

JEREMIAH 1:4-10 or ISAIAH 58:9b-14

PSALM 71:1-6 or PSALM 103:1-8

HEBREWS 12:18-29

LUKE 13:10-17

Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost; Twenty-First Sunday in Ordinary Time

August 21, 2022; Year C

Expending Energy!

Crudit  or veggie tray? Yes, believe it or not the difference between these two exactly alike vegetable snacks forms the basis of much of our homiletical journey this morning! Hold the ranch! Simple or complex, complex versus simple? Life, in all its myriad multifaceted experiences, in each instance determined by specific situations. The key is knowing when, where, and how! We have all heard it said that cutting corners, taking short cuts, is rarely a good thing, especially when building an edifice or when lives or at stake. I wanted to provide an excellent illustration of this familiar phenomenon for this sermon introduction, but nothing came to mind. So, we will have to conjure up from our own memory and recall specific times and situations when we experienced some kind of corner cutting, perhaps even having to intervene and put a stop to such sloppy short shrift preparation and implementation. In the south no doubt because of the “bubba gene” we take these operations to an art form! Even worse perhaps, at least on occasion, we have been guilty of such pedestrian processes and protocols, hoping against hope that no one would find out about it. Let’s face it, we have all done it! Circumstances or situations sometimes demand it! Only we know! It is our not-so-dirty little secret and ours alone to keep!

In many places there have been a host of inappropriate, slang, yes, racist, descriptions, all derivatives of “jury rigging,” the practice of performing a temporary fix or building a makeshift implement, to do that which is most convenient or expedient. The term is derived from things having to do with a ship. Now, my father was a sailor in World War II, a Pearl Harbor Survivor, in fact. And it is my guess that he learned the fine art of “jury rigging” in the great war, a practice he honed to an art form and brought home back to the states. Come to think of it, my mother also possessed the gift of this oddly twisted gene! Sometimes my dad’s epic feats would become the absolute most horrendous forms of embarrassment to me, the finished product looking most aesthetically unsightly, a creation calling for the most obtrusive amount of wiring, screws or nails, and of course duct tape, lots of duct tape, that adaptable, multipurpose problem solver that now even comes in a host of vibrant colors to vainly attempt to make this sticky stuff blend into the pressing

matter at hand. Yes, you can now match it to the project at hand! Good luck with that! I promise in this sermon I have cut no corners to deliver today's message!

I bring these vivid images to mind this morning because as is often the case, as I perused the lections prepared for this given Sunday, the Witness from the Gospels in Luke has directly led me to ponder these ideas! In proposing my sometimes-strange homiletical pursuits, this enjoyable habit is always the foundational method to my madness! As a hard and fast discipline, I preach without fail from the lectionary, bound to its content no matter how I perceive it, whether dull or boring, engaging or exciting. This good practice keeps me from speaking from the voluminous vacuum or vacuous volume, avoiding all the stuff that is usually floating around in my somewhat twisted mind! **In Luke's recollections today we read a typical story about Jesus, the rabbi found waxing eloquent, teaching in a synagogue as was his custom, or so it seems. As is often the case he encounters and engages someone living with an infirmity, the kind of illness that surely had a beginning point but clearly had no foreseeable end in sight, no cure in the offing. This poor soul had carried this affliction for eighteen long, miserable, years, no relief in sight, no healing on her horizon. She was obviously a person of faith, a child of Israel, faithfully attending synagogue, minding all the requisite duties, yes, doing the right things, but, as we all painfully know and have experienced in our lives, faithfulness never guarantees a positive outcome, a satisfactory conclusion, no means to a miraculous end, despite what the purveyors of pablum on the religious comedy channels promise as they hawk their wares and fleece their flock.**

In Jesus' day, illnesses, along with other calamities such as bad weather or tragic, serendipitous happenstances, all of which we tend to randomly and routinely categorize as accidents or the fortune of nature, were usually attributed to demonic forces, the wiles of the devil, the sordid sorceries having their spawn in Satan, the source of all things evil or wicked. This easy scapegoat was a convenient, pre-scientific, perversely comforting way of explaining the unexplainable, describing the indescribable, rationalizing the irrational. It made sense to ancient peoples whose finite understandings were more than limited based on the narrowest of their simpleton world views. The ancients did the best they could do with what they had. They believed as best they could with the paltry information at their disposal, the knowledge in their possession. Yes, let's acknowledge that much of their faith was based on fantasy and not fact, misinformation that comes with being a card-carrying member of the flat earth society as ancient peoples. What else could they do? It was what it was! Unfortunately, it still is for some, even for many!

