

## ***Working Together***

United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT

January 21, 2024 – Morning Worship

Text: Mark 1:14-20

We encounter the world alone from the moment we are born and take our first breaths. We interact with the world as individuals, solitary beings. Or so it seems. But, in truth, we are always encountering other people. How we manage those interactions tells us all we need to know about ourselves and who we really are. The truth is, we need other people. Even the most solitary among us, those people – like me – who crave silence and solitude as a means of recharging ourselves, we are introverts off the charts. But we still need other people. We need those human connections, even if we can't always describe them or even understand that need. It's still there.

This is why, over the course of the evolving history of Christianity, there has always been a very small group of folks who felt the need to withdraw from other people entirely in order to focus on prayer and developing an intense relationship with God. Hermits and anchorites were individuals who deliberately and quite intentionally separated themselves from other people specifically to be alone with God. Hermits would live in caves as far away from other people as they could get, subsisting off the food and water in nature. Anchorites were a different sort of person altogether, though, as they would literally have themselves walled off in a tiny room or cell attached to a church, convent or monastery. Food and water would be provided once a day through a slit in the wall. And they would be alone with their thoughts, their prayers and with God. Julian of Norwich, probably the most well known anchorite because of her prolific

writings on personal spirituality, lived as an anchorite in the 14<sup>th</sup> century. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Trappist monk Thomas Merton lived as a hermit for a time, when he first came into the monastery. He realized, though, that pursuing a relationship with God all by himself was not as productive as he thought it would be. He realized he did need to be around other people in order to understand more fully what God was all about.

Jesus understood the communal nature of our relationship with God and built his entire ministry around this concept. It's true that at key moments, he still needed that one on one time with God that he found when he was starting out following his baptism in the Jordan by his cousin John. In Mark's Gospel, the source of today's reading, we are told, "And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him." Throughout all the gospels we are told Jesus would retreat from others for prayer and solitude, even if it was only for a few hours which is usually all he could grab as the disciples and the people were keeping close tabs on him. Why? Because they needed him. They needed him to teach them about this God who was more concerned with love and kindness and justice and mercy than the judging, legalistic God they thought they knew. It was Jesus who taught them that his followers needed to be around others doing the same to solidify their connection with the God they sought to love. Matthew's Gospel spells this out completely as Jesus tells the disciples, "where two or three are gathered together in my name, there I am in the midst of them." Right from the beginning Jesus is clear that being

with other people is a key part of practicing our faith, a key part of truly understanding who he was and who he is in our lives today.

As I alluded to earlier, I am someone who needs silence, who needs time apart from other people in order to function. This is because I am an introvert. Much has been written about how to figure out if you are an introvert or an extrovert, some of it quite complicated relying on personality tests and the like. The way you know if you are an introvert or an extrovert is to recognize what you do when you are stressed or upset to the max, to the breaking point if you will. If you are someone who in those moments reaches for your phone to call someone, or you strike up a conversation with a complete stranger in a coffee shop just because you “need” to, then you, my friend an extrovert. You need direct human interaction in order to calm down and move beyond your current stress level. Introverts like myself, on the other hand, absolutely must have quiet and distance from other people. You need people to leave you alone, to give you space, lots of it. Introverts take long walks without earbuds because they crave the silence of nature. Introverts do love people but are always in need of that escape door when human interaction becomes overwhelming.

Most people are surprised when they hear me describe myself as an introvert. How can you be an introvert, they ask. You get up in the pulpit to preach and pray every Sunday! You talk to people all the time! Your ability to communicate well with people is foundational to everything you do. Yes, you’d be right about all that. But, when it’s all said and done, and I’m exhausted and at my wit’s end, as sometimes happens even to me, I need to be off by myself. This I was reminded of quite forcefully this past

week as Peter and I re-engaged with the health care system at Miriam Hospital for his second surgery and first cancer treatment. I stayed at the hospital the entire time, as you would imagine I would. I had even deluded myself into thinking this would give me additional time to read my book. It did, but not in the way I had imagined because people are inherently noisy. As soon as Peter was taken back for surgery, I left to get some breakfast only to discover that most of Miriam's delightful cafeteria was closed off as the dining room staff prepared to host, of all things, the Holiday Party for the hospital. That meant all of us trying to grab a bite to eat were crammed into what is usually a small dining room, ironically the spot for people who like more quiet while they take a break. Only today, this spot was NOT quiet. It was anything but quiet. I managed to find a space where I thought I could be relatively undisturbed but before I could get the cover off my yogurt container, I find myself in close proximity to a group of young surgeons grabbing breakfast between cases. Sigh. Trust me when I tell you that you do not want to be at a table with a group of still enthusiastic and energetic young surgeons intent on sharing the challenges of the cases they had already experienced or were anticipating. No patient names of course. Only details, lots and lots of details, that only another surgeon would find interesting. Yuck. I think I read about 4 pages while I gulped my food, and then I was on my way back to the waiting room for outpatient surgery.

