

Caring and Sharing

United Congregational Church, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT

October 8, 2023 – Sunday Morning Worship

Text: Psalm 19:1-6

So, I'm back. At last. No one is more surprised than I am that I was sick enough to miss not one but two Sundays in a row. And not just any Sundays! Oh no. I managed to miss two Sundays I have been planning for, anticipating, looking forward to, for most of the summer. You can imagine how upset I was. But then, as I calmed down, I recognized this situation for what it really was – living proof that our God is real, has a great sense of humor and really needed me to remember who is in charge of our church and all of our lives – and it's not me. After all, God knew how hard I had been working on all this, how excited I am for the Threshold designation we have earned. God knows everything there is to know about our little church – our struggles and challenges as well as our joys and successes. God knows what God is hoping for us, dreaming for us and what we need to be doing to be about God's work in the world. It was never about me or my efforts. It was and always is, all about God and God's plans. My becoming so ill that I literally could not move for over a week reminded me of this powerfully, like getting hit between the eyes with a two by four. And I am so very grateful it did. I am so very grateful for this amazing "reset" just when I, and our church, needed it most. I have a whole new appreciation of the sentiment "life is what happens when you're busy making other plans!"

One of the powerful reminders from God through my Covid experience is that our church is truly a community. I am so very proud, and humbly grateful, for how incredibly caring and supportive you have all been during my recent Covid reality check. The Deacons were fabulous, stepping up literally at the last minute to lead worship on September 24, our Threshold Sunday. I have all the thoughts and

notes compiled and they will play a central role in our preparation for our Threshold retreat to take place after the first of the year. Our Threshold conversations are just beginning and will be continuing as we consider new possibilities in the midst of current realities. You will notice that I have moved the photo display of all our front doors into the sanctuary so they can remind us each week of who we are as members of this community of faith – this threshold community of God’s people. I urge you to take a look at all the photos to get a sense of some of the people in our church family. You’ll also see several of the thresholds that are part of our church, a reminder of our call to be God’s people inside our building but even more importantly in the community outside our doors. If you still haven’t sent me the photo of your front door, it’s not too late. Just take a photo and send it along to me in an email or even a text from your phone and I’ll take it from there. I, for one, really do love the sense of broader connectedness these photos create of our community and the *Missio Dei*, the work of God, to which we are being called as a faith community and as individuals. I am so excited to continue our work of figuring out what it is God is inviting us to consider as we move forward into the second half of the first century of our church’s life.

I want you to know too that Rev. Isaac Lawson from the SNEUCC really enjoyed being here with you last week. Again, God’s hand that he was already scheduled to be here so he could officiate at Communion in my absence even though that was no where close to the original vision for his visit. I was so relieved when he agreed to come even though I wouldn’t be here because ministerial protocols definitely frown on Conference staff leading worship in a church when the seated pastor isn’t present. But Isaac recognized our dilemma and he still came and for that I am deeply grateful. And yet I think it went even better because I wasn’t here. You interacted with him directly

and as a result he has a good sense of who you are, who we are as a church, and he is very pleased that so many of you are excited about this threshold process in which we are engaged. Truly God is good. Even when we are crushingly disappointed in how things work out as I was these past two Sundays when I so wanted to be here, and I couldn't. Covid literally prevented me from being here, not once but twice. Good grief! Okay God! I get it! I get it. You are the mover and shaker as our threshold journey gets under way. Not me. Not the Conference. Not even our own lay leadership. You have placed this golden moment before us. Our task now is to discern our next steps. That process begins in earnest at the Church Council next Sunday after worship, an open meeting to which all are invited, as always.

Another irony in all this is that I was actually not supposed to be here *this* weekend. I had made arrangements months ago to attend a special UCC event in Boston on Trans Ministry and I was looking forward to it. I was going to stay with my daughter and her family for the whole weekend, spending just Saturday at the event. A real treat! But alas, Covid knocked these long held plans right out of the running too because these events have strict Covid isolation protocols, and I was still within the 10 day limit from my negative Covid test. So, I participated in some of the event on line and while those pieces were very good, I suspect I would not have enjoyed the in person event quite as much as I was anticipating. And, best of all, I get to be here with all of you after too long of an absence! I am so very grateful for that. I will share that what I most valued about the pieces of the event I was able to attend yesterday was the powerful sense of how vitally important the church community is. So many of the trans speakers I heard yesterday spoke with love and compassion for the struggles so many have with who they are. Yet their sense that they are who God created them to be was deep, genuine and humbling as was their

constant reminders to all of us that all they are asking is to be seen as people first, as people beloved of God just as they are. They reminded us that none of us should ever be reduced to how we look, how we dress, or how we sound when we speak. They revealed incredible courage as well as surprisingly deep compassion, talking over and over again about how much it means for them when churches make the effort to become truly safe, welcoming and non-judgmental spaces for them. I was and remain deeply moved, and even more determined that at least part of what God is calling us to do is to find more tangible ways to be a safe space for such folks. We would be so blessed by their presence in our midst.

