March 5, 2023

**Second Sunday in Lent**

John 3:1-17

Bold Blessing

*UCC Women’s Week, March 5-11*

Today we meet Nicodemus, a leader and teacher of the law. As a leader and teacher, Nicodemus is the one who other people come to for answers. If a conundrum is too complicated for the average person to unravel, Nicodemus knows what to think.

But although he is the teacher, Nicodemus knows he is not done learning yet. Whatever discomfort or even danger compels him to visit Jesus in the dead of night, his questions are even stronger than his fear. Because of his practice of learning and teaching in the temple, Nicodemus knows that the very best way to learn is in communities of other learners. He does not try to answer the unanswerable questions by himself. He is an example and a model of what it means to be a lifelong learner.

Like Nicodemus, participants in the United Church of Christ’s Nollau Leadership Institute are life-long learners, ready to take the risks associated with seeking community to answer life’s biggest questions. According to their website, the institute “is designed to cultivate today’s leaders who are committed to creating a just, caring, and compassionate world. It is a program that acknowledges the many ways this hoped-for world is alive in each one of us, and how it comes into fuller expression when we journey together…Through in-person retreats, online interactions, and peer mentoring, Nollau provides leadership formation through a variety of learning modalities and within a community of practice. Small group work, journaling, art, embodiment, and spiritual practices are all part of the program alongside the interactive didactic sessions. The program culminates with a capstone project and consecration as a Diakonal Minister at the CHHSM Annual Gathering.

If you are interested in examining what it means to be a leader by exploring what it means to be human, to be in relationship, and to be part of something larger than yourself, CHHSM welcomes you to apply to this transformative year-long program: https://www.chhsm.org/leadership/nollau/”.

“Nollau Institute.” *CHHSM*, 25 Feb. 2022, https://www.chhsm.org/leadership/nollau/.

March 12, 2023

**Third Sunday in Lent**

John 4:5-42

Thirsty Voices

*Amistad Sunday*

In today’s story, Jesus meets a woman at a well and the two have a long and wide-ranging conversation, although by their society’s standards they should never have spoken at all. They are Samaritan and Jew. Man and woman. Traveler and townswoman. So much seems to separate them. But by the end of the story, the unnamed woman and her entire community have been transformed.

This story is often understood as a story of individual piety, about one woman’s change of heart. But what if the woman’s actions could help to strengthen and inspire entire communities? Could your whole congregation become “women-at-the-well”?

Think of it like this. In the story today, the woman is open hearted in three ways that allow her to receive from and be transformed by the living Christ.

1. She is *curious*. The first question is from Jesus, who asks for a cup of water, but then the woman counters with another question, trying to find out more information. She continued to reach out to Jesus, her questions building a bridge across the gap that separates them.
2. She is *authentic*. She could have easily told a lie, but when Jesus asks her the reality of her life, she tells Jesus the truth about herself. She does not try to cover up the messiness of reality with some more beautiful lie.
3. She is *ready*. She is confident in her faith, so when it comes time to articulate it she can do so. The woman declares she is waiting for the Messiah. She has a specific hope for the future, and she expresses it with confidence.

Is your congregation open-hearted like the woman at the well? Are you ready to see and receive Jesus however he may appear?

1. Are you, as a congregation, *curious*? Are you ready to ask questions and get to know even those who you have been told that you have no business talking to?
2. Are you, as a congregation, *authentic*? Are you willing to tell the truth about yourself, even when the truth is painful?
3. Are you, as a congregation, *ready* and able to articulate your faith? Do you have a specific hope for the future that you have language for?

The woman at the well did not know when the Living Christ would appear, but by maintaining her curiosity, authenticity, and hopefulness, she was ready to receive him when he arrived. May it be so for your congregation, too.

March 19, 2023

**Fourth Sunday in Lent**

John 9:1-41

Restored

*One Great Hour of Sharing Offering*

For many churches, generations of givers have placed their tithe to the church in a basket or plate that is passed during worship. Usually taking place toward the end of the worship service, the receiving of the offering in this way was both practical and also symbolic of the gifts that each congregation member has to offer. In the past couple of years, spurred by pandemic changes, many congregations have made a shift from receiving the offering in person to receiving it online or virtually. This shift in giving is the tip of the iceberg, a symbol of all the changes that have visited all churches in these unprecedented times.

In today’s story, Jesus’ healing of a man blind from birth is met with skepticism and uncertainty by those who have known the man. They are not prepared for this change and may feel ill equipped to handle it. Like the townspeople, you may feel unready for change. And yet, you have been living with and adapting through change as it happens both without and within.

