**June 2, 2024**

**Second Sunday after Pentecost**

**“Stretch Out Your Hand”**

**Mark 2:23-3:6**

Today’s passage from Mark contains two short stories about how the presence of Jesus reveals the reign of God in ordinary things. The first story concerns feeding people on the day of rest, which violates the strict laws of the religious leaders of the time. The second begins on the same day, with Jesus going to the place of worship, *again*.

You might skip quickly over the *again* that starts the story in order to get to the main action of the story when a man with a “withered hand” is healed by Jesus, another act on the sabbath day that draws the ire of the authorities.

But let’s pause here, on the *again*. The *again* tells us that this is not the first time that Jesus and the people with him have gathered here, at the place of worship. Is it the first time that they saw the man with the withered hand? We don’t know. In fact, we don’t know very much about the man, except for that one descriptor.

Perhaps the man had been “withered” since birth, and had taken up residence in the temple, impoverished and hoping to beg or borrow enough money for his sacrificial offering. Maybe the man was a busy and wealthy landowner with a recent injury who had just popped into the temple to see what all the fuss about this new teacher was about. Maybe he himself was one of Jesus’ followers, and his hand was only the object of attention for the first time that day.

But, poor or prosperous, connected or lonely, we know that he did not ask for healing. Again, we don’t know why. Maybe he had been coming to the temple every day for years hoping for healing that never came until he just gave up. Maybe he did not ask for healing because he felt he did not need it. Or maybe he did not ask, because he hadn’t yet worked up the courage. But whatever his reason, Jesus offered healing anyway.

Here you are, dear reader, in worship on a Sabbath day. Maybe you have come from a long habit, as you have week after week, almost giving up hope for healing. Maybe you feel that your life is just fine without Jesus’ healing touch, but you popped in for some other reason. Maybe you haven’t been able to articulate, even to yourself, what you need today, let alone say it aloud. Whatever the reason, Jesus extends his hand to you now and offers you healing. You don’t even have to ask. The living Christ knows what you need and offers it to you without question, conversation or negotiation. May you receive the healing that Christ extends!

June 9, 2024

Third Sunday after Pentecost

“God’s Will”

Mark 3:20-35

Jesus is teaching and preaching, telling stories, and inviting listeners to a new way of life. In the midst of the teaching, someone brings word that his mother, and his brothers are waiting outside.

Jesus responds to their presence with what seems like uncharacteristic harshness. “Who are my brothers and mother?” he asks, looking around at the gathered crowd. And he answers himself. It is not Mary and her sons who are his family, but his gathered family and friends.

It may be the first, but it certainly is not the last time that Christ followers are referred to as a family. Many congregations consider one another a family. Is your congregation one of these? What are some of the pitfalls and positives of calling your congregation a family?

First of all, consider the positives. A family at its best is a place of sanctuary, growth, humor, help, joy in its season, and a willingness to weep when grief comes. Some people find such a place in their families of origin. Others find this sanctuary in found families created in adulthood, including church congregations.

What about the pitfalls? Well, it can be difficult to enter a family with its many customs, rituals, inside jokes, and ideas that may take years for outsiders to understand. And, while healthy families are sanctuaries, families that are unhealthy can be containers for toxic secrets and even abuse. Third, the very intimacy that creates a sense of deep belonging in families can also create a sense of being suffocated or constrained into a particular role.

If your church community considers itself a family, this may be a good Sunday for conversation about what that might mean for you. What are the positives of you considering yourself a family? What are the challenges? What are the ways that you can nurture the intimacy of family and still be open and welcoming to outsiders?

June 16, 2024

Fourth Sunday after Pentecost

“Flourishing”

Mark 4:26–34

Jesus spoke to his followers in a parable about planting seeds. In cold climates, seeds planted can take many months to grow into plants and bear fruit. The job of gardeners and farmers is not only patience. The job is also to tend; to fertilize and water and weed until at last the fragile plants break forth, and then leaves, then flowers and finally produce. *It takes a long time for seeds planted to bear fruit.*

This week, many congregations will be celebrating Juneteenth. Juneteenth has been celebrated for generations in African-American communities, although for some communities this will be the first year that this celebration is acknowledged. *It takes a long time for seeds planted to bear fruit.*

