June 4, 2017

Pentecost Sunday

Acts 2:1-21 or Numbers 11:24-30

**Strengthen the Church Special Mission Offering**

Fire in the ancient world was a sign that a divine announcement was imminent.. Flames surrounded a bush that did not burn and called Moses to Holy ground. Elijah prayed for fire and it appeared before all the priests of Baal could muster a spark. On Pentecost, fire comes as literal communication – as tongues of fire endowing the apostles with multi-lingual capabilities. Being gifted with tongues of fire meant they could speak the languages of many nations and be understood. All the people from all over the known world of that day, all those foreigners and travelers that flocked regularly to Jerusalem, could, on this day, understand what was being said by the apostles on Pentecost.

What a gift that would be! What a super power! Imagine being able to travel across the world and speak Danish to the Danes, Urdu to the Pakistanis, German to the Germans, Shona to people in Zimbabwe, and Mandarin to the Chinese. Neuroscientists are studying how being multilingual increases brain size, and we know that understanding each other’s language is what increases the power of humanity to come together. Opening up the way to global conversation is part of our mission as the United Church of Christ, and Strengthening the Church through our gifts to mission is a way of broadening and deepening these conversations.

Going global also might mean learning local. The First Congregational Church of Elmhurst, Illinois, is growing the brains of their children and contributing to a multilingual church. They do this every Monday evening as part of their De Colores Children’s Spanish Program. It’s a program in which children from grades K-5 combine learning Spanish with growing Christian faith using stories, games, art, food and prayer. What an opportunity to share tongues of fire, strengthen our church and deepen our future by teaching young brains to learn the language of others. Happy Pentecost!

 June 11, 2017

Trinity Sunday

Genesis 1: 1-2:4a

**This is Good**

How good is the world? In the opening of Genesis the first thing to appear by God’s command was light, a light shining through fog and chaos. It says that God saw it was good. Any artist, a painter, for example, might step back to see her work in progress and see that it is good. Imagine God is the artist seeing what is good in that harmony between creative action and result, paint and brush, and canvas. Clearly, in the beginning, according to the storytellers in Genesis, God was creating and stepping back, pleased with what was happening. Think of that opening chapter of Genesis as full of many “aha” moments and the creative pleasure of God.

Some mystics tell us is that what we experience when we feel the beauty of the natural world is a glimpse of the divine, “aha.” Somewhere in that moment of making art there is a piece of the creator, of the artist, left behind in the work reaching out to us.

If this world we see is good and the touch of the divine is in it, then our responsibility, as people of faith, to every mountain and fresh water stream and bird in the air becomes more than that of a caretaker. We are witnesses to that divine force in all of it. How can we keep quiet when we see the goodness of this precious earth polluted by plastic islands in the ocean and coal dust running through our streams? Creation is a gift from the ONE who saw it as good from the very beginning. The United Church of Christ knows this and champions God’s good world in its environmental justice ministries. All of us in local churches are urged to gather in small groups and educate ourselves about climate change. One way to do this is to watch the film, “This Changes Everything,” by Naomi Klein. There are faith based resources and questions to help guide any discussion. You can find out how to see the film and download resources at [www.ucc.org/environmental-ministries](http://www.ucc.org/environmental-ministries).

 June 18, 2017

Second Sunday after Pentecost

Genesis 18:1-15, (21:1-7)

**Sarah Laughed**

Stories always have many viewpoints. In Genesis, the ancient and elderly Abraham is sitting by a tree and three men appear. Abraham, recognizing them as divine emissaries, invites them to a meal and orders Sarah (his ancient and elderly wife) to make them food. After she has served them, she sits, out of sight, and listens. The four men set about to discuss Sarah’s future pregnancy. Sarah laughs . . . out loud. Wouldn’t you? What a ridiculous idea it was that an old lady should get pregnant. Of course, if Abraham is going to be the father of a great nation somebody has to get pregnant, and in this ancient tale of wandering tribes and tent societies Sarah is the only choice for matriarch. But still she is scolded for her laugh. Perhaps there is ancient embedded wisdom in the Erma Bombeck quote, “If you can laugh at it, you can live with it.”

As old as the old tales are, there isn’t much about human beings that hasn’t been told. Many a sitcom has begun with a spouse bringing unexpected company home for dinner. The saga of Abraham and Sarah is a story that walks between worlds of social class, power and gender. In these motifs we can read a lot that resonates with our contemporary world.