In your lifetime, there has been nearly unfathomable change in the world. Borders have opened and closed, names of countries have changed, allies have banded together to make war on other nations, and then turned on one another, and the English language has added hundreds of new words to the dictionary. (Before 2020, had you ever heard or used the word “superspreader” before?)

And that doesn’t even count the individual changes that you have adapted to in your lifetime. You have weathered and even thrived through changes in self-understanding, knowledge, relationships, emotional landscape, climate, education, fortune, health, travels, travails, employment status, living arrangements, and multiple television remotes with their array of mysterious black on black buttons.

You may push back against change or wish it would not come so fast, but in fact your whole life has been preparing you for the changes we are experiencing now. Whether your giving is the “old” way in a passed plate, or a “new” way through a computer terminal, you have everything you need to weather the changes around you.

*One Great Hour of Sharing®* is one of four special mission offerings of the United Church of Christ. This Lenten Offering supports the disaster, refugee, and development ministries of the United Church of Christ within Wider Church Ministries. https://www.ucc.org/giving/ways-to-give/our-churchs-wider-mission/one-great-hour-of-sharing/

March 26, 2023

**Fifth Sunday in Lent**

John 11:1-45

Breath of Hope

Traveling with his disciples, Jesus learns that his friend Lazarus is ill. Although his friends urge him to go to Lazarus at once, Jesus continues to travel and teach. When he reaches Lazarus’s hometown, he meets his friends Mary and Martha, who give him the news that their beloved brother Lazarus has died. Jesus is moved to tears at this.

This is a short recap of a long story that is worth reading in its entirety. You will find in the book of John, chapter 11, if you have not heard it already in worship. As you read, notice that several times Jesus proclaims that the healing of Lazarus will be to show God’s glory. This story reveals that God’s glory is revealed not only when Lazarus is raised but whenever those who are bound or considered dead are set free.

As far as we know, this is the only time Jesus commands someone to “Come out!” As you read this story, listen! Is The Living Christ saying those same words to you? What death do you need to come out of?

Perhaps it is time to come out of the closet, embracing for yourself and to others in your life the totality of who God made you to be. Maybe it’s time to come out of a suffocating relationship, one that stifles your growth and life. Maybe it’s time to come out of a job or career, taking new steps into a new life. Maybe it's the right time to come out from under the heavy weight of limits you or others have placed on you because of your abilities.

Listen! Jesus is saying, Come out! because it shows God’s glory when you live no longer bound, but as your full and true self.

And pay close attention to the end of the story. After commanding Lazarus to come out, Jesus gives another command to the wider community. They are to help to unbind the resurrected man. So, the process of coming out is not an individual one. It requires the help of a wider supportive community who can provide prayer, assistance, shelter, and encouragement.

How can you both come out yourself and support others in the process of coming out? This is how the glory of God is shown indeed!

April 2, 2023

**Palm/Passion Sunday**

Matthew 26:14-27:66

Palm Sunday

This is the first day of Holy Week. Each day of this week is an opportunity to draw closer to Christ, as we mark, with him, his walk to the cross. Each day you are given a very short prayer. Take this with you and keep it somewhere where you can refer to it often like in your bag or in your car. Tape them to a mirror or to the refrigerator. Be mindful of this Holy Week, even as you go about your life.

Palm Sunday (April 2) On this day, Jesus enters Jerusalem.

**Jesus, today let me lift my voice in praise of you.**

Monday (April 3) On this day, Jesus heals and teaches.

**Jesus, today show me ways that I can follow you by teaching or healing.**

Tuesday (April 4) On this day, Jesus visits the temple and turns the tables.

**Jesus, today speak through me to dismantle systems of injustice and economic oppression.**

Wednesday (April 5) Scripture says nothing about what Jesus does on this day.

**Jesus, today create in me a still heart as I breathe into the deep quiet of your love.**

Thursday (April 6) Jesus gathers to share one last meal with his friends.

**Jesus, today let me show hospitality to all.**

Friday (April 7) Jesus is crucified.

**Jesus, today give me courage to follow you even to places of death or despair.**

Saturday (April 8) Jesus is in the tomb.

**Jesus, today grant me hope for resurrection even in desolation**.

Sunday (April 9) Christ is risen!

**Jesus, today help me find you in unexpected people or places.**

April 9, 2023

**Easter**

John 20:1-18

Today we celebrate Resurrection Day! The women that first Easter Sunday did not know it was resurrection day, though, when they arose in the dark and made their way tentatively to the tomb where they had laid their friend and teacher. Still, although they did not know what they would find, they moved forward into the pre-dawn darkness, ready to perform what they believe would be a last act of love and service for their friend.