In many of the healing instances in the Gospels, we read where an individual approaches Jesus and tells him of his or her specific need. We see that scenario repeated over and

over and over again! My hunch is that Jesus wanted to make a specific point about Sabbath on this particular Sabbath day, and the fact that it was the Sabbath contained the very salient point he wanted to make! Sometimes, the best preaching is devoid of words! In the immortal words attributed to Saint Francis of Assisi, "Preach the Gospel at all times, and if necessary, use words!" Jesus saw this child of God, this walking and talking image of the Divine, and though not always, not every time, but as was usually his *modus operandi*, in this case the teacher immediately took pity and had compassion for this wounded soul. As one writer notes, you cannot fix or repair a problem until you "recognize that it's broken!" Jesus just seemed to have a way of seeing and hearing that other individuals simply did not! He possessed what we would call a certain kind of aura, a certain something, an unknown quantity! The gifted rabbi did not ask her any questions, inquire about her faith, demanding any pedigree showing her worthiness for God's lovingly gracious attention. Unlike other biblical healing texts, Jesus did not require her to perform an action, to go and do something. NO! Jesus saw her and called to her, declaring for all to hear on this Sabbath day, "Woman"—no doubt clearly affirming her gender—"you are set free from your ailment!" Big no, no! This was a no-fly zone! Off limits! Jesus then proceeded to lay hands upon her with that most caring of touch, and her healing was manifest in a nanosecond, in the twinkling of an eye. The Gospel writer declares for perpetuity, "When he laid his hands on her, immediately she stood up straight and began praising God!" And everyone lived happily ever after! NOT!

No, we have rules and regulations! Without fail we strictly follow processes and protocols, procedures, guidelines! No exceptions! We go by the book, and, oh my, what a thick book it is! We have a manual on ministry that tells us what we can do, how we can do it, when and where we can do it! Don't rock the boat! Stand up, sit down, keep law and order, honor tradition by obeying and observing completely and absolutely, then, and only then, will all be well. Well, that is not exactly how Jesus rocked and rolled, not according to his inclusive thought processes! In fact, those theological rubrics did not and do not describe Jesus at all! Rules were made to be broken! Some steps just ought to be skipped! The leader of the synagogue was indignant, insulted by this extravagant display of unmerited and unwarranted grace and mercy. The audacity! "The very idea" as my southern mother used to say when her genteel sensibilities were challenged. Above all else, it was a matter that mattered greatly to this annoying micro-nitpicky spiritual gatekeeper who was obsessed with the fact that despite the urgency, that this need just happened to be erroneously presented on the Sabbath. Her problems could wait! This was not just his main issue, but was his only concern, his only priority. We have a problem, a failure to communicate! Jesus, you are disrespectful, just plain wrong! You know better! You know the law! No, "there are six days on which work ought to be done! Come on those days and be cured and not on the Sabbath day!" So, let me get this

straight, let me see if I understand correctly, would not want to get this wrong, trying to be fair here, curing someone of their disease, doing for others, being neighborly, a neighbor to those in need, being courteous, kind and considerate, sensitive to the concerns of another human being and all that goes with that intimate goodness, all that is equated with that worthy aspiration, was all succinctly, but clearly not suddenly, reduced to, work, to work product, an occupational transaction, a perfunctory job that gets a job done. Wow! And just, “just” being the operative word, just where is the humanity in any of that? Elsewhere in a different context we read object lesson number two where Jesus raises the all-important issue, this time about an incident in which the disciples were picking grain on this supposed day of peace, “The Sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the Sabbath!” (Mark 2:27) He then added for good measure, “so the Son of Man is lord even of the Sabbath!” So there! Take that! Good grief, what a blowhard! Somebody always got to poop the party! In our initial story, object lesson number one, imagine the joy everyone must have been experiencing on that day, yes, that Sabbath day, in that moment. Sheer and utter glee! **A child of God, a woman, yes, a representative of the divine image, has been made whole, has been healed, cured from this deplorable illness, an affliction, that has only served to diminish her full humanity. What within that sacred act is there not to rejoice, to give thanks and praise?**

