

From the Pulpit

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Lenten Sermon Series 2014

“Sabbath, The Seventh Day of Rest”

A sermon delivered by The Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Ash Wednesday, March 5, 2014, dedicated to my friend, Denny Griffith, to our dedicated staff of First Church who work morning, noon, and night to bring hope, love and beauty to life at First Church and dedicated our families and loved ones and always to the Glory of God!

“Sabbath: Stopping Time for One Day”

Joel 2:1-2, 12-17; II Corinthians 5:20-6:10;

Matthew 6:16-, 16-21

(1 of 9 in Lenten/Easter Sermon Series – “Sabbath, The Seventh Day of Rest”)

While we have been digging out of the second harshest winter in the history of Ohio’s Capital City, Lent has been approaching. Today, we step through the snows of early winter into a season which will move us to the cross and finally the empty tomb and the resurrection of our Lord. Last night, while we were feasting in Parish Hall, one member told me, “I have been really looking forward to Lent.” Early this morning, these words resonated in my spirit. I have been really looking forward to Lent this year. “It’s About Time” has been our theme for Christian Education all year. This Lent, it’s about time for Sabbath.

I pray for you each day. I pray this Lent, in which we will saturate our souls with Sabbath, will be a true and lasting blessing for each one of us. As Sabbath becomes more real and more alive for us, I pray that hitting the reset button we all call “Lent” will really matter in our lives. It’s about Sabbath time. Let us pray...

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May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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On one of the bleak mid-winter days of January in which schools were closed because of ice, snow, and sub-zero weather, I was visited by a Tiger Scout. The Tiger Scouts are forerunners of Cub Scouts and Boy Scouts. This Tiger Scout was in full uniform as he entered my office. He looked sensational. His name is Elias Ewing. Elias is the oldest son of Eric and Christa Ewing. He and his dad stepped into my office to talk through his scouting book entitled, “God and Me.” This book explores a child’s relationship with God. It is quite good. It begins with Genesis and the Creation Story. I sometimes wish I could step back in time and have my relationship with God be as clear and simple as this...

As Elias stood by my right knee pointing to his pictures of God’s creation of the world, he told me how each of the six days happened – from darkness to light, from vapor to water, from nothing to land, to plants, to creatures and ultimately to Adam and Eve. In all of this, God always finished with “It is good.”

With the six days completed, I looked at Elias and asked why his book had no seventh day. I said, “*Elias, what happened on the seventh day?*” He looked surprised. “*Rev. Tim, don’t you know what happened?*” I smiled and

responded, *“I know, but I want to know if you know.”* He took a deep breath, sighed, put his hand on my knee and looked me straight in the eye and said, *“God was so tired after six days of creation. He was exhausted! It takes a lot of energy to make the world. So, on the seventh day, he slept all day long.”*

After three years of theological education at Yale, 29 years of pastoral ministry, thousands of books and hours reading about Genesis and everything else God-related – I had just heard the best theological definition of Sabbath in my life. **God made the heavens and the earth and all that is therein. God was exhausted. God slept all day long.**

Years before, a layman speaking to a clergy gathering in which I was present, prophetically scolded all the pastors with these words, *“DO you think you are better than God? All you clergy - Do you take a Sabbath day to rest? Do you leave the work of the church and sleep, read, rest, play? If you don't your actions are saying, ‘I think I am better than God. Although I teach ‘God needed rest,’ my life says, ‘I don't.’”*

Another way of getting at this question was posted on the wall of the Preachers Training Ground – the Homiletics Room at Yale Divinity School. The sign said, **“Preach what you Practice.”** My confession to you on the Ash Wednesday is that I don't fully engage and practice Sabbath. I am embarrassed to admit this. But, I commit to do something about this. I am choosing this Lent to change from a 24/7 life to a 24/6 life – only then can I preach what I practice.

How about you? Do practice Sabbath? How and when do you take time to restore, replenish and rejuvenate your soul? In the words of Elias reflecting on the First Sabbath established by God Almighty, *“Do sleep all day when you are exhausted?”* How will you spend Lent re-sabbathing?

In the Zohar, the books of Jewish mysticism, Sabbath is the name of God. It is not just a day of the week. Rather, Sabbath reflects all that is essential to God. Sabbath is God – through and through. We are seen as a living and being within the Sabbath rather than the Sabbath being within us. Living within the Sabbath, within the essence and being of God, we are called to create and receive and live into Sabbath as a foretaste of the eternal, a foretaste of paradise. Essentially, on the seventh day, God gave the world a soul. With our soul deeply and essentially connected to the Eternal One, the Divine Source of Being, we are called into a deep holiness.

On the Sabbath, we should rise – like the sun – with God in our hearts. Thoughts of God, thoughts of the holiness, thoughts of others in need of God, and all a peace which passes human understanding should be in our souls. This should be true all day and through the night. We need to be open to God's spirit. While the other six days of the week are committed to commerce, people, wrestling with the world and the stuff of work and life, running here and there being Human Doings (not necessarily being Human Beings), the Sabbath is different. It needs to be the day which calls us the Infinite, the Eternal, the High Ground, the Holy Ground.

In his book [24/6: A Prescription for a Healthier, Happier Life](#), Dr. Matthew Sleeth calls this “Stop Time.” This is a great image. We stop. Think about stopping. When we stop, we look, listen, feel, receive, share, laugh, love, and live. When we stop, we breathe easier, walk with purpose, laugh from our bellies, and love

deeply. When we stop, we turn off our cell phones, turn off our TV's and turn off our computers and ipads. This is a huge step to honoring Sabbath.

It is hard to honor Sabbath in our 24/7 world. Honoring Sabbath is not only an act of faith. It is an act of courage. One of the most courageous men I looked up and admired as a child was Sandy Koufax. He was the left-handed ace for the LA Dodgers in the early 1960's. He was also a practicing Jew. When Game 1 of the 1965 World Series fell on Yom Kippur, he refused to pitch. It was a Sabbath day. It was a Holy Day. As the best pitcher in Baseball, there was a lot of pressure on him to pitch Game 1. But he would not do it. By honoring Sabbath, Koufax truly placed God first. Along with his teammates, Sandy Koufax went on to win the 1965 World Series and the series MVP. Later that year, he was selected as Sports Illustrated Sportsman of the Year. He was my hero. I wanted to pitch like him. But, I also wanted to be a man of faith like him.

Our society has no more Sabbath. Our schools hold events on Sundays, our children compete in sports leagues on Sunday mornings, and most stores are open. The space and time of Sabbath has been swept away. It is gone. Unless we claim it back in our individual lives and in the life of our community of faith, it is never coming back. We must stop time to experience Stop Day. We have to claim it for ourselves. No one will give it to us.

In the weeks ahead, we will take baby steps to reclaim Sabbath. We do this through our study of Matthew Sleeth's book 24/6. There are small groups being set up in homes and here at church throughout the season of Lent. When you get an email or call, respond. Take time to be holy. Take time to be with your sisters and brothers of faith at First. We will reclaim Sabbath in worship each week – welcoming preaching on Sabbath and music and prayers drawing us into Sabbath rest. We will have adult education focused on Sabbath. We will do it in our homes, in our hearts, in our actions toward a more sane and sacred Sabbath in our lives.

It will take baby steps. I don't expect you to attain the mystery of God in Sabbath rest in only 40 days – with a money back guarantee! Last night I was talking with Cori Rowley about Wythe. He is now taking baby steps. She said *"He stumbles and falls. He does flips sometimes. But, he keeps pulling himself back up."* Taking baby steps for Sabbath may throw us off at first. We may stumble and fall. We may do flips. But, we need to pull ourselves back up and try again. We may experience withdrawal symptoms as those who are addicted to work, to things, to technology, to constant 24/7 motion. But, given time, we can learn the steps for Sabbath. Take my hand. Let take our baby steps into Sabbath together. let's admit we are exhausted from our constant work, motion, and lack of sleep. Let's reflect the spirit of God, the one we claim to worship and glorify. Those other days can be utterly exhausting. If you don't believe me, ask God about it.

Let's remember Elias' words – get some rest. Sleep all day if you need to. Remember if Sabbath was good enough for God to create, it is good enough for us to establish, to re-Sabbath and to recreate. Amen.

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A sermon delivered by the Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational UCC, Columbus, Ohio, March 9, 2014, Lent 1, dedicated to the Coalition of Immokalee Workers, especially those witnessing in Columbus to earn a fair wage working for Wendy's Inc., to my colleagues in ministry who give themselves each day to bring in God's kingdom and a prayer for them to find Sabbath rest & always to the glory of God!

“Sabbath: The Day God Rested... Why Don't We Rest?”

(Part 2 of 9 in sermon series,

“Sabbath, The Seventh Day of Rest”)

Genesis 2:1-4, 15-17, 3:1-7; Romans 5:12-19; Matthew 4:1-11

“ Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all their multitude. 2 And on the seventh day God finished the work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all the work that he had done. 3 So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all the work that he had done in creation. 4 These are the generations of the heavens and the earth when they were created.” Genesis 2:1-4

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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I penned these words as a firsthand experience of Shabbat in Jerusalem four years ago. “It is late-Friday afternoon in Jerusalem, Israel. As the sun moves to the western horizon and evening approaches, Jerusalem turns to Shabbat or “Sabbath rest.” The greetings change from “Shalom” to “Shabbat Shalom”- which simply means “Sabbath Peace.” People scurry about getting last minute shopping, cleaning, cooking, and preparation completed for the 25 hour day ahead. Shops begin to close. Cars and buses, trains and planes cease their motion. People cease their motion. As the sun sets over the mountains to the west, the sixth day comes to a close. Shabbat is Now.

