

## Creation Justice & New Member Sunday

Friends and neighbors, what a gift we experience and share as we freely gather for worship on this Creation Justice and New Member Sunday. We pause our daily rhythms to come together and focus on what we heard Sister Joan Chittister refer to in our opening words - *“the cultivation of beauty in the human soul.”* We are on the live stream and in this house of worship – on land loved by First Nations and others before us and where we are building community now and into the future.

Let’s begin this time of reflection in a posture of prayer. God, you are love more powerful than we can imagine. Yet, we feel you at work within and among us. Open our heart and minds today as you reveal ways in which you are working in and through our lives. We pray as followers of Jesus, who returned to life. Let the people say together, Amen: Amen!

Let’s talk about power this morning. I invite you to close your eyes if that is comfortable for you. Notice who in your life comes to mind when I say the following words. ‘When I encounter them, I notice that they have a powerful presence.’ Keeping your eyes closed, consider: **What does powerful look like in that person’s way of being?** If their presence is powerful, what is the nature or quality of their power? As we open our eyes now, would anyone care to lift aloud a word or two that convey the power that person bears? *[unafraid openness, a kind voice, centered, at peace, confident, they know who they are and why they’re here.]* Thank you for sharing within this space of community.

I invite you to close your eyes again and open your spirit to *“the cultivation of beauty in the human soul.”*

Borrowing from Sister Joan (who borrowed from *Goethe*), where (with what landform, body of water, plant, or animal) do you experience “*the cultivation of beauty in [your] human soul*”? **What does powerful look like in that beloved place or with that living being of another species?** As we open our eyes to one another, would anyone care to lift aloud a word or two that convey that kind of powerful? What does that place or other living being carry for you? [*Lake Superior – vast, Boundary Waters Canoe Area, storms in that they are about renewal and cleansing, quiet, rivers are unstoppable, ocean waves are peaceful and overwhelming.*] Thank you for sharing those ways of power as well.

Our journey with the gospels picks up today where we left off on Easter morning. Immediately after we heard this: “*Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, ‘I have seen the Lord,’*” we read today: “*When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors were locked where the disciples were, for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them.*”

It makes total sense that the eleven disciples were laying low, petrified. Members of their community had turned their leader over to the Roman army to be lynched as a supposed troublemaker. So there was a high probability that they would be snatched up next. Seems like this story could not be more appropriate for the times we’re living in. It was into that environment of fear that Jesus appeared with power.

One last time, I invite you to close your eyes. **What kind of power did Jesus come bearing, which he then breathed on his disciples then and is breathing onto us now?** The gospel writer remembered it this way: “*Jesus said to them again, ‘Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.’ When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit.’*”

Based on all you know of Jesus' story, what sort of power was in his breath? I invite us to open our eyes again and hear from one another. What was the quality of power in Jesus' breath? *[Hope, companionship, wisdom, eternal forgiveness, courage, conviction.]*

On this Creation Justice Sunday, our gathering prayer and our prayer of confession and longing were drawn from an ecumenical group called Creation Justice Ministries. Their tagline is this: Care for God's Planet and People. For 2025, they produced this resource entitled ***"The Power of God: From Extractive Theology to Transformative Faith."*** In short, the collaborators who created the resource find in their Christian faith a God whose power is not extractive (meaning dominating, oppressive, opportunistic) but rather a God whose power is transformative (meaning uplifting, renewing). Here are a few key morsels (food for thought) from the resource, which is easily downloaded for free.

*They write, "A transformative vision of power must extend beyond technological fixes to embody equity, humility and collaboration with creation..."*

*...Is the power of God informing what kind of energy we're promoting in the world? Are we in search of a power that must drill, extract, mine, and suppress the earth or a power that works to participate, collaborate, cooperate with and support the earth?...*

*...The journey toward a just transition demands a spiritual and moral awakening. It calls us to redefine power as something rooted in connection, renewal and the intrinsic dignity of all creation...*

*...Jesus' way invites us to use power in relational ways that restore and renew life."*

I am still hearing the echo of Sharri's first word – hope, hope, hope.

I invite us to notice in the coming week: **When do we find ourselves in a rut of interacting with others in a way that is drilling, extracting, and suppressing?** Is it when we are hearing an opinion very different from our own that we feel the need to drill, extract, and suppress? Is it when we are rushing or feeling a lack of options and closed in? **And in what spaces do we (with the windmills) feel more liberated to collaborate, cooperate, and participate alongside others?** I wonder.