The seeds of Juneteenth were planted on June 19th, 1865 when troops rode into Galveston, Texas announcing the end of the civil war, and the freedom of all enslaved Americans. This was good news, yes. But this good news came more than two and half years after the signing of the emancipation proclamation. *It takes a long time for seeds planted to bear fruit.*

Juneteenth was heartily celebrated in the early part of the 20th century with rodeos, speakers, preachers, music, worship and heaping tables of food, but those celebrations were largely shut down during the Jim Crow era. Recognition of Juneteenth began to be revived in black communities by activists in the 1960s and 1970s. The first legislation to make Juneteenth a national holiday was introduced in 1996. The legislation was finally signed into law in 2021. *It takes a long time for seeds planted to bear fruit.*

Whether your Juneteenth celebration this year is generations old, or is new this year, remember that it is the fruit of a seed planted decades before you were born. And the cycle does not end with this generation. As is the nature of growing things, the fruit that you enjoy in this season will produce seeds that will also, in their time, bear fruit. *It takes a long time for seeds planted to bear fruit. May the seeds you plant this Juneteenth, however small or mighty, grow beautiful fruit in its season.*

June 23, 2024

Fifth Sunday after Pentecost

“Pushing the Boat Out”

Mark 4:35–41

The United Church of Christ celebrates our 67th anniversary this weekend. These opening paragraphs of our history describe the ways in which very different faith communities prepared to live into the slogan “in essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; in all things, charity.” How does your congregation still live out that slogan today?

*On Tuesday, June 25,1957, at Cleveland, Ohio, the Evangelical and Reformed Church, 23 years old, passionate in its impulse to unity, committed to “liberty of conscience inherent in the Gospel,” and the Congregational Christian Churches, 26 years old, a fellowship of biblical people under a mutual covenant for responsible freedom in Christ, joined together as the United Church of Christ. The new church embodied the essence of both parents, a complement of freedom with order, of the English and European Reformations with the American Awakenings, of separatism with 20th-century ecumenism, of presbyterian with congregational polities, of neoorthodox with liberal theologies. Two million members joined hands…  
  
A message was sent to the churches from the Uniting General Synod, signed by its moderators, Louis W. Goebel and George B. Hastings, its co-presidents, and co-secretaries Sheldon E. Mackey and Fred S. Buschmeyer. After acknowledging the separate ancestries of the parties to the union and citing ecumenical “relatives” of both denominations, the message stated, “Differences in ecclesiastical procedure, which in sundry places and times have occasioned tensions and disorders, are appointed their secondary place and are divested of evil effect.” The union, the message continued, was possible because the “two companies of Christians hold the same basic belief: that Christ and Christ alone is the head of the Church … From him [we] derive the understanding of God, … participation in the same spirit, the doctrines of faith, the influence toward holiness, the duties of divine worship, the apprehension of the significance of baptism and the Lord’s Supper, the observance of church order, the mutual love of Christians and their dedication to the betterment of the world” (“Report on the Uniting General Synod:” Advance, July 12, 1957, p. 22).*

You can read more of the story of the birth and early decade of our denomination by navigating to:

<https://www.ucc.org/who-we-are/about/history/#united-church>

June 30, 2024

Sixth Sunday after Pentecost

“Healing Powers”

Mark 5:21–43

Today we celebrate the United Church of Christ’s commitment to growing into a fully Open and Affirming (ONA) fellowship, as we read a story of Jesus healing those who have been marginalized and outcast. Following Christ, the UCC has been a beacon for healing and hope for those pushed to the edges because of their sexual or gender identity.

“Beginning in 1969, the United Church of Christ has advocated for the LGBT community. From the campaign to decriminalize same-sex relationships to support for marriage equality, the UCC has made a difference in the lives of LGBT citizens and their families. The issues have changed over the decades, but the basic commitment to full inclusion and human rights remains the same…

The ONA National Gathering this coming September is the family reunion of the Open and Affirming movement in the United Church of Christ! Members of any church—ONA or not-yet ONA—are welcome to attend. Expect a celebration with exuberant music, inspiring preaching, and workshops that will feed your mind and soul.

While the Religious Right and their allies in federal and state governments are renewing their attack on the basic civil liberties of LGBTQ Americans, and our international queer siblings are experiencing attacks and unconscionable laws, our growing community of churches needs to respond with confidence, commitment and faith.

