

“Let Us Go On . . .”

A Sermon for Sunday Morning Worship
United Congregational Church, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT
February 5, 2012 – My First Sunday
“Repeat” – Sunday, September 28, 2016
Texts: Isaiah 40: 28-31 & Mark 1:29-39

Well, here we are at last! It’s been awhile since I stood before you as your candidate for the pastorate here way back in November. That was three major holidays ago, for heaven’s sake! Thanksgiving feasts, Christmas craziness and New Year’s resolutions have all come and gone as we’ve waited for this moment to arrive. In the intervening weeks you’ve said good-bye to the interim pastor you loved and I said good-bye to the little church where I was their beloved interim. Your annual meeting has been held successfully – I’m assuming – and life here in this special place, this cherished community of God’s beloved people nestled into this beautiful little corner where CT and RI wink at each other, has started to turn its attention to the new beginning we are celebrating together this morning. So, here we are – together at last – the first of many, many Sundays together, God willing. So, the obvious question for this morning is – now what?

Today’s Scripture texts from the Lectionary are particularly appropriate as we consider this question, I think. I confess I have always loved this story from the Gospel of Mark as it gives us a glimpse into a day in the life of Jesus. This morning’s text begins just after Jesus and the disciples had left the synagogue where

Jesus had been teaching and casting out demons. They go to the house of Simon and Andrew, presumably to get something to eat and rest a bit, but no such luck. As soon as they arrive they find that Simon's mother-in-law, who would have been the one to provide the hospitality they sought, was ill in bed with a fever. To be so ill as to take to your bed was no small matter in Jesus' time. It meant you were seriously ill, perhaps fatally so. And Jesus' response to this woman was both ordinary and extraordinary at the same time. He simply goes to her, takes her hand, and lifts her up. He took her by the hand and lifted her up – and she was fine. No grand and glorious scene of dramatic prayers and incantations. No dousing her with special oils. He just took her by the hand and lifted her up – and she was fine. She felt so wonderful, in fact, that she immediately began doing what she would have been doing for them had she not fallen ill – she began fussing over them, making food for them, bringing them something to drink and perhaps a basin of cool water and fresh towels to wash up with. In short, she ministered to them.

Commentators on this part of the text make an important observation on what's happening here with the healing of Simon's mother-in-law. We should take care, they tell us, not to see in this story any sort of self-serving motive behind this particular healing of this woman *so that* she could serve Jesus and the disciples. She does begin caring for them as soon as she feels able to but not

from a sense of expectation that she must. Rather, she begins caring for them because in healing her Jesus returns more than just her physical health to her, as important as that is. More significantly, in lifting her up and restoring her to health, Jesus is also restoring her vocation, her place and meaning in life. Jesus, in a very real way, gave her back her life in the fullest sense. This story remind us vividly that in his many acts of healing and casting out demons, Jesus was doing so much more than just alleviating physical and mental suffering. He was restoring people to life in all its sweetness, all its meaning and purpose. He was giving them back their own selves.

As our text from Mark continues, we see that the news of Jesus' healing of Simon's mother-in-law brings even more people to him, desperate to be healed. The text says the whole city of Capernaum gathered outside the door of the house where they were and Jesus cured many, but curiously it does not say he heals all. Apparently even Jesus had his limits. This is evident as the text describes how early the next morning Jesus got up and went out by himself to a deserted place to pray. It seems even Jesus needed respite and renewal from all that was being asked of him. And he knew it. The disciples got up and realizing he was gone went out to find him. When they did they made a point of telling him that everyone was looking for him. Clearly they were expecting him to go back to the house and pick up where he left

off the night before. But how does Jesus respond to them? He doesn't agree to go back with them to where they had been and pick up where they had left off the night before. Nope, no going back for Jesus. He says to the disciples in no uncertain terms – “let us go on to the neighboring towns so that I may proclaim the message there also, for that is what I came to do.”

Let us go on. No looking backward for Jesus. No dwelling on what he didn't get to the day before. No worrying about unfinished business in the past. Jesus was all about forward momentum. Jesus was all about doing God's work every moment of every day. Jesus was all about going on, moving forward into the new day, into the future, confident that whatever God has in mind for him to do will become clear as the day unfolds. Jesus wasn't looking back. Jesus was moving forward, every moment of every day. Teaching, explaining, chatting, healing, doing what he could to restore some he encountered to health and wholeness, life in all its sweetness – these were the actions which filled Jesus' life and ministry. These were the actions propelling him ever forward. “Let us go on,” he said to the disciples – and they did.

“Let us go on.” Guess what? Those words of Jesus spoken two millennia ago still reverberate for us today – right here in United Congregational Church – but most especially I think on this first Sunday of our new ministry together. That's not to say our histories – yours and mine – don't matter. Of course they do!

All that we have experienced up to this point in time, as individuals, as Christians, as members of this church and all the other churches which are a part of us – all those things combine now in this moment to make us who we are poised on the brink of this exciting new time in the life of this community of God’s beloved people. All that we have been through, all we have endured, all the successes we have celebrated, all the dreams we have imagined – all those things come together in this moment to prepare us to do just as Jesus instructed his disciples to do on that long ago hot and dusty morning in Capernaum. “Let us go on,” he said and they did.

Now hold on a minute, you might be thinking. Not so fast! We’re tired. We’re ready for some down time. We’re ready to take a breath and relax a bit before all this moving on business gets cranked up. Of course you are. Remember what Jesus did that very morning? He took time to renew himself, in prayer and by just resting in the presence of God. We have to do that too! We are only human after all. We all have our limits. And we all can push past those limits just so many times before we start to burn out and going on seems like a cherished but impossible dream.

This is a feeling, a reality our friend Isaiah whose words of reassurance we read this morning knew all too well. Writing to the community of exiles returning to Jerusalem after decades of captivity in Babylon, Isaiah understood that, while the people

were overjoyed to be returning to their beloved Jerusalem, they knew the challenges ahead were many. Their anxiety about the future in spite of this exciting new beginning was real. And what does Isaiah say to them? He reminds them in no uncertain terms that our God does not faint or grow weary. And more than that, our God gives power to the faint and strengthens the powerless! Even when things are so challenging and unclear that even the young become exhausted with thinking about it all, even then God restores the strength of those who ask God for help. And those who do ask God for help in the midst of all this going on – guess what – Isaiah tells us they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.

So here we are this morning, you and I, new to each other but not to God. New to each other and committed to building a future here in this place. Hopes and dreams and expectations abound in the midst of a desire for rest and renewal. We know where we've been and how that has brought us to this moment. We're anxious to get going on whatever it is God has in mind for us to do together even as we're aware that we are still strangers to each other in so many ways. So, now what? Lucky for us, Mark points the way – teaching, preaching, healing, serving, ministering, praying – a typical day in the life of Jesus – and of those who seek to follow him. Let us go on – together. I'm ready. How about you?