“Perhaps it is no wonder,” Dorothy Sayers wrote in the essay *Are Women Human?*, published nearly 100 years ago, “that the women were first at the Cradle and last at the Cross. They had never known a man like this Man - there never has been such another. A prophet and teacher who never nagged at them, never flattered or coaxed or patronized; who never made arch jokes about them, never treated them either as "The women, God help us!" or "The ladies, God bless them!"; who rebuked without querulousness and praised without condescension; who took their questions and arguments seriously; who never mapped out their sphere for them, never urged them to be feminine or jeered at them for being female; who had no axe to grind and no uneasy male dignity to defend; who took them as he found them and was completely unself-conscious. There is no act, no sermon, no parable in the whole Gospel that borrows its pungency from female perversity; nobody could possibly guess from the words and deeds of Jesus that there was anything "funny" about woman's nature.”

Centuries of church dogma and male leadership, including many periods in which systems of power explicitly sought to oppress and silence women, has not suppressed the power and wonder of this resurrection reality. In his life, Jesus loved and respected women just as they were, and after his death, they were the ones who cared for him and spoke the first words about him. Jesus needed the women in his circle as much as they needed him.

On this Resurrection Day, we rejoice that Christ came to bring new life to all people. And we specifically celebrate the women who waited at the cross, who went to the tomb and who told the first stories about our Risen Savior.

Quotation from Sayers, Dorothy L., *Are Women Human?,* William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 2005.

April 16, 2023

**Second Sunday of Easter**

John 20:19-31

Holy Language

Tuesday, April 18 is Yom HaShoah, Holocaust Remembrance Day. On a recent Yom HaShoah, Rev. Sigrid Rother of Westervillle Community United Church of Christ in Columbus, Ohio was invited by a rabbi at a local reform synagogue to speak at a Holocaust Remembrance Day service for the local Jewish community.

“I was probably the only Christian in the room. It was kind of an odd feeling,” pastor Rother remembers. But she took a breath and told her story. Rother was born and grew up in a Germany imbued with a common guilt over the atrocities of the Holocaust. Her sense of responsibility was personal as well as national. Her own father, just ten years old when Adolph Hitler came to power, had been part of the Hitler Youth and then later a Nazi pilot. Growing up in a small and impoverished Polish village, Rother believes her father’s Nazi involvement had provided an outlet for activities like camping and sports that were not offered elsewhere. “I say this,” Rother explains, “not justifying, just trying to understand. I don’t want to make him into a victim.” In the post-war years, her father worked as a miner and became a difficult alcoholic. Rother’s mother’s family was less enthusiastic about the Nazi party, but were coerced in joining the party, even though they did not agree with its policies.

All of this was in the background, but rarely mentioned in her childhood. Rother got a call to ministry while still in Germany but felt constrained by the limits of the state church there. She studied in South Africa when apartheid was being dismantled, and that experience along with her childhood gave her a strong sense of justice. “When Black Lives Matter happened, I could not but stand up, because it is so ingrained in me,” she says.

As she told this story to the group at the Remembrance Day service, Rother admits, “I was so nervous! Who do I think I am? Here are people who lost family members. Seeing survivors, with tattoos on their arms… there were tears in my eyes.” But at the end of the event, the only response was an outpouring of love and gratitude.

It took courage for Sigrid Rother to break generational silence and admit her family’s complicity in her nation’s violent past. The first steps were nerve-wracking, but the path she walked led to greater understanding and healing. May her story inform us as we take the journey toward reconciliation and the creation of the Reign of God.

April 23, 2023

**Third Sunday of Easter**

Luke 24:13-35

Breaking Bread

*Break the Silence Sunday*

A conversation about Break the Silence Sunday.

**One**: Today we Break the Silence about sexual abuse and violence, because breaking the silence can bring about healing and reparation.

**Two**: Usually we don’t break something in order to heal it. How does breaking the silence lead to repair?

**One**: The silence must be broken, because the silence in this case is one of the tools that makes violence seem acceptable, or shameful to the victims rather than the perpetrators.

**Two**: I see. It’s like the silence is another act of violence!

**One**: Yes, exactly.

**Two**: So the healing comes from talking about it.

**One**: For some people it does, if they want to talk and when they are ready to do so.

**Two**: Do you know that talking helped lead to healing in today’s scripture story?

**One**: What do you mean?

**Two**: The disciples thought Jesus was dead and gone forever. It might have been tempting to just keep quiet about their feelings, and the events that had occurred. They might have thought that keeping it inside would make the feelings about that time go away. But they knew better. Starting with the women who told the story, they kept talking about it. And eventually, that led to all of them seeing the Living Christ.

