

## ***“Only Speak the Word”***

A Message for Sunday Worship

on January 10, 2021

United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT

Text: Matthew 8:1-16

Well, dear ones, what a week this has been. The simmering undercurrent of denial and distrust in the outcome of the November elections exploded in a way we never dreamed it could. We witnessed an attack on the Capitol building itself, a building alive with history which functions as the heart and soul of our democracy, the oldest in the world. Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi called it “the Temple of democracy” and Senate Leader Mitch McConnell referred to it as “the People’s house” and so it is. This is a building which has witnessed thousands of protests over the decades, most of those having already faded into the mists of history. But no one will ever forget the attack on that building – the worldwide symbol of the power and authority of the United States of America – which television cameras caught as it unfolded this past Wednesday. It has already taken its place among heinous and memorable events like 9/11 and the Assassination of President Kennedy, events which broke our hearts and took our breath away. Somehow, though, this was worse. This was worse because there were so many warning signs it was going to happen that were dismissed, disregarded, downplayed or simply ignored. Simply put, it should not ever have happened for so very many reasons. But it did, and as we witnessed those unbelievable and terrifying moments unfold right in front of our eyes, every single one of us was changed forever. The trajectory of our country was changed forever. And we are left now in the aftermath wondering and worrying about what might happen next.

Obviously, there has been a lot of talk in the hours and days that have followed what amounted to an armed insurrection with loss of life, vandalism of the property of the citizens of the United States, and injuries both physical and emotional, on the part of all participants. I’ll leave it to the talking heads of which there are no shortage to parse the events. There is no need for us to relive that trauma here this morning. Frankly, we’ve had enough trauma in the last 10 months to last several lifetimes and still it keeps coming at us. When will all this end, we ask each other and no one in particular. “Now what do we do” is the question hanging on the tips of our tongues and the edges of our brains but we are too afraid to give it voice lest

we get the answer we are most fearful of receiving. But, dear ones, “now what” is exactly the question we must confront if we are ever to move beyond the trauma of the week just ended. And surely there is no better place to confront this question we can’t escape than right here in God’s presence. Surely there is no better conversation partner we could hope for than Jesus, the tiny baby in the manger whose birth we just celebrated and who grew up to be the man who changed the world.

This man Jesus, this man we know as the Savior, the Christ, was all about confronting and living through a “now what” reality every day. Stinging poverty amidst brutal power structures formed the framework for the world in which Jesus lived his life. We know little of that life between his birth and his appearance at the banks of the Jordan River as an adult when he was baptized by his cousin John and his brief three years of ministry began. What we do know of Jesus comes from the Gospel accounts of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, each of which offers a unique perspective into the man Jesus. What we do know about Jesus from them is that his ministry was built on two interrelated but distinct activities. Jesus taught and Jesus healed. His teachings came in moments when he spoke to small groups and huge crowds, usually outside, Covid-style. His first students were the men whom he recruited himself, those we know as his disciples. From there the gatherings grew and grew until thousands would turn up, sometimes following him from town to town. He literally could not escape them as his fame grew. And always, always, always the crowds included people needing to be healed. Sometimes these people would come to him pleading for his assistance. Other times Jesus would notice their affliction and offer his help without being asked. In his teaching Jesus healed hearts and minds, mending broken relationships with God everywhere. In his healing he did exactly the same as the healing opened the door for the teaching to happen.

So often what we focus on is Jesus’ teachings – what he said and what he meant as he spent hours and hours explaining the unique understanding he had of God. This relationship transcended the rigid ritual legalism of the Temple authorities replacing it with an intimate and loving relationship with the God he called *Abba*, a word that translates more easily as “daddy” than father. The healings of Jesus also reveal everything about who he was and how his extraordinary relationship with and understanding of God

could transform any situation. The text we read from Matthew this morning is a perfect example of this. It reads like a “day in the life” essay describing in seamless language how Jesus moved among the people as a source of wisdom, comfort, understanding and healing. This unique chronology of healings in Matthew captures simply how his healings formed the framework of everything he said and did in his ministry.

This morning’s text picks up in the immediate aftermath of his greatest teaching event – what we call the Sermon on the Mount. The crowds followed him as he left the mountain and soon a leper came and knelt before him. “Lord, if you choose, you can make me clean,” he said to Jesus. Without hesitation, Jesus responded, “I do choose. Be made clean!” After telling the newly healed man to present himself to the Temple priests, Jesus continued on his way. He arrives in Capernaum and is accosted by a Roman centurion, an officer in the Roman legion. This most unlikely supplicant to Jesus comes to ask for healing of his beloved servant, suffering with paralysis at his home. Jesus agrees and turns to go with the centurion but the man stops him saying he is not worthy to have Jesus in his house. “Only speak the word and my servant will be healed,” he says to Jesus. After using this as a teaching moment for the disciples about faith, Jesus tells the man his servant had been healed. And, sure enough, when the centurion returned home he found that the servant had been healed at the moment Jesus said he would be. At last Jesus’ reaches his destination and enters the home of his disciple Peter. He immediately notices Peter’s mother-in-law is ill and he reaches out to her, healing her with the touch of his hand. After enjoying a meal this now healed family member of Peter’s had served him, Jesus spent the rest of the evening healing “many” who came to him for help.