And while he was on a roll and a rant, Jesus took the leader of the synagogue to task, reprimanding him in public, dressing him down right then and there on the spot, and calling anyone in the room that dared might stupidly agree with the man’s stubbornly based, audaciously and negatively infused ignorance, a hypocrite. “Does not each of you on the Sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger and lead it to water?” Good question! Fair question! And we all know who the donkey is in this text, if you get my drift! Jesus hoists them all, and in the words of Shakespeare, hanging them by their own petard! Yes, he hung them out to dry in front of God and everybody! Every animal, including the human ones, must eat and drink, Sabbath observations be damned! And then Jesus moved from the practical to preaching, as if the two can be separated, “And ought not this woman,” not a theoretical unnamed and unknown somebody, but a real, live, flesh and blood, human being, “a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen long years, be set free from this bondage on the Sabbath day,” right here and right now? In most circumstances and situations, people must trump processes, protocols, and procedures, all of them established to enhance our personhood, that is until they do not, until they become layered with all the stuff that turns them into the weightiest of excessive add-ons! The biblical writer tells us that when Jesus had finished rebuking the purveyors of piety, the naysayers of negativity, those pathetically pharisaical prophets of gloom and doom, who sought to suck the very life right out of the party, that “all his opponents were put to shame, and the entire crowd was rejoicing at all the wonderful

things being done by him!” And now we can affirm that once upon a time met happily ever after, everyone’s life changed that day refreshed and renewed, restored and resurrected all because of the healing of one! And it always begins with one, a very manageable number!

Sometimes life demands expediency, that we cast aside the multilayers of untold numbers of any of our human-made traditions, in whatever myriad forms they take, and cut to the chase, making decisions in the moment, many of which can be life-giving, life-affirming, yes, even life changing or saving! I often wonder how much energy we expend chasing after the things that really do not matter, that in the final analysis are as religious irrelevant as is so much of our inane navel-gazing that masquerades as religious reflections, as what can be nothing more than mind numbing spiritual introspection or contemplation, much of our rationality sometimes defensively used as a smokescreen, the convenience of smoke and mirrors, to deflect, defer, or deny, all manifest in a moment to avoid or ignore a pressing need, looking the other way while failing to address the priorities that matter, the most important tasks at hand. How often do we go out of our way to make things complicated, to complicate the simplest of solutions? Yes, on another Gospel occasion, object lesson number three in our trilogy, Jesus was dining in the home as a guest of a Pharisee of all people. Yes, look who’s coming to dinner! Jesus literally would eat with anyone who desired his company, a challenging contemporary trait we all should strive to learn as we seek to follow in his very large footsteps. In this story it was a man in need of Jesus’ magical, miraculous, abilities, a man with dropsy, now known as edema, a swelling of the lower extremities. Jesus, always willing to poke the bear, asks those gathered, “Is it lawful to cure people on the Sabbath, or not?” Simple question calling for a simple answer. Ah, but it is a trick, is it not? If the Pharisees answer “yes” then their entire theological house of cards that turned Sabbath keeping into the ultimate oppressive drudgery is exposed, shot to pieces, blown right out of the proverbial water, all the while exposing their hypocrisy, allowing their pompous status and authority to be called into question. If the answer is “no” then then the already compromised Pharisees will come across as cold, calculating, and narcissistically self-centered, which many of them clearly were. If they dared make this special day of the week, a day that should have been peaceful, restful, life-giving and affirming, a day of misery and fear, they had nowhere good to go! But the die had historically been cast regarding Sabbath-keeping, this day of rest long ridiculously reduced to a laundry list of bizarre examples of trespass along with what seemed to be an unending, unlimited volume of rules and regulations. But perhaps more importantly, the Pharisees’ piety transparently portrayed themselves to be detached and uncaring or caring more about the law than the individual. Guilty as charged! What a conundrum! There was no way out of this one! And so, they did the equivalent of a practice that has become all too very common and popular these days, they do an ancient form of taking the fifth. They remain stoically silent, putting the impetus back on Jesus, the one