I have never experienced anything like this in my life. I have never seen a city become still. As a child, Sundays came close. But, even they were not the same. We would go to church, worship and return home. Stores were closed. No work for parents. No sports for the kids. No school or social events. Nothing of the regular work week seemed to invade Sundays. The TV was off until the Ed Sullivan Show. All this changed with the “Blue Laws” in America which allowed shopping, commerce, sports, community calendars and even school events to be held. There is no real Sabbath (no Shabbat) in America today. Religious Jews try hard to hold to it. But, it is a challenge.

“Remember the Sabbath Day and keep it Holy,” proclaims the fourth commandment in Exodus 20:8-11. Shabbat in Israel feels like a holy day. It is a quiet time. It is time when life slows to a near stop. People worship God. People walk to synagogues. People spend time visiting with each other. They see each other. They engage strangers on the pathways of Shabbat.

Shops are closed. Work stops. Israel Airlines does not fly and many other planes stay grounded. Religious Jews don't drive. Secular Jews and others are mindful of driving less or not at all. The pace is slow. There is rest. There is stillness. There is Shabbat.

On Saturday Evening the Sun will set again. Shabbat will end. Sunday brings a new work week to Israel, which is problematic for Christians who wish to “Hallow” their Sabbath day. But that is not today's problem. For today, I will savor Shabbat. I have only two more Shabbats in Israel. I will savor each as well.”

Today is our Sabbath day. In Christian faith, we see each Sunday as a Day of Resurrection – a little Easter in our lives. It is the day of new life, reawakening, rest and joy in Christ. We were reminded by Kevin Jones in his wonderful newsletter article on Lent that today is the First Sunday **IN Lent**. While the penitential season of Lent has 40 days – the Sabbath Days of Lent are set apart. Enjoy your break today! You have five chances take on what you have given up and to give up what you have taken on!

Today, let us recall that the first Shabbat was God's Shabbat. After the architect and artist of space and time and all creation had given everything within God's essence to make and mold a world within the created universe. Then came the seventh day. Our text from Genesis 2:1-4 does not say that God stopped on the eve of Shabbat. There was an act of creation on the seventh day, too. God created **“Menuha”** on the seventh day (Sabbath, Abraham Joshua Heschel, Farrar, Straus, Giroux, NY, NY, 2005, p. 22).

In his little book, The Sabbath, Abraham Joshua Heschel writes,

Menuha,” which we render as “rest” means so much more than withdrawal from labor and exertion, more than freedom from toil, strain or activity of any kind. **Menuha** is not a negative concept but something real and intrinsically positive.... What was created on the seventh day? Tranquility, serenity, peace and repose.

Menuha is the state wherein a (person) lies still, wherein the wicked cease from troubling, and the weary are at rest. It is the state where there is no strife, no fighting, no fear and no distrust. The essence of Good life is **Menuha**. “the Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures, he leadeth me beside still waters (The waters of “menuhot”). In later times, Menuha becomes a synonym for life in the world to come, for eternal life. (Ibid, p. 23).

Dr. Heschel continues, “In Judaism we pray on the other six days, ‘Guard our going out and our coming in.’ On the Sabbath day, the prayer changes to ‘Peace be upon your tent.’ And the prayer we pray on the Sabbath when returning the synagogue to home is, ‘Peace be to you, Angel of Peace’” (Ibid).

In the Talmud it is written that on the first Sabbath, Adam was so overcome with joy, he sang the first song of praise to Shabbat. And God asked Adam, “You sing a song of praise to the Sabbath Day, and sing none to me, the God of the Sabbath?” Whereupon Sabbath rose from her seat, laid on her face before the Lord our God and said, “All praise and thanks go to you Lord. And all of creation added to her song, ‘we praise thy name O Most High!’”

To this day, it is said that angels have six-wings, one for each day of the week with which they chant their song of praise. But, on the seventh day the only one who chants, who sings is Sabbath herself. It has been and always will be that Sabbath chants her hymn to God and all creation joins her song. To this day, it is believed that Sabbath – in her wisdom and joy - teaches ALL beings whom to praise (Ibid, p. 24).

We must make a clear distinction about this holy and sacred day. Sabbath is always a reminder of two worlds. Sabbath reminds us of this world and the world to come. It is an example of both worlds - for the Sabbath is joy, holiness, and rest. Joy is a part of this world. Holiness and rest and are part of the world to come.

Sabbath always belongs to God. Remember what I said on Ash Wednesday, “**Sabbath is the name of God,**” according to Zohar, the books of Jewish Mysticism. In its origins in Genesis, we need to remember that Sabbath was a day of rest, not a day of worship. God was so pleased and confident in the goodness of Creation which God had made, God felt that a gift was needed – a gift of rest. So God gave Godself a gift - a day off – the gift of Sabbath.

(Aside: I was reminded by one of our teens that by saying what I just said, it means they don’t have to come to worship. Very sly.... But, I would say that it means they need to find a way to rest and peace, a way to take a break. Hopefully, a small part of their break will be with us on the Sabbath Day...).

Giving Godself a day of rest says a lot about the nature of God. First – the six days: We need to remember God’s approach to the six days of work is not found to be coercion, but faithful invitation. God is not a taskmaster, but an invitational co-creator. And on the seventh day, God spends the day in serenity and peace. This says a lot about the God of Israel. It also says a lot about the world which God created. The world is safe in God’s hands. The world will not disintegrate if we stop our efforts. 14% of the time, God rests. The other 86% of the time, God creates and makes things happen. We need to remind ourselves of this God-given truth.

So Sabbath becomes a day to end exploitation. Sabbath becomes a day of revolutionary equality in society. On the Sabbath day, all rest equally – no matter how rich or poor. Whether farm workers or corporate CEOs, the Sabbath day is holy. Sabbath is an unspoken prayer about the new sanity shaped by the power and graciousness of God. God’s Sabbath is a continuous Blessing!

We are called back to sanity and peace in the words of John Greenleaf Whittier’s hymn, “O Lord and Father of Mankind”:

Dear Lord and Father of Mankind, forgive our foolish ways,
re clothe us in our rightful mind, In purer lives thy service find,

in deeper reverence praise.

O Sabbath rest by Galilee, O calm of hills above...

Take from our lives the strain and stress, and let our ordered lives confess the beauty of thy peace.

(Drawn from Walter Brueggemann commentary on Genesis, pp. 35-36).

As I said at the beginning of my sermon today, I love the day of Sabbath in Judaism. Shabbat (or “Sabbath”) services reverence the holiness of God.

Baruch atah Adonai elohaynu melech ha'olam asher kidshanu bemitzvotav vetzivanu l'hadlik ner shel Shabbat.

Praised are You, Adonai our God, Sovereign of the Universe, who makes us holy with mitzvot and instructs us to kindle the lights of Shabbat.

All praise goes up and out to God. Even in the prayers for those who have died unto God, the prayer is about God’s goodness and greatness – not about the grief which surrounds and touches those who worship God. I am often in the synagogue on Friday evenings. I stumble through the Hebrew – as I did a moment ago. But, there, enveloped in the fragrance of prayer, I hear God’s voice calling me to stillness and peace. At times I have felt the God breathing deep – inhaling, exhaling – resting. This week, many of us received one of the daily Lenten meditations – a quote from Abraham Joshua Heschel about the uniqueness of Shabbat – a quote I shared in my monthly newsletter article in March as well. He reminds us that Sabbath is about time and not space. He writes in The Sabbath:

“The Bible is more concerned with time than with space. It sees the world in the dimension of time...The meaning of Sabbath is to celebrate time rather than space; on the Sabbath we try to become attuned to holiness in time. It is a day in which we are called upon to share what is eternal in time, to turn from the results of creation to the mystery of creation, from the world of creation to the creation of the world.” My prayer for you this day is that you find rest. It may be in an afternoon nap. It may be reading a good book you have longed to throw yourself into. Give yourself permission to rest. Remember – if the Sabbath is in God, of God and good enough for God – it is good enough for you, too. Allow the peace of God to surround you and hold you today.

“Shabbat Shalom.” Sabbath Peace to you. Amen.

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A sermon delivered by The Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Lent 3, March 16, 2014, dedicated to our newest members, Kate and Don Erickson, Andrew Rozmiarek, Lael and Kai Weyenberg, Janet Newcity and Christopher Gelpi and always to the glory of God!

“Sabbath: Risk, Resistance and Promise”

(3rd of 9 in the sermon series,

“Sabbath, The Seventh Day of Rest”)

Genesis 12:1-4a; Romans 4:1-5, 13-17;

John 3:1-17

8 Remember the Sabbath day, and keep it holy. **9** Six days you shall labor and do all your work. **10** But the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work—you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. **11** For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and consecrated it.

Exodus 20: 8-11

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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Our lives of faith are not lived in a vacuum. We live our lives of faith in relation to a multiplicity of cultures. We are always confronted by and called to worship in cultures which challenge the culture of God in Jesus Christ.

The predominant culture of our times is the consumer culture, or for our purposes, the Culture of the Market God. The Market God is a powerful God. The Market God – like the God of Pharaoh in the Book of Exodus - wants us to work harder, have no rest, take whatever goods we want, consume whatever we desire, and revise the truth to get it. The Market God wants us to worship at the nearest store, shop 24/7 on-line, and never slow down in so doing. The Market God demands obedience and expects us to bow before him.

Meanwhile, there is a God whom we have promised to worship and glorify. This God, our God is the God of Abraham and Sarah; of Isaac and Rebekah; of Jacob and Rachel.

Our God has a culture too. Our God has expectations for worship as well. Our God calls us to make no other idols and worship no other gods, our God expects us and all living creatures to rest on the Sabbath, to be true to our commitments, to take nothing belonging to others, to be honest in all our dealings and want nothing that belongs to others. In Jesus Christ, we are actually shown, what we believe, is the best way to honor and follow our God.

