

With Authority

United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT
January 28, 2024 – Morning Worship on Annual Meeting Sunday
Text: Mark 1:21-28

I stumbled across a great article in the December/January issue of *AARP Magazine*. That is not a sentence I ever expected to write since *AARP Magazine* is – well – not known for its journalistic excellence. It is a decent magazine and usually has some interesting facts and some passably good articles. Who doesn't want to know what "the Fonz" is up to in retirement? But this one article I just read really struck a chord with me, and I think it might with you too.

Entitled "*The Serenity of Saying 'Never Again,'*" it was written by Stephen Randall who is a novelist and a former editor at *Playboy*. Got your attention with that one, didn't I? Surprised me too because his article makes a very simple yet very powerful point. After living through an unexpected lay-off and a serious bout of cancer, Randall re-engaged with what he calls his "old life" after more than a year of dealing with this serious illness. When he reconnected with old friends and colleagues, he was soon overwhelmed by questions from them about what he had learned from his time of illness. That is sort of understandable, maybe. Randall certainly understood it at first, but then it started to become annoying. This only got worse when he started getting all kinds of unsolicited advice about what kinds of "adventures" he should be planning for himself since he had this second chance at life. In other words, he was being pushed constantly to create a "bucket list" of things he really should do while he still could. These suggestions ranged from exotic travel to skydiving to swimming with sharks etc. Randall quickly realized he wanted to do none of these things. He writes, "my bad year taught me a lot, and probably chief among those things is that there's much to be

said for ordinary life.”¹ He continues, “Yes, the Eiffel Tower is magnificent, but so is the sandwich shop on the corner. Family, music, walks in the neighborhood. I love those things.”² He notes that his friends warned him that this wouldn’t be enough, that he’d get bored but he’s not buying it. Instead he recommends this: “I suggest you put the bucket list in the shredder. Do what I’ve done: Create an anti-bucket list.” For Randall this is an itemized list of all the things you do not want to do again. On his list you will find air travel, things that provoke fear or anxiety (presumably like swimming with sharks or skydiving), anything that makes your back ache, getting up too early or staying out too late. He goes on to make the point that he understands why his friends like their bucket lists noting that they do get bragging rights for their accomplishments along with what he describes as “pain and smelling like Bengay.”³ He ends with this observation, “I look at my anti-bucket list daily and see a stress free life full of comfort, fun and a genuine appreciation for what I have. At least for me, that’s a good way to live.”⁴

I loved this article. I love the idea of an “anti-bucket list” especially because I have never had much interest in creating a bucket list to begin with. It always felt like an exercise in futility because so many of the things I might include on such a list are also things I know will never happen. So, why should I go through life feeling like I failed some test I never knew I needed to take? An anti-bucket list, though? That I can agree with. In fact, I already have one. I too, like Randall, am done with air travel. I’m not saying never but it would

¹ Stephen Randall, “The Serenity of Saying Never Again,” *AARP MAGAZINE*, December 2023/January 2024, p. 35.

² *Ibid.*, p. 35

³ *Ibid.* p. 35.

⁴ *Ibid.* p. 35.

need to be a pretty extraordinary situation for me to get on a plane. I too am finding great joy and satisfaction, more and more every day in fact, with ordinary days. Cooking, keeping my house relatively clean and the laundry relatively under control, long walks with the dog, long conversations with my husband and my children – these are the things which bring me joy, which make me feel the most alive, and certainly the most richly blessed. The anti-bucket list – I love it.

So you might be wondering what the heck this has to do with today's scripture from Mark's gospel. This familiar story is about one of the first times, if not the first time, Jesus speaks in a local synagogue. We don't know how it came to be that he became the main teacher for that day – rabbi means teacher after all – but he did. And apparently what he said was so extraordinary that “a man with an unclean spirit” in attendance suddenly flipped out, asking what Jesus was even doing there. According to the story, Jesus rebuked the spirit and it came out of the man as he convulsed and cried out. Everyone who witnessed this extraordinary scene recognized it immediately as something miraculous. And what did they comment about specifically? That Jesus taught with authority. That he spoke with a kind of assurance and confidence they had never heard in anyone else before. Essentially, they recognized in Jesus someone who knew who he was, what he knew to be true about God, and he knew how to convey it to other people powerfully, so powerfully that at least one man's life was changed forever.

