

**The Beacon
February 2018**

**UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST
OF PUNTA GORDA**
An Open and Affirming Congregation



FEBRUARY HIGHLIGHTS

FROM THE PASTOR'S DESK

Rev. Mike Ford

FEAR OF THE DIVINE

The Gospel of Mark moves very quickly. In the beginnings of the first chapter we are introduced to John the Baptizer. Jesus is baptized with the Spirit descending as a dove to light on him and a voice from the heavens proclaiming Jesus as a beloved son. The Spirit whisks Jesus into the desert to face temptation by evil for forty days. Jesus reappears in Galilee and begins calling disciples. All of this happens in the first twenty verses of chapter one!

This past Sunday we encountered, in scripture, Jesus teaching in the synagogue encountering a man with an unclean spirit (Mark 1:21-28). As the story unfolds, since it was the Sabbath, Jesus attends worship. Seemingly uninvited, he steps into the role of teacher. The people are amazed (can also be translated frightened) at his teachings because he doesn't give a sermon like that of the scribes. He preaches a sermon that provokes.

In the middle of this experience, immediately as the story goes, a man with an unclean spirit rises and shouts at Jesus, "What do you want with *us*, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy *us*? I know who you are, the Holy One of God!" What is intriguing to me is that the reference to the unclean spirit is *plural*. This man is not afflicted with an unclean spirit. He is set upon by *many* unclean spirits.

Mark does not tell us what Jesus preached. However, we know from the Gospel that it was enough to draw out of hiding a multitude of very bad things from this man. What a powerful lesson it must have been! It is a little frustrating that Mark doesn't arm us with Jesus' words, but then again maybe it's better that he doesn't. Perhaps then it would become a "formula" to apply by rote to anyone WE deem as being inhabited by "unclean spirits" i.e. different? We know from the Gospels that Jesus preached freedom and healing for the oppressed and poor. For that, he was nearly killed.

Several aspects of this encounter speak to me. First, I have already noted that the man was possessed by many spirits. His suffering under this load must have been excruciatingly painful. I wonder, how often did this man come to church waiting for a provocative sermon to free him of this affliction? Perhaps he sat there for years. Possibly the people around him knew; perhaps they didn't. These unclean spirits might have had him put on a good face in public but saved the torment for private times. Perhaps he lost his family, his job, his community to them. He obviously needed relief.

The next aspect intriguing to me is that the unclean spirits *know* who Jesus is. In fact, they name him as the Holy One of God. In the Gospel of Mark Jesus has four encounters with unclean spirits that give his identity. I hypothesize that these unclean spirits know Jesus because they have already met him in the wilderness and he remembers them. Jesus remembers how they were defeated then, and they *know* he can do it again!

The most important factor for me in this encounter is that Jesus does not hesitate to silence the voices of the spirits but to cast them out as well. This is something no one else seemed to be able to do before. For as long as the man might have been present in the worship setting, he didn't get what he needed until Jesus came to town. He takes action. He doesn't wait until the leadership decides what to do about the man with the unclean spirits. I suspect their reaction would have been to kick him out of church. 😊

Probably the thing that fascinates me most in this passage is the reaction of the people who witnessed the event. They were amazed (can also be translated as frightened) at the power of his teaching. They were accustomed to the scribes reciting the law and extolling the people to follow it to the letter in order to be righteous before God. But Jesus? He brought something extra to those teachings, something that amazed and scared the people who were there.

The clincher comes next. In verse 27 the people remark, "What is this? A new teaching, and with authority! He even gives orders to evil spirits, and they obey him." Now, I'm only a rudimentary biblical scholar, but I found that this verse may have the punctuation in the wrong place. I read it this way, "What is this new teaching? With authority, he even gives orders to evil spirits and they obey!" Am I wrong or can I see fear in the response of the people to Jesus? They don't celebrate his casting out the unclean spirits and thereby restoring the man to an ordinary life. They don't remark about how moving the sermon was.

They ask themselves over and over, "What is this new teaching?" And they remark about the authority he has that doesn't seem to appear anywhere among their leaders. They only know that Jesus brings something new into their lives, and they're not sure it's safe to be around. It seems that they were more afraid of the divine in their midst than the evil that had been with them for some time. Boy, did they get that right!

Jesus called others into ministry with him to do what he did: confront evil. Not many of us are experienced nor comfortable with that notion. Jesus clearly demonstrated in this encounter from Mark that faith has that purpose.

Let me end this with two questions. What unclean spirits which exist in the open, do we, as a church filled with people of faith, leave unchallenged in today's world? Is that what Jesus would have us do?