At the crossroads of cultures the God of Abraham and the God of Pharaoh – that is The Market God - crash into one another. Their values conflict. Their worlds collide. You can't follow one and have the other be alright with it.

Certainly "living into Sabbath" is a clear form of resistance to the Market God. It is risky business to rest and recover one day a week – to lay down the tools of our trades and rest.

In his newly published book, Sabbath as Resistance (and in a study which we have been following in Church School by the same name), 2012 Gladden Lecturer Dr. Walter Brueggemann writes:

Sabbath keeping is a distinctively Jewish art form. It is, however, a practice and a discipline that has long preoccupied Christians who have responded to a core requirement of the God of covenant. It is unfortunate that in U.S. society, largely out of a misunderstood Puritan heritage, Sabbath has gotten enmeshed in legalism and moralism and blue laws and life-denying practices that contradict the freedom-bestowing intention of Sabbath. Such distortions, moreover, have led to endlessly wearying quarrels about "Sunday activities" such as movies and card playing and, in some states still, purchasing liquor on Sunday.

All of that common lore in U.S. society, of course, amounts to a pitiful misrepresentation of Sabbath keeping as an art form. When taken seriously in faith by Jews--and derivatively by Christians--Sabbath keeping is a way of making a statement of peculiar identity amid a larger public identity, of maintaining and enacting a counter identity that refuses "mainstream" identity that itself entails antihuman practice and the worship of antihuman gods.

Understood in this way, Sabbath is a bodily act of testimony to alternative values and resistance to pervading values and the assumptions behind those values. Pay attention to Sabbath keeping as testimony and resistance, as an act of faith commonly shared (in different forms) by Jews and Christians.

It is true. Sabbath means resistance and risk. It means following a God who calls us up, calls us out and calls us - beloved.

In Genesis 12:1-4a, Abram is simply minding his own business (and trying to appease the Market God) when Abram's God comes and calls him to get up and go out. On this day in history, God reaches out to offer a deal to all humankind through Abram.

God promises four things to Abram. He will give birth to a great nation. He will be blessed. His name will be great. His name will be a blessing to others. For good measure God vows to bless those who bless Abram and curse those who curse him. In this Call of Abram we see the ultimate summons to the world to devote itself to God.

In essence, God chooses this man and throws an olive branch to all generations. God is saying, "If you worship me and put your life in my hands, you will be rewarded. If you resist other gods and risk being happy, I will reward you." In the call of God to Abram, Abram goes forth, completely trusting in God. He goes forth completely submitting himself to God. He does this through what he does best. He sets off walking. But, this time, he walks with God. He leaves these footprints for us to follow. By walking forward in the footsteps of God, he demonstrates something important – for all us to follow. Abram doesn't believe in God! He BELIEVES God. He doesn't ask for proof. He provides the proof.

As the first man in the 20th generation of humankind, Abram is not spoken of as righteous (until the Apostle Paul calls him righteous in Romans). He is not particularly special. By the time we meet him he is old. He seems unsure. He makes mistakes. In a text which is completely focused on creation, Abraham is not able to create. His story is dominated by the childlessness. It is almost as if he is so unlike the Creator, that this makes him special. He is completely and utterly human! As such, he is completely in need of God! (Abraham, by Bruce Feiler, pp. 22-25).

While many in the human race, especially in our generation, strive to follow the Market God and become Godlike themselves - powerful, and in control, in so doing, they lack what Abram possesses. They lack absolute humanness.

Nelly Sachs, the German poet who won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1966, viewed Abram as a representative human being. She sees him as one looking out at a decimated landscape, peering beyond the flames, aching for just a piece of the divine. Nelly Sachs writes: "*You have called me, Abram. And I long so much for you.*" (Ibid, p. 25).

By the 20th Generation of humankind, God certainly needs one such as this - one who is so fully human, yet one who longs so much for the divine. As much as we are like Abram - so human, and yet so longing for the divine - we too will find our rest in God. As this regards Sabbath, we need to remember that between now and next Sunday morning, over 3 billion people - or more than half the world's population known as the Children of Abraham – Jews, Christians, Muslims - will invoke the name of Abraham, the man whom God loved, the man who loved God.

It is not easy to follow God's promise – to risk and resist in this world in which we live. If we don't believe this, we should look more closely at chapter 3 in John's Gospel. Here we are presented with a refreshing story about the presence of God in Jesus Christ. A man named Nicodemus; a leader of religious Jews stepped out his comfort zone, out of his house of privilege and sought out Jesus under the cover of night. He needed to figure out who this Jesus was. What was Jesus teaching? What did he have that Nicodemus longed to have? In an exchange between the men, we come to realize Jesus has what Nicodemus is missing. Jesus has peace with God. He has the Holy Spirit. He has the keys to the kingdom of God. He has the promise of eternal life.

In the end, Jesus shares with us and with Nicodemus the truth of the Gospel in one verse (as Martin Luther called it).

God so loved the world that he gave his only Son . . . for God sent the son into the world not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him" (John 3:16,17).

Rejoice, O people! God loves you! God's son was given for you. Christ came into **the world** (not the church, not Columbus, not America, but **the entire world**). He came not to condemn the world, but to save the world!

Somewhere, between the beginning of Lent and this morning, somewhere between the beginning of each of our lives and this point, we may have lost track of the absolutely amazing gift we have in the love of God for us through our Savior, Jesus Christ. It's good to be reminded of this, today. It is also good to remember and rejoice in the truth that God is not in the business of condemning us, or the rest of the world. While others may want to play God and manipulate the words of God for judgment, not grace, God is about the business of loving and saving us and the rest of the world!

But, what does God's loving and saving business look like?

John 3:14-15 tells us that life in God's love - through Christ - is both uplifting and eternal. Like Moses' serpent in the wilderness, Jesus is lifted up - both on the cross and in the ascension into glory - and in this lifting, belief in God's sacrifice and glory are given shape and form and eternal life is offered.

Uplifting and eternal! These are the central elements of God's saving love. I have seen the uplifting and eternal nature of God's love so often become manifest in the love, through suffering and pain, that people share in difficult and tumultuous times. While I sometimes wish that I could wave a magic wand over the pain I see embodied in suffering love, I am also aware that so much of the immensity of love would be diminished and even unrecognizable without it. To suffer in love for the one whom you love, in the midst of their suffering, is to live life to its holiest. I believe we actually come to see eternal life in the face of such suffering. We see grace, twisted by pain, but embraced by love. We see a peace which passes human understanding, growing forth from the depth of suffering.

Years ago, in the Toledo Museum of Art, a painting entitled, "The Disposition," showed the scene at the foot of the cross following the death of Jesus. His body was disposed from the cross to the earth below. As the dead body of Jesus lies at the foot of the cross, John, the beloved disciple, is beside him, having just washed his body of blood. Jesus' mother, Mary is looking on, but close at hand. Her face is twisted in pain. Her body is turned half way toward him, half way from him. In the distance, you see several people including the shadowy figure of Peter, who had denied and abandoned Jesus in his time of crucifying death.

For those who have stood by the cross - stood by him in his suffering - there is intense pain, but their pain is holy pain. For those who have tortured him or abandoned him, the pain is different. It is the pain of unholy guilt. It is the pain of dispossession. Uplifting and eternal are elements of God's saving love.

It is what we do in the face of the cross and at the foot of the cross which matters most. If we are to experience God's uplifting and eternal love, we must go there. We must abide there.

The ones who teach us about the saving love of God, are the ones in our lives who show us in their suffering how to love and even how to praise God and be of service to others.

Stephen Shoemaker tells the story of such a woman in his book GodStories. Jean Stout was a Kentucky woman who had been disabled all her life. As a young person, she had been too embarrassed about how she looked to be baptized. So, later in life, Stephen baptized her in her nursing home bed. When she was close to death, taking massive doses of medicine to reduce her pain, Stephen was visiting with Jean. She smiled at Stephen and said, *"The only thing that helps me in my pain is liquid morphine. This may sound silly to you pastor, but that morphine is the most beautiful color of blue I have ever seen."* Her improbable praise brought tears to Stephen.

Jean Stout reached a point in her battle for life, in which she said something like this:

God you've been in my actions, you've guided my life, and walked with me through all I have encountered. Now be in my dying, lift me up and carry me in your arms into the heavenly dwelling place that you call home. I can no longer care for my family, Lord. I hate that worse than anything. So, I leave them in your hands in the hands of those who you send as angels of mercy and love. Help them accept your presence in their lives, however you choose to make your love manifest."

I have heard such words at the bedside of your beloved ones through the years.

When such words as this come into the hearts and minds of people, a healing happens. It is a healing deeper than the body which is destined for death, a healing that is a final union with God. From such as these, I have learned not only how to die, but how to live. I have learned how to offer my passion to God as well as my well-intended actions.

At the heart of today's gospel is GOD'S LOVE. This verse tells us that the initiative in all salvation comes from the heart of God.

Listen to this verse, unpacked by phrases and listen to its powerful message of love: "**God so loved . . . God so loved the world . . . God so loved the world that he gave . . . God so loved the world that he gave his only son . . . God so loved the world that he gave his only son, that whosoever believes in him ... God so loved the world that whosoever believes in him shall not perish, but have everlasting life."**

Mother Teresa of Calcutta once said of John 3:16 –

"The Good News is that God **still loves the world** through you. You are God's Good News. You are God's love in action. Each time anyone comes in contact with us, they must become different and better people because of having met us. We must radiate God's love."

God still loves the world and by many accounts, it is not a world that is easy to love. Terror, war, hunger, oppression, and injustice are among those elements of man's inhumanity to man that make this world hard to love. God has to love the world in the face of the world hating God or battling with God. Nevertheless, our God continues to love the world.

