

**Centre Congregational Church, U.C.C.  
Ecumenical Sunday  
Sunday Morning Service, 10:00am  
January 22, 2023  
The Rev Dr Scott Couper**

**“Called Together”  
Christian Scripture: Matthew 4:12-23**



*Shepherd of the*

*Church (ELCA)*

*Mountain Lutheran*

I remember when I was a child, my parents driving on a road that went up and down and up and down. It was a rural country road in Connecticut. As a child I used to delight in what was like a roller-coaster ride. Perhaps because I was a child and thus lighter, I levitated off the seat when we crested a hill ‘at pace’. What a thrill! Sometimes it was long slow up-hill and then my father would give it a little bit of gas right at the top and we would almost leave the road (but not quite). As we crested the top, I could not see the other side of the hill, and my stomach

would inevitably end-up in my throat. Sometimes, it went beyond fun and I even got a little nauseous for a moment when we quickly descended.

The lectionary calendar, the narrative of Jesus' ministry that we journey on in church, is a little bit like that rural road in Connecticut with many exciting points, some scary points, sometimes going up, and sometimes coming down. We had slow gradual climbs and rapid descents. Of course, with Christmas we were recently on a high. The high continued with Jesus' baptism by John two weeks ago. As we journey through the year, there will be more highs. For example, like when Jesus will preach his first sermon quoting Isaiah and "I have come to proclaim the Lord's favor" (Luke 4:19). There will be lows. For example, like during Jesus' agony in the garden and his crucifixion. And then, we will have another high, the resurrection during Easter! There are also bitter-sweet moments like when Jesus leaves his friends in the Ascension. Then there is a depression of sorts caused by Jesus' absence. Then we go up quickly again when the Holy Spirit was sent on Pentecost and the church is born! This year will be a journey of spiritual highs and lows. Yet, all of it, taken as a whole will be a delight and a blessing.

In our scripture reading this morning from Matthew, Jesus called his first disciples. The first disciples were fishermen: Simon-Peter, Andrew, James and John. Jesus said to them, "Follow me, and I will make you fish for people". Little

did they know the wild undulating ride of ministry upon which they were embarking! I am sure that Jesus could very well have done ministry alone – after all he spoke for and was even seen to be the very incarnation of God. Yet, Jesus chose to have friends, companions, fellow sojourners to experience the highs of ministry, as they did during the Transfiguration, and the lows of ministry, as they did when they learned of and mourned the death of their friend, Lazarus. “Jesus wept”.

Though I preached in the service via ZOOM on New Year’s Day, today is my first Sunday with you this year in the sanctuary. I look forward to this coming year and journeying with all of you through the ups and downs of ministry that we will encounter. We will have cause for much excitement. No doubt, also happenings will unfold that will bring us great disappointment. We will journey together. Jesus and his follows experienced a great diversity of emotions during their ministry. And so will we.

Jesus and his disciples also lived-out their ministry in a great diversity of realms or scopes that were constantly expanding. Jesus’ ministry was often ‘one on one’. Remember Jesus speaking to the Syrophoenician woman who asked that her daughter be healed or the Samaritan woman at the well? Our ministry at Centre Church should be and also is ‘one on one’. While still on leave, I heard a

story from someone who recalled how in the parlor he witnessed Dart Everett give Becca Balint (U.S. House Representative for Vermont) a great big hug last week. That is 'one on one' ministry of the profoundest sort that provides hope to me and everyone who knows Dart and to everyone who knows of Becca.

Our ministry at Centre is also 'local church to local church'. Last year, the Dummerston, West Brattleboro, and Centre churches (and even someone not from any of the three churches) came together as if we were one church and for a year worked together seamlessly with great love and affection to provide one of the most beautiful acts of hospitality I have ever been a part of – the hosting and settling-in of an Afghan family through the leadership of Gabi Martin.

Our ministry at Centre reaches beyond 'local church to local church'. We belong to the United Church of Christ denomination that is a merger of four and then two churches in 1957. The United Church of Christ is a constituent member of the World Council of Churches. Our denomination is in partnership with other denominations, like the Congregationalists in South Africa and the Lutherans in El Salvador (with whom Centre also has a partnership through the leadership of Jenifer Ambler). Centre Church and the United Church of Christ celebrates 'ecumenism' – the wholeness of church – in word and deed.

Yet, Centre church's ecumenism does not end with an inclusive denominational affiliation. Our church worships the 'cosmic-Christ' that transcends even Christian ecumenism! Thanks be to God that I am a part of a faith community that lives-out its Christianity by being an inter-faith church. Woe to any church that limits the 'cosmic-Christ' I worship to Christianity alone! This past December, Centre Church lit the first candle on our menorah to celebrate Chanukah with our Jewish brothers and sisters and the queer community. Our church hosts Farid, the local *imam* in Brattleboro, and thus enables him to welcome the Muslim community to prayer at our church. And I learned this week that Building & Grounds agreed last week to rent a space to the Zen Buddhist community of Brattleboro. I will participate in their gatherings. I pray that you will too. They are a special and beautiful people.

Friends, I begin this year with you bursting with pride that I am a part of a faith community that through Dart's example understands ministry is very much 'one on one' and is best expressed with a hug. I thank God I belong to a faith community that understands ministry must and should be done together with other local churches. I thank God I belong to the United Church of Christ that seeks Christian unity through partnerships with other denominations around the world. I am particularly proud this year that all in Brattleboro know that Centre

Church is profoundly Christian because we worship a cosmic-Christ and *not* a parochial Christ confined and restricted to Christianity. The cosmic-Christ we worship welcomes Jew, Zen Buddhist, Muslim, and even those with no faith tradition to experience the warmth, hospitality, and love of God.

This was the word of God, and it was preached to the people of God, and the people of God responded, "Amen".