

Sermon - John 15:1-8

April 28, 2024, Camp Sunday

First Congregational UCC – Appleton

Good morning, I am Jim Schleif, the Executive Director for the United Church Camps, Inc., and I am thankful and appreciative of the opportunity to be with you this morning. I bring greetings and blessings from your three UCCI sites, Moon Beach, Daycholah Center, and Cedar Valley Retreat Center. Since stepping into my role with UCCI I have been regularly intersecting with folks from 1st Congregational here in Appleton. There are intersections with our efforts at Daycholah Center and your Indigenous People's Allies Committee. Steve Hirby, Phil Gabrielson, Jerry and Mary Dees. There are clergy intersections, Rev. Jane Anderson, the late Rev. Kathryn Kuhn. There are outdoor ministry intersections John and Sue McFadden and Memory Camp. Barb Uehling recently joined the UCCI Board of Directors, and I'm sure if I stood here long enough, we would find many more. In any case, it is good to finally have the opportunity to be with you. Thank you, Pastor Nick, and others for making this opportunity happen.

Grace and peace to you, which comes from God to each of us decisively in Jesus of Nazareth, Amen.

Our gospel reading this morning is Jesus' final of the "I Am" statements in John's gospel. A series of unique declarations that use metaphors to liken Jesus to something else, and ultimately make the absolute declaration that Jesus is God incarnate. I Am the bread of life; I Am the light of the world; I Am the door of the sheep; I Am the resurrection and life; I Am the good shepherd; I Am the way, the truth, and the life; and finally, I Am the true vine. What strikes me as unique in today's metaphor is the deep connection, the physical connectedness between the vine and branches. They are 'hard wired' together, literally. There is physical dependence and inter-dependence between the vine and the branch and a deep abiding relationship that NEEDS reciprocity to bear good fruit. Neither capable of standing on their own in bearing fruit, or in the ministry metaphor, neither is capable solely spreading the 'good news' of the gospel or of bringing God's realm into reality. On this Sunday following Earth Day, on a Camp Sunday where we also lift up outdoor ministry, it seems fitting that our gospel narrative drives us into reflecting on an agricultural metaphor that emphasizes our deeply connected reciprocal relationship with Jesus.

I grew up in an outdoor family. We tent camped as a family in the summer. I spent seven years in scouting and reached the rank of Eagle Scout. I served a summer as a scout camp counselor. I think for \$32/week! Camping and outdoor experiences in general were formative in my upbringing but I never attended church camp.

As a child, I remember each summer my Grandmother and uncle would attend a week of camp at Moon Beach. My uncle was cognitively challenged and lived at home with my grandma. He also had an eating disorder and was short but quite wide in stature. He loved to swim but trips to the city park often ended in tears as he would be teased as kids are prone to do. I envision the week at Moon Beach was a welcome week of respite for my grandma and a week where my uncle could bob like a cork in the waters of Moon Lake without being ridiculed or teased. It wasn't until I came back to the church in my adult years, that I realized Moon Beach and UCCI were connected to the WI Conference of the United Church of Christ. I'm sure that my first trip to Moon Beach in roughly 2010 was a different experience than my grandma and uncle's experience in the 1960's, but I could see, feel, and sense immediately, what a special place Moon Beach was.

It was the year that I came back to the church, in 2005, that I also experienced a profound sense of calling to ministry. That experience came while doing some study, prayer, and reflection in a pop-up camper in the Shoshone National forest just west of Cody, WY. It was a series of images and message that came in the early nightfall while the wind flapped the canvas of the camper. As profound as that experience was, it came at a very difficult and confusing time in my life. It made no sense to me, and I couldn't give it credibility or even talk to anyone about it for nearly seven years. I was working as an operator in the nuclear industry at the time, and if I went back and started speaking of visions and spiritual messages, I would be sent to medical for an opportunity to leave a specimen in a cup for analysis. My eventual awakening to that sense of calling came in large part in experiences connected to the church at Moon Beach, back in the outdoors. In summary, experiences in nature and the out of doors, have been impactful in my life.

I'm sure that my impactful experiences in nature are not unique. In outdoor ministry, we often see campers and retreat visitors return year after year. In summer family camps at Moon Beach, it is not uncommon to have four generations attending camp at the same time each year with largely the same community. Youth who have attended summer camp or youth faith formation events often return year after year. Camper experiences often lead to summer camp counselor experiences, which often lead to adult volunteer experiences, which at times lead to a calling to non-profit work and even ministry. Many personal stories, such as mine, provide testimony to the powerful and transformational experiences found in nature.

