

Going Ahead

United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT

February 4, 2024 – Morning Worship with Communion

Text: Mark 1:29-39

I don't know about you, but I have been positively dumbfounded by the number of people freaking out over Taylor Swift these days. She is a smart, beautiful young woman who is confident, self-assured, and outspoken. She works hard and is grateful for what she has achieved, even though she knows it is because she worked for it. She is a positive role model for young women in every sense of the word. She is a billionaire, self-made, and yet she is extraordinarily generous. She has given millions to charitable organizations in support of food banks, cancer treatments, autism and animals. And she gave bonuses to the crews working on her shows during the Eras Tour totaling \$55,000,000 plus. She rewarded everyone, from the truckers hauling her stuff everywhere to the dancers and the electricians, and everyone in between. So, knowing all this about this remarkable young woman who is the same age as my son, I find it impossible to understand why there is swath of folks in this country who absolutely hate her. But hate her they do.

She's been accused of being a distraction for attending her boyfriend's football games even though Travis Kelce's team has never played better. And the other teams aren't complaining either. She just sits and watches the game with Kelce's family, cheering along with everyone else. Travis' father noted that she is often the one cleaning up the box as empty cups and plates accumulate during the game. But I'll grant you, when she goes on the field to give Kelce a congratulatory kiss, the press goes wild. How dare she!! She's just a publicity hound, they cackle. Really? Like she needs their publicity? She's selling out stadium sized concert venues around the world. In what universe does she need more publicity?

Just this past week, she and Travis have been accused of being political “operatives” for the Democrats, whatever that’s supposed to mean. Oh, wait a minute, she does encourage all her young fans to get registered and vote. She does encourage them to have confidence in themselves, to believe that they matter. She sings about shaking off the bad comments and criticisms others throw at you. And, most people love her. If there was ever such a thing as an all American girl, Taylor Swift is it. And some people are just terrified by her for that very reason. She is living proof that an all American girl can be a phenomenal success by following her dreams, making her own decisions and speaking out as circumstances warrant. Worst of all to these people who hate her, when she speaks, people listen. Oh no! Not that! People listen to an intelligent young woman who has a heart and a conscience. What could be worse? Not much, apparently. At least to some of these people.

I’m talking about Taylor Swift this morning because our text from Mark got me thinking about her. This text comes right after the one we read last week which recounted Jesus’ experience in a local synagogue. Today’s text picks up the story as Jesus and his disciples left the synagogue and go to Simon Peter’s house. It’s these next few verses which have always proven quite challenging to feminist biblical scholars since Jesus’ first action in the home is to heal Simon Peter’s mother-in-law of a fever. She then promptly gets up to serve them. This is a tricky point because, on the surface, one could conclude that Jesus healed her so that she could serve them – make them a meal and place it before them. In other words, she was healed as a woman only because she was needed to do what women do for men – cook and serve. Yikes. To our 21st century sensibilities, this is not a good look for Jesus or the disciples. He healed her so she could cook for them? That can’t be right!

No, it's not. Traditional interpretation of this text is that Jesus heals her, and she is so grateful for the healing that she gets up to cook to show her appreciation. Well, that's okay as far as it goes. But I would argue it doesn't go far enough. First of all, to be sick with a fever in Jesus' time was all too often a death sentence. Fevers are still associated with more serious illnesses even in our time. Look at how much checking for fevers became a screening for Covid back in the day. Fever = bad! So, to heal her of a fever was no small thing. Would she be incredibly grateful? Undoubtedly. But is that all we are meant to glean from this story? I don't think so.

The next few verses launch into a detailed explanation of all the healings Jesus was soon asked for lasting well into the night. "That evening, at sunset, they brought to him all who were sick or possessed with demons. And the whole city was gathered around the door." Wow! That must have been overwhelming, not to mention scary. Everywhere Jesus looked he saw desperate people counting on him for help, for healing, for release from whatever was holding them hostage. And it went on, and on and on. No wonder that in verse 35 we read that while it was still very early, he got up and went out by himself to a deserted place to pray. He needed to be alone with the God who was guiding his footsteps. Remember, this was still early days in Jesus' ministry. He was still learning what it meant to be him! It had not been that long ago that he'd been just a carpenter, eking out a living like so many others. Now, he was embarking on a whole new life – a life devoted to bringing the reality of the God he knew and loved directly into the lives of other people. What an unbelievable task! What a phenomenal, gut-wrenching change – to go from being Jesus, Mary's son who built tables and beds to being Jesus, God's Son – bringing new life to all he met. We forget about the wrenching life shift for Jesus. Yes, he took those 40 days in the desert to prepare

after his baptism, but still. I don't think anything could have prepared him for moments like this when hundreds of people came clamoring for his attention and his help.

So when he first arrived at Simon Peter's house and healed the woman, he did it because he could. He did it because he could see she needed healing. She didn't ask him for anything. He saw her need and responded. That she then began to cook for them was, I'm confident, because it seemed like the right thing to her, the only thing for her to do. Think about your own mother or grandmother. Didn't she cook for you and the family, your friends, even when she was sick? I know my mother did. She was more likely to cook when she was recovering from illness, something she was no stranger to, because cooking gave her peace and comfort. The familiar tasks involved were soothing to her, sought after to complete her own healing. She literally kept going on because going on was what she wanted to do. What she needed to do to feel better. So too with Jesus as he responded to the disciples when they finally found him at the deserted place where he was praying. When they found him they said, "everyone is searching for you." And how did Jesus answer? "Let us go on so that I can proclaim God's message ... for that is what I came to do."

Going on. Going ahead despite all the reasons not to. That's what Jesus did every day of his earthly ministry. Do I think he had days when he just didn't want to go on to the next town, the next crowd of people begging for miracles? Yes, I'm sure he did. Why? Because Jesus was human, like us. Jesus knew all too well what it was like to be tired, to be exhausted beyond all human limitations, to long for peace and quiet. But he was also God's Son, and he knew he had to keep going on, going ahead, moving forward. He knew he had to, so he did. And in doing so, he models for us what it is God expects from

us. God is counting on us to continue on the work Jesus began so long ago. Are we up to the challenge? I sure hope so. But I confess I do worry about it. There is just so much wrong in our world. How can any of us make a real dent in any of it?

That's when I remember Taylor Swift and smile. She sings her way forward, every day, inviting us all to come along too. One of my favorites of her songs is "Shake It Off." It's the one that gets a lot of air time on different media, and if you listen to the lyrics, you know why. It's a long song so I won't share all the lyrics here, but I will share a little:

I stay out too late, got nothing in my brain, that's what people say. That's what people say.

I go on too many dates but I can't make 'em stay. At least that's what people say, that's what people say.

But I keep cruisin', Can't stop, won't stop movin'. It's like I got this music in my head saying it's gonna be alright.

'Cause the players gonna play ... and the haters gonna hate. Baby I'm just gonna shake, shake I just shake it off, shake it off.

Just shake it off. Sounds familiar, doesn't it. I think Jesus would like that song. Actually I think Jesus would LOVE that song. Dear ones, Jesus said exactly the same thing in today's text from Mark. "Let us go on," he told the disciples. And in another Gospel story, in Matthew, Jesus even gives the same advice as Taylor sings. He says to the disciples as they leave to try their hands at preaching the Good News on their own for the first time, "If anyone will not welcome you or listen to your words, shake off the dust from your feet as you leave that house or that town." Shake it off. Who knew? Jesus preached shaking it off. Way to go, Taylor! Amen.