I will be curious to see in coming years if we discern a call toward becoming designated as a **Creation Justice congregation** within the United Church of Christ. It is one of a number of designations that require a discernment process. And, wow, have we been through a number of discernment processes as a newborn church!

Here is a taste of the questions we would need to explore within four areas of our life as a local church.

1. First, in regard to **Theology and Worship**

*How can your congregation intentionally reflect upon God in relationship to caring for creation? How can it bring theological understandings of creation care and justice into its services of worship?*

2. Second, in regard to **Institutional Life and Practice**

*How can your congregation integrate care for creation into the life and work of its ministry teams, committees, and governing council? How can your congregation embody care for creation through its building and land use policies and practices?*

3. Third, in regard to **Circles of Awareness and Advocacy**

*With particular attention to socioeconomic factors such as race, class, and global inequality, how can your congregation research and inform itself about environmental justice issues at the local, state, national, and/or global levels? How can this awareness correspond to congregational advocacy and action?*

4. And fourth, in regard to **Connections to a Broader Movement**

*Within the UCC, what are the ways in which your church can connect with others, whether it is through a conference task force, a UCC campground, the UCC's environmental justice newsletter, or other points of contact? Outside of the UCC, what are the ways in which your church can connect with interfaith, ecumenical, or secular partners engaged in environmental justice work?*

We do not currently have a Creation Justice Team to lead St. Croix United Church in that effort. If you feel passionate about creation justice and would like to explore it further, please let me know!

I'd like to briefly raise that the work of anti-racism is integrally connected to creation justice. Today we will hold the first of four discussions of Jennifer Harvey's book, *Anti-Racism as Daily Practice: Refuse Shame, Change White Communities, and Help Create a Just World*. Our Adult Faith Formation Team welcomes you to consider reading along and participating in our discussions (onsite and on Zoom). In this moment of reflection, I invite you to hear a few words from Harvey as instructive for your growth in relationship to all creation alongside your work to become anti-racists.

She writes, "So what might happen if those of us awake to the devastating reality of racism and our own white complicity allowed ourselves to feel? To grieve?"

Harvey writes, *“I know I extracted energy and insisted on attention that wasn’t mine to take. I know I caused harm.”*

She writes, *“Attention to ancestors lets us talk about generational legacies we’ve inherited and the collective practices we’re all embedded in, every single day. It moves us from a focus on individuals to one on communities.”*

She writes, *“Among the many and diverse traits that characterize our socialization [as white people], white silence is pervasive... And this silence has been accompanied by white passivity in the face of injustice.”* We know that all injustice is connected.

And referring to leadership specifically that is by women who are Black, Indigenous, and People of Color, she writes this: *“So we need to invest actual time, energy, and resources to support such leaders. We need to be proactive and reliable.”*

Again, we invite you to consider reading along with us.

Let’s close this time with words to wash over us like a blessing – a bit more from Sister Joan Chittister in her devotional, *Cry Justice, Cry Hope*. I invite you to take one more breath and close your eyes to hear these words of blessing to instruct you.

*“We forget that there is nothing that is not a potential shrine to the will of God for creation. But for that to happen, we need to stop throwing wrappers and cigarette butts on sidewalks, we need to reject a culture of disposability, in which bottles and cans and pieces of plastic are casually thrown away.”*

*We need to identify those places—one at a time—that are a blight on the human spirit and change them until we have given our part of the world back to Creation better than it was before we worked on it.*

*It is out of this kind of effort and vision that the sacredness of the daily becomes plain.*

*The only question is whether or not we are doing our part to hallow life....*

*The purpose of life is to cultivate the sacred in ourselves so that we can come to know God before we see God. [Gyoo-tuh] Goethe puts it this way: ‘A person should hear a little music, read a little poetry, and see a fine picture every day in order that worldly cares may not obliterate the sense of the beautiful that God has implanted in the human soul.’ This week, follow Goethe’s advice. Every day this week, list one way that you tried to ‘cultivate beauty in the human soul.’ In your own life ... in your neighborhood ... in the world.”*

Words from Sister Joan Chittister.

Friends, may we receive Jesus’ transformative, renewing, uplifting breath. And may it be what powers our day-to-day living. Love is counting on us. Amen.

Rev. Clare Gromoll  
St. Croix United Church (Bayport, MN)  
April 27, 2025 | Creation Justice & New Member Sunday  
John 20:19-31, a companion text to Psalm 148