I love this collection of stories about a day Jesus spent healing folks because it tells us so much about how Jesus understood his gift for healing, and how others saw it as well. In the story about the leper, we see the leper remind Jesus, and everyone else including us, that whether or not to heal someone is Jesus’ choice. No one compels Jesus to heal the people who come to him for help. God is not making him heal. Jesus heals because he chooses to, because through the act of healing someone’s suffering he is making God completely and totally the center of that person’s new lease on life. This is a gift freely given but not deserved or earned. Just like grace.

In the healing of the centurion's servant we learn that the message of God's abiding and boundless love for all had already transcended political and human divides. This centurion was an officer of the occupying Roman legion! It was the legions who kept the people of Palestine, Jesus' own friends and family, under the brutal rule of Rome. Yet this centurion had been touched in such a way by what he had heard of Jesus that he risked everything by coming to ask for a healing. And he was asking for a beloved servant to be healed, not a wife or a child or even one of his soldiers. He was asking Jesus to heal a servant. Then he acknowledged that Jesus did not have to be physically present to the servant in order to offer the desperately needed healing. "Only speak the word" he said, "and my servant will be healed." Jesus is blown away by this because this centurion who would have known only the gods of Rome already understood more of faith in the God of Israel than any of the others following him everywhere. "In no one in Israel have I found such faith," he tells the disciples.

And I always love this story of Jesus' healing Peter's mother-in-law who immediately gets up and fixes them all dinner. Such a Jewish mother she was! The thing about this story is that this is a healing no one requested. Jesus came into the house, realized the woman was ill and approached her. He merely touched her hand and she was healed. I am struck in this story that no one asked for healing here – not the woman, not even Peter who had just spent all day watching Jesus heal person after person after person. Did Peter just not notice she was ill? Was he just not paying attention? Jesus saw the need, unnamed though it was, and responded. And then, he spent the rest of the evening continuing to heal everyone who came to him.

This, dear ones, is the image I invite us all to hold on to in this day and this week and this volatile time when it feels as though the very fabric of our lives as we know them is in peril. This image of Jesus, already exhausted by a long journey punctuated by healing everyone from a leper to a soldier's servant to his disciple's family member, is the one to sustain and remind us in these fearful times that Jesus and his love of us is as close as breath. In this image of Jesus, we see he was there for whoever needed him, for whatever they needed, for as long as he was needed. Dear ones, Jesus is doing the same for us right here and right now. Jesus was present, tears falling from his eyes as thugs brutalized the Capitol and everyone in it,

reacting in horror to the “Jesus Saves” banner being carried by some bent on carrying out violence and hatred in his name. Dear ones, Jesus is with us as Covid roils every aspect of our lives, filling us with fear about doing even the simplest things like hugging a friend or singing a favorite hymn right here in church. Jesus knows what we have already been through and what we are going through in this very moment. He knows what we need and what our bruised and battered country needs. We need healing, all of us. All. Of. Us. Those who were attacked and those who did the attacking. Those who are ill and dying from Covid and those denying its reality. Those who buy into conspiracy theories out of personal need or political gain and those who insist on naming the lies as lies. Those who believe we are all beloved of God and those who believe God only loves the same people they do. All of us need the healing Christ brings because only through healing will we find the strength to revitalize the ancient promises of God’s shalom in our own lives each day. We must also remember that before there can be healing there must be forgiveness and forgiveness comes only when sin is recognized, named and acknowledged. That is the challenge ahead.

This is why for the next several weeks between now and the beginning of Lent in mid-February, we will be exploring this sacred and life changing idea of healing. We will consider together how this can be the foundation of our future as God’s people in this place and time. Dear ones, we know how desperately healing is needed right now – for ourselves and our loved ones, and for our world. Join me in these next few weeks as we explore the possibilities offered in faith like the centurion’s, a powerful man who acknowledged his own unworthiness before God. This unlikely person reminded Jesus that he only need speak the word and the healing craved, the healing needed, would happen. May this healing grounded in the acknowledgement of sin and a desire for forgiveness be revealed in our midst. May we find in this healing the strength, the will and the joy to continue the work of bring God’s shalom to the world. Wouldn’t that be absolutely wonderful? Yes, yes it would. Amen.