**One**: That’s right! Breaking the silence has been a path for healing since the beginning!

Break the Silence Sunday is a day set aside each year for United Church of Christ churches to speak up about the epidemic of sexual abuse and violence. Learn more about Break the Silence Sunday at https://www.ucc.org/break-the-silence-sunday/.

April 30, 2023

**Fourth Sunday of Easter**

Psalm 23

Powerful Witness

*Pacific Islander and Asian American Ministries Sunday*

*You are invited to pray deliberately through the 23rd Psalm, perhaps taking one line per day. How is new meaning revealed to you as you make your way slowly through this familiar psalm?*

God is my shepherd, I shall not want.

*Consider what it would be like to not “want.” Pray for all those who are lacking.*

God makes me lie down in green pastures,

*Touch a piece of earth with your feet, hands, or entire body. How does being in literal touch with creation help you feel closer to the Divine?*

and leads me beside still waters;

*Remember times that God has brought you through rough waters. Give thanks.*

God restores my soul, and leads me in right paths

*Pray by walking. With each step, rejoice in God’s renewing presence.*

for the sake of God's name.

*Pray using all the names of the Divine you can think of. Are there names that make you uncomfortable? Why? Which names are most meaningful to you?*

Even though I walk through the darkest valley,

*Pray for all those who have no one to pray for them. Ask God to help your prayers become acts of mercy and justice.*

I fear no evil; for you are with me;

*Remember times when you have felt afraid. What gave you courage?*

your rod and your staff--they comfort me.

*What are the tools you use in work or hobbies? Notice their shape and ask God to bless them and their use.*

You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies;

*As you eat, give special thanks for the land and the hands that produced your meals.*

you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.

*Anoint yourself. Place a small amount of lotion or oil on your head or hand, giving thanks to God for the gift of your body.*

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life,

*Give thanks for those who have shown you God’s goodness and mercy.*

and I shall dwell in the house of God my whole life long.

*Imagine the house of God. Can you draw it, or describe it in writing?*

May 7, 2023

**Fifth Sunday of Easter**

John 14:1-14

Enduring Witness

A communion liturgy based on John 14, NRSV.

Leader: Jesus said, “Believe in God, believe also in me.”

**People**: And the people said, “How can we know The Way?”

Leader: And Jesus said, “I am the Way. And the truth. And the light.”

**People**: And the people said, “Show us, and we will be satisfied.”

Leader: And Jesus said, “If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it. And so since you have asked, today I will show you one of the ways that I will always be here with you.”

**People**: And so Jesus took the bread, and broke it, and gave it to them and said, “I am the Way and the truth and the life.”

Leader: If you know me, you will know my Abba God also. And I will show you, so you remember. Take this bread. This bread is just like my body, whenever you eat it and remember all that unites you, I am with you.”

**People**: And after supper, Jesus took the cup and poured it out sharing it with them. And again he told them. “I am the Way and the truth and the life.”

Leader: Then he said “In my Abba’s house there are many rooms. And I will show you, so you remember. This is the cup of forgiveness, which is as vast as my Abba’s house in heaven. This cup is grace, poured out abundantly on all and for all.”

**People**: Then Jesus said, “I go and prepare a place for you, so that where I am, there you will be also.”

Leader: This is Christ’s table and all are welcome here. Come from the East and the West, from the North and the South to gather at this feast for forgiveness and unity.

May 14, 2023

**Sixth Sunday of Easter**

John 14:15-21

Witness of Love

*Mother’s Day*

*Rural Life Sunday*

A recent *Thursdays for the Soul* video focused on the special joys and challenges for rural churches. Rev. Barbara Howlett of Dille Parish, PA says that her joy is that everyone in her small rural congregation participates with their whole heart, mind, and soul. For her, the joy happens when her church models itself after the early church described in Acts, where all the believers were together and held everything in common. She says this is the best description of rural communities. In other congregations Howlett has served, getting to know each other is the biggest challenge. But in a rural community, the church is very visible and personal. There’s a sense of familiarity that can’t be bought or packaged, it’s innate in the character of the rural community. Howlett says she appreciates the stability of a community where people are deeply rooted, not moving in and out. Because of that stability, she believes that ministry in a rural area is more aligned with the ministry of Jesus, who was able to deeply know and understand those he ministered with. “We may be small,” Howlett adds with her infectious laugh, “but we serve a BIG GOD!”

