

**“One Thing I Do Know”**  
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**First Congregational UCC**  
**Washington, DC**  
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First Church, thank you for worshipping with us this morning as we experiment with a totally new kind of worship. Make no mistake—what we are doing this morning is deeply radical—claiming that God’s love knows no bounds and the body of Christ transcends any one place. It matters that you show up today, opening your heart to a sacred truth about what holds us together. Will you pray with me? *Gracious God, oil the hinges of our hearts that they may swing wide to welcome your Word for us today. Amen.*

Perhaps it’s no coincidence that God circled this date on the calendar for us, right in the middle of the pilgrimage through a lonesome valley. You embarked on this journey before my arrival. Some might say this wilderness trek extends years into the past, and my arrival does not mean it’s over but that I will accompany you. Lent is a journey to prepare our hearts to receive the mystery of Easter—the mystery of new life rising from death’s tomb and divine grace on the loose. And Easter is such a big mystery that it takes time to prepare our hearts to truly receive it. This year, Lent’s reminder of the frailty of the human condition is visceral. Lent etches into our hearts, from dust we come and to dust we shall return and so what will we do with this exquisite moment that is ours? How will we love this day?

Like Lent, this pandemic grants us permission to be honest about things we often hide—our loneliness and the longing to know we matter. As we set forth new ways of worshipping and community connection, there will be times when, despite our good intentions, we will fall short. I, your new pastor, will miss the mark. We will make mistakes and, God willing, we will learn from them. But I promise you this: if you stay on the journey, we will behold how God’s love is stronger even than death.

We follow the one called the Great Physician because of his power to heal. Jesus didn’t frequent places where folk were already just fine. Where not one could name their pain, or confess harm they caused, or admit a need for healing. Instead, he circulated among the suffering. He sought out those excluded by religious legalism, political oppression, and social injustice. He met people where they were—along the shore, on the street, at the well.

Today’s story is no different. As Jesus walked, he saw a man blind from birth. To the disciples, this prompted a theological inquiry: *Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?* Jesus’ answer: *Neither.* The disciples, you see, were content to use the man’s disability as theoretical fodder to cast blame. Jesus, however, noticed the whole man—his condition and its effects; his heart and its silent longing. Jesus took the theoretical and transfigured it into the incarnational. Which is to say: Jesus got his hands dirty. He spat on the earth and made mud. He spread it on the man’s eyes and spoke instructions for healing.

The healing was messy, some might say unsanitary. Then again, Jesus healed just about every body he came across that was called unsanitary, impure, or broken. The woman with the issue of blood. The girl reportedly dead. Lepers with oozing sores. Mixed blood Samaritans. The mentally ill. The paralytic. He spoke to them, touched them, commended their faith, and sent them—healed and whole—to the priest where they would be restored to community. In a tradition that managed public health with holiness codes, the stream of healed people Jesus sent back to the synagogues must have overwhelmed the priests and public alike. Were these folk truly healed? And if so, how was one to sit next to the unsettlingly sane person who not one week earlier had been begging at the temple gates, denied entrance to the sanctuary and the community it held?

What are we to make of Jesus' dramatic healings, particularly in these times? Some say it means God might heal anything, if we just pray hard enough. I suspect it's much simpler. Poet Lynn Ungar, speaking to the COVID-19 pandemic, wrote, "We are connected in ways that are terrifying and beautiful. (You could hardly deny it now.) Our lives are in one another's hands. (Surely, that has come clear)." If we call upon Jesus, that Great Physician, first we must admit that we too stand in need of healing. We also can trust that God wants us well. Well doesn't mean immortal and healing doesn't always mean cured. In this season of Lent, as we face our human frailty and sure mortality, we must own our vulnerability and lean into a God who desires nothing less than our transformation.

The religious authorities of Jesus' time could grasp no such thing. They had questions about this unauthorized healing. It happened on the Sabbath, which was forbidden. The manner of the healing was quite unconventional. Was this healing of God? Truth be told, all healing is of God. But the Pharisees were divided on the matter and finding the man's personal testimony inadequate, they instead landed questions like blows upon his parents, who were terrified. Something radically unsettling took place in this healing—Jesus flipped the social order on its head. The outcast became centered. His parents sensed how deeply this threatened the powerful. So they said, "He is of age, ask him."

So they pressured him to denounce the healer. "Give glory to God!" they urged. "We know this Jesus is a sinner." And the man answered most brilliantly. "I do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see."