This September’s National Gathering will focus on how ONA churches can act faithfully in our current social and political climate. We’ll learn best practices from vital and growing ONA churches. And, as is always true at our Gatherings, we’ll explore the intersections of our movement with other movements for social, racial, economic, and environmental justice.”

Find out more about how to register and at openandaffirming.org

July 7, 2024

Seventh Sunday after Pentecost

“Sent with Power”

Mark 6:1–13

Mark 6:7-9 tells us that *(Jesus) called the twelve and began to send them out two by two, and gave them authority over the unclean spirits. He ordered them to take nothing for their journey except a staff; no bread, no bag, no money in their belts; but to wear sandals and not to put on two tunics. (from the NRSV)*

Some folks in the United Church of Christ jokingly refer to evangelism as “the e-word.” Evangelist simply means “messenger of good news.” And yet, the word has become associated with the most damaging aspects of Christian experience. Even the the idea of evangelism can call to mind uncomfortable or even traumatizing past experiences. And yet, as Jesus called those early disciples to a life of evangelism, he calls followers today.

Take some time today to consider the word evangelist.

Do you think the idea of United Church of Christ evangelism can be refreshed and renewed for a new generation? How might that be accomplished?

How do you feel when you hear the word evangelism? Pay attention to where the word settles in your body. Do you feel quite comfortable? Very uncomfortable? Why do you think you have that response?

What do you think the role of an evangelist is? How does the role in modern times echo the call that Jesus made to his original disciples?

What are some ways that your faith community engages in evangelism now? What are some ways that your community could evangelize that it does not yet?

July 14, 2024

Eighth Sunday after Pentecost

“God-inspired Joy”

2 Samuel 6:1–5, 12b–19

*A prayer of confession based on 2 Samuel 6:5*

Reader One: David and all the house of Israel were dancing before the Lord with all their might, with songs and lyres and harps and tambourines and castanets and cymbals.

Reader Two: In those days, the people were so delighted in God that they whirled and spun, sang and shouted, and played their instruments as loudly as they could.

Reader One: Why is it that we cannot remember the last time that we whirled our bodies in grateful amazement? Why do our songs fall tuneless from our mouths? Why is our praise so constrained, our rejoicing so quiet?

Reader Two: And when was the last time we did anything at all before our God with “all of our might?” Our prayers are half-hearted, our rejoicing is lukewarm, and our commitment to be fully present to the presence of God is flagging.

Reader One: But it is not too late, for us, sluggish though we have been. Sound the trumpet! Strike up the tambourines and castanets and cymbals! Play the instruments with all your might! Sing aloud and LOUD! Let God know of your gratitude and delight!

(Congregational dance break.)

Reader Two (a bit breathless, from dancing): Friends, by the grace of God, we are here! By the glory of God, we are a grateful and joyful people!

Reader One: By the sweat on our brows, by the breath that moves within and through us, by the bodies that awoke this day ready to sing and dance and move, we give thanks for God’s presence with us, even when we forget to be present with God.

Congregation: We are God’s people and so we sing! We are God’s beloved people and so we dance! We are God’s beloved, forgiven people and so we shout, AMEN!

July 21, 2024

Ninth Sunday after Pentecost

“Wherever You Are”

2 Samuel 7:1–14a

In today’s reading, the Holy One speaks and asks for a place to live, and then offers specifications about what is needed. Is God still speaking to your congregation, asking for a place to live? Even if you are in the early stages of listening for God’s voice, the time may be right to call on the Church Building and Loan Fund.

According to their website, “Our vision is to transform communities by helping the Church live into God’s economy. We assist new and renewing congregations of the United Church of Christ—and other Christian denominations in the United States—with programs and services that help a congregation [plan](https://cblfund.org/plan), [raise](https://cblfund.org/raise), [finance](https://cblfund.org/finance), and [build](https://cblfund.org/build) projects, including property and social enterprises, that advance the mission of the church.”

