

North Congregational UCC New Harford CT  
WORSHIP: 4th. Sunday after Epiphany  
January 31, 2021

FOR YOUR MEDITATION

“Over the years I have been convinced that the more important question is not who believes in God, but in whom does God believe. Rather than claim God for our side, it’s better to wonder whether we are on God’s side.” William Sloan Coffin

PRELUDE *A Mighty Fortress Is Our God* Johann Pachelbel (1653-1706)

INVITATION TO WORSHIP

We come together in any way that we can to testify to the power and light Jesus Christ brings to us as we pray, read God’s Word, embrace the Spirit of God in each of us. In this time of worship we will again see the way Jesus can bring healing to our troubled minds and see how Paul ministered to a community of faith he helped form and nourished. May the time we spend individually or together bring us to the point where we can create a community that draws more people toward God with us. (Immanuel)

HYMN OF GATHERING #181 (verses 1 & 3) in Glory to God Hymnal

“Silence! Frenzied, unclean spirit,” cried God’s healing, Holy One.  
“Cease your ranting! Flesh can’t bear it, flee the night before the sun.”  
At Christ’s voice the demons trembled, from its victim madly rushed,  
While the crowd that was assembled stood in wonder, stunned and hushed.

Silence, Lord, the unclean spirit, in our mind and in our heart.  
Speak your word that when we hear it all our demons shall depart.  
Clear our thought and calm our feeling, still the fractured, weary soul.  
By the power of your healing make us faithful, true and whole.

OPENING PRAYER

Holy Spirit of God, who prefers before all temples the upright heart and pure, instruct us in all truth. What is dark, illumine; what is low, raise and support; what is shallow, deepen, that every chapter in our lives may witness to your power and justify the ways of God to all people. In the name of Jesus, giver of all grace. Amen (John Milton 1608-1674 English Poet)

EPISTLE LESSON I Corinthians 8:1-9, 13 Page 208

Now concerning the food sacrificed to idols, we know all of us possess knowledge. Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up. Anyone who claims to know something does not yet have the

necessary knowledge; but anyone who loves God is known by God. Hence, as to eating of food offered to idols, we know that no idol in the world really exists, and that there is no God but one. Indeed, even though there may be many gods and many lords, yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist. It is not everyone, however, who has this knowledge. Since some have become so accustomed to idols until now, they still think of the food they eat as food offered to an idol; and their conscience, being weak is defiled. Food will not bring us close to God. We are no worse off if we do not eat and no better off if we do. But take care that this liberty of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak. ....Therefore, if food is a cause of their falling, I will never eat meat, so that I may not cause one of them to fall.

GOSPEL LESSON      Mark 1:21-28 Page 43

They went to Capernaum; and when the Sabbath came, Jesus entered the synagogue and taught. They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes. Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, and he cried out, "What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God." But Jesus rebuked him saying, "Be silent and come out of him!" And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying out with a loud voice, came out of him. They were amazed, and they kept on asking one another, "What is this? A new teaching, with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him." At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.

SERMON: Recipe For Building Community Pastor Art Yost

We are seven days away from the biggest (or next to biggest depending upon your interest) of the year so far. Up to this point-no argument- it was the takeover of The Capital Building and verifying the election of Joe Biden. So, what could possibly be bigger than that? SUPERBOWL next Sunday, February 7<sup>th</sup>. It'll be very different this year-with crowds limited to 22,000 in the stands (hopefully wearing masks?). America goes crazy over its sports. Lots of hype and costly ads-which to me are often more exciting than the game. This year it is the Kansas City Chiefs playing the Tampa Bay Buccaneers. The two quarterbacks are the furthest apart in age of any two quarterbacks starting in a SUPERBOWL game-Tom Brady (on a new team is oldest to start and Patrick Mahomes is 5<sup>th</sup> youngest. Patrick and Chiefs won last year's SUPERBOWL game. Tom is the present GOAT and if Patrick wins he'll be youngest GOAT. (GOAT means "greatest of all times")

OK- enough sports stuff. In today's scriptures we have, as the main characters two simultaneous GOATS- Jesus Christ and Paul. Jesus is claimed the "greatest of all" because he speaks with authority as the Gospel passage tells us. Paul is the greatest evangelist of all, having done more by spreading the good news of Jesus the Christ with the greatest number of books in the New Testament attributed to Paul. I'm sure the coaches and star quarterbacks have plans

for winning the game. In scripture we learn that Jesus and Paul had a game plan in mind also- recipes for building community.

