March 3, 2019

Last Sunday after Epiphany/Transfiguration

**Astounding Glory**

Luke 9:28-36 (37-43a)

*UCC Women’s Week - March 3-9, 2019*

From time to time it is good to stop talking and listen. Just as an awestruck and babbling Peter was reminded by God, “This is my Child, my Chosen; listen!” we also sometimes need a reminder. How glorious Peter’s reminder must have been on that day!

During our days, we consume ourselves with the crush of work, news of the world, and other obligations. We forget the divine is all around us, a still-speaking God who leads and guides us.

Let’s commit to listening this week and trying these 7 things:

Sunday: Spend some time with God today and commit to letting grace speak through your life.

Monday: Ask God to shake off our complacency and forgive us for failing to listen for the Holy One’s voice.

Tuesday: Spend time with God at the end of the day reflecting on what has happened and examining your thoughts, intentions, and heart.

Wednesday: Listen to what God is calling you to do this week: help the elderly, welcome a new friend, volunteer at a women’s shelter, clean up the neighborhood.

Thursday: Spend time not only seeking God, but sharing God among your circle of friends; find the Holy One’s Voice together.

Friday: Spend time outdoors listening to the sounds of God’s magnificent creation.

Saturday: Journal about what gets in the way of hearing God’s call for your life.

**This is Women’s Week at the United Church of Christ**

This week, think of Queen Vashti, who was summoned to an elaborate party by King Xerxes that she refused. Not allowing herself to become objectified, she lost favor and was banned from the King’s presence, but maintained something more valuable, her dignity. Think of Queen Esther, who risked her life to foil a plot to annihilate her fellow Jewish people. As you celebrate Women’s Week, remember Queen Vashti and Queen Esther. Their lasting legacies inspire not only women, but all who stand up for justice and freedom. (Book of Esther)

March 10, 2019

First Sunday of Lent

**Wilderness Companions**

Luke 4:1-13

Lent begins in the deserted wilderness, where we are given another opportunity to deepen our understanding of who Jesus is. Today's lesson is about the way and the why of the ministry of Jesus: we might say that the ground rules are set. The Son of God is not here to grab power for himself, or to show off how much he matters to God, or to work magic for the masses. Jesus spends forty days struggling alone and wandering, tested by the seductive voice of evil that is backed up by scripture. This reminds us how easily the Bible can be used for wrong purposes and to be mindful of seductively good things that can lead away from God.

Jesus leaves the wilderness, filled as always with the Holy Spirit, assured that he is God's beloved, and ready for what lies ahead. As our own Lenten journey begins, we too are sure of Jesus, our companion in whatever wilderness we face, and we walk with trust in him.

This Lent, contemplate tests you have faced in your journey of faith and what path you will take in the Lenten season ahead. Even better than giving up chocolate, we might develop a daily spiritual practice of reflection on God's provision, God's abundance, and God's power in our lives.

"The greatest temptations are not those that solicit our consent to obvious sin, but those that offer us great evils masking as the greatest goods." (*Thomas Merton, No Man Is an Island*)

**Take the UCC Environmental Justice Quiz!**

*Did you know that UCC ministers coined the phrase “environmental racism” and played a leading role in giving birth to the environmental justice movement in the 1980s?*

During a six week campaign of civil disobedience in 1982, a movement was born that made national headlines and introduced the world to the issue of environmental racism.

*Did you know that the UCC is building a powerful environmental network that stays connected through a blog and e-newsletter called The Pollinator?*

*The Pollinator* is a digital platform of the UCC for the sharing of ideas and inspiration, so that we might become more fruitful in the pursuit of environmental justice. Its focus is the building of a faith-filled and faith-rooted movement for the care of creation.

*Did you know that UCC churches are deepening and expanding their commitment to the environment by becoming Creation Justice Churches?*

Whether it is taking on climate change or addressing the lead poisoning of children, environmental justice ministries could not have a higher purpose or calling than they do now.

