

August 16, 2020

'YES!!!'

Rev. Jane Courtright

(Isaiah 43:18-21, 2 Corinthians 1:18-22, Matthew 9:1-8)

"I say to YOU, STAND UP! Pick up your mat and go!"

At Capernaum, where Jesus is 'at home,' a group of people bring their sick friend to Jesus. Many of us know this faith healing story from Sunday School classes. We loved this story of a man who was physically challenged, whose friends wanted to help him SO MUCH that they were willing to cut a hole in the roof where Jesus was staying!

And maybe that's where this sort of story ought to stay, in childhood, in that simple, naïve time of life...BEFORE we learned to ask questions like: HOW & WHAT'S THE POINT? Because sometimes, when we become adults, we tend to 'demystify' life! So that, what once seemed full of mystery and wondrous things, now seems flat and mostly explainable; and with definite categories like the impossible and the possible.

This Gospel reading comes from a different world! But don't make the mistake of thinking that that world was simply naïve or primitive or pre-scientific; and that WE have grown out of that world because WE know more and are a more sophisticated people. No: the world of Matthew's day was a world in which people had faith! Not just faith that people could be healed, but faith that God intended things to be better, faith that God heard, cared and acted!

I wonder if our problem today is not so much that we don't believe that people can be healed, as it is that we don't have the faith that there could be more good afoot in the world - other than the good that WE do or manage or think up? What we dare to expect says a lot about what we believe about God!

The physically challenged man's friends in today's gospel had faith. They believe that God had more in mind for their friend! In the gospel of Mark's telling of this story, Jesus finds their faith to be amazing! I would say that their imagination was amazing! And maybe that's a good definition of faith: 'The Spirit works in and among us, working wonders, and we say, "We have never seen anything like this!"

Usually, you and I try to make sense of the world based on what we've experienced in the past. We assign ourselves to the boundaries of our situation, whatever it is, because we can't really imagine anything other than our situation. Somehow, we lack the imagination to see ourselves beyond the boundaries of the

past or present: beyond, in a new world, a new thing, to see ourselves in a situation perhaps not of our own creation!

To expect better from life. To yearn for more!
To reach out and in to God.
And THEN to act with the power of the Holy Spirit.
NOW THAT'S FAITH!
Faith, the ability to imagine something more.

A woman was laid very low in midlife. She became paralyzed from her waist down and was now living her life in a wheelchair. By most people's standards, she was at the end! "We've done all that medical science can do," the doctor told her. "There's nothing else to be done." Fortunately, this woman did not agree! Her response was, "I wonder what God has in store for me now. Now that I can't use my legs, I wonder what it is that God wants me to use?"

Finally, she took a beginning computer class. Eventually, she began a business designing web pages for not-for-profit organizations. She began her business as a way of helping others, but in time she became very successful. Her business became quite profitable, and she was able to support herself in comfort. This story reminds me of the story of 'Superman' Christopher Reeves!

Many said it was a miracle. Some said that, while she never got a miracle of healing, she was given a true miracle! What do YOU say? I think she did get a miracle. A miracle called inspired imagination. A miracle of faith!

Several years ago, while I was a pastor at the United Church of Byron, Illinois, a young woman in that church went into childbirth prematurely. She gave birth to a little girl who was labeled a 'preemie.' I went to visit this woman and her little 'preemie' in the hospital. I remember the first time I saw this little girl named Lauren (and I do mean LITTLE – she weighed barely 2 ½ lbs.!) I looked at her and I prayed for her and her family.

But I didn't really believe that Lauren would make it. After all, I had seen other Preemies not make it, Preemies who weighed more than Lauren. And most of the Preemies I had known later experienced severe physical or cognitive problems. Also, in the back of my mind was Lauren's big sister, and some other challenges that her parents were experiencing. I have to confess that a part of me believed that not even God would will this situation on this family!

Thank God, that despite my lack of being able to see beyond my past experiences with Preemies and despite my lack of imagination in seeing beyond

this family's problems, Lauren thrived and so did her family. Two years later, the only challenges Lauren had from her Preemie days were a pair of very cute blue eyeglasses and a petite body! As Lauren toddles around the church, every time I heard her say, "Pastor Jane this and Pastor Jane that..." I also heard God telling me, "I was about to do a new thing – did you not perceive it?!"

This First Congregational UCC in Eagle River, Wi. has experienced quite a lot over the last few years. I won't go back too far in your history – there's just not enough room in one sermon! Let's begin with Jeff Wartgow, who served as your pastor for 15 years! Phil Garrison followed, then Pastor Pat Tucker served with him as co-pastor and teacher. Following Pastor Phil's departure, Pastor Pat served as your full-time minister from 2003-2011.

Next to serve as full-time pastor was Mary Anne Biggs, from 2012-2019. Dale Bishop then served as Interim Minister, and then little than a year ago, I was called to be your pastor! A wonderfully diverse group of ministers, along with many Interim Ministers and church staff! During those years, you also burned a mortgage, adopted the concept of 'Safe Sanctuary,' renovated the church sanctuary, kitchen and Fellowship Hall (ROSE.) FLOCK, Befriender's, Sanctuary Arts Group, and so many other events livened up the church! Who could have imagined such things happening!

During these years, you have shared even more with one another about your faith and life stories. You have shared about your belief in God, what your faith has meant to your life, your reasons for attending this church and how your church family impacts your life. During this time and others, relationships deepened. Who could have imagined such things happening?!!

You have together experienced shattering events in our nation and world, including school shootings, rumors of war, Police brutality toward people of color, and now the (for us) unprecedented worldwide Coronavirus. Who could have imagined these things happening?! And these are just some of the things you have experienced together over the years. They just begin to touch the edge of the iceberg, so to speak. And always, as time goes on, the reality is definitely outside the boundaries of church as known and experienced in the past. God's reality is so much more than imagined!

I know that very often, the secular world thinks of us Christians as those with limited vision, those whose brains are constrained by their religious traditions. But today's gospel suggests otherwise! It suggests that Christians are those who have their minds blown, expanded by the accounts of this Jesus who shatters our ideas of what can and cannot be, this Jesus who is always turning

things upside down, and with the power of God is in the business of transformation! This Jesus who still challenges our concepts of what is status quo.

So, what lies ahead in the future for this First Congregational United Church of Christ? Well, it depends. Take a look at your wildest dreams for this church and live toward those dreams. Keep your faith roots, but also take some risks, don't be afraid to stretch the boundaries of your past experiences. And then, be prepared for more wondrous things to 'spring forth,' things which are beyond your wildest dreams!

Take up your mats and go. Say **"YES!!"** to God and to a future only bounded by your faith, your imagination, even as God says **"YES!!"** to you! Then, may you continue to be amazed and glorify God, and say, "We have never seen anything like ***this!***"

Amen.