Glennon Doyle Melton is a best-selling author who reflects on such contemporary stories. She facilitates an online community called Momastery. Her quirky take on motherhood, family, politics, religion, and women’s lives has resonated with many around the country, and she will be a featured speaker at General Synod 2017 on Saturday, July 1. General Synod meets every other year and it is the body that steers the work of the United Church of Christ. People from all walks of life, from all over the country and the world gather to vote on resolutions, elect officers and create a vortex of denominational energy. This year we will meet in Baltimore, Maryland, and the theme is “Make Glad.” Gathered in that one body, the delegates that will make up that Synod each bring their own stories, like Sarah’s, that shine a light on both what unites and divides us.

 June 25, 2017

Third Sunday after Pentecost

Matthew 10:24-39

**Daring Discipleship**

Lose your life? Find your life? Do not be afraid? What is there to fear? Jesus did lay out very clearly the hard work, the commitment, and the fearlessness required of his disciples. if nothing else, you couldn’t follow Jesus and not end up a little braver. It would, at least, require some daring and fearlessness. Discipleship still does.

In a few days, the 31st General Synod of the United Church of Christ will convene in Baltimore, Maryland. They will gather under the bannered theme of “Make Glad.” “Make Glad” is what a river in Psalm 46:4 does; it “makes glad the city of God.” For the thousands of people descending on Baltimore’s Inner Harbor, the theme will make immediate sense when they see the Patapsco River flowing through Baltimore harbor into Chesapeake Bay. “Make Glad” will also make metaphorical sense when we consider our baptism by water into a life of discipleship. And, ultimately, discipleship is what all our General Synods are about. They’re about what it means to follow Jesus as a big organization trying to stay true to the Gospel. A Gospel that calls us to follow Jesus no matter where that may lead us.

The very first lines of Psalm 46 begin: “God is our refuge and strength/a very present help in trouble/Therefore we will not fear . . . .” “Make Glad,” then, is not a simple call to be happy for happiness’ sake but to know that in the midst of everything that might make us afraid, God is present breathing bravery. After all, bravery begins in fear. Only when you are afraid can you be brave. We are called to follow God into sevice – wherever that may lead. If our discipleship leads us into difficult and fearful places we can remember that the river that bears the water of our baptism “makes glad” the city of God. As we prepare to gather in Baltimore let us also remember that on this day, 60 years ago in Cleveland, Ohio, at its first General Synod, the United Church of Christ was born.

 July 2, 2017

Fourth Sunday after Pentecost

Matthew 10:40-42

**Holy Welcome**

It isn’t all dancing and shouting and singing and greeting old friends at General Synod. The delegates in Baltimore will also be going into the community to perform acts of service for the people of Baltimore, as well as attending eye-opening first hand encounters with the faces of homelessness.

Delegates will participate in what is being called an “Injustice Walk.” At the end of such a walk, UCCers from around the country will understand better the reality of being homeless in a big city like Baltimore. They will hear from representatives of of Earl’s Place, United Ministries, a UCC Council for Health and Human Services Ministries member, and 20-year provider of supportive housing to the homeless. In addition, the Central Atlantic Conference of the UCC has asked attendees of General Synod to bring hats, gloves, scarves, socks, blankets and small pillows for distribution to the over 26,000 estimated homeless people in the geography covered by that Conference. All those items collected will be distributed during winter months.

Another project, that should inspire the delgates and create goodwill will include some urban forestry and volunteer gardening in the city with a program called “Blue Water Baltimore.” In addition, people will be able to donate toys and supplies to a no kill animal shelter.

Giving and receiving a holy extravagant welcome is what the United Church of Christ is all about. In addition, our sprit of mission and service undergirds everything we do – even a rollicking convention hall filled with many thousands of church folks is going to spread that welcome throughout the city. Attendees will bring back to their churches stories of effort and hope and a deeper sense of the ties of service and faith that bind us together.

 July 9, 2017

Fifth Sunday in Pentecost

Genesis 24:34-38

**Chosen Journeys**

If you could hover in the sky over Baltimore as all the delegates to General Synod left for their homes, and if all those delegates were all wearing the same solid color – let’s say, blue – and you could watch all the blue-colored people from your vantage point in the sky what would you see? You would see blue trails that spread out and clumped together at airports and scattered again by cars and trains. It would probably look like a kaleidoscope moving and swirling and changing patterns as all the bodies moved then stopped for lunch, changed direction or decided on new routes, until finally everyone was somewhere. The next day, without their blue outfits, they would blend back into the everyday journeys we all take; to work, or groceries, the post office, visiting friends.

