individuals to transition into new, faithful roles.

And Sarah, you are about to make a commitment to lead a people with the gifts of the Spirit. Yours is a commitment to a lifetime of growing in scripture and prayer. And your task is to see each and every one of us with the eyes of our Savior; and behold our beauty and brokenness. God asks you set aside your judgments, predilections, and personal proclivities for the weight and glory of Immanuel to manifest grace and hope and a new future- through your witness. May you share the Good News is word, deed, and character at all times and all place. Further you will help lead our church, children and youth in some uncertain times and

ugly times. So, let me remind you this: that with God, you are enough; with God, all things are possible, for with God - who can stand against us?

Friends, the journey ahead is through uncharted waters. Our work of ministry is a complex network of relationships and institutional needs that is our mutual body, of which we are all interdependent members. May the Lord bless our friendships with wisdom, grace and faith. May we continue to carefully sow and nourish harvests yet to come. May we be capable of receiving and sharing all manor of unusual and enriching blessings in this, our hometown and beyond. Amen.