March 6, 2022

First Sunday in Lent


Wilderness Companions

UCC Women’s Week – March 6-12

Women’s week is an opportunity to celebrate the lives of women who have had an impact on the church. Here, some UCC clergywomen reflect on the women who were formative in their faith stories from childhood on. What a great cloud of women witnesses surrounds us!

My preschool teacher, Kay Mitchell...took me with her to church when she realized my parents were never going to. (Jane Sorenson)

Katie Weisenheimer met me after school in our church’s fellowship hall. She played the piano, and I sang from the hymnal. She was an always-single woman. I might have been the daughter she would never have. Or she might have sensed the unhealthy environment of my home. Whichever, she enabled me to live God and the church. (Diane Snowa)

My mom, Yolanda Rosas waited 25 years until her church recognized women's call to ministry and ordained her. I asked her why she waited so long? I would have left right away! She said, "someone had to make a way for you and your sister." God and she made a way for me and for so many! (Nancy Rosas)

Amelia Altenbaum was our neighbor and distant relative...I loved being around her, swinging on her porch swing with her and sitting on the piano bench while she sang and played the piano. One time she asked me what I wanted to be when I grew up. I was about five years old at the time. I said a minister. Without hesitation her response was, "That's such a noble profession." She watered the seed God had planted... (Paula Compton)

Peggy Cleveland, a lay Presbyterian woman, who served as a missionary in Zaire and came back fully understanding the intersections of race and gender and colonialism which she infused into her work as Director of the Women’s Center at the Graduate Theological Union, Berkeley, when I was a student at Pacific School of Religion in the 70’s. (Loey Powell)

Ann Landers, who, when I thought I was too old to enter seminary, advised someone that time would pass whether or not they pursued the degree they wanted. They could be four years older with the degree or without it. I started filling out applications immediately. It was a message from God to me. (Ellen Witko)
March 13, 2022  
**Second Sunday in Lent**  
Strong and Tender

In today’s passage, Jesus refers to himself as a mother hen, tenderly gathering the city he loved under his maternal wings. By making this strong statement of maternal love and care, the Holy One sees and describes Themself as beyond gender.

In other ages, this was not so strange. The fourteenth century mystic Julian of Norwich often referred to Jesus with maternal images in her writings. “So, Jesus Christ who sets good against evil is our real Mother,” she wrote. “We owe our being to him—and this is the essence of motherhood! —and all the delightful, loving protection which ever follows. God is as really our Mother as he is our Father.” Julian even compared the breast milk of a mother to the elements received in the sacrament of baptism: “A mother can give her child milk to suck, but our dear mother Jesus can feed us with himself, and he does so most courteously and most tenderly with the holy sacrament, which is the precious food of life itself… The mother can lay the child tenderly to her breast, but our tender mother Jesus, he can familiarly lead us to his blessed breast through his sweet open side….”

Julian did not invent this idea in the 1300s. She drew from a rich history of naming God in many, varied, gender-fluid ways. According to the UCC-produced 2007 pamphlet “Expansive Language with Reference to God, Inclusive Language with Reference to God’s People,” in the scriptures we can find God named as midwife, mother, mother bear, shepherd, woman, baker, eagle, hen, fire, wind, rock, water, light, bread, and vine among many others.”

This question in the UCC brochure rings as relevant now as it did fifteen years ago: “What is the right way to speak about God?” And the answer is equally compelling. “This is a question of unsurpassed importance, for speech to and about the mystery that surrounds human lives and the universe itself is a key activity of a community of faith. In that speech the symbol of God functions as the primary symbol of the whole religious system, the ultimate point of reference for understanding experience, life, and the world. Hence the way in which a faith community shapes language about God implicitly represents what it takes to be the highest good, the profoundest truth, the most appealing beauty. Such speaking, in turn, powerfully molds the corporate identity of the community and directs its praxis.”

May the many names of the God reveal “the highest good, the profoundest truth, and the most appealing beauty” to each and all of us.