God loves the unlovable and the unlovely. God loves the lonely that have no one else to love them. God loves the man who never thinks of God. God loves the woman who lives in God's presence constantly. God loves the graceless and the graceful. God loves the one who has never given a thought to God and knows not how to lift a prayer and the one who seeks God and prays without ceasing. God loves the one

who is angry at God and the one who is content in God. God loves the one who spits at God and the one who smiles at God. God loves you, just as God loves me.

As St. Augustine has written, "God loves each of us as if there was only one of us to love."

As we head into the third week of Lent, may we join the ranks of those who risk and resist. May we embrace the promise made to Abram and fulfilled in Jesus the Christ. As we seek Sabbath, may we remember that there will always be Jesus to teach us how to love. Amen.

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A Communion Meditation delivered by
Sister Teresa Tuite, OP

“Sabbath: Giving Jesus a Drink”

John 4:5 - 42

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I first want to thank you for welcoming me into your community. I consider it a very special invitation and an honor to worship with you.

In our scriptures for today and also during the week we have a few water stories. Today we have two stories and both are very strange. There is a sense of tension in both readings. The people, having left the slavery of Egypt are beginning to grumble. Why did you make us leave Egypt? Did you bring us into this desert to watch us die? They were getting worse and Moses is getting nervous. What is he going to do with them? What are they going to do to him? Are they going to start stoning him? Then we hear that Moses strike a rock and water comes forth. Then things settle down for a little bit.

Then we went to the Gospel and we have the wonderful story of the Samaritan Woman. It will be the first of a wonderful trilogy ... the Samaritan Woman, the Man Born Blind and The Raising of Lazarus. Today we will linger with the Woman at the Well and look to see what we might learn about Sabbath.

This gospel passage is so familiar to us that often when the proclaimer of the gospel says “A woman of Samaria came to draw water” ... we say –“O yeah, I know this story and sometimes we tune out.” That is really dangerous because when the story is from the Gospel according to John we have to keep peeling back layer after layer after layer trying to plumb to the depths of the text. Whenever we hear the story it is for the first time because the Word is a Living Word.

There are so many strange things happening in this story and each one inviting us to come and ponder and question... to pull at and poke at the passages, ... to pick it up and look under it and around it to see what the Word is for us. We have to let the Word walk around in us and we have to let ourselves walk around in the Word.

I have to confess that the last time we had the reading of the Woman at the Well I happened to be the preacher. I thought –that’s nice I will pull that preaching out; dust it off and I would be good to go. As if that would work!! Sometimes I shock myself with my own denseness --because I know when I say that or when I think that I am so, so far off the mark. It suggests that I merely have to pull it out from my file, dust it off and preach it again. If you want to make God laugh tell him your plans. Preaching doesn’t work that way ... the Word is a living Word and every time we proclaim it or hear it is the first time. I also have to keep reminding myself that I am not the preacher – merely an instrument through which the Word will be the preacher. The word God has for you today is new.

Since Tim invited me I have been praying with this reading and with this community in mind wondering how it could be woven into the idea of Sabbath. As I said, I have let the Word walk around in my heart

for weeks. Going over it again and again; letting days go by when I didn't give it a thought but it was still working in me.

Jesus is going from Galilee to Judea and chose to pass through Samaria— although a very dangerous way to go it was the most expedient because the trip could be made in three days. That they chose to go that way is not too strange but what is strange is that the disciples went to the village to get food. They left Jesus alone...by a well but with no bucket and no cup to get or drink the water. This was a very dangerous territory for any traveller but especially for a Jew and they left him alone without a bucket and without a cup. Our scriptures tell us, "Jesus, tired from his journey, sat down there at the well."

Then the woman appears in the story. She is alone and that is very, very strange. Wells were very important ... just as our water sources are very important... which we all too well know after the disaster in West Virginia. This was Jacob's Well and the water from this well was known for the coolness and sweetness of the water because the well was very, very deep. The women would go to the well in the early morning while it was cool. They had a leather bucket that was used to draw the water up from the well. Then they would fill the water jug; place it on their head and take it back to their home. This would be repeated until they had enough water for the day. They would repeat this in the cool of the evening to collect the water that would take them through the night. It would have been very dangerous for a woman to be so far from the village by herself. Also it is noontime ... not the time for going to the well— it would have been the hottest part of the day. I wonder why she is alone. Why didn't she go with the other women? In John's Gospel always pay attention to the time. One of John's underlying themes is light and dark and he conveys it through time and also blindness and sight. This is noontime, the brightest part of the day. The woman is in the light.

The hatred between the Samaritans was deep and fierce and right away Jesus breaks through that. Jesus says, "Give me a drink." Right away he pushes the racial, gender, religious and ethnic boundaries of his day. Jewish men did not speak to Jewish women in public so you can be sure that it was a taboo to speak to a Samaritan woman and an even bigger taboo to share a drinking cup. For a Jew to do that would mean that he was unclean and would not be able to enter the Temple until he had gone through the rites for purification. But it is hot and Jesus is thirsty. Jesus is tired and he is thirsty and the disciples left him alone without a bucket and without a cup to get the water.

Not the first time we have heard word like this – on the first Sunday when Jesus had been in the desert of wilderness for forty day and nights we heard that he "was tired and famished." Not the last time we will hear words similar to this. From the cross we will hear Jesus say, "I thirst."

This gospel has been haunting me ...Jesus is tired. Jesus is hungry. Jesus is thirsty but he has no bucket ... he has no cup.

I wondered what makes Jesus tired. What makes me or you tired? Jesus is tired from the journey ...tired from walking, yes -- but could he be tired because things were not going well. The disciples were not getting the message. He has taught them, showed them, explained to them and they still don't get it. ...and it has worn Jesus out. They went out to buy food not realizing the Bread of Life was in their midst. They

make him tired. They left him alone with no bucket and no cup and he is thirsty. They don't quench his thirst.

So we have a tired and thirsty Jesus. Again I sat with this gospel letting it roll around in my mind and heart...think about it – he has no bucket and he has no cup. He has no bucket to draw forth the water and he has no cup in which to pour the water.

One night I woke up out of a sound sleep and instantly heard I don't need a bucket.

I am from Massachusetts. When the sun comes up one of the places that receives the first rays of the rising sun is Marblehead, the most eastern land point in the state. So if you are a bit dense but you finally get something you or others might say: "Light dawns on Marblehead."

The light was beginning to dawn on my marble head. Of course, Jesus does not need a bucket to draw forth the water. Jesus is the water. It flows from him. But that cup... now that cup gave me lots of sleepless nights. He is tired and thirsty and he has no cup! He has no cup!

I began to wonder ... do I make Jesus tired. Do I make Jesus thirsty? I have heard his message. I have been instructed in the message. It has been explained to me but I still do not always get it. I go off to the village – to do all kinds of good and important things --and leave Jesus alone sitting at the well... tired and thirsty with no cup?

Yes! Yes! I do! I do that over and over again. Our second reading this morning told us that the Holy Spirit pours out love. Yet so often I think we have filled our lives, our hearts with so much other stuff that there is no breathing room for the Spirit – no space in our heart. Too often, we have gone off to our villages looking for food. Too often we leave Jesus tired and hungry with no cup. We are busy doing our thing ... our job, our social life... all good things. Sometimes we have filled our heart with things that are not good – resentment, anger, selfishness: we know what takes up too much space in our heart – our cup. When we do that we, too, leave Jesus alone tired and thirsty without a cup.

Think about that Jesus is thirsty ... in John's writing there is always layer upon layer of meaning. Jesus is probably thirsty physically ... he is tired and it is noontime – the heat of the day – so of course he is thirsty... but what else does Jesus thirst for?

If we look at the definition for thirsty we find: Feeling the need to drink but it also means having a craving for or great desire for. What can Jesus be craving? For what does Jesus have a great desire?

From the cross we will hear Jesus say, "I thirst." Was it just for water ... maybe—but I don't think so. I think Jesus has a deep thirst to do what Jesus was meant to do. I think Jesus has a deep thirst to pour out his love upon us. To pour out the life giving water of the spirit into us until it flows and flows and flows over us and not only fills us up but overflows. Jesus longs for that. He wants to fill us up. He thirsts for us... but he has no cup.

What will quench Jesus' thirst ... what will ease his tiredness?

Maybe... maybe the Sabbath is not just for us. I have a friend and when I get too caught up she will say, “Get over yourself; it is not always about you.” That’s true – it isn’t always about us. Maybe Jesus needs the Sabbath because he is tired and thirsty. He is tired of us leaving him alone, sitting at the well with no cup. He is thirsty for us ... he greatly desires to spend time with us. Maybe Jesus needs Sabbath time with us even more than we need the Sabbath time with him –BUT — BUT he has no cup.

He doesn’t need a bucket but he needs the cup. You and I are invited to be the cup. You and I are invited to open ourselves up to let Jesus pour into us all the love he has for us. He needs us to be the cup that receives the life-giving water that he wants ... the life-giving water he greatly desires to fill us with... the life-giving water he craves to share with us. You and I are the cup that will be used to satisfy Jesus’ thirst. You and I will be the cup that Jesus will fill and will satisfy his thirst.

I think when we stop leaving Jesus sitting at the side of the well with no cup and we take the time to take the time to linger at the well; to let ourselves be the cup -- life giving water will fill us up and Jesus’ thirst will be quenched and our thirst will be satisfied.

When we gather here as a faith community we are honoring the Sabbath. It is wonderful and we need this but it doesn’t replace the time we need to be alone with Jesus. It doesn’t satisfy the thirst Jesus has for each of us.

What else is happening at this well? We have that wonderful line – “he told me everything I ever did.” What do you think Jesus told her? (– most likely you are thinking of her sins, those five husbands and the man she is currently living with--).

