

Sermon, Sunday February 23, 2025

7th Sunday after Epiphany

Luke 6:27-38, Love for Enemies

Genesis 45:3-11, Joseph's forgiveness

I am Jim Schleif, the Executive Director for the United Church Camps, Inc., and I appreciate the opportunity to share this worship time with you today! I extend warm greetings from our three sites: Moon Beach, Daycholah Center, and Cedar Valley, as well as from our central staff.

I'll start this morning with a brief update for UCCI. 2024 was a solid year for us. Our guest participation at Moon Beach showed a modest steady increase through the late spring and summer months. Cedar Valley had a 'breakout' year that shattered all previous guest numbers. Our leaders at these sites, Rev. Missy Miller at Moon Beach, and Michelle Spettel at Cedar Valley, were also working on their third and fourth year respectively, which seems to be the breakthrough point for Camp/Site Directors. Both Moon Beach and Cedar Valley outperformed our budget goals and finished 2024 strongly in the black. Daycholah Center continued to be our challenge. Our Managing Director at Daycholah Center resigned on the cusp of summer camp season which set us back in leadership stability nearly two years. Fortunately, Rev. Jeremy Hylan, Pastor and Teacher at St. Paul's UCC in Sheboygan, shared some of his sabbatical time, stepped in, and did a masterful job of running summer camp on short notice. Unfortunately, we needed to cancel our fourth week of camp due to a COVID-19 outbreak. That was our busiest week of the summer and resulted in a \$48K loss for that week alone. Overall, UCCI finished 2024 roughly \$70K ahead of budget, which I consider a big success.

In our development efforts, we raised \$234K for the Moon Beach cabin foundation renovation project. \$100K of that was a very generous matching gift donation from Rev. Milton and Trudy Staskal in New London. We have completed six cabin foundation restorations and have adequate funds for two to three additional cabins depending on which are selected for the next priority and the scope of work. We also raised \$100,600 with our 'Roots & Wings' campaign. Although this was roughly half of our 'Roots' goal, when you consider what was raised with the Cabin Foundation project, and our annual generous donation from the WCUCC, we are on target with what I believe is needed for total development numbers for sustainable

outdoor ministry operations. We need to shift more of those development dollars to underwriting the operating budget, but our community has again shown that there is NO sign of donor fatigue and demonstrated their love for our sites and outdoor ministry.

With our fourth quarter 'Roots & Wings' campaign, we reached out to local churches requesting churches consider a modest donation. The idea was that a \$500 donation by all our local churches would provide over \$100K in donations. I fully recognize that a fourth quarter unbudgeted donation is a big ask, but I was encouraged that roughly 30 churches responded. In some of those cases, local church members donated a gift to the church such that the church could participate in the 'Roots & Wing' campaign. I also recognize that we are beyond the 2025 budgeting cycle but going forward, I see developing a health relationship and perhaps donor support from our local churches as a key element of our ongoing success. I fully realize that many of our local churches are struggling with ongoing budget stress and steady pastoral leadership, but for those churches who have the capacity to help, it is greatly appreciated.

What is UCCI doing to help? We are working diligently at continuing existing successful events/camps, and programming and also expanding our offerings to create new and exciting ways to experience our sacred sites. We have hired Jaime Craig as the Director of Development at Daycholah Center to provide professional focus on business development, the wedding chapel, guest camps, open market rentals, and year-round retreats/events. Rev. Jeremy Hylan is coming back to lead summer camp at Daycholah Center. We also continue to 'right size' our UCCI staff. One of those efforts is my role stepping back to a half time position beginning in March. Our assist visit in late 2023 identified that we do not have the revenue capacity for three full time site directors and a full-time executive director. Site leadership and capacity is absolutely the priority so the scale back of my role is being done in an effort to overall balance our administrative staffing while keeping the focus on our sites. I am also starting a half-time designate interim position at FCC – PW. I feel called back to local church ministry at a time when many local churches are struggling to find an affordable yet steady pastoral leadership role. I also feel strongly about continuing the positive trajectory and recovery of UCCI and our three sites.

I thank all of you for the ways you individually or collectively have supported UCCI, and I look forward to continuing how we might strengthen our relationship and partnership going forward. Thank you, again!