Paul wrote letters to the church in Corinth, a church that he founded there during his travels bringing the good news of Jesus Christ to Corinth. (See Acts 18:1-11) Corinth was one of the most important cities in Greece. It was pretty cosmopolitan and in Paul's mind, a place that was pretty seedy like Times Square in New York before they got rid of all the X rated entertainment mixed in with great theater and restaurants. However, in this passage Paul is struggling with one of many problems the church faced as it dealt with conflicts. The conflict in this section was between those who fully comprehended the oneness of God and salvation through Jesus Christ- people who did not believe in gods and idols, and those who couldn't quite grasp Paul's teaching about Christ and limited their food intake to items not offered to an idol. Those knowledgeable were "lording it over" those who seemed less informed. So, Paul gives the dictum "Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up."

I remember a teaching I learned a long time ago and I think it still holds true- "a little knowledge is a dangerous thing." (Alexander Pope 1709) These days with all the information pipelines we have, knowledge changes quickly. We get facts and alternate facts. Many of us, just trying to survive right now, don't have the energy to try and make sense of all that is being said. Even those things we think we know as constant universal laws can change and challenge our perceptions. For example: Each of three people is holding a small block of pine wood. The first person release it and it falls to the ground. The second person releases it and it moves upwards. The third person releases the block and it remains in exactly the same place. This seems impossible-it goes against our understanding. The first seems logical but the other two-not so. The first person is standing on earth. The second person is standing under water. The third person is in an orbiting space capsule with zero gravity. Context is everything. With it, the most illogical becomes logical. In the debate above, the "strong, knowing Christians" were right. It didn't matter whether food was offered to idols because they "knew" idols didn't exist in their universe. Forcing the issue however was not going to "build up" the faith community in Corinth. So, Paul, though he knew he could eat meat dedicated to an "idol", would refrain from doing so in respect for those who yet haven't reached that level of faith or understanding. I was ordained in the United Methodist Church. The denomination had a strong stand against smoking and drinking and asked all members but certainly the clergy to take an abstinence vow. The year I was ordained (1967) they changed the wording in the Book of Discipline to the following: "Clergy will abstain from doing anything that might be detrimental to their ministry." The intent was to include new vices that were becoming prevalent in the late 60's, early 70's. I knowingly read it differently. I knew I enjoyed an occasional glass of wine with my evening meal and did so once or twice a week. Fortunately, I had no problem with addiction issues and did not use the alcohol for any reason other than enhancing a meal. However, I never drank with any church member. We served only grape juice with Holy Communion. We never allowed any form of liquor on church property. Luckily for me I wasn't a member of a group of Methodists known as Primitive Methodists who held on to abstinence from playing cards and dancing. (Footnote: I met my wife at a singles' dance). The point here is simply Paul's ethic called upon all Christians to use their hearts as a mode of knowledge. He wanted the faith community in

Corinth to practice love knowledge that builds up and not head knowledge that simply puffs up. Church historians will point out that, in this, Paul was not overly successful as church teachings in many communities still practice a stifling dogmatism. (Aside: Our Congress could use a little love knowledge rather than puff up knowledge)