Learn more at ucc.org/environmental-ministries and get involved.

March 17, 2019

Second Sunday of Lent

**Strong and Tender**

Luke 13:31-35 or Luke 9:28-36 (37-43a)

*St. Patrick’s Day*

Lent is the season for uncomfortable questions and hard truths. Exactly what is needed to open our eyes and our hearts, and set our feet on the path of faithfulness? In today’s Scripture, the petty tyrant Herod’s vision of how things should be clashes with what Jesus is teaching as he travels around, right there on Herod's home turf. But Jesus brushes aside the warnings about Herod's evil scheming as only words that are insignificant when viewed in relation to the plan of God. Those in official positions of power, whether it's Herod in Galilee, Pilate in Jerusalem, or the mighty Roman Empire itself, can cause havoc.

During these six weeks of Lent, we take a hard look at the obstacles between us and God (obstacles that God didn't put there), not just on our own personal spiritual path, but also on the road toward a new world of justice, wholeness, and peace. Consider these three questions this week:

1. 1. How can we reflect the selfless, unconditional love of Jesus in the world?
2. 2. How can we embody “love of neighbor” in our public life?
3. 3. How would Jesus be perceived in the halls of power today?

**One Great Hour of Sharing**

One Great Hour of Sharing, as part of Our Churches Wider Mission, is the special mission offering of the United Church of Christ that carries God’s message of love and hope to people in crisis. The UCC works with international partners to provide sources of clean water, food, education and health care, small business micro-credit, advocacy and resettlement for refugees and displaced persons, and emergency relief and rehabilitation. One Great Hour of Sharing also supports domestic and international ministries for disaster preparedness and response.

Through One Great Hour of Sharing, lives are literally changed daily. Your support provides clean water, food, medicines, shelter, healthcare, education and so much more. In 2017, the OGHS offering received over $2 million. Nearly sixty-five percent of UCC congregations participate annually.

On March 31st, members and friends of the United Church of Christ will have the opportunity to respond to all of these needs through One Great Hour of Sharing. Let’s all give generously.

March 24, 2019

Third Sunday of Lent

**Open Invitation**

Isaiah 55:1-9

*Amistad Sunday*

Isaiah offers in nine verses the heart of the biblical message: God loves us, no matter what, reaching out to us even (or especially) in the worst of times, making promises that are not pie-in-the-sky, not theoretical. God promises what we most deeply yearn for: homecoming when we’re lost, a rich feast when we’re hungry, fresh water to satisfy our thirst, and a community of hope when we long for meaning—something greater than ourselves through which we might be a blessing to the world. There’s no price of admission to this feast, and everyone (even the most unexpected) will be invited to the party.

**A Litany for Amistad Sunday** (*based on Isaiah 43)*

The 1839 slave revolt aboard the Amistad brought Congregationalists from New England together to defend the rights of these slaves to their freedom. That defense finally came before the U.S. Supreme Court. When it was finished, the slaves were freed and the American Mission Society (a forerunner of the United Church Board for Homeland Ministries) was formed.

One: In the hold of the ship, the Amistad, the slaves were chained and rowed together.

MANY: But God made a way in the sea, a path in the mighty waters.

One: Chains were broken, slaves revolted,

 But God said, “Do not remember the old ways I am about to do a new thing.”

MANY: The slaves were recaptured, prisoners again, but not alone.

A committee was formed to support and defend.

Advocates, lawyers, ministers and more.

People of faith who brought clothing and money and food.

One: Now it springs forth; do you see it?

MANY: Before the court, the Supreme Court, justice, this time, prevailed,

One: “I will make a way through the wilderness,” said the God of the slaves.

MANY: And the slaves were acquitted. All were set free.

One: God gave water and rivers in the desert so the thirsty could drink.

MANY: The slaves went home but their friends persisted.

One: For abolition, for education, for liberty.