I mention this experience because attending that event yesterday was very much one of lived “caring and sharing” which is what this “Caring and Sharing Sunday” is intended to highlight. Our first Caring and Sharing Sunday was last July while I was on vacation, and it was an intentional time when worship became an opportunity to reach out to members and friends whom we have missed seeing here at church recently. We did this primarily by writing notes to them, but I also know several of you went beyond and made phone calls and even a few in person visits to folks. Yes!! Just yes. Once again during Fellowship time this Sunday you will have the opportunity to do the same once more. I have prepared a contact list of all the folks we would especially like to reach out to but feel free to include anyone you would like to connect with. You can also take a copy of the list and reach out to them by phone as well, or maybe even stop by for a visit. You can also take this as an opportunity to reach out to your own friends and family members with whom you haven’t spoken in a while. No time like the present! It’s always a good time to show you care by sharing a little of yourself through a phone call or a note. By the way, that’s another thing I learned when I was home sick for two

weeks. Every text, every phone call, every email, every Facebook message – they all touched me deeply. And, amazingly, they always seemed to pop up exactly when I was feeling at my worst. They literally felt like God smiling at me every time this happened! And we even got a care package from someone here in the church. I won't say whom, but I will admit that hermit cookies were involved. What a delightful, soul-lifting treat!

That's why I am especially pleased with the Scripture text I picked for this morning. Remember, it was originally intended that this text be a set-up for an early end to worship so you could all go and spread some cheer through your cards and notes. But, now it feels like so much more than that. This text just rings out the joy our God offers us every day, if only we stop to look for it, to see it, to allow ourselves to be wrapped up in it. "The heavens are telling the glory of God, and the firmament proclaims God's handiwork. Day to day pours forth speech and night to night declares knowledge." This is an incredible description of what it really means to be the people of God. We witness God and God's truth in the glory of creation, of life all around us. God's voice echoes everywhere, bouncing off the sights and sounds of every day life. The thing is, it's not just the good stuff, the happy days, the beautiful scenery when we are feeling great, and all is right with the world. It's easy to celebrate God in those moments! But what about those dark nights of the soul, those moments when we feel alone and forgotten, exhausted and sick, wondering what happened to all the plans we hoped would come true. To celebrate God in these moments is truly a gift, and one we so often overlook. To celebrate God in these moments is truly the beginning of the life transforming possibilities of God's abiding love for us, just as we are.

These moments, these dark moments we all experience, are exactly the time when we need to proclaim God's glory to ourselves. But this is also the moment when it is virtually impossible to do so because we are just hurting too much. We just want to roll over in bed and pray for the next day to be better even as we secretly fear it won't be. These are the moments when the caring and sharing so central to a Christian faith community become so very important. When you are too sad, too sick, too exhausted to even remember God's presence in your life, the other folks in this community are here to lift you up in that moment of darkness. Do they do it by proclaiming God's glory to you? Of course not! They do it by sending a text, by sending a note, by calling and leaving a voice mail, by sending cookies. They do it by taking care of something you were supposed to do and now can't and they do it just because they care about you, just because they want you to have one less thing to worry about. This is what caring and sharing truly is. It's being a part of a community where you feel safe and valued, where you are missed when you're not there, where you are seen and valued as integral to God's plans, whatever they might be in the moment. This is what church at its best should be all about. Of course, for that to be true, you have to do your part and allow the people of this community in to your dark moments when life is overwhelming. You have to ask for help when you need it. You have to receive the love and assistance offered, and too often that becomes the most difficult part of this whole situation. That's when it is time to let go and let God. Literally.

What it means to be church. Exploring, pondering and imagining all the possibilities this holds is what this threshold process is supposed to be about for us as a church. Who we have been is important to know, to grapple with and to celebrate. This is some of the work you have already done on that first Sunday I missed. Now

we move on to consider how who we are will inform our approach to the threshold process together. Our goal is to discern together who it is we might become, beyond the traditional roles and boundaries of church. This is the stuff dreams are made of, certainly. But our task is to discern what dreams and imaginings we can make into a fresh new reality so that more and more people will want to be a part of our church community, joining us as we proclaim together the glory of God and the life changing possibilities God makes possible. Caring and sharing. It's who this church has always been. It's who we are now. It's who we will become to an even greater extent in the future. How exciting is that? I'm ready! I hope you are too. Amen.