they wish to lay blame! Silence can be a blatantly brilliant form of passive aggressiveness, a perfect passive aggressive tactic, allowing for an individual later a certain level of deniability. Ah, the sound of silence! Silence is a wonderful thing except when it is not, when it is strategically used as a weapon, a manipulative tool, an instrument allowing individuals and/or groups to politely pass when a demonstrative word, a clear witness, a transparent testimony, is demanded in whatever bellwether moment is occurring in real time in any given scenario or situation. So, after however long this awkward silence took place, Jesus healed the man and sent him on his merry way, with another form of Sabbath rebuke, “If one of you has a child or an ox that has fallen into a well—giving rise to the adage about ox falling into ditches, a near impossibility based on their ability to navigate terrain—will you not immediately,” who among you would not “pull it out on a Sabbath day!” The writer then says they could not answer, I would better suggest would dare not answer! Definitely not a “reply all!” I am sensing a recurring theme here!

Very soon our congregation is going to be asked to consider a visioning statement crafted by Steve Burrill and carefully edited by our Church Council which began the long process of allowing the document to breathe and intentionally and organically become a group project. The next phase will be for each and every one of you as members of this local missional church known as First Congregational United Church of Christ is to take this reading material home, read it carefully, and be prepared to give your input at three different listening sessions or Town Hall gatherings as we seek your much-needed, all-important feedback. Dates and times will be announced soon. Our goal is for this draft to become a mantra driving the agenda and fueling the engine of the First Congregational United Church of Christ, Eagle River, Wisconsin. One of the challenges we face as we move into what we hope and pray will be a bright future together is that we will find balance between theory and practice, that we will find our collective equilibrium between the complex ecclesiological and theological issues that can never be avoided or ignored, juxtaposed against streamlined solutions that will excite and energize, embolden and empower us to get to where God wants us to be and where we too long to find ourselves. The answers are always found somewhere between the polarities of our thoughts and our actions. Our corporate energy must be expended well, expediency not to be equated in any way whatsoever with an easy way out or the path of least resistance, the least common denominator, but our gift and guide when invoked appropriately. We must think big, way outside the box, color far beyond the lines! Go big or go home! In other words, whenever and wherever we can match Jesus’ ideal of getting the job done in the best way possible, with the least amount of baggage, those are the paths, the forks in the road we must take. His way must inform and impact every decision we make, agonizing and praying as we go! As I like to say, we will need a lot of luggage, not baggage, for our congregational journey together because we are all in this together.

As I read the Gospels, one of my takeaways, a conclusion I think is beyond all doubt, is that Jesus was a deeply intuitive person, able to read the proverbial tea leaves in any a given setting, no matter the context in which he found himself. No, this is not about the theories promoting his divinity, the mythology describing his divine characteristics, because, as we all know full well, those attributes are up for debate and scholars have never been able to reach even close to a unanimous consensus on the subject, not in the least been able to agree on this major conundrum, a conflict that has challenged the Church for centuries. No, there was obviously something unique about Jesus' person as a living, breathing, in other words, real, historical figure, his ability to relate to any and every human being devoid of any, even a modicum of prejudice, oh well, except for that one time with the Canaanite or Syrophenician woman, everybody I guess lapses on occasion and deserves and gets a forgiving pass. There was an aura in Jesus' persona when it came to his seeming oneness with God, the one he intimately, personally, called his father, Abba, his brilliance and innately profound, provocative, knowledge, all of which evidently flowed with the greatest of ease. All these grand and glorious attributes combined made for one incredible human being exuding deepest depth and broadest breadth. History has only managed to produce a few individuals who have come close to matching the traits he possessed that are indeed so special, so uniquely suited, that those who followed dared called him perfect and sinless, titles he would have shunned, would have never embraced for himself under any circumstances in the least. In fact, part of the beauty of the personhood of the man from Nazareth was his authentic, genuine, humility, that he never got hooked and his ego never got in his way nor ever needed stroking. Ironically, he shunned the spotlight, Jesus always deflecting, deferring, and yes, denying, every praiseworthy title his devotees, including a host of sycophants, wanted to heap upon him, yes, especially coronating him as Christ, as Messiah! He was anointed by God and no one else's opinion mattered! Flattery and praise got his disciples and other followers nowhere, because to use an overused adage, Jesus was clearly his own man, his own person, never yielding to the hype but always leaning into the hope.