I started my very limited work with UCCI in what I thought would be a space between church settings. I was given the assignment to facilitate the renaming of our Pilgrim Center Camp. On that journey, I heard Rev. Jim Bear Jacobs speak of Indigenous traditions and culture living in a deeply connected relationship to the land. Living in a deeply connected relationship with the land is beautifully captured in Robin Wall-Kimmerer's *"Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous*

Wisdom and the Teaching of the Plants". It was that work, the collaboration with our Ho-Chunk UCC partners and other stakeholders, that convinced me outdoor ministry was an ok sideline to the local church.

Author and UCC Pastor, Daniel Cooperrider, writes from a Christian perspective in *"Speak with the Earth and It Will Teach You: A Field Guide to the Bible."* Now, I have never actually met Daniel Cooperrider, but I think there is an editor's override in Daniel's title. "Speak to the Earth and 'She' Will Teach You (or whatever pronoun you prefer) seems much more appropriate for the title. I'm sure a publicist or editor swapped the pronoun for an 'it'. How Eurocentric of us! Cooperrider speaks of his years of academic and seminary study preparing him to search for God and God's meaning by reading and interpreting scripture. He also speaks of how his church in the mountains of Vermont taught him to be attentive to God's presence and meaning in the landscape and events of the earth. Cooperrider writes, *"They taught me that the church was not just a place to read and interpret the written scripture of God, but a place to read and interpret the expressions of God that emanate constantly from every corner of God's creation."* Cooperrider builds a case through Greek philosopher's and early Christian thinkers of the "two books" theory of God. One of scripture, and one of nature. While western Christianity and thought focuses on written scripture, the ministry of Jesus, his apostolic followers, and early Christians were deeply rooted in nature. Deeply connected, as in the metaphor of the vine and the branches. Deeply connected recognizing mother earth as a living breathing entity, not an 'it'.

I would like to share a few highlights at our sites with you.

- After four years, Cedar Valley Retreat Center is showing signs of sustainable operations.
- At Moon Beach we have completed foundation restoration on 4 of 16 lakeside cabins and active fundraising continues with a goal to complete all 16 within the next three years.
- At Daycholah Center, we have worked with UWM Archaeology to create an effigy mound preservation plan and we seek to continue efforts to strengthen our relationship with our Ho-Chunk partners and a vision to create a hub for educational and immersive experiences in indigenous justice ministry.
- And ultimately, we continue to work hard at finding the sweet spot of new revenue and expenses that afford sustainable operation.
- I am excited about collaborative efforts between UCCI and the WCUCY YFF activities, the Damascus Project and hybrid youth education and confirmation programs, and newly exploring collaboration with Flicker Wild Church.

As I prepare to close, I come back to that deeply connected relationship between the branch and the vine. Richard Rohr's Daily Meditation on Monday, Earth Day, was written by theologian Tony Jones who writes of "*Encountering God in Wild Places*". Jones writes:

The God of wild places offers peace. In a modern world that's frenetic and busy-always connected, always on-finding peace is getting more difficult... To receive the peace offered by the God of wild places, we'll have to retrograde to old technologies: canoe and paddle, hiking boots and walking stick, bow and arrow, and fishing pole. We also have to remember that the peace we long for is within, a spark of the divine that resides within each of us. To bring that spark to a flame can be done indoors, but I have a lot more luck when I'm outdoors—and the wilder the place, the better.

It is no wonder, that outdoor ministry experiences have the capacity to be so transformative and healing. When we step into the world of God's creation, we make ourselves available to the healing elements that God has put before us and around us in nature.

I close this morning by extending an invitation to "Return to Sacred Ground." If you have never been to one of our sites, Moon Beach, Daycholah Center, or Cedar Valley Retreat Center, please consider finding the opportunity and right fit for you and come. If you have been to our sites, please return. We provide a safe, warm, and dry place for you to stay. We do our very best to provide gracious and extravagant hospitality. And you, just might find yourself in God's Book of Nature, experiencing God in the wild spaces, a deeply connected relationship where we experience the Divine, nature, and others in new and transformational ways.

I will spend some time with you after worship today. I have material sharing our event offerings for 2024 and some fun giveaway items. Please visit and allow me to do my best to answer your questions. I look forward to seeing you soon at one of our sites.

Thank you and Amen.