What if we always left a wake, or a trail, behind ourselves in the molecules of every place we ever went? Suppose we could shine a black light that would capture all those molecules and highlight them? What would we see? What patterns or light rails do we leave behind between friends, changed jobs, relationships, life choices? Could we look back in time and see the exact spot where we made a choice that changed our life? Would we see from our vantage point in time the other permutations of every choice?

All journeys create patterns and lay new paths. The United Church of Christ turns 60, and in those years it has hit many crossroads, made resolutions and pronouncements. We have restructured and reorganized. We have supported causes of justice and created an ever-widening welcome. We have become more inclusive and more ready each year to be the church. All along the way our molecules have swirled with our travels and stopped at every turning point poised and waiting for the nudge of the spirit or a whisper, or a kick to move us to the next stop and the next turn. As people of faith, we believe that all these stops and turns matter, and from the vantage point of distance – either high in the sky or from years hence – we see an open possibility of all the future journeys and choices ahead of us.

 July 16, 2017

Sixth Sunday after Pentecost

Genesis 25:19-34

**A House Divided**

The twin sons of Isaac and Rebekah, Esau and Jacob would always have trouble. They were born that way, born to be divided, born to scrap and fight, and constantly wrestling.

Esau, born first, was an outdoorsman, a hunter. Jacob preferred to stay in the tents. It would be the quieter one, the homebody, Jacob, who would end up stealing Esau’s birthright as the first-born. As their story progresses a natural rivalry between them will turn toward animosity, much as our nation’s poltical mileu has become in recent years.

It may be that there have been other eras when political discourse and everyday interactions were punctuated by the sounds of relationships fracturing and a people seriously divided against each other, but it does feel like this time is unlike any other. Sometimes, everything seems charged with an electricity of division. We are divided not only by opinion but as always by race and national origin and all the other categories that lay claim.

Rev. Nayiri Karjian is a UCC Interim Transitional Minister who has served UCC churches from Connecticut to Missouri to Tennessee and Colorado. She was born in Syria to Armenian parents who had fled from Turkey. She grew up in Aleppo and went to school in Lebanon. She has woken up to the sound of gunfire, and she has heard bombs more than once in her life. In 1982, she fled to the United States with a few clothes, $300, and a student visa.

Since 1985, Nayiri has shared her story with many congregations.. She tells about her experiences growing up in Syria. She talks about going to school with both Muslims and Christians, and how important it is to hear each other’s stories. Story-sharing, she will tell you, is an invitation to friendship and compassion, and a way to discover our shared humanity. It may not be inevitable that we were born to face others over a wall of differences. Sharing our lives means telling our stories in order to find our connections and not just our divisions.

 July 23, 2017

Seventh Sunday after Pentecost

Genesis 28:10-19a

**Place of Blessing**

The words in that great gospel hymn, “Jacob’s Ladder” are just a bit misleading. We sing that great refrain, “We are climbing Jacob’s Ladder.” We probably imagine a ladder into the sky and ourselves hanging on and climbing higher and higher as the ladder disappears before us into the night sky. However, if you re-read chapter 28 from Genesis you’ll discover a very different narrative. In Jacob’s dream, he’s not the climber. Indeed, no human person is. It’s the angels that do the climbing. Climbing up and down it says, as if they have business on the earth and scurry between worlds doing their angel chores. When Jacob wakes he names the place a place of blessing, a place where he saw the gate to heaven. The ladder, then, is a metaphor for a gate between worlds. On one end is the earth, and flesh and people, and on the other is something we can’t even imagine. A ladder separates what is holy from everything else. Those angels moving up and down the easy, ordinary ladder route show that the two worlds are not so far apart.

In Clemson, South Carolina, Peace Church UCC has a worship schedule and an approach to ministry that is itself a kind of Jacob’s ladder joining worlds. They worship at 5 p.m. on and people dress casually. Each Sunday in the month has its own form, its own expression. The second Sunday usually has a short film and the fourth Sunday is all music.

On Second Sundays they create an outdoor experience that the congregation shares together. This description from their web site says it all!