*Revelations of Divine Love, Julian of Norwich  
**https://www.ucc.org/expansive-language-with-reference-to-god/
Among the resolutions at the United Church of Christ’s 2021 General Synod gathering, was a resolution declaring racism to be a public health crisis. On this Amistad Sunday, we remember the brave captives aboard a slave ship who took on the system of slavery through the legal system. Nearly two hundred years later, people of faith are still called to address the systems and institutions that perpetuate racism. Only by addressing these systems of oppression can the evil of racism be dismantled. We follow a Christ who himself took on systems and institutions that perpetuated power for a few at the expense of a marginalized many. How is your faith community living out the powerful language of this General Synod resolution? Portions of the resolution follow:

“…WHEREAS “racism is a marriage of racist policies and racist ideas that produces and normalizes racial inequities,” in the words of Ibram X. Kendi.
WHEREAS without exception and across generations, racial inequities persist in every system of society—as evidenced through health care access, education, criminal justice, employment, housing, access to food and clean water, services to youth, older adults, and persons with disabilities, organizational leadership, governmental office, voting, and immigration, among many others—and thus a specific anti-racist lens is required for health equity and broader systemic change.
WHEREAS inequities based on race also intersect with other dimensions of identity—such as income, sex, gender, sexuality, citizenship and incarceration status, geographic location and housing status, ability, education, language proficiency, etc.—and thus racial justice is a necessary method from which to respond to other intersecting oppressions impacting health and equity overall.
WHEREAS public health promotes and protects the health of people and the communities and environments in which they live, learn, work and play.
WHEREAS the word crisis comes from the ancient Greek word that means “turning point,” and comes from the verb meaning “to decide”—thus connoting a call to change and action.
WHEREAS framing racism as an issue of public health rallies and compels faith communities, organizations, and the government to address the crisis through systemic change, in the same way other threats to public health have been addressed, such as through policies, practices, enforcement, education, and support services...."
“...NOW THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED that the Thirty-Third General Synod of the United Church of Christ declares racism a public health crisis...."

You can find more of the implications and calls for action that are the result of this bold resolution here: https://www.generalsynod.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Racism-Public-Health.pdf
March 27, 2022

**Fourth Sunday in Lent**


Embracing Love

*One Great Hour of Sharing*

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Even if you don’t know much else from the Bible, it’s likely that you have heard the story of the prodigal son. A young man leaves his comfortable family home with his ill-gotten inheritance, only to squander what he has been given on fast living. When he returns to beg forgiveness, he is received with jealous skepticism by his brother and with abundant love by his father.

We usually are invited to hear this story from the point of view of either the careless and morally bankrupt youngest son or the hardworking and resentful eldest. In either reading, we are in need of forgiveness and transformation. Yet, it can sometimes be helpful to place ourselves in this story from another perspective - that of the forgiving father. In so doing, we can see ourselves not merely as those in need of redemption like the two sons, but also as those who are able to offer what is needed for another.

If we are able to shift our point of view in this way, recognizing that sometimes we are the prodigal, sometimes the eldest and sometimes the parent, we begin to see giving and receiving not merely as a one-way street, but as a circle of care, respect and love, in which sometimes we all have need, and sometimes we all can give.

This circle is nowhere more strongly demonstrated than in our yearly One Great Hour of Sharing offering. When you give, One Great Hour of Sharing (OGHS) is able to help families around the world become stronger, healthier and better equipped to address hardships and catastrophes that would otherwise leave them destitute and hopeless. And, you do not know when you will be in need of help yourself. Please consider your gift to OGHS this morning as part of the circle of giving and receiving and giving again and then receiving again - the circle into which we have all been invited as people of faith.

Whether you want to give others a “new normal” in their lives after disaster strikes or provide care to new mothers and children with high mortality rates, or give refugees a place to call home, the OGHS offering can help you to help. From the Philippines to Fiji, from western Africa to Haiti, from Japan to more than thirty states that have been struck with hurricanes, fires, flood and illness, OGHS has stepped in as part of the circle of care.