Game plan number two brings up to the Gospel account from Mark. Jesus has developed a large gathering of followers. At this point his teaching of repentance with forgiveness and grace had resonated well with the people's need. His message had not yet been politicized by certain segments of the Scribes and Pharisees. His teaching is interrupted by a man with "an uncleaned spirit" later recognized as demon possession. There is no question that demons, the devil, personified evil was a belief at the time this was written. In all my 50 years of ministry I only had one situation when a mother called me frantically to say that someone had put a curse on her teenage daughter and she was threatening to jump off the roof of her house. In conversation with the mother on the phone, I found out that the mother believed the daughter was demonized and found that the daughter seemed to calm down when handed an eyeglass case that had a crucifix attached to it. Since the initial threat seemed to have lessened, I convinced the mother to call for medical assistance. Since the family were not church members, I do not remember any follow up. I do know clergy who have had multiple experiences with possession and I hold it as a possibility. Yet my experience has been that most cases have a mental health explanation and such phrases as "the devil made me do it" do not point to an external evil source. (Others would disagree) When Paul, in Romans, speaks about principalities and powers, he is pointing to an external force for evil. Remember, in the temptation account of Jesus in the wilderness, the Bible says he was tempted by Satan. However, in this story, Jesus' game plan is two steps: "Be Silent and come out." For me this is an attempt to quiet the mind of someone disturbed. In difficult times, when we find ourselves agitated, a good first step is always to quiet the mind. We seldom find quiet times in the course of a day. External noise, busyness of schedule, raised voices in frustration, screen time hours all break into a time for meditation, prayer and yes, even mindfulness. I have a client with whom I am a daily contact and every (yes every) time I call the TV blaring in the background. It is her constant companion. To engage her, every day I have to tell her to tune off or at least turn down the volume so we can talk. A great old hymn- "take time to be holy, speak oft with the Lord... take time to be holy, be calm in thy soul," shows us a good way to silence any demons, real or figuratively, in our body. Part two of Jesus' recipe for community is to say come out-break free, get rid of something. For an addict, it means letting go of the addiction and trust in love. For the driven business person, it means letting go of success at all costs and reconnect with focusing on the needs of others.

I always expected my churches I served to be a little inefficient. Other than myself as a paid professional, my staff were mostly volunteers, most programs ran with volunteers, some more skillful than others. However important the task at hand, I tried to never lose track of the need to keep them in common-unity. Of all the sermons I read while in seminary and all theology learned from reading people like Paul Tillich, one sermon always has stuck in my mind. The title is riveted there- "YOU ARE ACCEPTED!"

So Paul and Jesus have laid out a plan for us. I don't know which coach or quarterback will win the SUPERBOWL next Sunday but I have confidence the plan in today's scripture will see us through-you are a blessed community at North Church.

MUSICAL INTERLUDE            *Meditation Music*

PASTORAL PRAYER

Gracious God, since last we met virtually as a faith-filled congregation, we have had members who have needed your healing presence. From injuries suffered in a fall, to health issues that have resulted in hospitalizations, for members continuing their fight against cancer and other diseases, help them to know that your presence and love is available. We long for the time when we can gather in the sanctuary of North Church and see each other, appreciate its beauty, memories while praying, singing, listening and rejoicing together. Yet, we want to be safe not only for ourselves but for others for whom contact might bring on disease.

We pray for everyone in the health vocations who are truly ministering to the needs of their patients and their families. They represent in the healing and their caring the greatest example of selfless love and compassion. May we give them all our support as they truly minister to their patients. We continue to pray for the world ravaged by the pandemic and may the vaccines provided be a life changing event to restore hope not only in health but in the everyday return to normal activities of living for everyone.

Be with all political leaders around the world that all might gain a spirit of unity that allows for celebrating diversity, not divisiveness, fulfilling need, not greed, sharing not hoarding, engaging in dialogue not monologue, willing to trust not create mistrust, recognizing reality not obscuring facts. We know it pains you to see the warring madness among all your children. In the spirit of Jesus Christ we pray as he taught us, Our Father, who art in heaven...

HYMN OF JOURNEYING

“THE REAL WORLD” Paul Cornell  
Album “The River” 1998

<https://music.youtube.com/watch?v=5s3zfWplbzE&feature=share>

Heaven above, send us the love to heal our troubled planet.  
Please show us the way to a new day and help us to understand  
Why we are here in this illusive world of fear?  
Give us the key to the real world.

Please give us a sign, open our minds, teach us to love each other.

The hour is late, how long must we wait, till we know  
We're all brothers in one family, born to be happy and free.  
Give us the key to the real world.

Let our judgments cease and grant us peace, give us illumination.  
Make straight our path, remove our wrath, let us see all creation  
As one beautiful world, made up of loving souls,  
Please give us the key to the real world, the real world of love.

Heaven above, send us the love to heal our troubled planet.  
O heaven above, send us the love, to heal our troubled planet.

**BENEDICTION:**

And now in the wholeness and the goodness of God, go forth into the day. Find a way to safely reach out to family and friends, share a laugh and a smile, reconcile with those who have hurt you, be kind to strangers, and feel the Diving smile upon you. Now and forever more. Amen

**RECESSIONAL**

POSTLUDE    *Prelude in C Major*    J.S. Bach (1685-1750)