And it was crowded. Very crowded. And people are loud, even in that situation. Suffice to say that most of the people in that waiting room – about a dozen or so – had clearly forgotten the concept of indoor voices, if in fact they ever knew it. I learned

way more about these people than I ever wanted to. I learned that the couple waiting for their daughter who was in surgery were hoping they could retire early and were more than a little disappointed when the person they were talking to over the phone made it clear that wasn't going to happen. I learned that the lady waiting for her daughter who was in surgery had never been through anything like this before and was terrified something bad was going to happen to her daughter, something she was talking over with someone on her phone very loudly. I learned that Lorenzo had a ride to and from surgery but there was no way anyone was going to stay with him at his home overnight. He was going to be just fine on his own, thank you very much. Lorenzo won't see 85 again, let me be clear. It was only when the nurse told him that if he didn't have someone stay with him, then he would be admitted to the hospital. His sister who was his ride then agreed she would sleep on the couch. The nurse was satisfied and took Lorenzo back for surgery. His sister scurried away, set to come back in several hours. And I am pretty sure Lorenzo was on his own that night anyway.

Why am I telling you all this? Two reasons, actually, First of all, my experiences this week were a powerful reminder to me that none of us ever really know what's going on in someone else's life at any given moment. None of us can tell just by looking at someone if they are okay or not, if they are frightened or not, if they want to be alone or they are craving company. That's why Jesus tells us we must always be kind. We must always be loving to others. We must dig deep when we need to so that the love we learn from Jesus shines through us to everyone we encounter.

Second, my experiences this week brought home to me in an entirely new way that we absolutely do need other people. Humans, even us introverts, do need other people, even if we think we need to be alone in a particular moment. The surgeons in the cafeteria weren't asking each other for advice or even for encouragement. They were just reassuring themselves by talking with colleagues that they knew what they were doing, that the patients entrusted to their care were right to trust them. The folks using their outdoor voices in the waiting room were just doing whatever they needed to do – in this case talking loudly, in person or over the phone – to convince themselves that everything would be okay as they waited for a health care team – none of these surgeons work alone – to take care of their loved ones. The simple truth, dear ones, is that we need each other. We need other people. We need other people to make it through the day. None of us are anchorites or hermits, praise Jesus. We know that God has provided us with an abundance of folks to make our respective journeys through life with, and even when they make us crazy, they're still part of God's plan.

That's why I love today's story about Jesus in Mark's Gospel. This is a snapshot of how Jesus built his team of disciples to keep him company through his years of ministry as he lived into this calling from God. Here we see him call Simon (soon to be known as Peter) and his brother Andrew, both of whom were fishermen. Shortly after that he calls James and John, the sons of Zebedee, also fishermen. He tells them that if they follow him, they will make them all "fishers of men." Different versions of this story appear in the other Gospels, but I confess to loving Mark's the best because in Mark, these four follow Jesus "immediately."

They don't take the time to store their boats or pack their gear away. They just leave and follow Jesus. Immediately. Wow. Just wow. Was that God shoving them along? Was it just something about Jesus that compelled them in ways they could neither explain nor really understand? Whatever the reason, they decided to follow Jesus and their lives changed forever – and all of ours did to – because without that extraordinary moment of making a commitment to work together with Jesus despite all the reasons not to, we would simply not be here today. This church and all churches would not exist. Jesus would be lost to history, and to us. Working together, and the decision to do so, made all the difference, made the impossible possible.

As we move forward into 2024, with all its challenges and joys for us as individuals, as families and as members of this, our beloved church, we are going to engage in the Threshold process which is essentially exploring and re-evaluating how it is that we work together as a church family to lay the foundation for the future of this church. At our retreat next month – which I hope all of you will register for – we will be working together to figure out where we go from here, what's practical and what isn't, what's possible when we let go and let God. As we move forward, we will re-discover, I am sure, who has indoor voices and who has outdoor voices, and we will work to be sure we hear them all. Dear ones, 2024 will indeed be a turning point year for our beloved church. I trust God has amazing things in mind for us and, above all else, I know – *I know* – that with God all things are possible. Even for a little, vital church like ours. I hope you are as excited as I am. Amen.