You can give today through your church or online: https://www.ucc.org/giving/ways-to-give/our-churchs-wider-mission/one-great-hour-of-sharing/
On this day, the prophet Isaiah boldly declares God's plan to do a new thing. It is one of the blessings of the scheduled lectionary readings that this is also the first day of Ramadan for our Muslim brothers and sisters. This month of fasting marks the month that the words of the Qur'an were revealed to the prophet Muhammad and is a time of growing closer to the Holy One.

As people of the Word, we are siblings with our Muslim neighbors. Yet, historically, the relationship between Christians and Muslims has been fraught with misunderstanding and even violence.

How might your church or conference be part of a new thing done in God’s name, as we begin to rewrite that history by building bridges where traditionally there have been walls?

The New York Conference of the United Church of Christ has built a bridge by providing resources for education and inspiration. The conference has added a web page about supporting Muslim neighbors to their website. Besides personal narratives, it provides quotes and helpful resources for those wanting to learn and read more. You can read them here: http://uccny.org/resources/resources-to-support-muslim-neighbors/

Some churches have taken the next step, from education to action. The United Church of Christ Pacific Northwest Conference encourages churches to do a new thing by honoring their Muslim neighbors very tangibly during Ramadan. These churches were invited to do one or more of these actions:

1) Hang a banner or change their message boards in a way that honors our Muslim neighbors.
2) Take time to make an appointment to visit a local mosque or Islamic center to bring greetings from their local congregation.
3) Consider hosting an event to learn more about Islam and make a special effort to speak up against anti-Muslim rhetoric.

You can read more about the Pacific Northwest Conference’s outreach to the Muslim community during Ramadan here: https://www.ucc.org/honoring_sacred_time_uniting_ucc_muslim_faith_community_in_pacific_northwest/
April 10, 2022
Sixth Sunday in Lent
Palm/Passion Sunday
Into Jerusalem

Accompany Jesus on his Holy Week journey. Take time to read the scripture and pray each day of this sacred time.

Sunday, April 10 Jesus enters the city of Jerusalem during the festival of Passover.
Read Luke 19:28-40. Jesus asked the disciples to go and find a colt for him to ride. That must have seemed like a strange request, but they did it anyway. What strange thing is Jesus asking of you? How might you respond?

Monday, April 11 Jesus enters the temple and clears out the signs of commerce.
Read Luke 19:45-46. Jesus drove the people who were exploiting the poor out of the temple. Who is being exploited today? How might Jesus respond? How might we?

Tuesday, April 12 Jesus teaches that “the stone the builder rejected will be the cornerstone.”
Read Luke 19:47-20:19. This passage is imbued with menace, as the political and religious leaders of Jesus’ days seek a way to punish him. Why was his message so threatening to those in power in Jesus’ day? Why is it so threatening today?

Wednesday, April 13 Jesus continues to teach those gathered in Jerusalem.
Read Luke 21. This teaching begins when Jesus observes the difference between the wealthy and the impoverished. What differences do you think Jesus would notice now? What differences do you notice? What stories will grow from noticing these differences?

Thursday, April 14 The celebration of the Passover is followed by arrest and betrayal.
Read Luke 22:1-62. You hear these words when we celebrate communion together. Read them now and listen for what is new or challenging in this message. What does communion mean to you? How do you acknowledge or celebrate that meaning?

Friday, April 15 Good Friday. Jesus is crucified.
Read Luke 23. Jesus is executed in a state-sanctioned act of violence. Even in his final moments of suffering, Jesus promises forgiveness and eternal life to those crucified near him. What places of suffering need to hear Christ’s voice? In your own life? In your region? In the world?

Saturday, April 16 Holy Saturday. Jesus lies in the tomb.
Scripture says nothing about what Jesus did on this day and there is no scripture reading for this day. In your prayer time, light a single candle, and meditate on the illumination cast by even one small flame. How has God been steadfast, even in times of seeming absence?
April 17, 2022

**Easter Sunday**
John 20:1-18
Resurrection Joy

A Litany in Word and Song for Easter Day.

Reader: Hallelujah! Christ is Risen!
People: Hallelujah! Christ is Risen indeed!
Reader: We raise our voices in song because we cannot keep silent.
People: This is the good news of our Lord Jesus Christ! This is the good news of the resurrection!