Now think about that for a minute. If Jesus sat with you and told you every single thing you have ever done that was wrong; told you every sin you had committed – pointed out all your faults – would that make you bubble up and overflow with joy? Would that make you want to linger at the well with Jesus? I don’t think so! If Deacon Tom came running into this church and said come meet this man I met. He will tell you every sin you have ever committed, tell you what’s wrong with you and point out all your faults. I would say, “Really! – I’ll get back to you on that.”

Jesus loved her – I think he told her how much he loved her; told her all the good she had done; revealed to her the goodness that is deep within her – did not define her by what she had done wrong. Her sin – our sin does not define her or us. She has been defined from all eternity. She is a beloved daughter of God and has always been loved by God. He helped her put her life in perspective – all because she lingered at the well and offered him her cup. Now that would make me bubble up with joy. That would make me want to tell you that and invite you to have that experience.

BUT – he needs a cup – he needs you to sit and linger by the well and be the cup he needs ... he needs you to take Sabbath time to quench his thirst. Jesus thirsts to touch the places of hurt in our heart with the healing waters of his love, the places of darkness and confusion; the places where we doubt and wonder what it is all about; the places that need to be touched with forgiveness.; the places that are clinging to hope in a world that sometimes seems to have gone mad. Linger at the well with Jesus spending Sabbath time with him helps put our lives in perspective.

In our gospel today I believe Jesus says to us what he said to the Samaritan Woman, “Give me a drink.” We are called to quench Jesus’ thirst. He craves to pour life-giving water into us BUT! BUT! We have to be the cup that receives that life-giving water. We have to linger with him at the well; we have to give Jesus Sabbath time not to quench our thirst for him but to quench Jesus’ thirst.

Jesus always turns things upside down. So when we do this ... when we come to the well. When we linger at the well and not go off to our village leaving Jesus alone with no cup to satisfy his thirst, I believe that we will find that the life-giving water not only quenches Jesus’ thirst but it fills us up and not only fills us up but it starts to overflow.

It will overflow and overflow and overflow and be an endless fountain springing up within us and it will flow out of us as individuals, yes, ... but also as a faith community. When we come to the well as a faith community to spend Sabbath time with Jesus, the life-giving water we receive will overflow and through us touch the places of violence in our world, the places of injustice, the places of hate. It will touch them with the life giving water of God’s peace and God’s love.

When we let ourselves be filled to overflowing to the point of proclaiming ... to the point of being disciples with Sabbath strength, then Jesus’ thirst will be quenched.

When we, time after time, linger at the well and be the cup that Jesus will use to satisfy his thirst then gradually we, too, will begin to thirst with the thirst of Jesus. We will begin to thirst and that thirst will only be quenched when we begin to let his endless spirit touch others through us then Jesus thirst will be satisfied his tiredness eased.

Look at Sabbath not from your need only – for indeed we certainly do need the Sabbath but also look at Sabbath from Jesus’ need. Today he says to us. “Give me a drink.” Hear that not as a command, hear it as a plea. Jesus is asking you for a drink.

He is tired.

He is thirsty.

He has no bucket but doesn’t need one.

He has no cup and he absolutely, positively needs a cup.

He needs you to be the cup. He needs me to be the cup.

We need to linger at the well with Jesus over and over and over and over again and continually let Jesus pour forth that life-giving water.

Notice, the Samaritan woman got this and when she did she immediately went to tell the others. She left her watering jug at the well because now the life-giving water was within her. She is our Sabbath example of an overflowing cup. She is an example of a Sabbath filled disciple.

Recall the question that ended the reading from Exodus today, “Is the LORD in our midst or not?” Yes, the Lord is in our midst but all too often we have gone off to our villages and have left him sitting by the well with no cup. We really have to stop doing that.

March 23, 2014 First Congregational Church. -- Teresa Tuite, OP

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A sermon delivered by The Rev. Dr. Janine Wilson, Associate Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, March 30, 2014, Dedicated to the glory of God made visible through the life and now, new life, of Sam Gordon – a man of great courage and a heart filled with joy.

“Sabbath: Bringing Light into the Darkness”

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Let us pray: Amazing God, thank you for calling us to you by name and sending us forth in love, amen.

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Have you noticed that Lent is disruptive? Every Lent we are challenged to consider discontinuing our daily patterns, including some of our joys. Maybe it’s that rich, creamy dark chocolate we enjoy, or a need to reduce the noise in our life, or taking up the encouragement and positive “take-ons” instead of ‘gives-ups’ during Lent. We do these things hoping God can insert some new life back into this equation called life. We do it hoping we will insert some new life into the world too. Regardless of the year, we mark Lent as a time of struggle, challenge and a combination of what we let go and what we feel called to take let in. Like tulips finding their way to the surface, Lent invites us to grow and reach, even while resting until the time is right.

All of this wondering, searching and opening of oneself, combined with fresh discipline, could lead any of us to believe that coming to church out of respect for the Sabbath, the day of worship and rest, should include hearing messages of peace and calmness... as though Sabbath is a serene interlude, a calm in the middle of the storms of life... a holy comma, as Matthew Sleeth says, in a seriously run-on sentence of a week. You may have caught on by now, but just in case, I will point out that it’s not really the way Lent works! Everything is not as it seems.

Truth is – the lectionary stories in Lent are *irritatingly disruptive*. Week after week Jesus has been confronting and giving new life to people right and left since Lent began just four weeks ago! From the beginning there has been a little bit of ducking and dodging at first – followed by transformation.

This morning, we just heard the footsteps of the Pharisees as they went racing off to find someone to blame for their assumptions regarding the lack of vision of one man. We heard how free they were with their words of shame and blame - as they accused the person and his family. They assumed sin was running rampant with this man, his parents, and Jesus, who they claim sinned by healing this man on the Sabbath day. By the end of the narrative, we are heartened to hear that this young man sees just fine, but we are equally disturbed that the vision of the angry ones has not improved at all. They could not see at the beginning and they still cannot see in the end. Transformation is challenging. Envisioning God with us and through us, is risky business. It is disruptive and can drop us to our knees.

So let me ask you about the event - who do you feel more like this morning, the Pharisees who are walking around in the dark in the daytime, or like the one called blind who comes to see Jesus before the end of the story?

To make it easier, I invite you to wonder about your own vision and/or visions. Have you experienced a sense of conversion of faith, sight or understanding, in your own journey into faith? I would note here, don't worry if the answer is 'no'-- it's not a requirement! Some have experienced the change from before to after, from lost to found, from frightened to safe and others have not yet.

I'll go a step further..., if you have an identifiable journey in faith, or have experienced a Christly encounter, savor it for just a minute... Can you remember anything at all about it? Were you just sitting in church one day, or out at the lake or in your garden when you suddenly felt God's undeniable presence with you? Did you have an 'aha' moment, the way lightning strikes the transformer in the storm, or was there a slow and steady breeze that moved you forward – an opening of the sails to catch the wind just right? Was it “nothing special” or “something remarkable”? Was it more like just noticing you were breathing freely, or were you like Yamba in the story of Amistad – and you suddenly began seeing crosses everywhere? Or, did someone come up to you and taunt you, and then someone else applied spit and mud on your eyes?

OK, so that last possibility probably didn't happen to you, but I couldn't resist adding it to our list. The point is, that God really can and does move in mysterious ways – sometimes we have to just wait and be... the wind really does blow where it will. Other times though, things happen and we don't know it until down the road. Hindsight can be much clearer than the things the present moment. Along with some of you, I know that I have been through things that made little sense when they occurred and a lot of sense, years later.

On the bright side, I remember how fun it was at the former church I served in Dayton when some adult leaders and I drove our high school youth group on a scavenger hunt with cameras in cars, searching for various targets on a list. One target was to locate crosses – literally as well figuratively, including crosses in the ordinary. It started slowly, but once the first person spotted the cross in the telephone poles, the rest of the teens caught on and found them everywhere they looked! So much of our faith just starts with a hint or a spark. The really fun part is that it stuck with them – crosses are now easy to see everywhere!

Reading scripture can sneak up on us the same way.

I have to share, I am not one who ordinarily fusses about the lectionary. I appreciate it's guidance a lot. This morning I want to add to it though – I commend you to keep reading – maybe as part of your Lenten devotions today. Keep reading and listening past the end of the passage identified in your bulletin today. Keep listening to John all the way through chapter 10, verses 1-21. The story today was long, even so, it was reduced. The continuation of it sheds light back on what we just heard. When we hear the full story it is easier to see how this man without vision, is gradually transformed step by step.

He progressed from hearing - to knowing - to understanding - to proclaiming. He hears *and* sees Jesus, but it doesn't just happen in the blink of an eye. His seeing also comes through steps of recognition. He had markers in his journey that happened in his discovery of Jesus – the same way there was a string of markers in last week's story of the woman at the well. There is a progressive unveiling of layers. And like both of them, our eyes may see things, or we may see God in other ways, until our heart catches on, and eventually what we experience gravitates into, and finally out of us - flowing into the lives of others. Then one day, “out of the blue” we talk about our ‘Aha!’ moments as if we were struck by lightning!

I remember when I would go to Litchfield, Illinois every summer and my aunts and uncles would look at me and say, “My how you have grown up!” And something in the way they said it made it clear it was a good thing and that it wasn’t just about being taller. All I was aware of day to day was that the sun was good, the neighbors were kind, the seasons came and went, and finally it was summer.

When I started writing this sermon to share today, it occurred to me that I had lots of seasons in my faith journey that happened before I could see, not with my eyes, but with heart and intuition. Our physical sight can get in the way, it distracts us. We often need stepping stones. It is possible that the core of John’s message today is most easily accessed when we take a small step, back, close our eyes and pray the Lord’s prayer, recite the 23rd Psalm and or sing, particularly when we sing, “I once was lost and now am found was blind and now I see...”!

