

A sermon delivered by the Rev. Dr. Janine Wilson, associate minister at the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Lent III, February 28, 2010, dedicated with joy and thanksgiving to God for the Rev. Dr. David C. Hester and the Rev. Matthew A. Wilson, who make “the redemptive ministry of Jesus Christ in the world” a little more visible every day.

“An Exciting Faith Creates a Just Community”

Luke 13:31-35

**(Part III of VIII in sermon series
“An Exciting Faith”)**

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in Thy sight O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Did you watch any of the Olympics these past two weeks? One by one, the athletes, families and fans gathered under the dome in Canada. Overnight the excitement of opening exercises turned into out-going action on ice rinks, ski slopes, and cross country events. The finely honed athleticism displayed courage, hope and honor for countries and participants. Was there a favorite sport at your house?

Did you watch any of the snowboarders? They would take off from high above the “half-pipe.” If you didn’t see it, it looks a little bit like a giant soup can cut in half lengthwise and implanted into the snow. One of the most amazing parts of snowboarding is watching the transfer of energy as it moves from potential to kinetic. Do you

remember the lesson from your high school science class on the relationship between energy and work? For snowboarders it plays out something like this:

Snowboarding superstar and defending champion Shaun White, already attached to his board, would hobble into position, as if he were kin to a penguin. You could almost see his potential energy building up inside him – adrenalin mixed with talent just seconds away from being released. Gently he began his sideways slip into start position and waited . . . again. Suddenly, he pointed his board down the slope, and when he got to the top of the left side of the half-pipe, he would turn again and fly down toward the bottom, picking up speed as he went.

As he went down, his potential energy decreased while his kinetic energy increased. Down and then up to the other side, always reaching for his goal to “get air” (alias fly up and defy gravity for a few seconds). Left and right, back and forth, up and down the pipe – his potential energy was lost while his kinetic energy thrust him up into the sky. From the so-called “simple moves” to the amazing Double McTwist 1260 – Shaun’s once invisible inner force became the amazing visible motion – all the way to a gold medal.

Who wouldn’t want to be a Shawn White after seeing that? Seeing them fly back and forth and do their amazing tricks offers all of us as Christians a lesson I’d never thought about before. It stems from this question: What kind of potential energy has God placed inside of you and me?

Most of us rarely think about our spiritual energy this way, but consider where we are right now. This morning we gathered to worship God. We greeted a few people and then sat down. Our potential for worshipful work was just beginning. The choir helped us to focus our energy on the mercy of God. It encouraged us to confess and seek forgiveness and strength. When the hymn came, our potential energy turned into kinetic energy as we sang or spoke, stood or prayed. We went into immediate action. With joy we were set free to proclaim our faith.

Potential or inward energy, changes back and forth into kinetic or outward energy all through worship. When you pray, sing, and listen to the sermon for example, do you expect something to happen?

My best guess is that you do. If you did not, why not just stay at home in bed and practice the ultimate form of potential energy – sleeping. No, we anticipated something would happen to our in worship. Have you ever been unexpectedly drawn to putting yourself out there “on the line?” All the sudden, you just felt like singing – or cheering – or speaking your mind.

When the feeling overcomes us here, in this house of God, we become vulnerable – but unlike vulnerability in the world, in here there is no fear to block us. We receive and give; give and receive. For a few minutes in life, we feel safe. In times like this we can almost imagine ourselves only a few weeks down the road shouting out, “Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!,” (Mt 21.9) as Jesus rides into town, or up the aisle of the church on the back of the little brown burro.

Inside a healthy church we strive to make such vulnerability feel safe, but that doesn’t happen all the time. Vulnerability can also cause us to feel like the frightened chicks of which Jesus speaks this day. We can be the ones who choose not to be comforted, or the ones who feel threatened by false authority and illusory security. Spiritual excitement, like snowboarding the half-pipe has two sides: it is both exhilarating and terrifying. But Jesus tells us not to be afraid of the bullies and the naysayers. In other words, he says quite plainly, “Don’t worry about that old fox, Herod.”

It’s possible that when Jesus called Herod a fox, he meant something a little different than we do today. In the early rabbinic writings, a fox was not always a stealthy predator; sometimes it was more of an insignificant weasel. Jesus may also have thought of the animal like Ezekiel did 13:4; where the prophet used the term ‘fox’ to label false prophets, those who are interested only in their own interests.

Whatever his intention, someone had told Herod that John the Baptist had been raised from the dead. To Herod’s mind, this must have seemed to be quite a trick or quite a threat, especially since John had announced the importance of Jesus to the world. Was Jesus going to be a political rival? Was he a new king of the Jews? If he was, then he needed to be eliminated, and the sooner the better. So two things happen: First, Herod lets it be known that he wants to

kill Jesus, and second, the Pharisees decide they need to go and tell the man from Nazareth what's up.