All voices sing:
People rise up and praise our God!
People rise up and see what God has done!
People rise up and bless the name of the Lord: the Risen Christ.

Reader: On that first Easter day so long ago, the women crept to the tomb, expecting to find the body of their beloved friend and teacher. Instead, they were astonished to find that God had once again done the unexpected - turned death into life.
People: And they went away singing, “This is the good news of the resurrection!”

All Voices Sing:
Let us sing out with praise to God!
Let us sing out, the stone has rolled away,
Let us sing out and bless the name of the Lord: the Risen Christ.

Reader: The story they told that day continued to be told and retold, across borders and through generations. This is a story that transcends time and space. This is a story that brings freedom to the imprisoned, power to the meek and hope for the despairing.
People: And today we continue to sing together the good news of our Risen Savior! Hallelujah!

All voices sing:
Shout and then dance for God is good!
Shout and then dance, new life has come from death,
Shout and then dance and bless the name of the Lord.

“People Rise Up” From *Sing! Prayer and Praise*
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April 24, 2022

**Second Sunday of Easter**
Acts 5:27-32

Resurrection Witness

*Pacific Islander and Asian American Ministries Sunday / Break the Silence Sunday*

*Armenian Martyrs’ Day*

Soothing Spirit,
Whose gentle winds hovered over the Euphrates,
Surround our souls with support in these days of remembrance.
Strengthen our resolve to never let anyone forget
The atrocities of April 24 and beyond –
The genocide of the Armenian People
They wanted to kill all of the aunts and uncles and grandparents
And place the very last one in a museum to show their sordid victory.
But they did not win.
Hate was not victorious.
We remember the spirits of our ancestors,
Of our sisters and brothers in Christ,
Marching through the mayhem
Of death, confusion, loss.
We remember their steps on the march to Deir-Zor-
Their empty stomachs and heavy hearts.
Their lives chipped away
As they lost their mom, or baby, or brother,
and endured violations of body, mind and soul.
In gratitude, we remember those who defied their people,
The Turkish and Kurdish souls who rebelled against the powers-that-be
Saving the lives of our kin.

We are grateful for those who stand against the powers today
And refuse to call these events anything but a genocide.
Heal our hearts as the deniers’ speeches become
Louder and louder.
Their words will melt into the pool of justice one day.
We give voice to the trauma that lingered in survivors’ hearts
From the days they left their homes in the ‘Old Country’
To the moment when they saw the face of God.
Help all who carry the stories of the past into the future
So that we will not forget,
And we will not stand by,
As more of God’s children are massacred.
We pray for the survivors of all genocides that burned our earth
And stole our siblings-
Armenia, the Holocaust, Rwanda,
Cambodia, Bosnia, Darfur, and then some…
And then some more…
Knowing that God will give them resurrection from the ashes of yesterday, rising into the winds of tomorrow.

By Rev. Michele Torrigan, whose grandfather was a survivor of the Armenian genocide.
May 1, 2022  
*Third Sunday of Easter*  
Acts 9:1-6  
The Way Forward

Saul, the persecutor of God’s people became Paul, champion of the living Christ, after a powerful singular experience on the road to Damascus. For Silver Lake Award honoree Valerie Tutson, the powerful, singular moment that Christ came alive for her was not on the road, but in the pews of her childhood church.

Valerie Tutson is a storyteller by trade and her eyes widen with joy when she tells the story of the first time she saw a performance by some of her church friends after they returned from a camp experience at Silver Lake Conference Center (SLCC), a United Church of Christ facility. She recounts that in seeing those young women - dressed in plastic garbage bags meant to represent frog costumes and singing about the plagues and pharaoh - her life was changed forever. From then on, scripture stories were not merely words on the page, but a living breathing story, one that became hers to tell with creativity and wonder. After that she attended camp as soon, and as often, as she could.

“Silver Lake has been a part of my life since I was 11 years old,” Val said. “Without a doubt, Silver Lake has helped to shape the person I am in the world. It has always been a place where my life, my creative work, and my faith get explored and braided together. I tell people all over the world that all the good stuff I learned about life and caring for God’s people I learned and keep learning at camp!” She has been a camper or staff member of the camp since 1977.