I grew to know Jesus a little at a time. I asked myself this week when I first *saw* Jesus and I came to the conclusion I heard him first, then began to know him differently, listening, then reading, most often through scripture when I had finally absorbed it over and over again and let it rattle around inside a bit.

Then later I began to see him around the world and then in you and in the people on the street. At some point I began to see him in photographs and in poetic verse; I began to hear his heartbeat through the organ, piano and choirs. I started to hear and notice him at public events – even at political gatherings – people gathered who didn’t always believe what I believe, but are always part of God’s diverse creation.

When I am quieter and braver, I see him in hospitals, at bedsides and in soup kitchens. I wonder why we don’t all do more to visit, feed and keep the comforts going toward the Christ.

He also shows up when I start judging people – identifying them as “that mean person” or “the woman with the attitude” or “the girl with orange hair,” or “the one who keeps interrupting” or the one who.... Well you know; you may have labeled instead honored the name and personhood of others at some time too.

Try as we may, we human beings are prone to defining one another by attributes instead of getting acquainted. If I label you, I keep a safe distance from you. The Pharisees never even recognized the man by name, they just assumed they knew him and tagged him as the blind man – but then it was clear they did not know him at all.

His family chose not to stand up for him – probably out of fear of being cast out. But when push came to shove, the man was fine with being cast out from the temple....because there was Jesus welcoming him with open arms. Not a bad gig...

It seems to me that God has shown up here with us this morning to remind us we are not identified by God simply by what we look like, or whether we are married or single, know or understand our sexual orientation, have a job, are unemployed, have money or only have lint in our pockets. God knows we are not categorized by body size or shape, by what languages we speak or what medications or street drugs we have taken. God does not parse us out like beans to be sorted or dollars collected.

In the end, the man who cannot see doesn't actually have his sight 'restored' at all—*Jesus gives him sight, something that he never had*. Jesus created something new for him. And slowly, over the next passages—those we read this morning and those you will read at home later today—slowly, this man becomes a new creation.

God does not define him by his lack of sight... instead, God's love is communicated and the man is made new through the state of the art form of medicine of the day -- amid the spit and the mud and washing in the water Jesus sends him to wash in. And best of all, when the story we hear is over – it continues through us.

Our challenge is not to slide backwards. We humans waste a lot of time creating and recreating the same problem over and over again out of fear, or stubbornness, or just plain bad habit.

Consider the marriage or the family or congregation that has had too much practice being ornery and the same problem just keeps resurfacing over and over again. Thanks be to God the world does not revolve around the ups and downs of the movie stars, political parties, large bank accounts, gossip or crankiness because it's clear you and I spend too much time defining our lives and systems by crazy things like these.

The good, disruptive news is that Lent is a time to consider new ways, so here's our challenge: Just think what amazing things we will see and celebrate if we spend most of our time looking for the good that is in us and around us! I don't mean for us to ignore needs of others, rather, focus on the good we can do to reach out and make a difference; and what it will be like to fight the causes that underlie the disparity of needs; and then -- how much stronger families, neighborhoods and cities will be when we get up and celebrate the work we can do in God's name.

If I have any word of salvation to share today it is this – I believe it is time to step away from fussiness, anger and disappointments and live as those called to focus our vision on what is good and right and just.

I believe if we invest 99.9% of our time focused on God's creativity, the world will change for the better and we will have participated in the change. It is time for us live as though we *believe* in the 23rd Psalm that goodness and mercy shall not just *follow* us... but in knowing that these words in the 23rd Psalm can also be marvelously translated as *God's goodness and mercy shall pursue us all the days of our lives*... It is time for us to be open to God, amen.

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A Communion Meditation delivered by The Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Lent, April 6, 2014, dedicated to the memory of John Siddall who passed away 3/24 and Sam Gordon who passed away 3/31 and always to the glory of God!

"Sabbath as Homecoming"

(6 of 9 in the sermon series,

"Sabbath as Homecoming")

Ezekiel 37: 1-14; Romans 8:6-II, John II: 1-45

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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Years ago, our denomination had a series of ad campaign posters - one of which read, (If you think it is hard to get up for church on Sunday, try rising from the dead. If you don't believe us, Just ask Jesus. Come join us for worship. The United Church of Christ. " How true!

While some of us are yawning, moaning, even snoring this morning as we sit in the house of the Lord, our Savior is busy raising the dead in the Gospel of John. And in Ezekiel, God is busy putting bodies and souls back together in a valley of dry bones. Two weeks from today, all our texts in word and music will be tuned to resurrection with the volume turned way up! I hope it true that none of us will be sleeping in our overnight tombs on Easter morning! Raising the dead is God's business. But, in our times, we have given the tales and the tasks of raising the dead to the dead themselves. Zombies, Vampires and Hunters in search of Ghosts lead the way. TV shows, books, films and ghost tours make "Raising the Dead" a multibillion dollar business! The Twilight film series alone grossed \$3.3 billion at the box office a few years ago. Clearly, raising the dead in the 21st Century is big business' business. The driving force of this death defying business is the mystery and audacity of the dead to not stay dead. Overcoming death is actually the work of God. It is also the work of God's Sabbath. Sabbath is all about saying "No" to the things that drain us and will eventually kill us. It is about saying "Yes" to the things that sustain us and give us life. Sabbath is about Homecoming. Rabbi Yehiel Mikhal of Zlotchov writes of Sabbath, "*Sabbath means the homecoming. On that day, all returns to its true place ... on the Sabbath day, all find rest because they are allowed to go home.*" Dawn J. Liphrott picks up this theme in Shabbat: A Taste of Wholeness:

"Shabbat (or Sabbath) is a day of reconnecting with the essence of Life, and being

'held' by the Divine, it is the day of coming home -- to yourself and to your inherent connection with all Creation and with God. It is when you return to your true place and nature which is harmony, wholeness, and peace. According to Jewish mystical tradition, it is also the day in which the Sefirot (Attributes) through which all is created return to their proper place and relationship.* All is in balance and harmony, allowing the Divine flow to abundantly enter the world. Shabbat is a time when the Light of the beginning of Creation is revealed again in your world. It is a taste of the 'world to come'-- to nourish you and to challenge you to co-create a world that is the essence of Shabbat. (Furthermore) Because Shabbat is a celebration of Creation, you do everything on Shabbat 'as if for the first time.' You see everything in the first Light of Creation. On each and every Shabbat you say the prayers and sing the songs with the excitement of the first time. You eat challah and drink wine 'as if for the first time.' You eat your meal and enjoy the flames of the candles 'as if for the first time.' You see each other 'as if for the first time.' You approach every moment as brand new -- and in so doing, you come closer to the reality of experience. The rabbis warned about 'growing old' in our seeing, thinking, and experiencing. Shabbat breaks open life to reveal its eternal newness in each and every moment. Shabbat reminds you to see the Divine in the everyday. With the eyes of Shabbat, the true nature of Creation is revealed. (we must remember) that Creation did not happen just one time, but that at every moment, God continues to create all things in order for it to exist. At each moment all things are new and Shabbat gives you practice in experiencing each moment with fresh wonder and awareness. There are days in our lives when we feel as far away from this experience and reality of new life as seems possible. We are wasted -out of energy, completely and utterly depleted. We lack for everything because we have nothing left. Each of us wonders, "why should I get up, go out, and encounter the world around me?" We feel like our bones and our souls are all dried up. When we add others to this mix, when we look around us and see others in similar situations, we think we might as well be living in a valley of dry bones. While being there by yourself is de-energizing, being in the valley with a host of others is downright depressing. On such occasions, we look around and the words of God to Ezekiel resonate in the depths of our souls, "Mortal, can these bones live?" With Ezekiel, we can answer, "Lord God, only you know that." God knows that only God knows if dry bones can live again.

When we are all dried out, burned out, wasted and depleted, it is time for Sabbath. It is time to return to God. It is time to go home to God. Then and only then, God begins to knit our bodies and souls back together. In the valley of dry bones, God knits bodies and souls together - bone to bone, sinews to muscles, skin on bones. Finally, when the power of God has done all the body building, God blows the breath of new life into the newly restored bodies and souls. To say "Yes" to the Spirit of God, to the Breath of God, we have to say no to the valley of dry bones. We have to walk out of "death valley." We have to find our way home to God. We have to trust that our God - who can bring life to dry bones and raise the dead- as God did with Lazarus - can bring new life to our bodies and souls. In John's Gospel, Jesus didn't simply run to the tomb and resurrect Lazarus. Our text carries us through conversations, confrontations and conversions with Mary, Martha, and a host of others before Lazarus walks out of the darkened tomb into the light of day. Jesus raises his dead friend only after he weeps for him. His tears water the path of resurrection and hope. His tears turn the "no" of death into a "yes" of new life. I believe our task today and throughout this week is be about the work of

raising the dead- beginning with the death we see in ourselves, in our attitudes, in our bad habits, our unforgiving words that hurt and separate, our hearts which we allow to stay broken and thus wound others. Our Sabbath work this week is one of homecoming. We need to forgive those who seem unforgiveable in our lives. We need to weep for those who for whom we have not shed one tear of compassion in recent days or years. We need say: "Yes" to the goodness of creation. "Yes" to the belovedness of its messy, inconvenient creatures. "Yes" to doubting, moody, whiny prophets. "Yes" to poetry and love songs. "Yes" to our children and grandchildren. "Yes" to the blessing of the poor, the weak, and the lowly. "Yes" to the cross and the resurrection. "Yes" even to our " no ' s. " As we say "Come out" to the dead parts of our lives and attitudes; "come out" to the puss we have allowed to fester in the wounds of our heart, "Come out" to old beliefs about ourselves and others, "Come out" to pain we carry and the pain we cause - Jesus words "unbind him!" and "Unbind her!" will bring resurrection life our weary bones and souls. Only God knows that we can do this. Only we know if we will do it. May you experience Sabbath as Homecoming this today and throughout this week. Amen.

