

MATTAPOISETT CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH

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<https://youtu.be/uJ5sW5WHzb0>

SCRIPTURE: MATTHEW 10:16

“See, I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves; so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves.

Today we look past, and we look forward.

Tomorrow is Memorial Day, when we remember and honor the men and women who died while serving in the U.S. military. We remember and honor their valor and their sacrifice. Perhaps we will visit cemeteries and decorate the final earthly resting places of those who made the ultimate sacrifice of life in service to this nation. We thank God for those who, through the years, have put themselves in harm’s way for the sake of their country. We pray protection for those who serve now, and for peace among nations and among peoples.

At the same time, we look toward new horizons as we honor this year’s graduates. We celebrate all graduates, of any level, from any program or school. Graduations are important, not because they are endings, but because they are beginnings. “Graduation” comes from a Latin word that means “step,” as in, one step in a series of steps. Graduation is all about what comes next.

All of us fall into that category, and pretty often, because we are always graduating to the next step: new career, new home, new phase of life, new outlook, new information. At each step, we do well to consider what we want to carry forward, and what we want to leave behind. This isn’t easy.

To illustrate: In the 15 years we’ve been married, we’ve moved four times. Each time, our sincere intention has been to sort through our collective stuff and discern what to bring along with us. Each time, we end up bringing it all. Now that we are sheltering here in the parsonage, we’re noticing just how much stuff we’ve collected through the years. Some of our boxes haven’t been unpacked since before we met!

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Of course, the discernment involved in making next steps isn't just about physical stuff – any more than college graduation is about moving out of the dormitory. It's about our ideas, too. As we graduate to the next step, what ideas do we hold onto, and which do we leave behind? What about our habits? Our assumptions? Our plans? Our values? There comes a time when we may graduate from those things, too. Or, we may decide to carry them into the next phase of life.

Today's scripture might be considered part of Jesus' baccalaureate address to his disciples. The verse is sandwiched between Jesus' words regarding service and simplicity of life, and the dangers his followers could face. Between those two considerations – service and potential danger – Jesus offers a meaty bit of advice when he names four animals: sheep, wolves, serpents and doves.

First, the sheep and the wolves. These are two fundamentally different animals, both of them creatures of God. Sheep and wolves have entirely different temperaments, different intelligences, different vulnerabilities, different priorities. In his teaching, Jesus pointed out many contrasts: sheep and wolves, sheep and goats, Gentiles and Jews. Jesus often emphasized that we live in a world of difference. We live in an incredibly complex and rich world of fascinating differences, and we are experiencing this more and more every day.

Jesus doesn't suggest we fear these differences. He doesn't say we should fight against them or run away from them. Jesus says we best encounter our world of difference by becoming something other than a vulnerable sheep. Namely, we are to become like serpents and doves. (In the original Greek, the word "be" is really "become.")

Jesus' followers are to become "wise" and "innocent." Those words bear a closer look. The word "wise" is not the word some of you might expect, which would be the Greek *Sophia*. *Sophia* does mean wisdom. It's the kind of wisdom that comes from learning facts. It comes from having been taught by a teacher, an expert, or master – or maybe a book or a webpage. Knowledge has been imparted to you, and you can act on it. If you have *sophia* knowledge, you are smart. You would do really well on the Jeopardy game show.

Serpent wisdom is different. The word is *phronimos*. This wisdom comes to you after you have some life under your belt. You've thought deeply about a subject and have incorporated it into what you already know. It's practical knowledge. It's not about knowing the correct answer so much as having insight and experience. It has to do with good judgment and good character. It means openness to change, and adaptability.

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You might think of the difference between *sophia* wisdom and *phronimos* wisdom as the difference between two cooks. One makes the most extraordinary dishes by following a complicated recipe and using special techniques he learned at prestigious cooking institute. The other can go into any cupboard, pull out what's there and whip up something quite tasty without a recipe – a pinch of this and a handful of that.

The word “innocent” is interesting, too. Literally, it means, “unmixed.” In Jesus’ time, doves were believed to be pure, biologically speaking; it’s why they were used for sacrifices. As it pertains to people, the word (*akeraios*) means candid. It means honest, straightforward. It means no hidden agendas, pretense, or compromise.

When you put these two things together, it means both a) being adaptable to change and using your good judgment in any situation that comes along, and b) knowing deep down where you stand, and what are the pure, uncompromised things that define you as you.

When his disciples graduated from their community, that was Jesus’ advice. He said, You are going into the world of many different beings, and there may be some danger. So, know how to adapt, and know when not to compromise. When you take the next step, know what to take with you and what to leave behind. Know when to quit and know when to never give up. Know when to trust your gut and know when to change your thinking.

This is a lifetime endeavor! Discernment, which is what Jesus is talking about, doesn’t necessarily get easier the more steps we take! From time to time we might think, “Now I have arrived!” Or “Now I get it!” But Jesus tells us, there’s always another step. There’s always more to learn, so keep becoming more of a serpent, and more of a dove, with every passing day.

And, we can know this: We are always in the loving hands of God, no matter where, no matter when, no matter what. Amen.