This story, dear ones, is about what it means to have the confidence of your convictions, to know what it is you think and believe and then to have the inner strength and fortitude to share it with the other people in your life. This is what Stephen Randall did in his innocuous little article in *AARP Magazine* when he dared to make a strong argument against something as mundane as bucket lists. He

understood the same basic truth that Jesus revealed to those people in the synagogue that day. Speaking with authority sets you apart from everyone else who is just going along to get along. This was Jesus every day and this is what he teaches us, expects from us. Speak with authority about how God is alive in your life. Speak, even if what you are saying is something you know they don't want to hear. Even if you know others might find your words upsetting or even confrontational. This is what it means to speak with authority. It means to claim your voice as your own and to trust that what you have to say matters. For we who follow Jesus, it means finding the courage to speak our faith when it's easier to stay silent. And let's be honest, there are so many, many times when it's easier to stay quiet rather than speak up when confronted by a situation where a word from you could make a difference.

What do I mean by this? Well, of course, it could be the sort of "big ticket" moment in life where you witness a real injustice – like when all those folks in Ferguson saw the cop leaning on George Floyd's neck and did nothing. Except they filmed it, of course, and that changed everything. But most of us will never find ourselves in such a situation, thank God! I'm actually thinking about more mundane situations we've all encountered. Like when you're the next customer after someone has been really rude to a clerk or cashier or a server in a restaurant. Here's the perfect time to offer a word of encouragement to that person like, "wow, I'm so sorry that happened." Even this simple phrase offered with a smile can be huge. Sometimes a whole conversation ensues and that's super. There have even been times when I've said something to a clerk and a conversation ensues which continues on with the person behind me in line. That's when I walk out of the store smiling because I know I just left a little Jesus behind.

And trust me, dear ones, anytime we can leave a little Jesus behind, in whatever way the situation calls for, that is a good day. A kind word said to someone who's hurting can work miracles, especially when it is offered with the authority of someone who really cares. As followers of Jesus, that should always be you and me. Does it require us to move out of our comfort zones? Probably yes. But it is so worth taking that risk. Plus, as you learn to feel more and more comfortable with the authority of your own voice, the easier it becomes to be that person who brings a little love and a lot of Jesus into whatever is happening, even if his name never comes up. To me, that's not the point anyway. Mouthing Jesus is never as important, never as authoritative, as acting like Jesus. That's when your actions speak louder than any words ever can. That's when you have the opportunity to make Jesus real to someone in a surprising yet genuine way. That's when we become *like Jesus*, speaking with the authority our faith gives us, even if it's in such a simple way as offering words of empathy in a painful situation someone else is going through.

This is why I so enjoyed Stephen Randall's lighthearted article about having an anti-bucket list. His words held a confidence borne of the suffering he had endured and survived. In other words, he had come to know in an entirely new way what was important and what wasn't. He would not allow himself to feel pressured by the authority with which even his own friends pressed him to take risks and do some new things. His own confidence in himself and his truth enabled him to not only remain true to his own hard-learned truths. They empowered him to point out that another way was possible – the anti-bucket list way, the “never again” way. I like that. I know Jesus would like it, counter culture agitator for God that he was.

Finally, as we join together for our Annual Meeting in just a few minutes, I am confident you will hear in all the reports the leaders and

workers of our church speak with authority about all the various aspects of the many ministries of this, our beloved church. As we face the future together, we do so with the confidence that we are standing on the shoulders of all those who have gone before us in this church. We are so fortunate that we still have some of those trailblazers who created this church with us, if only in memory. But those are our memories of people we knew and loved! We know firsthand what courage and strength and determination it took to build this church and we know the people who did it. That, dear ones, is truly an amazing legacy that is very rare in New England where “young” churches are 150 years old. We don’t just remember our forefathers and mothers in this place, we know them. And we know the authority with which they approached creating this dream which became and still is UCC Westerly. Is the church we have today what they thought they were creating? In many ways, yes, but probably not everything is what they would have expected. That doesn’t matter. What does matter is that we are the church, and continuing to become the church, God needs us to be in this moment, in this place. That, dear ones, is all we need to know. We are enough for whatever God intends for us. We are more than enough. That I say with authority! Thanks be to God. Amen.