The American Missionary Society was born,

And continues today as part of the United Church of Christ.

MANY: So says God, “These are the people whom I formed for myself.

so they might declare my praise.”

One: Let us worship our God, a God of freedom and justice.

 Oh God of the Amistad,

MANY: Give hope to our prayers and make true our hope.

that liberty and equality and fairness bless this land.

March 31, 2019

Fourth Sunday of Lent

**Embracing Love**

Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

*One Great Hour of Sharing Offering*

Jesus’ story about a precious son lost and recovered was a response to self-righteous religious authorities who questioned the company he was keeping, but it’s also appropriate for Lenten reflection on our own lives. Where do we find ourselves in this story? Why do we so often identify with the older brother? Are we, like that older brother, perhaps stuck in scarcity thinking, when we’d be much happier, much freer, trusting that there is more than enough for all, and great cause for celebration?

**One Great Hour of Sharing**

You arrive home in the evening, tired from a long day, and on the news comes a bulletin about an earthquake, or refugee crisis, or typhoon, or famine that has struck. You watch it on the television, or your computer screen and say to yourself, “There’s so much misery in the world.” Then, you change the channel. After all, what can you do? You have work the next day, and your life to live. In your wallet might be twenty or forty dollars. How far could that go to help thousands of people? You can do something other than look in your wallet and feel powerless. We have a way to reach into that news story and make a difference. You can watch but you don’t have to stand still; you can run toward the one who needs you and give to One Great Hour of Sharing.

One Great Hour of Sharing is more than a helping organization. It’s part of the mission of the Christian church. More than just the United Church of Christ, we join with eight other Christian denominations in this work. Together, with those partners, we raise approximately 12 million dollars a year. Of each dollar given, more than 90 cents is used directly for mission services on the ground in areas of need.

Imagine yourself separated from your family by a disaster and there are only strangers all around you. Then picture someone handing you something warm to drink, a blanket and a way to get home again. Give to One Great Hour of Sharing because when we join our gifts with others we can make a difference in the world. Share in this ministry because it’s a way we can share the love of Christ with others.

Give generously so we can all be there to offer hope to those suffering and to restore home the lost.

April 7, 2019

Fifth Sunday of Lent

**Something New**

Isaiah 43:16-21

Exodus and Exile: the most momentous experiences in ancient Israel’s life. In each hour of need, God heard the cry of the people and sent prophets--Moses in Egypt, and prophets like Isaiah to the people in Babylon. For Israel, exile was being lost, homesick, divided, unmoored, rootless except for memory. It must have been hard to resist the temptation to settle down, fit in, sell out, and forget the story that had held them together. After all, what good had all that done them? Into that heartache and doubt stepped a poet-prophet to sing a new song about ancient things, and the new thing that the God of old was about to do.

**General Synod 32**

You’re invited to the United Church of Christ’s Thirty-Second General Synod that will be held in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, June 21-25, 2019!

*The theme for the 32nd General Synod is based on the scripture Matthew 5:16 “In the same way let your light shine before others . . .”*

“When we light just one candle in the darkness, it illuminates dimly, but when many candles are lit, and all let their lights shine, together we can bring brightness to the world.” ― The Rev. Franz Rigert, Wisconsin Conference Minister.

Always an extraordinary event in the life of the Church, delegates and visitors will experience dynamic workshops, generative plenary sessions, inspirational worship, engaging youth activities, special banquets, and luncheons. Delegates will conduct the business of the denomination and set priorities for our ministries. Keynote speakers will offer illumination and insight into challenges that face our congregations and communities. And delegates and visitors alike will stand up for issues that demand a faithful witness, worship together, and participate in local community service projects.

Find out more at www.synod2019.org and plan to attend.

