

Immanuel United Church
Sept 12th, 2021

Welcome

Call to Worship (inspired by Psalm 125 and Proverbs 22):

All people on earth share a common bond;

God is the Creator of us all.

Those who trust in God **are strong and full of courage.**

Have no doubt: the reign of terror will self-destruct.

God has given this world to all of us, for all of us to use our hands for good.

Those who bless others with their generosity are blessed in return.

In this time of worship, may we seek the good we may do in God's name.

Prayer:

**Holy One, in your heart, there is room for all
and a welcome that is deep, wide, and rich.**

You join us together in your love.

You feed us with teachings of kindness, respect, and justice.

You heal us and make us whole.

**As we gather today, we give thanks that these gifts of welcome and warmth
await us.**

**We would fill ourselves with these gifts that we might take them and share
them**

with everyone we meet.

Bless us in this time together, and send us out to be a blessing.

In Jesus' name. Amen.

Hymn: VU 401 *Worship the Lord* (V. 1, 2, 3, 5)

Scripture reading: Luke 5:17-26

One day, while Jesus was teaching, Pharisees and teachers of the law were sitting nearby (they had come from every village of Galilee and Judea and from Jerusalem); and the power of the Lord was with him to heal. Just then some men came, carrying a paralysed man on a bed. They were trying to bring him in and lay him before Jesus; but finding no way to bring him in because of the crowd, they went up on the roof and let him down with his bed through the tiles into the middle of the crowd in front of Jesus. When he saw their faith, he said, 'Friend, your sins are forgiven you.' Then the scribes and the Pharisees began to question, 'Who is this who is speaking blasphemies? Who can forgive sins but God alone?'

When Jesus perceived their questionings, he answered them, 'Why do you raise such questions in your hearts? Which is easier, to say, "Your sins are forgiven you", or to say, "Stand up and walk"? But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins'—he said to the one who was paralysed—'I say to you, stand up and take your bed and go to your home.' Immediately he stood up before them, took what he had been lying on, and went to his home, glorifying God. Amazement seized all of them, and they glorified God and were filled with awe, saying, 'We have seen strange things today.'

Sermon: Story writing beyond the boundary

On the first day of school, I dropped the kids off at 8:20 AM and hurried home. I ate breakfast, made a quick cup of coffee, and turned on my laptop computer. It was time for my long-anticipated Zoom meeting with Yujene. Officially, she is a ministry candidate, currently looking for her internship site in the United Church of Canada. Personally, I consider her my colleague - a minister who has probably more years of ministry experience than I do, as a volunteer or paid staff in churches in Korea and Canada. Due to the patriarchal barriers in Korean churches, she was not ordained before immigrating to Canada. I had offered to assist Yujene with her preparation for job interviews. Last month, Yujene's family moved from Saskatchewan to the Niagara Falls area. Her family had been looking for their new home where both my friend and her husband would work in separate churches in the same region. Her husband chose a church in Niagara-on-the-Lake with the hope that Yujene could find a student ministry site nearby. Yujene's family visited us this summer on their road-trip to Ontario.

That morning, Yujene and I reviewed the 'signature story' she wrote about herself. Jennifer Aaker (Stanford Business Graduate School) explains, 'Everyone needs a signature story. It's a story that, after you tell people, people who listen to it somehow look at you differently. And the most powerful signature stories are those that take the audience where you want to go. For many of us, there's a gap between how we see ourselves and where we are going versus how others see you and where you are going. Story is the most effective way to close the gap. The story brings other people along on your journey.' I hope that my friend's signature story would take her interviewers (next week!) straight to the bull's-eye of her experience and vision, past any bias or expectation they might carry at the start of the interview...

I know very well the bias I used to be conscious of (especially in my early ministry years) about how others saw me — someone who was a younger woman, mother, wife, and Asian. I remember needing to project a more dynamic character than the combination of the above descriptions before each job application and interview. I used

to feel, often, that until I made a speech, in the pulpit, I was treated like a box in the corner of a room which few people would get interested in, checking to see what's inside. To close the gap, or open the box, I needed to make things "strange" as the people in today's scripture reading say at the end, "We have seen strange things today."

In today's reading, all those in the story actually did see strange things that day. Not only did Jesus speak the words that the religious authorities at that time considered to be "blasphemies", the paralyzed man "Stood up and walked" home. And there's one more strange thing in the story. While Jesus was teaching, some men, unable to find any way to bring their friend to Jesus because the room was so full, went up on the roof, removed several tiles from the roof, and lowered their paralyzed friend, with his bedding, through the hole "Into the middle of the crowd in front of Jesus" (V 19).