Our gospel reading this morning comes from Luke, chapter six. Jesus has delivered what is referred to as the “Sermon on the Plain” whereby Jesus came down from the mountains with his newly called apostles and stood among huge crowds on a level place. Jesus has delivered Luke’s version of the ‘beatitudes’. Jesus continues in today’s reading, **“Love your enemies. Do good to those who hate you. Bless those who curse you. Pray for those who mistreat you. If someone slaps you on the cheek, offer the other as well. If someone takes your coat, don’t withhold your shirt either. Give everyone who asks and don’t demand your things back from those who take them.”** Jesus gives no credit for loving those who love us or doing good to those who do good to us or lend to those whom you can expect repayment. Even sinners do those things. **“Don’t judge, and you won’t be judged. Don’t condemn and you won’t be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven.”**

How do Jesus’ words fall on us this morning? In this divisive, polarized, politically and emotionally charged environment. Just speaking for myself, they pose quite a challenge. My first response is more like, “Whoa, whoa, whoa, what about those guys? Them? Really, them? Do you see what they are doing? I’m supposed to love them? Pray for them? Bless those who have cursed me or what I value? Turn the other cheek? Are you kidding me? And yet, these are Jesus’ instructions. I would like to write this off thinking, times now are just different. These words can’t apply to them! The crowds that followed Jesus were not the rich and famous. They were those on the margins. They were those under the oppression of the occupying Roman government and army. They were those often exploited by tax collectors, soldiers, and greedy lenders/landlords. Yes, these words are a challenge to me today, but I admit, to Jesus’ followers, they would be just as challenging. I would be totally misguided if I thought that I had more beefs right now than Jesus’ followers.

So, “What is needed on my part to try to embody Jesus’ message?” If I let go of my initial emotional response, which is all about my needs and accusations of ‘them’, I realize that perhaps work is needed on my part to approach Jesus’ instructions. The last time I was with you, I believe I spoke of how Robin Wall Kimmerer’s *“Braiding Sweetgrass, Indigenous Wisdom and the Teaching of the Plants”*, and Daniel Cooper’s, *“Speak to the Earth and It Will Teach You”* lands us securely in a grounded relationship with our creator, from both an Indigenous and a Christian perspective. For Christmas this last year, my sister’s gift was a book entitled, *“All Creation Waits: The Advent Mystery of New Beginnings”* by Gayle Boss. Each daily Advent reading depicts the adoption of specific animals, birds, fish, reptiles, etc.

that adapt and survive the winter months of long nights, cold temperatures, and lack of food supply. I was amazed at the adaptations made by creation in effort to survive and reveal a new beginning. Each one of these readings is started with a quote of scripture, or from a notable theologian, or author. From Job 12:7-8, "But ask the animals-they will teach you-and the birds of the air-they will tell you; or speak to the earth-it will teach you-and the fish in the sea will inform you." I guess we know where Daniel Cooperrider got the title for his book! From St. Columban, 543-615, "If you wish to know the Creator, come to know his creatures." From Thomas Merton, 1915-1968, "The smallest creature is important in the sight of God.....Nothing that is important to God can be treated by us without the greatest respect." These are additional examples of how powerful the grounding of our relationship with God is found in nature.

When I immerse myself in the connectivity between Creator and creation, my mind goes to a different place. I start to release the 'me centered' response toward those who might offend me. Last year, I read Father Richard Rohr's book entitled, "Falling Upward: A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life." Rohr describes how the first half of life is very 'me' focused. We focus on ourselves, our growth, our education, our vocation, our earning power, our parenting, you get the picture. We are building the 'best version of ourselves' possible and perhaps feel like as we climb the mountain of accomplishments, we will get where we want and need to go. However, in this goal-oriented climb, we make mistakes, we sometimes fail to achieve what we want. Jobs are eliminated. We might be downsized. Parenting, no matter how we approach it, does not guarantee our children will live into our desired image. Marriages sometimes end in divorce. All of these real-life experiences can leave us unfulfilled, feeling inadequate, and perhaps nowhere to go but down. Even when we might reach those material or status related goals, they might leave us unfulfilled.