April 14, 2019

Sixth Sunday of Lent (Palm/Passion Sunday)

**Into Jerusalem**

Luke 19:28-40

Palm Sunday is a Sunday of possibility and expectancy. There’s a colt and cloaks on the road, people shouting and a lot of excitement. Jesus is coming! There’s a party atmosphere with neighbors that don’t like the noise and tell Jesus to keep his followers quiet. But Jesus replies, “Even if everyone was quiet the stones would shout.” Can you imagine feeling so much hope and joy at the entrance into your city or town of someone who represents not a political, military or sports victory, but the coming of peace itself?

The day after Jesus arrived in Jerusalem, he went to the temple and turned over the tables of people who were buying and selling and changing money.  He drove them out saying, "my house shall be a house of prayer; but you have made it a den of robbers" (Luke 19:46). The economic injustice of the money-changers’ profiteering in the temple infuriates Jesus and this is one of the few times we witness his righteous anger.

At that time, following Jesus meant making choices about whose side you were on. Christians still make those kinds of choices. But we followers of Jesus have not done such an excellent job of understanding his message of compassion and love. Instead, for two thousand years, we've often been part of the same kind of brutal power systems as the one in Jerusalem long ago. And all of this time, the God of compassion and love must have wept.

This week, as we stumble toward Jerusalem, we can rely on God's grace to carry us every step of the way and trust the unknown future to the God who works good in every circumstance and in every holy week of our lives.

Work this week for peace and economic justice. Here are some ideas:

*  Start a prayer and meditation group in your church with a focus on peace.
*  Find ways to use your voice in solidarity with others who may not always be heard.
*  If there are ways in which you are serving the master of money in your life, free yourself!
*  Put love into action: right some wrongs with an organization seeking economic justice.

April 21, 2019

Easter

**Resurrection Joy**

John 20:1-18 or Luke 24:1-12

Scripture Reading

*Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him." Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went towards the tomb. The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, and the cloth that had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. Then the disciples returned to their homes.   But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. They said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" She said to them, "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him." When she had said this, she turned round and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? For whom are you looking?" Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away." Jesus said to her, "Mary!" She turned and said to him in Hebrew, "Rabbouni!" (which means Teacher). Jesus said to her, "Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord"; and she told them that he had said these things to her.*John 20:1-18

**Facing the “Tombs” of our Lives**

When we face life’s losses, disappointments, heartbreaks, and failures, Jesus shares those with us. He also shares new life and new hope with us - resurrection. It isn't a one-time thing, but the dawning of a new day, and new life. Jesus is risen!

No matter what things look like now, this Easter morning says, “Wait. We are part of something greater than ourselves, and our lives are lived in a new age of hope.”

 "Never let anything so fill you with sorrow as to make you forget the joy of Christ risen."

 --Mother Teresa

April 28, 2019

Second Sunday of Easter

**Resurrection Witness**

Acts 5:27-32

*Pacific Islander and Asian American Ministries Sunday*

*When they had brought them, they had them stand before the council. The high priest questioned them, saying, "We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name, yet here you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and you are determined to bring this man’s blood on us." But Peter and the apostles answered, "We must obey God rather than any human authority. The God of our ancestors raised up Jesus, whom you had killed by hanging him on a tree. God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Savior that he might give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins. And we are witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey him."* Acts 5:27-32

Today we sing a song of joy and thanksgiving for a new day. The psalmist calls the people to rise up and rejoice as branches bursting with renewed life. After the night of persecution, confusion and death, there is new light and hope! The risen Jesus enters our fearful lives, offers us peace, and sends us to cooperate with God’s abundant grace throughout the whole of creation.

Faithful witnesses all of them, Peter and the Apostles, risking death and public humiliation because they must preach what they preach. New church starts are kind of like that, though usually without the death part, because they have no building or traditions born of “we’ve always done it this way.” They have only the way in which they proclaim their faith and their hope. Just like Peter in the Book of Acts, pastors planting new churches have only themselves and the genuine message of their personal testimony to convince and invite. Such is the ministry of The Lighthouse Church of Chicago.

