

Third Sunday after Pentecost, June 18, 2023 First Congregational United Church of Christ, Appleton, WI

SCRIPTURE READING Matthew 9:35-10:8

³⁵ Then Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and curing every disease and every sickness. ³⁶When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. ³⁷Then he said to his disciples, 'The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; ³⁸therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to **send out laborers into his harvest.**'

¹Then Jesus summoned his twelve disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to cure every disease and every sickness. ²These are the names of the twelve apostles: first, Simon, also known as Peter, and his brother Andrew; James son of Zebedee (ZEH-beh-dee,) and his brother John; ³Philip and Bartholomew; Thomas and Matthew the tax-collector; James son of Alphaeus (AL-fee-uhs), and Thaddaeus (THAD-dee-uhs); ⁴Simon, and Judas Iscariot (is-KAR-ee-uht), the one who betrayed him.

⁵ These twelve Jesus sent out with the following instructions: 'Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, ⁶but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. ⁷As you go, proclaim the good news, "The kingdom of heaven has come near." ⁸Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons. You received without payment; give without payment.

SERMON "Pay Attention"

Pray with me: First, take a deep breath....let it out slowly. Loving God, thank you. Thank you for this day... for the people around us today...and for the blessing of being the church together. Thank you for leading us further into the mutual ministry that you had in mind for us all along and for the amazing grace that has enabled our steps along the way...in Jesus name. Amen.

In the summer following my graduation from 8th grade, my parents hired a company to dig a huge hole in the middle of our back yard. It turned into a kite-shaped swimming pool. My Dad had been a lifeguard in his younger years. He wanted me to be a good swimmer and, it was his intent to teach me how to dive.

As the lessons began, I stood on ground level, at the edge of the pool, and he would say, "Tuck your head down, hold your arms out...keep your legs together...take a little jump and dive in...like this!" He made it look so easy, but, at that point, the arguing would begin. Somehow, I didn't think he knew what he was talking about. To me, the edge of the pool felt like a high-dive. (You know the ones that are used in the Olympics!) I didn't want to be there. Tears were shed.

My Dad...a very patient, optimistic, persistent man, knew that I would love to dive, once I actually tried it. As I look back now, I should not have wasted so much time arguing with him...I should have trusted that **he was absolutely right**. I loved diving!

At that time, I had no idea these words were written in the book of Proverbs 4:1-2 as the Message translation puts it: *Listen, friends, to some fatherly advice; sit up and take notice
so you'll know how to live. I'm giving you good counsel;
don't let it go in one ear and out the other.*

If we have been paying attention...words our parents have spoken have often filtered back to us, even the difficult words have taught us lessons that 1. have changed how we react to different situations; 2. That have given each of us different degrees of compassion and caring; 3. And that have led us down the path on life's journey that has brought us here today. In our lifetimes, as we watched and gathered knowledge; we cherished some family traditions and have chosen which ones to leave behind. When we look back, we see how our thoughts and our beliefs were formed; how, when trying our hand at taking some risks, each time, something changed in us as lessons were learned. "Chalk it up to experience," one of my friends often advised.

If we had been paying attention during the years of COVID, we would have noticed that God was working through us to create some changes, too. Last week, in the Thursday workshop at the WI Conference Annual

Meeting, Matt Miofsky, author of the book: "Let Go... *Leaning into the Future Without Fear*," pointed out steps that we all have taken since March 2020. If you didn't notice then...look back now:

We have all: Left something behind and we have acknowledged it openly.

We may not have anticipated the grief that would result, or even be able to identify it, but we for our safety, shifted our lives accordingly. I do not have to tell you that it wasn't easy for anyone...we all know that for sure. It wasn't easy for the church.

If we were paying attention, in these COVID years, we may have found ourselves *attempting to define* what isn't over and we certainly have learned something about respecting the PAST.

Matt suggested that where we are now in a time of navigating the wilderness that has followed the days of the COVID pandemic...and not only that, we, as members and friends of FCUCC, are navigating the wilderness that has followed a series of transitions in this church that have taken place here for over a year now. We didn't chose to be in either of these situations. But here we are!

We have many questions. We have harbored fears. We have shuffled from doubt to doubt. How long will this recovery take?

Do you not know? Have you not heard? Something new is already beginning to happen. We are standing at the edge of the blue water with a shimmering pool in front of us. God is nudging us, saying, "Be still and know that I am God..." God's got this.

If we **pay attention** to the stories in the Bible ...we read countless stories of people who **trusted in God**. Moses. Abraham and Sara. Samuel. Joseph. David. Daniel. Jesus' earthly parents. The Wise Men. Mary and Martha. John the Baptizer. Saul. Jesus' disciples.