Who would want their house's roof, even if just a few tiles, to be taken off? Regardless of what material the roof was made of, it would be an outrageous, unthinkable way to treat somebody's home! But – that's what the community who advocated for the paralyzed person did. The community wrote a new signature story, in faith, for their friend who needed to come through the roof to tell their needs, to be visible, to exist in a real public space, and to show who they really are. In today's story, the message is clear: healing must be accessible and achievable and no one should be left in the background – or on the roof. Perhaps, the paralyzed person themselves was the one who initiated this act of risking faith, daring hope: open the roof, when it is a barrier.

I asked Yujene, "Could you write a signature story, and share it with me?" I hoped that her signature story could create a life-size hole on the roof and let her come out of the landscape, into the crowd, in front of Jesus. What is in her deepest heart that would become a shareable vision? A meaningful story invites hearers to meet the storyholder in dynamic multiangles. Here's Yujene's story:

"Every Child, Every Where. This is the slogan of UNICEF. I watched the ads many times, and the words bothered me every time and dragged me to be a nurse in the end. I wanted to be a part of the group who cared for those who were in need. I dreamed of medical volunteering and went to learn nursing. I declared the Nightingale Pledge at the graduation ceremony of nursing college. "I solemnly pledge myself before God and in the presence of this assembly ... I will devote myself to the welfare of those committed to my care."

I devoted myself to the people who needed care. My first call as a nurse was in the ICU. I often thought about the concept of healing when I faced many seriously ill patients there. To be healed or cured, it strongly needs both spiritual care and physical

treatment. Whenever the medical team determined that treatment was impossible or recovery difficult, the patients leaned on God or their faith. I witnessed that it really helped and some patients healed. Even if patients did not recover, their end of life was more comfortable and peaceful. I wondered where the power came from. Then, I dreamed that I would study theology and learn how God's justice and love come into the lives of others and myself, and bring healing and transformation."

Later, she added some comments: "When I first met the patients, especially children in the ICU, it was a reality beyond my boundary. These people, very ordinary, were not in the usual landscape of my everyday life. When I met them, I needed to step out of my comfort zone and truly meet them in their needs. I like ministry because when I try to meet others, share care and affection in faith, these ordinary people like me become very special, outside the boundary of my familiar world. I hope to share this vision of 'Beyond the boundary' with the congregation I apply for to share my gifts."

Yujene's words, the introduction of her signature story, invited me to reflect on my own experience in ICUs. How often I lost what words to say, how to respond. I stuck to one principle while handling my feelings of insufficiency quietly inside: "Ha Na, to be present matters. If I cannot find perfect words for love and beautiful prayers for peace and comfort, at least I have come to listen well." To me, visiting Seniors' Homes has been 'the beyond of my boundary' where I meet ordinary people and they become special. Bill Hickerson could be my mentor. However, I felt anxious every time I parked my car at Tuxedo Villa. My mind was busy while I was walking through the maze of the hallways to figure out how I would greet him and say hi and ask how are you today. But once I met him, I enjoyed the entire half an hour so much that it would turn into one hour before I knew it.

A Senior's Home is a 'strange' place: while I get lost in the beehive-like building with many numbered rooms, I pass by some seniors with dementia or other challenges. All of the eye-contact or inability to make eye contact evoke some strangeness. Foreignness. Even fear about all the ways time can change us. Then, I remind myself that it is important to remember that care and healing ministries integrate boundaries and make fear and familiarity meet to still find God's justice and love in both worlds. Writing a signature story and bringing healing ministry into a Seniors' Home's hallways and rooms both involve coming out of the familiar world, opening the roof of bias and division, and going into the middle of the crowd before Jesus. I pray that my friend Yujene stretches her wings of ministry and shares her gifts in the ministry of 'Beyond the boundaries' in the right place where she can serve her people the best, with joy and her signature "I like it. I can do it."

With practice, prayer and reflection, we live out the signature story of faith with the wholeness of ourselves, stepping beyond our boundaries, moving into the crowd, in front of Jesus. We glorify God in faithfully strange things, in the family of all things.

Hymn: VU 619 *Healer of Our Every Ill*

Prayers of the People:

Extravagant God,
who scatters the seeds of your love without counting the cost,
we share with you the matters on our hearts.

Extravagant God,
scatter the seeds of your love.

Hymn: VU 509 *Here I Am, Lord*

Commissioning and Benediction:

**Dance the seasons with new colour,
Caress each face into a smile,
Splash creation with your laughter,
And teach us how to joy.**

~ Kery K. Wehlander