The Lighthouse Church is 5-year-old church plant called by God to be, “passionate about Jesus and serious about Justice.” Lighthouse is a predominately African American LGBT-inclusive church that welcomes all people. They follow the life, teachings, and ministry of Jesus Christ, believing that God has offered the greatest love story in all of human history: the story of a God who has come to us in human form, lived, died, rose, and is soon to come again. From faith, Lighthouse takes serious the call towards Justice. Lighthouse welcomes people of all sexual orientations, gender identities, races, ethnicities, and class—beloved not in spite of the gospel, but because of the gospel. And anywhere they experience –isms or –phobias at work in the world, they commit to work to uproot them, inspired by the example of Christ. Pastor Jamie Frazier says of the Lighthouse Church of Chicago: “It is wonderful to be so utterly supported by all levels of the United Church of Christ, including National! Words cannot express the pleasure and honor it is to pastor the incredible folks at Lighthouse.”

Learn more about Lighthouse here: http://www.lighthousechicago.org.

May 5, 2019

Third Sunday of Easter

**The Way Forward**

Acts 9:1-6, (7-20)

“Saul got up and was baptized,and after taking some food, he regained his strength.” Acts 9:20

“Jesus said to Simon Peter, ‘Feed my sheep….’” John 21:17

In an act of compassionate faith, the followers of the risen Christ share a meal with Saul, their former persecutor. Sharing food is a ritual long associated with peace-making. More than simple nutrients, food is imbued with the legacy of local soil, the people’s covenant with the land, and the just or unjust practices of the community. Each morsel is laden with the culture, identity, and values of the communal body and the spirit of those who have gathered, grown, prepared and offered it. When Christians share food, we share the blessing and power of the body of Christ.

This has been true for Rev. Randy Mayer, pastor of Good Shepherd United Church of Christ in Sahuarita, Arizona, who welcomed an asylum-seeking family escaping domestic and gang violence in Honduras into his home in 2018. This was at the time the Department of Justice began changing the rules indicating that domestic and gang violence may not qualify families for asylum. "Having an Asylum Family sitting at your dinner table and on your couch watching TV in your living room is quite the experience as you are listening to the evening news," Mayer said. "Maybe that is the best way to get through an experience like this —having the stranger sitting right in front of you, loving her family and proving right before your eyes that the ugly rhetoric and hate filled comments have nothing to do with the truth."

As you walk in faith this week, consider taking the following acts to welcome others into the circle of God’s grace:

*  Meet your neighbors and invite them to enjoy a meal together.
*  Work through your church to plan an immigrant welcoming dinner.
*  Lift up in prayer those who seek asylum and those who would turn them away.
*  Prepare food from a culture that is new to you and share with friends.

May 12, 2019

Fourth Sunday of Easter

**Life-giving Acts**

Acts 9:36-43

*Mother’s Day*

Today’s scripture tells about raising Tabitha (or Dorcas) from the dead. She was a seamstress for the widows of Joppa and has become a symbol for lay women who have worked in the church for centuries. Churches also can be brought back to life, raised from ruin. This has been the experience of Rev. Jennifer Brownell who is pastor of the Vancouver (Wash.) United Church of Christ that was severely damaged by fire in May 2016, displacing its congregation.

Adopting the mantra “you can burn us down, but you can’t burn us out,” Rev. Brownell kept the flame of faith alive as the congregation grew in its commitment and numbers even as its home was being rebuilt. This accomplishment was celebrated in a dedication ceremony in September 2018.

For Rev. Brownell, the experience, including the open house celebration, has reinforced the power of community. “We have been focused for a long time on our internal needs — we had to be, because the rebuild was so complicated and absorbing,” she said. “The rededication was packed with neighbors and friends who had supported us, and it reminded me again how important it is to continue to forge connections across the lines that we think separate us.”

