

St Paul United Church of Christ  
5312 Old Blue Rock Road  
Cincinnati, Ohio 45247  
Allen M. Fluent, Transitional Pastor  
**Order of Worship for Fifth Sunday after Epiphany**  
**February 7, 2021**

(As our congregation returns to holding worship in our building, we are conscious of the many people who will not be able to be physically present. Therefore, we will be continuing the practice of sending a worship bulletin to all who are on our mailing lists for email or hard copy. Those who will be worshipping from home and who have computer access will also be receiving a recorded version of the service that will be sent out by email on Sunday afternoon and also can be seen on our Facebook page. We welcome your participation in any way that is convenient for you, and we encourage you to share our worship service with any person you know who may appreciate receiving it. )

Morning Announcements and Prayer Requests

Prelude (recording begins)

Morning Praise: Isaiah 40:21-31

*Have you not known? Have you not heard?  
Has it not been told you from the beginning?  
Have you not understood from the foundations of the earth?  
**It is God who sits above the circle of the earth, and its inhabitants are like grasshoppers;  
who stretches out the heavens like a curtain, and spreads them like a tent to live in;  
who brings princes to naught, and makes the rulers of the earth as nothing.  
Scarcely are they planted, scarcely sown, scarcely has their stem taken root in the earth,  
when God blows upon them, and they wither, and the tempest carries them off like stubble.**  
To whom then will you compare me, or who is my equal? Says the Holy One.  
Lift up your eyes on high and see; who created these?  
The One who brings out their host and numbers them, calling them all by name;  
because God is great in strength, mighty in power, not one is missing.  
Why do you say..., "My way is hidden from the Lord, and my right is disregarded by my God"?  
Have you not known? Have you not heard?  
**The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth.  
God does not faint or grow weary; God's understanding is unsearchable.  
God gives power to the faint, and strengthens the powerless.  
Even youths will faint and be weary, and the young will fall exhausted;  
but those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.***

Hymn

"On Eagle's Wings"

#438

*You who dwell in the shelter of the Lord, who abide in God's shadow for life,  
Say to the Lord, "My refuge, my Rock in whom I trust."*

**Ref:** *And God will raise you up on eagle's wings,  
bear you on the breath of dawn,  
make you to shine like the sun and hold you in the palm of God's hand.*

*The snare of the fowler will never capture you, and famine will bring you no fear,  
under God's wings your refuge, God's faithfulness your shield. Ref.*

*You shall not fear the terror of the night, nor the arrow that flies by day;  
though thousands fall about you, near you it shall not come. Ref.*

### Opening Prayer

**God, bear us up on eagle's wings. In times of weakness, lend us your strength; in times of uncertainty give us direction; in times of fear encourage us; and in times of sorrow bring hope into our lives. Grant healing to our worried souls, that we may rise and serve you in faithfulness all our days. Amen.**

### Epistle Lesson

1 Corinthians 9:16-23

*If I proclaim the gospel, this gives me no ground for boasting, for an obligation is laid on me, and woe to me if I do not proclaim the gospel! For if I do this of my own will, I have a reward; but if not of my own will, I am entrusted with a commission. What then is my reward? Just this: that in my proclamation I may make the gospel free of charge, so as not to make full use of my rights in the gospel.*

*For though I am free with respect to all, I have made myself a slave to all, so that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law) so that I might win those outside the law. To the weak I became weak, so that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, so that I may share in its blessings.*

### Gospel Lesson:

Mark 1:29-39

As we continue with the story about Jesus' ministry in Galilee, we see in the passage for today that there are three parts to Jesus' ministry – to bring healing, to drive out demons, and to proclaim the message of the Gospel.

*As soon as they left the synagogue, they entered the house of Simon and Andrew, with James and John. Now Simon's mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they told him about her at once. He came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them.*

*That evening, at sunset, they brought to him all who were sick or possessed with demons. And the whole city was gathered around the door. And he cured many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons; and he would not permit the demons to speak, because they knew him.*

*In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed. And Simon and his companions hunted for him. When they found him, they said to him, "Everyone is searching for you." He answered, "Let us go on to the neighboring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do." And he went throughout Galilee proclaiming the message in their synagogues and casting out demons.*

Sermon:

My wife Nora always sneers when she hears the first part of our Gospel story for today. She says there's an ulterior motive for Jesus' healing of Simon's mother-in-law. He doesn't seem to really care about the woman at all, she says. He just wants her to get up and fix dinner for the twelve people he has brought into her house.

Nora is right about that, of course. That's exactly why Jesus heals the woman, and while that might strike a discordant note among us today, because it associates in our minds with patterns of male dominance and the expectation of women's being available to serve them, we should not miss the central point of this ancient story: Jesus heals people and drives out the demons from our lives as a necessary precondition of our being called into service of the gospel: You can't help anybody get well unless you are well yourself.

A central mark of spiritual health is the capacity for self-acceptance. "Love your neighbor as yourself," the most universal ethical principle among the world religions, just doesn't work unless you do in fact love yourself. Because of this, it is widely recognized that much bad practice in the art of caring for others results from practitioners who are incapable of self-love or self-acceptance. Actions taken because of feelings of guilt or shame, or to make up for a lack of recognition, just don't produce beneficial results. So before he did anything else, Jesus went to work healing his own community first.