FROM YOUR LEADERSHIP TEAM

MODERATOR'S REPORT – Judy Minier

Happy February to all!

The annual congregational meeting was successfully held January 21 after church. My thanks to Bill Ringelstein for chairing the meeting in my absence. I know he did a wonderful job! I was very sorry not to be in the country for our important gathering, but American Airlines cancelled our Saturday flight home from Honduras. The cancellation meant we got home late Sunday evening instead of Saturday as planned.



I'm grateful to all in the congregation who stayed to participate in the meeting and helped us work through some needed changes to our Constitution, the Endowment Team operations, and several financial and personnel matters. It is my fondest desire that we have a fully staffed Leadership Team in the coming year, based on the new opportunity for Associate Members to join our Team. Don't be shy – we have several positions available just waiting for your involvement!

On that note, please welcome our newly named Leadership Team members: Tonya Miller as Clerk and Mike Stonier as Assistant Clerk. Thank you for offering your time and talents to the well-being of our church. We are a stronger and more united church going forward!

Recent Events and Upcoming Opportunities

1. **Thank you for your service:** I want to say thanks again to Joanne Arvid and Jerome Noble for their contributions and work on our behalf this past year, and in Joanne's case, past several years. Jerome served as Discipleship Chair, helping to organize our worship activities, and Joanne as Clerk, ably keeping records with minutes of our meetings and acting as an officer of the church. We are fortunate to have had their wise input during many important events and actions.
2. **Thanks to the volunteers who attended Pride Fest:** I am pleased that we had a contingent of folks again at this year's LGBTQ event held at Laishley Park. It is such a worthwhile opportunity for us to become known in the community as an open and affirming congregation.
3. **Baker Street Children's Clothing:** I am asking for a volunteer from the congregation to assist with our annual collection of children's' clothing for the Baker Street Center (daycare) in association with the Punta Gorda Woman's Club. Over the years we have been one of the sponsors to help children in need of play clothes for the spring/summer months at the Center. This leadership opportunity involves only a few hours of work early in the project and then delivering the clothing to the Woman's Club in early March. I have the contact information on hand to pass along to someone who is able to help with this very worthwhile project. You'll enjoy doing this as you meet delightful people in the community and also be invited to a luncheon at the Woman's Club where the children perform songs and model the clothes. It is fun to do and only requires only a once a year commitment!
4. **Seek individuals to take on leadership roles** The LT is looking to bring on board an Assistant Moderator, a Discipleship Chair, and committee members to support Cathy Ann

Colson with Stewardship responsibilities. We need these filled to keep worship operating, our facilities in good shape, and to help the next Moderator to learn about LT's activities and responsibilities. Associate Members are welcome to serve in the Discipleship role and with Stewardship – please let me or another LT member know if you can step in to one of these roles.

Goals going forward:

1. **Plan for the replacement and upgrade the eastern section of the church's roof** which leaks badly during the rainy season. This issue has been put on hold for some time and we are approaching a critical situation needing our attention. You will hear more about this matter as the year progresses as we try to come to an agreement to improve this pressing need for our facility.
2. **Consider upgrades of our very dated air conditioning system** with modern wall mounted, energy efficient units. We spend a lot of money cooling the building and could do so with less cost if we upgrade our system. This may be tackled in the coming year or beyond as we find ways to help upgrade our approach to cooling, one of our biggest bills during the summer.
3. **Update our website** and provide ways for office staff to keep the information on it more current and timely. By February we hope to have the new site in place and functioning.
4. **Complete an in-house, updated Church Directory** by late spring with photos, names, and contact information.

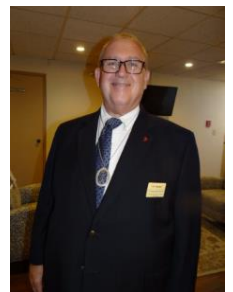
Next LT Meeting: The February Leadership Team meeting takes place on Tuesday, February 13, at 4:30pm Remember, we are here to support our pastor, our church ministries/responsibilities and operations, and one another in the congregation. We welcome your input about what we are doing, how we are doing, and what we should be doing. Please see any of us if you have questions, concerns, or suggestions about how we can more effectively manage our resources or make our church more responsive for our members and the community we serve.

A thought for the day: "Gratitude is our most direct line to God and the angels. If we take the time, no matter how crazy and troubled we feel, we can find something to be thankful for." Terry Lynn Taylor



MINISTER OF MUSIC - Tim Sperber

January finds both our choir and bell choir busy at work preparing music for our worship services. The Bell Choir will be playing on March 4 and have been preparing three pieces of music. It is never too late to join the choir. Come join us on Wednesdays from 7:00pm to 8:30pm in Faith Hall.