In South Dakota, Becky Leonard is the office administrator at First Congregational UCC in Redfield, a small community of just about 2,000 residents. In spite of being a small congregation of 45 or so worshippers, this small community is able to serve the community in a number of ways. Together with another UCC church 10 miles away, the congregation runs a nonprofit apartment building that provides housing for the elderly and disabled of the community. They also have a food bank, which is important as their rural community is considered a food desert. They also support local schools with a backpack program.

*Thursdays for the Soul is a webinar series to care for the whole church. Topics are wide-ranging and are focused on the spirituality and care of people. One recent Thursday for the Soul considered the special joys and challenges for rural congregations. Find more at this link or by searching the United Church of Christ YouTube channel:* https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2FTa1-69DVA&t=598s

May 21, 2023

**Seventh Sunday of Easter**

John 17:1-11

Spirit of Witness

*Mental Health Sunday*

“Pandemic has us living at 80% of our stress capacity. This is why those minor things set us off. We aren’t going from 0 to 100 without cause. We are going from 80 to 100 with good reason. If there was no pandemic, the dog incessantly barking might cause usual stress levels to go up 20 points. We get annoyed and yell at the dog with a little more volume than strictly necessary. However, given the 80% stress we endure as a result of COVID-19, the same constant barking puts us at or over maximum capacity to cope. We might end up crying over the stubborn dog or feeling way more anger than the situation calls for.

Of course, not all of us are in the same boat. Those of us with more resources have an obligation to support those with fewer resources. We need to remember that for some of our neighbors pandemic conditions have elevated their stress levels to maximum; they are coping the best they can. Now is a time to practice compassion and not judgment. Remember that Paul tells us in Romans that we are to “owe no one anything, except to love one another.” If you are doing okay today, right now, what can you do to help someone else alleviate some of their stress? Reach out and listen before choosing what to do. Remember that people living alone, single parents, healthcare workers, retail workers, delivery people, people with physical disabilities, people with mental health challenges, People of Color, and many others have increased stress, often more than the 80% we can attribute to COVID-19.

One of the most often over-looked spiritual need is the need for community. A good spiritual practice is to intentionally connect with a community (church, AA, book club, etc.). Remember that it is okay to be stressed, to be overwhelmed, to feel what you feel in any given moment. It is not okay to ignore the stress, self-destruct, or take out our emotions on another person. We are not alone. God wants us to find life in God’s ways even now.”\*

\*Keefe, Rev. Dr. Rachael. “Recognizing Reality: The Stress of Pandemic.” *United Church of Christ Mental Health Network*, 7 Sept. 2020, https://www.mhn-ucc.org/2020/09/07/2281/.

May 28, 2023

**Pentecost Sunday**

Acts 2:1-21

*Strengthen the Church Offering*

You might have heard someone joke, “King James English was good enough for Jesus, it’s good enough for me.” Today’s story is about the first day a small and ragtag group of Jesus followers became a church – the church we still are today. It’s our story, and it’s not a story about everyone suddenly speaking the same language. It’s a story about everyone speaking - all of them, all at once - the languages of each other. This is not a story about understanding each other. It’s a story about understanding that each of us speaks to God in our own way, and God speaks to us each in our own way.

Pentecost understood this way happens all the time. It happens whenever you have a meal with a youngster whose music and ideas you don’t understand, but who you love just the same. It happens when you sit with a loved one, whose words have been lost to disease, and so you no longer understand, but you love just the same. You are speaking the language of Pentecost, when you really listen to the person sitting next to you right now, whose hopes and dreams and visions you have only gotten a glimpse of, even after a lifetime of knowing each other.

That we don’t all speak the same language doesn't make us less of a community, it makes us more of one. Whether you came to worship this morning speaking the language of health or of illness, the language of joy or of sorrow, the language of despair or hope, the language of a pounded nail or a warm hug, Pentecost is the hope that your congregation can be a place where all those languages are spoken, all are heard. May your community be a place where people, when they hear you speak, can say in wonder “they are speaking in words I can understand.”

*Today, many churches receive the Strengthen the Church (STC) Offering. STC reflects the shared commitment of people across the United Church of Christ to cooperatively build up the UCC. Conferences and the national setting equally share the gifts given by members and friends through their local congregations. The funds raised support leadership development, new churches, youth ministry, and innovation in existing congregations. By your generosity to this offering, you build up the Body of Christ.*