“The United Church of Christ Church Building & Loan Fund offers several programs to support and help facilitate your project planning process, including: Visioning & Strategic Planning, Leadership & Capacity Building, Training & Learning Programs, including Partners in Building, and Congregational Legacy Planning…

Fulfill your vision and mission. Build a new sanctuary. Renovate an old building or construct a new one. Add space for your educational or family life ministry. Expand your staff. Grow your endowment…

The United Church of Christ Church Building & Loan Fund offers the only professional capital campaign services authorized by the United Church of Christ. Our capital fundraising executives help churches meet their fundraising goals, and our services are cost-effective…

Our loan programs are available for site purchase, construction and renovation, building purchase, loan refinancing, energy and environmental upgrades and disaster recovery. We serve new United Church of Christ congregations that are younger than 30 years, as well as renewing UCC congregations of any age—and Christian churches (regardless of denomination) in the U.S….

The United Church of Christ Church Building & Loan Fund facilitates several programs that support the development phase of projects and enterprises, including the Adese Fellowship, Redeem!, and Partners in Vision.”

Find out details about all these opportunities at https://cblfund.org/.

July 28, 2024

Tenth Sunday after Pentecost

“God’s Abundant Presence”

John 6:1–21

**Ecumenical** means promoting or relating to unity among the world's Christian Churches. The United Church of Christ, which was founded just under seventy years ago out of an **ecumenical** impulse following the second world war, is founded on the principle that working together, people of many faith traditions can achieve more justice than any one organization working alone.

Inspired by today’s story, in which one gift multiplies to feed an entire crowd, many UCC churches have gathered **ecumenically** with other organizations to create feeding programs inspired by the story of the loaves and fishes.

One of those is Pilgrim Church in Fond du Lac, WI. Founded in 1982, Loaves and Fishes in Fond du Lac provides meals to approximately 150-200 local people twice a week. Pilgrim church provides volunteers for quarterly meal preparation that include donating and preparing food, set-up, serve, clean-up and distributing leftovers. The number of families served continues to grow and the program’s websites emphasizes its open and welcoming nature. “Sometimes they may not be hungry for food but for companionship. The lonely people are hungry too; we never judge. This is everyone’s program. It is **ecumenical** and covers all faiths.”

Another is St. Luke’s UCC in Jeffersonville IN. Loaves and Fishes in Jeffersonville is a weekly community meal in partnership with other local congregations and housed at St. Luke’s. Every Saturday, groups volunteer to plan, prepare, serve and clean up a meal for individuals who might not otherwise have a hot meal that day. Much more than a soup kitchen, Loaves and Fishes provides a sense of community and welcome to those who might not find welcome elsewhere.

Another Loaves and Fishes (this one called Fish and Loaves) program in Taylor, MI counts St. Paul UCC in Taylor among its charter members. Fish & Loaves Community Food Pantry, a cooperative, non-sectarian, non-profit, faith based initiative seeking to insure adequate food and nutrition for all residents within seven local communities: "client choice" pantry that allows individuals and families to "shop" on a monthly or bi-monthly basis for items they need, providing not only food but dignity to all they serve.

How will the story of the loaves and fishes inspire YOUR congregation?

August 4, 2024

Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost

“Bread of Life”

John 6:24–35

A Communion litany based on John 6:24-35

One voice: In the beginning, the Holy Three danced in the chaos just before creation. Out of their dance was formed All-That-Is, and they looked at it and blessed it, calling it very, very good.

Many voices: One of the parts of that creation was humanity. That’s all of us! Created in God’s image, we sometimes believed that we, alone, were All-That-Is, and our arrogance drove us from the beauty and peace that The Holy Three wished for us.

One voice: Many voices called throughout time, for humanity to return to our place in All-That-Is. But we did not always listen. When the time was right, one part of the Holy Three, that part called Christ Jesus, came to speak so we could hear.

Many voices: Jesus said, I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty. And the people replied, Teacher, give us this bread always.

One voice: And so, on the night before Jesus was killed by those who were threatened by his message of love and care for All-That-Is, he gathered with his closest friends and chosen family, and he gave them bread, saying “This is my body, the living bread that gives life to the world.” After they ate, he passed them a cup and said “This is the cup of new life, that you might believe in the one whom the Holy Three has sent.” Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.

Many voices: And so they ate and drank. And so we eat and drink and remember and rejoice.

One voice: Let us pray. Brother Jesus, we thank you that you have given us the bread that is your body, the cup that is the source of life. We eat and drink today in the strong name of the Holy Three - Creator, the Christ and the Redeemer. Amen.