 *To date, Second Sundays have seen us sitting at the foot of waterfalls, floating in kayaks on Lake Jocassee, riding bikes on the Doodle Trail, and experiencing a Japanese Tea Ceremony in the SC Botanical Gardens. Spiritual components have included silence, quiet walking, doodling with chalk, writing haiku, being saged. We have included Native American Spirituality, Celtic Spirituality, and a Zen experience. We are not sure where future ones will lead, but always there is the integrating of the spiritual with God’s creation*. ( thepeacechurch.org)

 July 30, 2017

Eighth Sunday after Pentecost

Genesis 29:15-28

**Weaving the Future**

Sometimes our world is woven out of starts and stops, and the threads tear and we don’t always see how grace is evident in things that feel hurtful. Clearly, Jacob’s extra seven years at work for his beloved probably didn’t feel like a good turn of events. Life doesn’t always turn out the way we think it will, and reconciliation doesn’t always happen. People from our past who have wronged us or misjudged us rarely come to us and say, “I’m sorry.” But what a surprising and hopeful thing it is when resolution and healing does happen, and how appropriate when it happens in the church, especially between a church and a pastor.

In 1981, Rev. Kevin A. Johnson was ousted from his United Methodist church when a member of the congregation outed him as gay. At the time, it was devastating to him and for twenty years he left church work. In 2002, after joining the United Church of Christ, he returned to ministry and helped start the Bloom in the Desert Ministries, a sanctary community for people who have experienced abuse and discrimination. This year the church that fired him asked him to come back and be feted so they could apologize and make right what was wrong.

The United Methodist Church in Kenosha Wisconsin voted to become a reconciling congregation within the United Methodist system. They now stand as a congregation fighting their denomination’s stance on sexual orientation. They now stand as a church that, like the United Church of Christ, offers extravagant welcome to the whole world.

And that welcome included a reaching out to their old pastor and a hope for reunion.

In February, 2017, Reverend Johnson and his husband were welcomed to Kenosha with tears and great joy. In the years he spent out of the church, Kevin Johnson says he never felt separated from God. As injustice and ill treatment did not break the spirit of Jacob, neither did it destroy the spirit of radical inclusion that emerges anew everyday from the power of a reconciliation such as this.

 August 6, 2017

Ninth Sunday after Pentecost

Genesis 32:22-31

**Face to Face**

 “*At exactly fifteen minutes past eight in the morning, on August 6, 1945, Japanese time,*

 *at the moment when the atomic bomb flashed above Hiroshima . . . ”* John Hersey

So begins John Hersey’s small, detailed and almost dispassionate account of six particular lives in Hiroshima on the days following the bombing. Hersey’s book, titled *Hiroshima,* was first published as a magazine-length article in the *New Yorker* and to this day remains the most immediate and vivid narrative of that event. That the people described in the book survived is perhaps scalable with Jacob’s wrestling with that divine being at the ford of the river Jabbock. Indeed, they all wrestled with the terrifying power of a galaxy-spinning God, and survived.

The name “Hiroshima” conjures so much and in every imagination must live that most terrifying of mushrooms clouds. Yet with all that power and history, life goes on, people continue to live, to fall in love, to create families and to build churches. Even after Jacob’s wrestling , he still had a brother to reconcile with and a family to protect. There is, for an example of continued life, a Hirsohima Church and it is a part of the United Church of Christ in Japan, a partner of our denomination. During the war the Japanese government forced all Protestant churches to merge. After the war many separated out again, but the denominations that remained together continued to call themselves the United Church of Christ in Japan. They are the largest Protestant denomination in Japan, with 1,700 churches.

Representatives of their denomination visited our United Church of Christ headquarters in Cleveland for the first time in 2015 with the hope of creating stronger ties. Our two nations have a shared history, painful and deep. Our denominations spring from the same reforming and congregational spirit. On their web page, the Hirsohima church says this as part of their purpose, “.. . we hope to find our own ways of true living as human beings, pursuing the essence of our own existence.” We all seek what is genuine and true about ourselves and what it means to be human.