When we talk about Christian health, of course, we're not talking about what a good doctor or a good therapist can do for us, though we should value and trust the treatments provided by those important disciplines. In Jesus' day, the limited scientific knowledge of people who engaged in healing professions probably contributed to some blurring of the line between physical wellbeing on the one hand and spiritual wholeness on the other. There is, to be sure, some relationship between the two. All of us can probably recount a time when we or someone we knew got better because they felt the support of a community of prayer. But being spiritually healthy and able to do good for others is also sometimes independent of physical health. There are those who, on their very death bed, have the capacity to calm our souls. I have been blessed to know such people. Spiritual wholeness is a healthfulness that is at the core of religious teachings. It is more central to our faith than the specifics of doctrine that we teach (though bad doctrine can sometimes become a barrier to healthy spirituality).

As we consider the way Jesus' ministry began, we might ask how it might apply to our own congregation as a community of ministry. I am specifically using the expression, "community of ministry," because it seems to me that is how the original followers of Jesus understood themselves. That's something people looking for a church to join sometimes forget to put on their shopping list, along with good music, an active youth group, entertaining sermons, and a pretty building. A Christian congregation ought primarily to be a group of people who are gathered for the work of ministry and mission. For us to accomplish this work, we need to be spiritually healthy. That should be the first priority for any congregation. Without spiritual health and wholeness, no matter what we do or how well-intentioned we are, we cannot accomplish the mission of Christ.

If we only read the story these first few verses in Mark's Gospel tell, we could be misled to believe that the spiritual wholeness advocated by the early church was something instantly implanted in people, but that is not so. The Gospel of Mark gives few details, but we know from other passages of Scripture, like the teachings of the Sermon on the Mount or the great founding story of the church in the Book of Acts, that the people of the early church found their source of spiritual peace in their certainty that God's love revealed in the Christ Spirit among them would never leave them. This Spirit became practice among them, so that there was no separation between devotion and action, as they engaged in a community practice of welcoming acceptance, shared resources, trustworthy faithfulness, and active, nonviolent resistance to anything that might bring their neighbors harm. The early church suffered much hostility and painful persecution from the Empire; but they persevered by living every day in a way that reminded each of them of the presence of God's love. And one thing more they did: they spread the message to communities outside their own.

Returning for a moment to the story in Mark's first chapter, remember how it said that crowds of people were gathering around for Jesus' healings. The excitement was contagious, as people throughout the region became aware of the gracious words and actions of this sage of Galilee. And at that very moment, Jesus surprised them all, most of all, perhaps, his own disciples. He went off to a lonely place to pray, and when they found him he said it was time to move on. "Let us go on to the neighboring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came to do." And he went throughout Galilee, proclaiming the message in their synagogues and casting out demons. The great, healing work inside the church, as good as it may feel, is not the Gospel's final goal, because the good news isn't a message given solely for us. It's a message for all the world to hear and to experience, by our voice together, and our hands, by the grace of God.

So Nora's interpretation was indeed right. Jesus didn't heal Simon's mother-in-law just as an act of kindness. He did it to give her the capacity to serve, and that's what she did. And when we're spiritually whole, so should we.

## Sacrament of Holy Communion

(Using whatever is available to you for the food and drink of the Communion Meal, we will bless the elements and receive the Sacrament together, remembering that Christ is present in our midst.)

Hymn

**"Sing a New Church", vss. 1,2,4 &5**

**#577**

***Summoned by the God who made us rich in our diversity,  
gathered in the name of Jesus, richer still in unity:***

***Ref: Let us bring the gifts that differ and, in splendid, varied ways,  
sing a new church into being, one in faith and love and praise.***

***Trust the goodness of creation; trust the Spirit strong within.  
Dare to dream the vision promised sprung from seed of what has been. Ref.***

***Bring the hopes of every nation; bring the art of every race.  
Weave a song of peace and justice; let it sound through time and space. Ref.***

***Draw together at one table all the human family;  
Shape a circle ever wider and a people ever free. Ref.***

Come, now, with whatever you have to bring to the table of God, a place of perfect sharing where none are without, because the life of Jesus is shared among us. Come away from the world with all its disputes, with all its sorrows and inequities. We will not forget to return to it with Christ's powers to heal, to drive out the demons and to bring the message of the righteous realm to those who live in need. But now we come to live for a moment in the Holiness of God's peace. In Christ, there is a new creation, and we ourselves have been made new. On the evening of his last meal with his disciples, our Lord took bread, and when he had given thanks he broke it, saying "Take and eat. This is my body which is given for you. In the same way, he took the cup, and said, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Take and drink. Do this in remembrance of me."

## Our Time of Prayer

Holy God, in the fellowship of your love, we receive these elements of food and drink, believing that you are present among us as we gather, whether in physical or cyber space. We believe we are your body, if your Spirit resides in our midst. And therefore we pray, Come, Holy Spirit. Heal us, and cast out all unworthy spirits, ideas and attitudes that lodge within us. Call us to ministry in your name, so that we, by your

mercy, may reach out with compassion and understanding to all those you love. Grant the gift of your healing to those among us who are sick, to those who are lonely, to those who grieve, to any who are filled with anger, remorse or sorrow, and to all who are struggling to find the ways of life and love in a troubled world. In the blessings of this hour, we give you thanks. For the joys that come each day, we give you thanks. For the hope that lives within us, we give you thanks. And for the peace that passes understanding, we praise and glorify your name.

As Jesus has taught us, so we pray:

### **Lord's Prayer**

**Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.  
Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.  
Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors,  
And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.  
For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.**

We give you thanks, most holy God, for this your sacrament of grace, for the wonder of your love and your fellowship with us to the end of time. We depart now in peace, confident in the gifts of your grace, eager to engage the world with the truths of your Gospel, rejoicing in hope and in the bonds of fellowship.

### **Benediction**

*Now may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all. Amen.*

### **Postlude**