His unknowing is instructive. In this moment of uncertainty, as we face the very real anxiety of COVID-19, economic turmoil, and a presidential election, sometimes we too must confess, "I do not know." I do not know what the future will bring, I do not know if the best or worst will come to pass, in this life, O God, some things are beyond our knowing. Yet there was one thing the man did know. An anchor in the turbulence, a calm in the storm, a bedrock truth to which he held fast—I was blind, he said, but now I see.

Rather than reflect on the sheer depth of that answer, the religious leaders barraged the man: *What did he do? How did he do it?* And then the text says they reviled him, for he did not prove their theological premise but instead testified to the life-giving healing of Jesus. They sneered, "You were born entirely in sin, and you are trying to teach us?" This is, in fact, precisely what the man was doing, for wisdom flows from the experience of constantly being on the outside looking in. The man born blind saw with more clarity than the religious leaders ever could, and it scared them.

We live in a time when the world seems split at the seams, in desperate need of mending. A time when seismic shifts shake our systems and institutions. A time when the poor and the privileged, and all those somewhere in between, stand in need of healing. And if there's one thing I know, it's that love heals. The church has so often consumed itself with questions of orthodoxy, or right belief; love, as a theory. Or a doctrine. Or a statement of faith. Today we must lay aside such focus on conformity and instead give ourselves over to the practice of love. You see, we learn to love like Jesus in community.

This is a bold claim to make when most of us have, at one time or another, been on the receiving end of harm perpetrated by a community of faith. The church is not synonymous with God's vision of shalom. It is full of flawed human beings, like me and you. But as we practice loving the world—deeply and truly; as we learn how to center those on the margins, reach out to the isolated, and participate in our own healing, we do so, rooted in the Source of all love. That source, which is pure grace, which is the ground of our being, the rest for our weariness, the God who delights in first loving us.

There's [a story](#) about a church declining in numbers. Just 18 members were left to care for their decaying building, all of them elderly. Clearly, it was a dying church. The pastor decided—as a

last resort—to visit a retired pastor in case he could offer any advice. The old man welcomed the pastor into his apartment. When the pastor explained, the old man commiserated. ‘I know how it is,’ he said. ‘The church is dying. It’s happening everywhere. I’m afraid I don’t have any advice. The only thing I can tell you is that the Messiah is one of you.’

When the pastor returned to the church, the congregation asked what the old man had said. ‘He couldn’t help,’ the pastor said. ‘The only thing he did say, just as I was leaving, something cryptic—that the Messiah is one of us.’ In the weeks that followed, the congregation pondered these words. The Messiah is one of us? Could he have possibly meant one of us here at the church? If so, who?

If he meant anyone, it must be the Pastor. She’s been our leader for years. On the other hand, he might have meant deacon Thomas. Deacon Thomas is a holy man. Certainly he couldn’t have meant sister Hazel! Hazel gets downright cranky. But come to think of it, even though she is a thorn in peoples’ side, Hazel is almost always right. Often very right. Maybe the old man did mean Hazel. But surely not Oliver. Oliver is so passive, a real nobody. But then, he’s always there when you need him. He just magically appears. Maybe Oliver is the Messiah. Of course the old man couldn’t possibly have meant me. I’m just an ordinary person. Yet suppose he did? O God, not me. I couldn’t be that much for you, could I?

As they pondered the matter, the congregation began to treat each other with extraordinary hospitality on the off chance that one of them was the Messiah. And, on the off chance that they themselves might be the Messiah, they treated themselves with great respect. Because the neighborhood in which it was situated was so beautiful, people would often hold events on the church lawn. They would wander its paths and pray on the garden bench. As they did, they sensed the extravagant hospitality that permeated the church. There was something strangely compelling about it. Hardly knowing why, they began to visit the church and bring friends. Then it just so happened that a young family asked to join the congregation. Then another. Within a few years, the congregation began to thrive and, thanks to the old man’s gift, became a vibrant school of love.

What would it mean, in your sequestered life, to awaken to the possibility that the healing love of Jesus is already among us? That the face of God can be found in your own family? What would it mean if we faced the world and looked vigilantly for the Spirit of the living Christ? How would the world lurch if, when this fever breaks, each time we encounter someone we glimpse the secret beauty of their hearts and treat them accordingly? Over time, we might manifest the Christ light in ourselves. We might say, when questioned: I don’t know quite how it happened, but one thing I do know—I was blind, but now I see; I was lost, but now I’m found; we were walking the lonesome valley, but God’s grace called us home.

This is the good news of the gospel—out of human frailty, the Spirit is building the very body of Christ. It is a body that centers the vulnerable, a body that invites participation in healing, a body that suffers in solidarity and is made whole in community. This is who we are. This is the legacy handed down to us. This is the power of the church in these urgent times. May it draw us more deeply into love. Amen.