Are you surprised that the Pharisees are standing on Jesus side here? They must believe in the old adage that the enemy of my enemy is my friend. They have no love lost for Jesus, but they warn him of Herod's threat because they believe that Herod can really do them harm as well. Jesus doesn't share their view. Still, Jesus sees Herod as nothing but an old fox, an ineffectual leader who can only posture but cannot really make good on his threat.

Eugene Petersen translates Jesus' reply to the Pharisees in verse 35 this way: "Tell that fox that I've no time for him right now. Today and tomorrow I'm busy clearing out the demons and healing the sick; the third day I'm wrapping things up. Besides, it's not proper for a prophet to come to a bad end outside Jerusalem." (Luke 13:35, *The Message*)

Jesus stood and did his work knowing that it was a place and a people, not a person that would be his ultimate obstacle. Jesus knew that Jerusalem was where the prophets were killed. It did not matter who sat in the tower, it was the people in the streets that would ultimately seal his fate. And yet, his goals remained clear and strong. He was going to go to Jerusalem to preach this simple message by word and by act: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind." (Mt 22.37) – and spend your days engaged in actions of compassion. Don't worry about the fox, and don't run away. By so doing, our Lord knew that he was not just merely protecting the chicks but he was gathering them together to make them bigger and stronger.

My family and I live in a small neighborhood in Delaware that has a pond in the center. (It has other uses, but we only think of it as our pond.) I look forward to spring when the new ducklings arrive. Three years ago, I saw the most remarkable thing – one tiny little fuzz ball of a duckling was straggling behind the mother (you might say he had far more potential energy than kinetic). When he looked up and realized it, he literally ran across the top of the water! I laughed and hollered out loud, "Hey, only Jesus is supposed to be able to do that!" Once reunited with the clan, I saw that when they were all gathered, instead of eight little ducklings and one mother, from a distance they

had become one large duck. I've never lived with chicks and hens, but my guess is that the same thing happens. Staying together generates both wisdom and size – especially when reflected to the eyes of a prowling predator.

While we are called together to worship, learn and heal, as exciting as it is to see our shared energy and faith in the form of gathering new members and commissioning new leaders, it is also true that **every one of** us is entrusted to works of compassion and justice. Our enthusiasm is a gift of God, not meant to simply be potential, but realized.

When we look out and see the hungry, homeless and enslaved, we also see the need for food and shelter and justice. Like Jesus walking the countryside, we too must take our responsibility to God's will seriously. We can resist God, we can sit it out for awhile, but we have to wonder what a world of compassion and justice would look like. We can choose to take care of ourselves over all others and wait to see what happens. Or we can take the lead, feel the burn and go out and change the world.

Imagine the potential of a church that decided that the world would not fall apart if women were allowed to engage in serious study and one day be ordained. Over 150 years ago, a 28-year-old graduate of Oberlin College stood before a small Congregational church in upstate New York and together, they made it happen. Imagine the potential of a church that believes God's evolving creation is extravagantly interrelated. In 2008, the UCC Environmental and Energy Task Force began to do work based on just that premise. ⁱ Imagine the potential of a church that sets captives free – in 1839, off the coast of Sierra Leone, New England Congregationalists made sure that freedom came to 49 men and four children. ⁱⁱ Imagine the potential of a church that trusts the notion that God welcomes **everyone** into the house of glory, regardless of disabilities, race, to be open and affirming and then goes out and you made it happen!

The students in my doctoral program came together from Kentucky, Ohio, Oklahoma, Vermont and Sierra Leone. On the first day of class we were asked: "Why are you here?" Most of us gave an awkward smile. We said things like, to be a better counselor; to learn more about leading the church in faithful mission; to get a degree;

and everyone chuckled a little. It went on like that around the table until it was Peter's turn. Peter told us that his wife and children were back in Sierra Leone. He was working every night at the slaughter house so he could send them money. We began to notice he looked tired. His country was at war, but so far his family was safe. And then came the most startling part of his story. With visible excitement he told us he was there because he wanted to learn to heal people, just like the pastors where he came from. We were silent.

The Christ is ministering to the religious, economic, political and social dilemmas of the world for all of us to see this day and every day. Imagine you and I recommitting our life and accompanying him to (our) Jerusalems, with steadfastness as strong as Peter, and without fear.

Let us pray, God, we give you thanks for our Savior Jesus Christ, from whom we draw our strength and courage this day and all days, and in whose name we pray. Amen.

ⁱ Environmental Justice - Eco-Justice, <http://www.ucc.org/earthcare>,(2008).

ⁱⁱ Joanne Griffith Domingue, <http://www.ucc.org/ucnews/febmar08/new-jersey-pastor-sails.html>,(Feb2008)