Rohr's approach is that the transition after this first half of life is not an ending but a new beginning. In the second half of life, we are challenged to move beyond by our own mistakes, losses, and forms of suffering. I can attest, 68 is NOT the new 45. And yet, Rohr considers these challenges as gifts, an opportunity to step outside of our comfort zones, and broaden spiritual horizons. Rohr emphasizes the universal story of scripture, being that of God's accompaniment. The journey of the Hebrew people, and Jesus' ministry, demonstrate example after example of God and God in Jesus accompanying life's journey and creating new beginnings, just like God's creation adapt to the challenges of Advent days and lead to new beginnings.

In the second half of life, we are actually “Falling Upward” focused more on meaning than accomplishment. Rohr states that humans are creatures of meaning, and finding deep meaning in our experiences is not just another name for spirituality. It is also the very shape of human happiness. Rohr states that in the second half of life, we can give our energy to making even the painful parts of life... belonging to a new unified field. Here was a kicker, **“If we have forgiven ourselves for being imperfect and falling, we can now do it for just about everybody else.”** This shift in life’s goal for meaning vs. accomplishment while trusting in God’s accompaniment and new beginnings, allows us to forgive ourselves, and then forgive just about everybody else. This turns us back to our gospel reading today. Perhaps the work that is needed to extend forgiveness starts with us?

Early this week, Fr. Rohr’s daily devotion share the story of the Cosmic Egg. Rohr describes four layers of a nested egg metaphor for our lives. If we are going to be the rebuilders of society, we need to be rebuilt ourselves. A healthy psyche lives within at least four containers of meaning. Imagine four nested domes. The first is called *my story*, the second is *our story*, the third is *other stories*, and the fourth is *the story*. In the first dome, we are focused on ourselves. The second dome includes others in our family/communities. The third dome incorporates other’s stories. And the fourth dome is The Story, or our Creator’s story. In the fourth dome, we find what Rohr calls universal truths that apply to all/everyone’s stories.

Rohr finds universal truths in the fourth dome. The fourth dome of meaning, which encloses and regulates the three smaller ones, is called *the story*. By this, I mean *the patterns that are always true*. This is much larger and more shared than any one religion or denomination. All healthy religions would, on some levels, be telling *the story*, as the Roman Catholic Second Vatican Council authoritatively taught. [2] For example, forgiveness always heals; it does not matter whether we are Hindu, Buddhist, Christian, or Jewish. Forgiveness is one of the patterns that is always true,..... There we are, back to forgiveness.

Our paired Old Testament scripture for today was the remarkable conclusion of the story of Joseph, the second youngest son of Jacob. After being subjected to unbelievable cruelty at the hand of his brothers, being sold into slavery, being subject to the evils of oppression and imprisonment, Joseph becomes very successful and wealthy, but he finds the ability to heal and offer forgiveness, finding truth in the bigger story.

As I am at a point of transition in my vocation, I am thankful for over the last four years, the works of Robin Wall Kimmerer, Daniel Cooperrider, and the connectivity

between Creator and creation have been so meaningful to me as I have invested in outdoor ministry. I truly appreciate the study of how God's creatures adapt and adopt through challenging and life-threatening times to create new beginnings. I better understand and appreciate how outdoor ministry experiences can be so transformational. And I am thankful for a God that continues to accompany us through life's successes, failures, and uncertainties to always work toward creating new beginnings. I hope that by doing MY work to Fall Upward into a healthy second half of life, I might catch glimpses of The Story, and in that find the ability to forgive myself for my shortcomings, and then even find the capacity to forgive others.

As I close, I leave you with an invitation to experience an immersion with God's creation in nature at one of our sacred sites. All 2025 events and camps are open for registration. Scholarships for summer camps are available. You can start on our website at UCCI.org and please call any of our respective sites if you have questions about opportunities, or the registration process. I thank our dedicated volunteers who arrive on site each spring and fall and help keep our camps in tip top shape. And I thank each of you who have donated time, talent, or funds to sustain outdoor ministry with UCCI.

May God bless you and keep you, as we all strive to fall upward into God's story, The Story!

Amen