SLCC Executive Director, the Rev. Ryan Gackenheimer, says that even many decades after her “come to Jesus moment” in the pews of her home church, “It is difficult to be in the presence of Val and not know that God is alive and loves you to the deepest core of who you truly are.”

Do you have a “road to Damascus” moment? How does it continue to inform your life to this day?

Information about the Silver Lake Award adapted from the Silver Lake Conference Center website: https://www.silverlakect.org/newsdetail/valerie-tutson-recognized-with-4th-annual-silver-lake-award-14029263
In Joppa there was a disciple named Tabitha (in Greek her name is Dorcas); she was always doing good and helping the poor. About that time, she became sick and died, and her body was washed and placed in an upstairs room. Lydda was near Joppa; so, when the disciples heard that Peter was in Lydda, they sent two men to him and urged him, "Please come at once!" Peter went with them, and when he arrived he was taken upstairs to the room. All the widows stood around him, crying and showing him the robes and other clothing that Dorcas had made while she was still with them. Peter sent them all out of the room; then he got down on his knees and prayed. Turning toward the dead woman, he said, "Tabitha, get up." She opened her eyes and seeing Peter she sat up. He took her by the hand and helped her to her feet. Then he called for the believers, especially the widows, and presented her to them alive. This became known all over Joppa, and many people believed in the LORD. Peter stayed in Joppa for some time with a tanner named Simon. (NRSV)

This story of the healing of Tabitha/Dorcas is populated with lively and fascinating characters. Take a moment to step into the shoes of each of these people, imagining what they must have seen, heard, smelled, tasted, and touched, not only as part of this story but before and especially afterwards.

Imagine yourself first as Peter. How do you feel when you are summoned to help this woman who you have never met? What gives you the courage and the authority to know what to do in this seemingly hopeless situation? What leads to your decision to stay in the area of Joppa after this initial healing?

Imagine yourself as Tabitha. Imagine being willing to give all that you have and are in service to others. What would be your reaction to learning you are ill? What changes might you feel in your body and mind when you are called from the precipice of death back into health and wellness?

Imagine yourself as one of the widows or disciples. How do you react to this rollercoaster of events from serious illness back to life? How will being witness to this situation change you going forward?

Imagine yourself as Simon the Tanner. Tanning is difficult, dangerous, and smelly work. How does it feel to welcome one of Jesus’ followers into your home? How might it change you?
May 15, 2022

Fifth Sunday of Easter
Revelations 21:1-6
Imagine

Mental Health Sunday

The United Church of Christ Mental Health Network is a special interest group within the UCC that works to reduce stigma and promote the inclusion of people with mental illnesses/brain disorders and their families in the life, leadership, and work of congregations. According to their website: mhn-ucc.org, “We envision a future in which people with mental illnesses feel welcomed, supported, valued and included in their congregations.”

A new curriculum released last autumn describes how a mental health diagnosis intersects and interacts with other parts of persons, bringing both challenge and clarity to the quest for identity.

In a video clip publicizing the curriculum, Rhina Ramos claims her identities as “an immigrant woman, from El Salvador, a lesbian and a Christian.” When asked how those identities interact within herself, as well as what others think of her identities, Ramos reflects, “Well, I can get confused because I am all these identities. But people outside me get confused because they tend to see just pieces of it...but I’m a whole person. I’m a whole person who is very colorful!”

In describing his identity, JJ Flag says, “I am both a black male, and one who lives with a physical disability...I navigate the world using a wheelchair because I was born with cerebral palsy. Being both a black man who has a disability, it’s interesting to see how those two things play out in my life...It was the Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas that said, “if you want to see what God looks like, look into the face of the other.” He continues, “I have sat down and really toyed with the idea, “What would it mean to get to heaven and God be a direct reflection of who I am? People talk about ‘when one day you'll get to heaven and you’ll be walking around.’ And I'm like, ‘what if I get there and God’s ROLLing around?’”