I say these things because in as much as humanly possible, we need to find ways to tap into at least some degree, to approximate Jesus' level, to implement Jesus' kind of communication, interaction, cooperation, and, of course, proper action. In other words, in all our decision making we need to emulate Jesus in every pivotal choice we make as we navigate and negotiate our present into the future. Our goal is to imitate in every way possible, in every manifestation imaginable, the way and ways of Jesus, the man from Nazareth. Imitation is not only the best but is the only form of flattery that gets us anywhere, that honors the legacy of Jesus' life, the person of history, making a world of difference demanded by any among us who would dare to risk choosing to follow his patterns, his paradigm, taking up his cross that inevitably becomes our own in the

crucible of life's critical timing and experiences. The priestly member of the Brethren of the Common Life, in his pursuit of spiritual perfection, Thomas à Kempis, writing on the imitation of Christ begins his suggestive musings by quoting from the Gospel of John (8:12) which says "He who follows me, walks not in darkness!" This most intuitive writer then declares, "By these words of Christ we are advised to imitate his life and habits, if we wish to be truly enlightened and free from all blindness of heart. Let our chief effort, therefore, be to study the life of Jesus Christ. The teaching of Christ is more excellent than all the advice of the saints—I would say those then and all of us now—and he (or she) who has his spirit will find in it a hidden strength. Now, there are many who hear the Gospel often but care little for it because they have not the spirit of Christ." They are now transparent! We see them in their white Christian nationalistic allegiance! "Yet whoever wishes to understand fully the words of Christ must try to pattern his whole life on that of Christ." I would offer that this is a formula for success if, and that is a very big "if" indeed, if we can somehow capture and yes, imitate that image, wistfully embrace Jesus' foundational structure for living. Jesus was a mentor and model, not some kind of robotical totem or a mere shaman, some kind of detached, ethereal, guru, all above and beyond our pay grade, a divine freak of nature masquerading as the very embodiment, the incarnation, of God who could never be copied, never be emulated in any way whatsoever, in any way imaginable because of the impossibility of copying those holy attributes. No, Jesus was flesh and blood, a real person who really could and can be followed, yes, an experiential reality! Sometimes we all need to learn how to practice spiritual triage and get to the heart of the matter, expediently doing that which is needed. Sometimes we all need a little KISS, that is "keep it simple stupid." And I for one am well aware that I often need that constant reminder! Life is complicated enough! Sometimes we need Jesus' common sense and intuitively proactive practices, all that social justice minded stuff designed to help get the world and all of us where God longs for us to be and where we should desire to be as well! Jesus was an amazing archetype for goodness and grace, his being and doing revealing all that is possible within and among human beings as they go about their doings, yes, a humanity, a human race reflecting the very machinations, the very substance, of the Divine, a perfect mirror, a doorway or window, into the very will of God! We can be, we can do, because Jesus was and because Jesus did! His goal is within our reach! His abilities reveal a gracious gift that keeps on giving, yes, even in the likes, the limitations and unlimited capacity inherently imprinted, stamped upon us all, imbued within each and every one of us as the crown of God's creation, glorious images all, reflecting in every way the Spirit of the Divine!

In the name of the One who creates, redeems, and sustains and wants us to get it done, even if it means taking a short cut on occasion. Amen and amen.