“We live in challenging times for our community, and for our nation,” Brownell added. “As we move forward, it is our prayer that we are able to take what we have learned about the power of community and the hope of resurrection out into the world, to be a force for justice and healing.”

*I thought, the only good thing about sorrow is that it brings us down to ground zero inside ourselves, it reacquaints us with our best and truest self, and it releases compassion like some mighty hormone and if there is one thing that is good for us it's to have compassion, because it brings us together. -*Elizabeth Berg, American novelist

May 19, 2019

Fifth Sunday of Easter

**Imagine**

Revelation 21:1-6

*Mental Health Sunday*

The book of Revelation was born on the Island of Patmos, a place where the Roman world dumped all those people it considered vagrant and disturbers of the peace and used them as slaves in the Island’s quarry. It could not have been a pleasant life there and yet out of its misery comes these words of hope and miraculous possibility. Some scholars of religion have suggested that the words of this book were spoken out loud, recited as litanies in worship services intended to bring visions of hope alive so the island inhabitants might feel an embodied realized hope.

Embodied hope would be a hope that was real and present and touchable. Homelessness is a great destroyer of hope in our communities. When LGBTQ individuals near the campus of Clemson University, in the areas of upstate South Carolina unexpectedly find themselves without a home or a place to feel safe, Peace Congregational United Church of Christ is ready to meet them.

Congregation members and the Clemson community are working side-by-side in the design and construction of a tiny house, a mobile residency for a person in the LGBTQ community who is no longer welcome at home. The project received a $10,000 Grasstop Grant from UCC Justice and Witness Ministries through the Neighbors in Need special mission offering.

In today’s scripture from Revelation, God is no longer remote but visible among the people, wiping their eyes, and lifting pain and sadness. “See,” says God, “I am making all things new;” and later in the passage, “To the thirsty I will give water as a gift . . . .” Water in the desert, or on a remote rocky island, is embodied hope indeed. How more embodied a hope is there than a clean and welcoming home?

In providing such assistance, churches offer that visible, tangible message that God is love, born in our deeds encouraged by grand visions of what a world graced by God would look like. We are not separated from God. God is with us, embodied and tangible in a warm bed and a safe place.

May 26, 2019

Sixth Sunday of Easter

**Disciples Together**

Acts 16:9-15

*Rural Life Sunday*

In many early Christian traditions, prayers for the renewal of the earth were offered in the days before Ascension Thursday. Lay folks and clergy walked throughout the parish fields and petitioned God to bless land and seeds. These were called Rogation Days: in Latin, *rogate* means “to ask.”

**A Prayer for Planting**

Bless the land, Creator God;

bless pavement and open field,

rocky cliff and desert sands,

forest floor and ocean bottom.

Hear, O hear our prayer…

Bless the water, Creator God;

bless crystal streams and deep blue oceans,

dancing waves on the lake and swirling eddies and rising tides.

Hear, O hear our prayer…

Bless the air, Creator God;

bless gentle breezes and powerful gusts,

hurricanes and tornadoes

and the silent stillness after a great storm.

Hear, O hear our prayer…

Bless the animal kingdom, Creator God;

bless house pets and forest dwellers and residents of the desert,

bless four legged and many legged and the winged ones,

bless the furry and the sleek and the scaly.

Hear, O hear our prayer…

Bless our neighbors, Creator God;

bless the factory worker and the farmer,

the CEO and the waitress,

the over-the-road trucker, the computer analyst, the unemployed and all your children.

Hear, O hear our prayer…

Bless these little seeds we have planted, Creator God,

and all that grows upon the earth.

Bless us with desire to care for your earth so that your bounty will increase and

all may share it!

Hear, O hear our prayer…

Bless us, O God,

let appreciation of your creation

expand beyond our imaginings. **Amen.**

Taken from *Outside the Gates: Service Prayers for the Sixth Sunday of Easter*, written by the Reverend Jill K. Warner, Pastor of Plymouth Congregational United Church of Christ in Aberdeen, SD.