David Finnegan Hosey reflects, “A lot of my identities are at the intersection of advantages I’m given. White, male, cisgender, straight - and a lot of those forms of identities that tend to carry a lot of power within our society are really quite fragile. I mean, you get kicked out of the boy’s club really quick when you break down crying every five minutes because you're having a bi-polar episode.”

Listen to these stories, and many more, and explore the intersections of your identities at mhn-ucc.org.
May 22, 2022

Sixth Sunday of Easter
Acts 16:9-15
Disciples Together
Rural Life Sunday

In today’s reading, Paul gets called to Macedonia, which is far from the urban centers he has known. On this rural life Sunday, we celebrate pastors in rural communities, who also answer calls far from cities. Today, a few of those pastors reflect on the joys and challenges of being a rural church pastor.

Dana Schindler, whose church recently celebrated 150 years together, says that a joy is that members feel a real connection to the church. A challenge is related to the joy. Almost everyone is related and it can be difficult for new people who are not members of the 2 main families to feel accepted.

Whitney Prose Bruno writes, “We really are family. (Often literally.) Everyone knows everyone. This means you're welcomed with flaws and merits both. But the challenge is that rural churches like most organizational groups are in decline. An urban congregation has the opportunity to share church space with other congregations, and nonprofits. Community continues. A rural congregation does not. If the handful stop meeting, there's not another socialization and community for the elderly (not online) members to join.”

Rural churches understand the importance of feeding one another. Sara Bartlett gives thanks for the joy of shared vegetables from the many gardens in her community. Rev. Deanna Armstrong is proud of her small congregation which produced 200 pounds of food in its community garden. In a drought, at 6,200 feet of elevation.

Family and food are blended with a good bit of humor, too. Rev. Kimberly Shrader, who serves a two-point charge in Maine, says wryly, “The smaller of the churches I serve gave me a bit of a surprise when I first arrived. You see they have to turn the well pump off in late October, which means no restroom in the parish hall. The 200-year-old sanctuary building has no pumping at all. So, the worship service MUST BE 45 minutes, no longer, so they can get to the home of whomever is hosting fellowship.”

When Paul received the call to Macedonia, the scripture tells us that he left for there, immediately. Whether they heard and answered the call at once, or responded more slowly, give thanks for rural pastors and the churches they serve today.
When Paul and Silas broke the walls that bound them, they created a new life not just for themselves but for the other prisoners and the jailers, as well. Suddenly, everyone in the story began thinking of themselves and their place in the world in a transformed way. Like the transformed people in the story of Paul and Silas, as old walls and ways of being crumble, many churches and conferences are opening themselves up to a new way of being and doing in the world.

In recent years many UCC Conferences have gone through the wrenching process of letting go of their beloved church camps, for a variety of reasons. Tears have been shed over these decisions, because of the poignant memories and formative faith experiences that have taken place at these camps. Many clergy are camp alumni; they felt their call to ministry in the beauty of nature among extraordinary people.

After the tears, one such camp alum felt propelled by the Holy Spirit to start a non-profit to purchase and operate Camp Mimanagish in central Montana. Rev. Cathy Barker, with her husband, Rev. Dick Weaver, started talking with others who love that particular sacred space. The group sent out a “What If” survey to gauge the interest in seeing Mimanagish into a new future.

Within months the working group had founded and incorporated Singing Waters Montana, a 501(c)(3) non-profit. The group consulted extensively with the U.S. Forest Service, who manage the land, sharing their vision of becoming “A Camp for those who have no Camp.” Mimanagish alumni lent their expertise in fundraising and Singing Waters Montana raised over half a million dollars for the purchase and maintenance of the facility.

At the Dedication Celebration on July 31, 2021, over 50 people, including UCC Conference leaders, honored the past and shared hopes for the future. In addition to faith communities, this lovely wilderness retreat on the Boulder River will host recovery groups, veterans, LGBTQ+ support groups, youth de-stress weeks, Foster and Adoptive Family Camps, and more. Fishing, Art, and Music will round out the schedule. The welcome will be wide.

When the Holy Spirit is leading, anything can happen!