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A meditation delivered by The Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Palm/Passion Sunday, April 13, 2014, dedicated to Abby and Brian Cave on their fifth anniversary and Emily Elizabeth Cave on her birthday, April 10, 2014 and always to the glory of God!

“Sabbath as Suffering”

Matthew 21:1-11; Philippians 2:5-11; Matthew 26:57- 27:61
(Part 7 of 9 in the sermon series “Sabbath, the Seventh Day”)

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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On this day in 30AD two processions entered Jerusalem.

In their book, *The Last Week*, Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan write of that first Palm Sunday:

It was the beginning of the week of Passover, the most sacred week of the Jewish year . . . One was a peasant procession, the other an imperial procession.

From the east, Jesus rode a donkey down the Mount of Olives, cheered by his followers. Jesus was from the peasant village of Nazareth, his message was about the kingdom of God, his followers were from the peasant class. They had journeyed to Jerusalem from Galilee, about 100 miles to the north, a journey that is the central section and the central dynamic of the Gospels. Matthew’s story of Jesus and the Kingdom of God have been aiming for Jerusalem, pointing toward Jerusalem. It has now arrived.

On the opposite side of the city, from the west, Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor of Idumea, Judea and Samaria entered Jerusalem at the head of a column of imperial cavalry and soldiers. Jesus’ procession proclaimed the kingdom of God; Pilate’s proclaimed the power of empire. The two processions (on this day, 1,984 years ago) embody the central conflict of the week that led to Jesus’ crucifixion.” (*The Last Week*, John Dominic Crossan and Marcus Borg, Harper and Row, San Francisco, 2006, p. 2).

As the week we call “Holy” unfolds, we will see that the power of God embodied in Jesus Christ and the power of Rome embodied in the legion under Pilate’s rule will come to confrontational head by week’s end.

Pilate and his troops had come to reinforce the Roman garrison in preparation for Passover. Normally Pilate lived by the sea 60 miles away in Caesarea Maritima. It was more pleasant there and much less hostile than Jerusalem. Pilate came to Fortress Antonia, overlooking the temple and court, to keep an eye on the Jews and to oversee the suppression of all insurrections. Passover is the Jewish celebration of liberation from slavery by Moses from Egypt. Clearly, Pilate had cause to be concerned about insurrections in a week when the liberating hope of Passover was in the hearts and minds of all Jews (*Ibid.*, p. 3-4).

The sounds and actions of a liberating force were in the air that day entering from the east. But this force was no less than the power of God to heal, to bring peace, to transform lives through the message brought by the man of Nazareth. As Jesus entered Jerusalem, the people's cry shook the ramparts on the east gate: ***"Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of our Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!"*** People laid their cloaks on the road, they cut branches from the trees and laid on the road as well.

Jesus and his followers knew exactly what they were doing. They were staging a demonstration against the power of the empire. The symbolism of the Hebrew prophet Zechariah was clear: *"A king would come to Jerusalem, humble and riding on a donkey"* (Zechariah 9:9). He would be a king who, in the words of Zechariah *"would cut off the chariot from Ephraim, and the war-horse from Jerusalem. He would cut off the battle bow and command the nations in peace"* (9:10) (Ibid).

Jesus' followers were proclaiming Him as the king of peace who would reign in coming kingdom of God. They believed that military might would yield to the power of God. This peaceful procession from the east was about to confront the power, violence and glory of the empire that ruled the world and had its boot firmly on the neck of the Jews in Jerusalem and Judea. But, as Matthew's Gospel tells us, *"When Jesus entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil asking, 'Who is this?' The crowds were saying, 'this is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee.'"* Guess what - in the first century Roman Empire, there was only one way to break the back of a revolutionary movement like this. You stopped a prophet like Jesus through public execution on the "lynching tree" of Roman Rule known as "The Cross."

It was Sunday, but Friday was coming... The cost of discipleship in the kingdom of God is great. The week unfolding, which we call Holy Week, will show us that the call of discipleship means to lay down your life for others. From palms waving and shouts of "Hosanna," we move to confrontation, to beatings and finally to Jesus' death on a cross. This is a week of prayer, confusion, confrontation, liberation, terror, tumult, breaking bread and breaking bones; pouring wine and draining blood. Ultimately this is a week of death. Even more ultimately, this is week of resurrection from the dead.

I pray that we soak into our souls this Sabbath of Suffering. I pray that we take holy week for "Stop Time." Find Sabbath time this week – to walk the Labyrinth, break bread, drink the cup, pray, and ask ourselves, "Who is Jesus in my life?" "How do I lay down my life for others?" "How do I follow him?" "Who am I and who is he- and who are we together?"

The story of this week has ultimate purpose and the meaning for our lives. For today, we need to answer some questions... Which procession will we join? Which Gate of Jerusalem will we enter - the one from the east gate or the one from the west gate? Which powerful ruler will we follow? Will we give ourselves to God and to one another? Will we lay our lives down for God and one another?

On this Sabbath Day, enter by the east gate. Proceed with him to the cross. If you look up - before the Cross of Jesus you will see the face of God. Watch closely. Be touched deeply. Be liberated completely. Listen carefully. Be his followers. Amen.

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A Meditation delivered by The Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Good Friday, April 18, 2014, dedicated to all the men, women and children across the globe who “have laid down their lives for their friends” since the last Good Friday and always to the glory of God!

“Sabbath as Execution Day”

Matthew 26 and 27

(Part 8 of 9 in the sermon series, “Sabbath, the Seventh Day”)

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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Jesus’ death is a real death. His death is historical fact. In fact, nothing in his life is more meticulously documented as his dying and death. As we have heard tonight, Matthew, like the other Gospel writers, spends great detail telling us how our Savior died. Jesus’ death is as real and physical as each of ours will be.

I pray our deaths are nothing like his.

Having been whipped 39 times by nail-laden leather whips while in custody of the Roman Guard in Fortress Antonia, having lost much blood, having been forced (as was the custom) to carry the 110 pound cross beam to Calvary over 650 yards of dusty, steadily inclining streets through mocking crowds, having been nailed to the cross with the nails driven through both wrists and then a single nail driven through the instep of both his left and right feet together, having been hoisted in the hot sun to roast and die – his breathing difficult (causing him to suffocate), his heart stopping, his blood draining, his heart slowing to a stop, his body temperature dropping, and his breath and brain stopping – Jesus dies after three hours of public humiliation, almost absolute abandonment by the men he called disciples and 12 hours of excruciating suffering – three hanging on the cross.

As the sun sets on Friday, he breathes his last breath. The Sabbath of the Jews has arrived as Jesus gives us his spirit to God. An earthquake

hits. The veil in the temple - all 60 feet in length and 4 inches thick is torn in two.

Jesus is executed on the Sabbath Day. The day which God commands us to rest becomes the day in which God’s beloved son rests in peace. It is the seventh day. For those who follow Jesus in the centuries to come, it will never be their Sabbath day again. Instead, the Sabbath day will always be the day of his rising.

Years ago, I was present in worship in a synagogue on Good Friday. As I joined with my Jewish brothers and sisters in prayer, a strange feeling came over me. It was a feeling of absolute emptiness and sadness. I couldn’t understand why. Through the years, I have always loved worship in the synagogue. I love the

music, the prayers, the joy, the language, the text. I love the focus on God as “Creator of the Universe” and all that is herein. So, why the emptiness? Why the sinking sadness?

Then it sunk into my soul. If Jesus had lived through the Sabbath of his suffering and death, he would have been in the synagogue praying, singing, reading Torah on this night. Instead this Sabbath was his dying day. He would never again pray in the synagogue. The essence of all he was, was extinguished on the Sabbath Day.

But, all he ever would be was only just beginning to become real. As we are here on this Good Friday, we must remember that there is more –much more - than the cessation of vital signs and the end of life as he knew it. Salvation came to the hill at Calvary and to all the world this night.

A divine event was enacted in the death of Jesus. His death – willed and sacrificed by him for us – was an offering for the sins of the world. His death conquered death. His death was the death of death. In his death we encounter the greatest mystery of the cosmos. In his death, it becomes clear to us that God comes down in human form and share his life with us in his son, our savior. In him we are recreated – “ransomed, healed, restored, forgiven” as our hymn cries out.

This mystery shapes the way we as Christians live and die, love and believe, forgive and are forgiven. It is salvation, not a coroner’s autopsy of the death, that brings us back to the cross every day. Coming back to the cross is not like visiting the cemetery with flowers as we keep the blessed

memory of our most beloved friends and family members in our hearts. We come back to the cross to remember we are and whose we are. We come back to the cross to daily probe in prayer, in spirit and in action how we will live our lives more fully in the spirit of Christ. We come back to the cross to remember - as he laid down his life for us - we too must lay down our lives for others.

As we go forth on this Shabbat of our Lord’s Execution, let us carry Fanny Crosby’s words in our hearts: “Near the cross, a trembling soul, Love and Mercy found me; there the bright and morning star, Sheds its beams around me. In the cross, in the cross, be my glory ever, till my raptured soul shall find, rest beyond the river.”

Tonight, we give you thanks O Lord for your sacrifice, for your grace and for your amazing love. In you, we find our true and perfect rest. In you, we will find our Eternal Sabbath. Amen.

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An Easter Meditation delivered by The Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Easter Sunday, April 20, 2014, dedicated to our First Church Staff who work hard every day serving God in Christ in the heart of our capital city and to the members of First Church who are the most amazing community of faith I have been honored to serve and with whom it has been my privilege to live for Christ in the heart of the city for 14¼ years and always to the glory of God!

