

What Helps Us to Try Again?

Friends in faith – gathered via live stream and in this house of worship on land loved by First Nations and others long before us and which we hope will be cherished long into the future – let us wonder together this morning: What helps us to try again? I invite you to join with me in a moment of prayer.

God of all, we give thanks for the gift of being freely gathered for worship today. We pray that your Holy Spirit would encourage us to keep trying again in our practice of your love and justice – in both our personal relationships and as your church. We pray as followers of Jesus. Amen.

Across the past week, I have prayed for wisdom and for words to share with you on this Racial Justice Sunday. The question of what helps us to try again was inspired by these two verses in our reading from the gospel text in Luke: *“[Jesus] said to Simon, ‘Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch.’ Simon answered, ‘Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing. Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets.’”*

We know that Simon did make another attempt – another try to fill his nets. I think that his willingness to try again was supported both by openness to expanding perspective and to going deeper. Expanding perspective and going deeper go hand in hand. Jesus called Simon then and calls us now to build the community based in healing love. And healing love requires expanding perspective and deep fishing.

As we interact with our readings for today, I invite you to consider Jesus calling us to healing love along two dimensions. In what circumstances are you called inwardly to healing love – to expanded perspective and deep fishing within your own thoughts and feelings?

In what circumstances are you called outwardly to healing love – to expanded perspective and deep fishing in relationship with others?

In our first reading for today, I appreciate how author Cole Arthur Riley in her interview with the Center for Action and Contemplation speaks about **resilience**. She said this: *“I’ve had to confront a kind of resilience that isn’t really about returning back to the way you were before, but is much more about reclaiming whatever new shape your form has taken. A resilience that doesn’t really ask us to forget, but that carries the memory of whatever harm or whatever fire we’ve been through. A resilience that carries that memory and still is committed to one’s survival and one’s going on in the world, however that shape looks....”*

On this Racial Justice Sunday, we recognize that we are one hyper local manifestation of the body of Christ, knitted together in a web of several thousand UCC congregations and several hundred NACCC congregations across this land in addition to global partners in both bodies. Today, the wider community of the UCC invites us to wonder about the resilience of our Black and brown neighbors among us. Let us hear in the experience of one (just one) Black neighbor, Cole Arthur Riley, that part of her experience of resilience amidst the racist ideas and policies that pervade our society is an openness to holding space to honor lived experiences of wounds, of fire, of injustice while also moving forward.

Within the interview, Riley draws on the work of teacher and psychotherapist James Finley, who writes about a healing path. I keep returning to the part in which Finley describe the healing path he envisions – *“a path along which we learn to circle back again and again to cultivate within ourselves a more merciful understanding of ourselves as we learn to see, love, and respect the still-confused and wounded aspects of ourselves.”*

I particularly appreciate the way he writes of the kind of salvation (in the sense of liberation) that we can experience in this life. He says, *“We are now attempting to bear witness to the sweet secret of experiential salvation in which the torn and ragged edges of our wounded and wayward hearts are experienced as... the opening through which the gentle light of God’s merciful love shines into our lives.”*

Let’s consider for a moment how we relate to Finley’s words about showing mercy toward the *“still-confused and wounded aspects of ourselves.”* I was touched and I hope you also were by the story that Telae shared with our young people and also with us. I did not have an opportunity to read the text before she shared it, so it was a wonderful experience of how we love each other based on our experiences with one another more than on our view visually of the person next to us.

And yet, today we are still confused and wounded in our relationships. And we can become ever more aware of how some of that has to do with what is called our social location. We can look at our own selves and recognize both opportunities and barriers we’ve encountered. I know that my race is White. That has given me access to opportunity. I know that I am a cisgender woman. My gender identity has given me plenty of access. My orientation as a straight person has not caused me many stares. My education of getting to go to college and graduate school has given me opportunity for work.

Everyone has a social location based on various factors. And again, we’re still confused because we know we are not limited to the boxes – the isolated aspects of our identity, while knowing that they can cause opportunity and barrier.

We can expand our perspective and go deeper by asking ourselves and others: **Where have I or where have you encountered opportunities or barriers based on some aspect of your identity or life experience?**

The Rev. Dr. Cheryl A. Lindsay, Minister for Worship and Theology at the national setting of the United Church of Christ offers a beautiful reflection on our gospel reading today. I invite you to close your eyes if it helps you to take in her thoughts. Rev. Dr. Cheryl Lindsay shares this:

“The flow of the story suggests the nature of ministry for those who accept the invitation to follow Jesus into this mission. Those fishing knew how to fish so expertise or experience was not a problem. They chose a good location as evidenced by their eventual net. They had the right tools and equipment...and knew how to use them. Their reach was too shallow... Luke’s framing tells us, ‘if you want to go through the motions, go shallow. If you want to fill your nets, go into the deep.’

Perilous times, like turbulent waters, require more than shallow responses. When the tax status of institutions providing for the common good are threatened, stewardship practices, appeals, and commitments need to go deeper... When programs designed to celebrate our distinctiveness through recognition of diversity, equity, and inclusion are eliminated in favor of protecting and preserving the privileged, mediocre, and unqualified, our public witness and ministry creation compels us to go into the depths of human solidarity and belonging.

Where shallow ministry fails to find anyone, deep ministry reminds us that the needs are great and perhaps even overwhelming... Jesus calls us to cast our nets into the deep in order to capture what needs to be brought to the surface. This is hard work. This is how to fill the kingdom.” Words from Rev. Dr. Cheryl Lindsay.

I appreciate that she used, instead of an acronym that becomes a bit meaningless, the words programs that support diversity, equity, and inclusion. We hear the words often today. The question to ask ourselves is: **How are we interacting in conversations that are uncomfortable and tricky about diversity, equity and inclusion – including real people’s experiences with those practices?**

I look forward to our Wednesday evenings in Lent, beginning in early March. We gather for a brief contemplative service of worship followed by a soup and bread supper, and a book discussion. We are welcome to participate in any or all parts of the evening. The evenings hold space for expanding perspective and going deeper (both inwardly and in our relationships with one another). At the heart of each worship service, we will hear a personal story from someone in our congregation of struggle and resilience. More than likely, we will make more sense of our own stories as we resonate with the struggles of our friends.

During supper, we will grow to know one another more fully in the subtle ways that happen through conversation over a meal. Our discussions of the book *Neither Wolf Nor Dog* will welcome us into the White author’s experiences of expanding perspective and going deeper through his journey with a Lakota elder named Dan.

During our Wednesday evening services, will likely draw on these Lent Devotionals from our two wider church bodies – the United Church of Christ and the National Association of Congregational Christian Churches. Seminary educator Mary Luti offers an introductory devotion for the UCC’s 2025 Lent Devotional booklet, which is entitled “Into the Deep.” She summarizes the thrust of “Into the Deep” in this way:

“God loves the deep. God works in the deep. Down there, God gives life, possibility, new direction. It’s where the reckoning is, the wonder, the courage, the life-sustaining bliss. So it’s not surprising that when Jesus calls disciples, his first instruction to them is to go deep. No more skimming the surface, hugging the shore, wading in shallows. And when they brave the deeper waters and let down their nets, what comes up is fat, lapping, gill-breathing awe—a vision, a way of life, a joy no circumstance can alter.”
Words from Mary Luti about venturing into the deep.

Friends, may we venture into the deep, open to the perspective that comes from within us and from alongside us. The path of healing Love is counting on us. Amen.

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Resilience Requires Flexibility, Luke 5:1-11