August 11, 2024

Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost

“Shaping Community”

Ephesians 4:25-5:2

In the passage from Ephesians today, Paul calls the members of the church in Ephesus to build and shape their community. Because God is still speaking today, prophets continue to urge the church to intentionally build and shape the communities they are called to.

If you are interested in reading a more recent twist on how to build the body of Christ, take a look at Pilgrim Press’s *Building Up a New World: Congregational Organizing for Transformative Impact* by Anne Dunlap and Vahisha Hasan.

The book asserts that “the church is an organizing body. No matter how big or small the membership roll, no matter a rural or urban location, churches around the world and across generations organize people:

* to educate in Sunday school or at public lectures;
* to feed at potluck luncheons and soup kitchens;
* to comfort through funerals, visitation, and refugee resettlement;
* to uplift with worship, public witness, and policy advocacy.

There's not a congregation that doesn't organize!

But how to organize—effectively and justly for the transformation of the world—remains a frequently asked question. Audre Lorde wrote, "The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house," therefore community-organizing tools from diverse and marginalized groups are essential for the work of liberation.

Congregations will be invaluably equipped through the stories, practical wisdom, and diverse perspectives of Building Up a New World, with chapters such as:

* Organizing Congregations for Impact
* Building a Just Economy
* Resisting White Nationalism
* From Potluck to Policy Reform
* and many more.”

You can order this and many other books on leadership, congregational change, and community building from the Pilgrim Press. https://www.thepilgrimpress.com/

August 18, 2024

Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost

“Wisdom Quest”

1 Kings 2:10–12, 3:3–14

It’s the time of year when many of us prepare members of our households - or ourselves - to return to school. If you are a life-long learner and would like to return to school, the United Church of Christ has many opportunities for you, including Pathways. Pathways, an online program in progressive theology, offers many points of entry and programs of different lengths and intensity depending on what the student would like to focus on.

“PATHWAYS offers you a program for progressive theological engagement that values the past without being limited by it, moving intentionally into the present while looking boldly towards the future. We provide a welcoming online space to bring your questions, doubts, and desire to deepen your understanding. Pathways welcome all people who yearn for a still-speaking God. Whether you are on the path to authorized ministry, want to hone your current skills, or just want to explore your faith more deeply, we have a program for you.

### What Makes PATHWAYS Unique

Why does a Pathways education work so well for its students?

* Affordable, Accessible, and Flexible – We are able to include students from a diversity of regions, backgrounds, and economic means, with coursework that flexes around the rest of your day-to-day life.
* Learner-Centered Adult Education – Our pedagogical approach, including weekly readings and facilitated online discussion forums, allows you to focus on your own personal educational goals so that you can get out of each course whatever is most relevant to your own needs.
* Asynchronous Education – Rather than following a traditional semester and set class-times, with just a computer and internet-access, you can opt-in to weekly forums for our six-week regular courses, four-week Explorer courses, or 12-week UCC history and polity courses.”

To find out more and to register for Pathways, navigate to https://www.secucc.org/ministries/pathways/

August 25, 2024

Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost

“At Home with God”

Psalm 84

We don’t know how the original would have sounded, but modern translations usually divide Psalm 84 into five verses, which makes it perfect for praying during the week from Monday through Friday. For the next five days of the week, pick a phrase or two from each verse to read in the lectio divina style.

Lectio divina is an ancient method of prayer which invites the pray-er into a deeper attitude of listening and responding to God through scripture. To pray lectio divina, set aside a time of 25-30 minutes. The five steps of lectio devina are preparation (a time of silence), reading (reading a single word or phrase slowly and carefully 2-3 times), meditation (asking the reading to open its meaning to you today), praying (responding to what you have heard) and contemplation (welcoming the Word deeply into your heart and soul). With Psalm 84, you may wish to pray with these or other phrases.

Monday: How lovely is your dwelling place… OR My heart and my flesh sing for joy…

Tuesday: Even the sparrow finds a home, and the swallow a nest at your altars…OR Happy are those who live in your house, ever singing your praise…

Wednesday: Happy are those whose strength is in you… OR They go from strength to strength, the God of gods will be seen in Zion…

Thursday: Lord God of hosts, hear my prayer give ear, O God of Jacob!... OR O God;  look on the face of your anointed…

Friday: No good thing does the Lord withhold from those who walk uprightly… OR  Lord of hosts, happy is everyone who trusts in you…