“Sabbath: Rest as Resurrection”

Jeremiah 31:1-6; Acts 10:34-43; John 20:1-18

(9 of 9 in the sermon series, “Sabbath, the Seventh Day of Rest”)

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O God, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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Poet and author John Updike writes of Christ’s Resurrection in his poem, *Seven Stanzas at Easter:*

Make no mistake: if He rose at all
it was as His body;
if the cells’ dissolution did not reverse, the molecules
reknit, the amino acids rekindle,
the Church will fall.

It was not as the flowers,
each soft Spring recurrent;
it was not as His Spirit in the mouths and fuddled
eyes of the eleven apostles;
it was as His flesh: ours.

The same hinged thumbs and toes,
the same valved heart
that—pierced—died, withered, paused, and then
regathered out of enduring Might
new strength to enclose.

Let us not mock God with metaphor,
analogy, sidestepping, transcendence;
making of the event a parable, a sign painted in the
faded credulity of earlier ages:
let us walk through the door.

The stone is rolled back, not papier-mâché,
not a stone in a story,
but the vast rock of materiality that in the slow
grinding of time will eclipse for each of us
the wide light of day.

And if we will have an angel at the tomb,
make it a real angel,
weighty with Max Planck's quanta, vivid with hair,
opaque in the dawn light, robed in real linen
spun on a definite loom.

Let us not seek to make it less monstrous,
for our own convenience, our own sense of beauty,
lest, awakened in one unthinkable hour, we are
embarrassed by the miracle,
and crushed by remonstrance.

We step into Easter today believing that 1984 years ago on Easter Sunday, the rock to Jesus' tomb was rolled away, Jesus Christ rose triumphant from the grave and the Sabbath of the Christians was born as the Savior of the world was raised from death to life by God.

Today we join with over 2.18 billion Christians in every country of the globe and proclaim with one voice - ***"Christ is Risen! He is Risen Indeed, Alleluia!"*** This joyful, soulful, heartfelt invocation reaches out in every tongue in every land! Today we share Christ's Resurrection with our Orthodox sisters and brothers - a rare and special day indeed! All of us celebrate Easter today! We are Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Protestant, Pentecostal, Evangelical, Independent - all in Christ - speaking in all tongues, in all races, in all places - and all 2.18 billion of us lift our voice and sing, ***"Christ is Risen! He is Risen Indeed, Alleluia!"***

I would love to tell you today that on this Easter, we - though many in voice - are of one accord. I would love to tell you that all 2.18 billion Christians - or 1/3 of the 6.9 billion global citizens - are truly "One in Christ." But I can't even tell you that for the 247 million Christians in America (11.3% of the global church). I can't tell you we are "One in Christ" because I know we are a rowdy, diverse, highly independent, extremely bright, overly creative & a very opinionated body in Christ - and I am only talking about the people of faith in this sanctuary!

Each of us brings to the Resurrection Story a different understanding and interpretation. As I opened with Updike, I know that not everyone in this room was in agreement with *"the dissolved cells reversing, the molecules reknit, the amino acids rekindled."* I know that we have many opinions about the reversed, reknit and rekindled Jesus of Nazareth and his physical resurrection. DO you think I was born yesterday? I know that some of you think you belong to Everyone Has Their Own Belief United Church of Christ. That is EHTOBUCC for short! But really we are FCCUCC!

While many of us focus on the spiritual nature of rising in Christ, many others join Updike in believing that if He is not physically resurrected the whole enterprise called the “Christian Church” falls apart. I honor all your beliefs that are different than mine. That is the nature of our covenant in Christ!

Be that as it may, in the resurrection of Jesus Christ – we can all agree that Sabbath shifts for his followers from Saturday to Sunday. As Christians, we acknowledge that the “Lord’s Day” or the “Sabbath of our Savior” is no longer the Sabbath of the Jews. We celebrate each Christian Sabbath as a Day of Resurrection! By so doing, we claim and proclaim ours as a “Resurrection Faith.” **We are a people of Resurrection!**

As “Resurrection People” we have to get clearer on what this looks like and feels like to us. The Resurrected Christ is our ground of being and our Alpha and Omega - our beginning and end.

So what do we believe and practice as a people of resurrection?

In our United Church of Christ, it may surprise many of you that our one true statement of faith can be found in our Denomination’s Constitutional preamble: “We believe that Jesus Christ is our Lord and Savior.” That’s right – we are not Unitarians Considering Christ (although there is nothing wrong with my Unitarian sisters and brothers). We believe in the Risen Christ. Our UCC Website opens the “what we believe” section with: “We believe in the triune God: Creator, resurrected Christ, the sole Head of the church, and the Holy Spirit, who guides and brings about the creative and redemptive work of God in the world.”

Everything we say and do is rooted in the Resurrected Christ. We are people of Resurrection. As People of Resurrection in the United Church of Christ, we believe many other things.

As people of Resurrection, “We believe that each person is unique and valuable.” In the eyes of God all are loved and accepted. Leave your prejudice, your hate, your bullying, and your judgment outside the doors because in this room, in this church none of that holds sway. Each of us is unique, beautiful, valuable and beloved beyond imagination!

As people of Resurrection, “We believe that each person is on a spiritual journey” - and that each of us is at a different stage of that journey. We treasure this truth!

As people of Resurrection, “We believe that the persistent search for God produces an authentic relationship with God,” engendering love, strengthening faith, dissolving guilt, and giving life purpose and direction.

As people of Resurrection, “We believe that all of the baptized 'belong body and soul to our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.” No matter who – no matter what – no matter where we are on life's journey – notwithstanding race, gender identity or expression, sexual orientation, class or creed – we all belong to God and to one worldwide community of faith. In other words, all 2.18 billion of us are united by our baptism – no matter how or when it happened.

As people of Resurrection, “We believe that all people of faith are invited to join Christ at His table for the sacrament of Communion.” Everyone is welcome to the Lord’s Table. You may choose not to come, but you are welcome here because we believe it is not our table. This table of grace is the table of the Risen Christ. In him we are all invited into a relationship of love and grace.

As people of Resurrection, “We believe the UCC is called to be a united and uniting church.” “That they may all be one” is not just a passage of scripture spoken by Jesus and found in John 17:21. This belief guides our faith. We believe “In essentials—unity; in nonessentials—diversity, in all things—charity.” Even though we will join with the church universal today and speak together the Nicene Creed, we are non-doctrinal. I don’t expect you to agree with the whole Nicene Creed – (in fact I know that won’t happen) - since we express no rigid formulation of doctrine or attachment to creeds or structures. But I do expect you to live the one commandment of Jesus in John 15 – “to love one another as God has loved you.” That is our creed. That is our commandment. It is all we truly need.

As people of Resurrection, “We believe that God calls us to be servants in the service of others” and to be good stewards of our personal resources and the earth's resources.

As people of Resurrection, “We believe that God calls us to be a prophetic church.” As in the tradition of the prophets and apostles, God calls the church to speak truth to power, liberate the oppressed, care for the poor and comfort the afflicted. As such, every one of us is called to do social justice.

As people of Resurrection, “We believe in the power of peace.” And we will work for nonviolent solutions to local, national, and international problems.

As people of Resurrection, “We believe we are a people of possibility.” In the UCC, members, congregations and structures have the breathing room to explore and to hear ... for after all, we believe, “God is still speaking,”

So, as you see, we have lots of beliefs at First Congregational Church in the United Church of Christ. And all our beliefs begin in the clear and simple belief in the Risen Christ – however we choose to express that belief!

As you see, there is a lot of Resurrection going on!

Having spoken of our beliefs as Resurrection People in the UCC, I must add - belief is never a simple thing.

William Cantwell Smith wrote an essay several years ago, “Believing: An Historical Perspective,” that asked us to consider the way in which the concept of belief has changed in recent centuries. “To believe” in Latin is *opinor* or *opinari*. You’ll recognize that as the root of the English word “opinion,” which was not typically a religious word. Instead, Latin used the word *credo*, which means, “I set my heart upon” or “I give my loyalty to” as the word to describe religious “believing.” In medieval English, the concept of *credo* was translated as “to believe,” meaning roughly the same thing as its German cousin *belieben*, “to prize, treasure, or hold dear,” which comes from the root word *Liebe*, “love.” So, in early English, “to believe” was to “belove” something or someone as an act of trust or loyalty. Belief was not an intellectual opinion. Belief was an act of the heart.

In this way, to say, “I believe in the Risen Christ” means “I hereby pledge to Christ and give God my heart and soul. I choose to be loyal to God.” “I believe God in Christ.” With this said, we move away from cognitive speculation and offer our hearts to God.”

So our hearts claim God and then we trust in faith that God will take care of bringing our heads along, too. For all of the Thinkers in the crowd, this is not so comfortable. I count myself among you. But, today, beloved ones – believe and BE-LOVE in the Risen Christ.

When you follow your heart to resurrection joy, you will experience resurrection as real. Resurrection is very real.

I have seen resurrection too often not to believe in it! This last year alone, I have witnessed Teresa Polo, Sharon Walquist, Jane Weddle, Karen Mazingo, Gracie Glaros and Rebekah Salzer rise from the ashes near death and through the power of our Healing God - rekindle, reknit and regather themselves to live! They embody resurrection in real life! Their experiences are heart-opening and life-changing. But, I have also seen other members and friends of First rise from the ashes of homelessness, unemployment, underemployment, intense loss; pain and suffering and rise to new life. I have witnessed resurrection in this body when it reknits, rekindles and regathers each week on the Sabbath day to worship and praise God in Christ.

Believe beloved ones! We are a people of Resurrection who follow a Resurrected Savior. On this the greatest Sabbath Day of our Faith, may you find rest for your souls in Him.

Christ is Risen! He is Risen Indeed! Alleluia! Amen.

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