 August 13, 2017

Tenth Sunday after Pentecost

Genesis 37:1-4, 12-28

**When All Seems Lost**

If you have ever crossed a desert you know the emptiness and constancy of its endless horizon, and you know the loneliness it evokes. Imagine that you are Joseph abandoned by your brothers and left in the desert. Imagine you are a mother holding your childrens’ hands hoping to cross a border over a desert and you need water. Then, you see a water station and it actually has water in it. You cup your hands and under the night sky the water feels cool. Members of Shadow Rock UCC in Phoenix, Arizona, keep such water stations full and they offer their church as sanctuary. They are on the front lines of a battle for welcome. They are on the front lines of a battle to remind ourslves, as a country, who it is we are called to welcome. They are on the front lines of a battle to make a home for the refugee and to care for the marginalized. Every month they travel to their local ICE (Immigration and Customs Enforcement) office, read a statement and pray. They match the constancy of the desert with the constancy of their belief that doing the gospel is as important as preaching it.

American soldiers in postwar Europe found these words inscribed in the basement of a bombed-out building. The words were scrawled under a Star of David.

“I believe in the sun,

even when it is not shining.

I believe in love,

even when I do not feel it.

I believe in God,

even when God is silent.”

Both the members of the Shadow Rock congregation and those they serve could say these words and scratch them anywhere. The mother and her children walking for their lives only make it through the night because they have words like these on their heart. Those who serve the mother and her children are people who understand that hope is stronger than hyped belief and they do this work because it is mandated by the prophets of the Hebrew Bible who called nations to protect the refugee and by Jesus who calls us to shelter the weak and give water to the thirsty

 August 20, 2017

Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost

Genesis 45:1-15

**Bold Moves**

Joseph was bound and tied, sold into slavery and abandoned to whatever fate might befall him. His brothers did that. One might imagine a fair amount of resentment could hang heavily on one’s heart as a result of such treatment. Today’s Bible passage tells us of the meeting between Joseph and his brothers many years later. They are in Egypt, refugees from a famine in their homeland, come to ask for food. Joseph is now an advisor to the Pharaoh and his brothers do not recognize him. When he comes face to face with his brothers he cannot contain his feeling. He sends everyone from the room and he weeps. Their meeting is emotional and full of the vulnerability of those who have experienced antipathy and now, in their fragility and need, find each other.

Something like that kind of coming together in the midst of pain and a shared threat has happened around the country as a result of increased attacks on places of worship. In Chicago, Jews, Muslims and members of the black community gathered last winter to support each other. One Saturday in February, the windows of a Chicago synagogue were smashed; swatstikas were drawn on the building. The next day, leaders from the Muslim community came with flowers and hope. By Wednesday the building was cleaned and windows repaired, and a thousand people attended an interfaith gathering against hate.

One of the speakers was Reverend Otis Moss III, pastor at the Trinity United Church of Christ. He told how his father had marched with Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel to Selma. Reverend Moss said, “Blacks and Jews are connected because we know your pain,the broken windows, the broken lives, branded by people with their eyes glazed by hatred.”

When people who have a history of disregard discover that they have a shared enemy and that enemy is racism and bigotry, then there may also rise a hunger for community and support. Sometime reconcialiation comes in recognizing our need for each other and our shared vulnerability.

 August 27, 2017

Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost

Be Transformed

Romans 12:1-8

Paul the Apostle, that tireless letter writer and new church planter, was a great advocate of an embodied Christianity. All Christians were a part of the body of Christ and following Christ was not a mental game or interior journey alone. It was something, for Paul, that you acted on everyday. You had skills and gifts to share, people to care for, and, besides yourself, you had the world to transform. The only means you had to do this was living in the material world, in your body. For Paul, following Chist meant living your life in service.

There’s so much a believer can do today because so much in the world aches for transformation. The good news is that you don’t have to figure it out on your own. Our denomination, the United Church of Christ, though our Justice and Witness Ministries, has many programs to help you put your faith in action. There are justice alerts through the Justice and Peace Action Network (Go to ucc.org to sign up). These alerts are emailed once a week. There are justice training resouces, ecumenical conferences, curricula on a variety of issues like economic justice or environmental issues. Information is available on congregation–community organizing, and many more doable and possible opportunities to be an agent for the good news of the gospel creating a world that reflects the kind of transformation Paul hoped would happen for all his churches.

The work that we do on behalf of the gospel is born in the gifts and skills we have. Paul names such gifts as teaching, and giving, and leading, and showing mercy. These are the many jobs each of us, as parts of the body of Christ, can do. And, for Paul, the only use for all of our particular skills as gifts from God is to transform the world. What do you do everyday to transform the world and renew your commitment to it? What do our churches do every week that makes life worth living for all people? Be transformed . . . and transforming.