As we look into the Gospel today...Jesus (¹Then Jesus) summoned his twelve disciples (you know, the ones who left behind their jobs, their families, their friends, their comfortable lives...and took a risk to follow Jesus) and he gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to cure every disease and every sickness.

⁷As you go,(he said) proclaim the good news, "The kingdom of heaven has come near."
You received without payment; give without payment.

Did you ever notice that the Bible doesn't indicate how the twelve reacted, "Are you sure we can do this?" "I can't possibly heal anyone." Do you think that Thomas doubted these instructions? "Wait.... What!!!? No pay? No belongings? Begging for food?? Door to door?" Did anyone say, "Thanks, but, I'm out 'a here." Is there any part of those commands that you would agree to do? Or would you be saying, "Please, send someone else, Lord."

I *wonder* what we would say. (Would Jesus accept that answer?)

It is because of these twelve...and many more since then.... who have taken a chance that Jesus knew what he was talking about! It is a result of their receiving the power to spread the good news that we are here today.

I used to think that when Jesus says: "ask the Lord of the harvest, to send out laborers into his harvest... it meant that we all should start praying that *some other people* would listen to their calling and attend a seminary so that **they** can preach and pray and be spiritual leaders.

In the United Church of Christ, we interpret these verses as God speaking directly to each one of us...we believe in the priesthood of all believers. All means all. We are each called to minister to one another.

Being called to follow Jesus is for us now, as it was back when the first disciples were called...risky business. Wilderness becomes normal...we manage the difficulties. We get through the hard times while speaking the truth in love. We might go screaming and kicking as we leave behind some of the blessed "we always did it that way" pieces of how we were being the church in 1968, but God is guiding us right here and right now along a path to something new and something beautiful.

A friend once gave me a bookmark with these words on it: “You would not be called if you would not be enabled.” I have always found it to be true. Just as the twelve disciples were empowered to carry out the instructions that Jesus gave them, you and I, as 21st century disciples **are also**.

God’s kin-dom is all around us. It might take a century to complete the makeover that God has in mind for this church. The seeds of change are being planted today. It is not ours to say “Why?” “We can’t do that.” “We never did that before.” But to say: WHY NOT? (Is it laughable?)

Bible scholar Walter Brueggemann writes: “Laughter is a biblical way of receiving a newness which cannot be explained. The newness is sheer gift—underived, unwarranted.”

I will end with a story that I think is a good illustration for times such as these: pay attention to what it might be saying to you today. It’s taken from the book: *Mourning into Dancing*, Walter Wangerin Jr.

“When I was a boy, I told people that my father was stronger than anyone else in the world In those days a cherry tree grew in our back yard. This was my hiding place. Ten feet above the ground, a stout limb made a horizontal fork, a cradle on which I could lie face down, reading, thinking, being alone.

Nobody bothered me here. Even my parents didn’t know where I went to hide. Sometimes Daddy would come out and call, “Wally? Wally?” but he didn’t see me in the leaves.

I felt very tricky,” Wangerin recalls.

“Then one day, there came a thunderstorm ... It was usual for me to dream in my tree and therefore not to notice changes in the weather. So, if the sky grew dark or gave any warning, I didn’t see it.”

But that day, a wind tore through our backyard and hit the tree with such force that it tore the book I was reading from my hands and threw me from the limb.

“I locked my arms around the forking branches and hung on. My head hung down between them. I tried to wind my legs around the limb, but the whole tree was wallowing in that wind.”

“Daddy!” I shouted. As the wind blew, I felt that my arms were going to slip from the branches.

“*Daddeeee!*” I yelled even more loudly. 5

Then I saw his face at the back door, peering out. “He saw me, and right away he came out into the wind and weather, and I felt so relieved because I just took it for granted that he would climb up the tree to get me.

But that wasn’t his plan at all. He came to a spot right below me and lifted his arms and shouted, ‘*Jump!*’

“What?” ““Jump. I’ll catch you.” ““I screamed, ‘Oh No!’”

But as the wind continued to blow, I changed my mind. I let go. In a fast, eternal moment I despaired and I plummeted. “But my father’s arms caught me. Oh, my daddy — he had strong arms indeed. Very strong arms. But it wasn’t until I actually *experienced* the strength, that I also believed in it.”

If it ever feels like we are jumping out of a tree, or diving into the unknown depths of the pool of water in front of us; or if we look out over the edge of tomorrow, and are not quite sure how we will **be the church**, we can trust that God is already there waiting to catch us “paying attention” to the call...

Take a deep breath...breathe in trust. Breathe out all hesitation. Now, take the dive! Amen.

Preaching today, Pastor Mary Jo Laabs,

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