If you want to know more, you can call me at 954-298-7230, email me at sperbert@gmail.com or just stop by the organ after the service.

ENDOWMENT TEAM – Bill Ringelstein

IRS notice has provided that distributions from IRAs that are directly donated to nonprofit organizations (think UCC Church, here) can be made tax free. Typical distributions from IRAs are normally taxed when the withdrawal is made, but direct donations are tax free.

TREASURER – Melissa Brown

If you had a chance to read the annual report, you will have seen that we ended the year with a loss of around \$3,000. Also, at the annual meeting, the congregation approved an operating budget for next year that projects donations to the operating account of \$171,000 and projected expenses of \$157,689. If all goes well, we will be able to repay some if not all the monies that were borrowed in FY2015 & FY2016 from the Cornerstone Fund.



It is encouraging to have a budget that projects a possible “profit.” I am looking forward to seeing the results of our stewardship campaign, “Journey of Generosity,” provide the donations that will enable us to meet our goal of \$171,000.

Since we do not have January financial results yet, I am going to close my report with a few “housekeeping” items:

- We have a few boxes of 2018 donation envelopes left over. If anyone has not received envelopes for 2018 and would like to have a set, please contact the church office, and we will get a set to you.
- Please refrain from mailing checks to the church’s street address. For security purposes, it is best to mail your check to our post office box address: PO 510838, Punta Gorda, FL 33950-0838. If your check is being mailed by your bank, please check that you have given the bank the post office address rather than the street address and, if the latter, we’d appreciate your instructing your bank to change the mailing address.
- Please note that you may have been assigned a different envelope number as of 1/1/2018. When writing your envelope number in the memo section of your check, please be sure to use your 2018 envelope number.

FELLOWSHIP MINISTRY TEAM - Jan Tulk

Maybe, by now, you have had a chance to see the new sign-up sheet. Hopefully these smaller steps will make it easier to host our Fellowship Hour. I would like to thank the following people for hosting in January; Elden and Diane Wick, Bill and CathyAnn Colson, Pat Blandford, Betty Balmer, Emily Klossner, Bruce and Mary Ellen Nielsen, Molly Hall, Myra and Don Nagel, Milt and Gretchen Smith.



Now, if you look at the sheet and are doing the math, you will realize although the steps are smaller, you will have to take your turn more often. The Wicks were hosts on two different Sundays,

and the Niensens signed up for two blocks on the 21st. The Nagels also signed up for two blocks on the 28th. You can mix it up: one time you might bring fruit, and another time, make coffee.

Speaking of coffee, I'm hearing that some people are a little intimidated by the coffee machines. Believe me, it is not rocket science. If I can do it (a non-coffee drinker), anyone can do it. I am there on Sunday anywhere from 9:00 to 9:15 and will be glad to help you. Please give it a try. It is easy. Everything is supplied for you, and the directions are on the inside of the cupboard door by the coffee maker. The door is even labeled "Church."

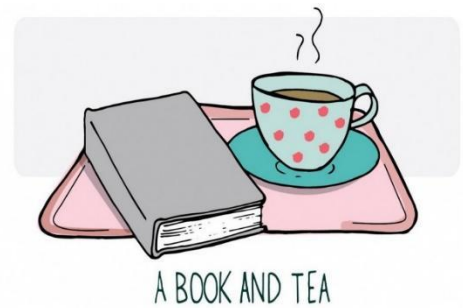
Our church picnic is going to be on March 11, hopefully at Gilchrist Park (updates to follow). Please mark your calendars. This year we aren't going to have our gentlemen grilling. Two years ago, it was too hot to be working over a hot fire. Last year, it was hard because it was so windy that we worried about fire danger. So, we decided to make it an old-fashioned picnic, where the cooked meat is part of the sign-up sheet. A few suggestions would be meatloaf (my favorite!), fried chicken, sloppy joes, or pulled pork. Also, we are asking that you bring your own beverages and table settings. We want to continue to try to reduce the amount of waste we put in our landfill by not using so much paper. I hope you are looking forward to this. It is always so nice to have our worship service outside, overlooking our beautiful harbor, and then enjoying fellowship over everyone's favorite recipes.

LIBRARIAN – Sandy James-Nogaj



Thanks to Linda Greenfield for hosting January's Book Talk Tea. We watched a video on the Seminole Indians and had a discussion afterwards as well as reviewing books that we have read. Linda supplied a fabulous lunch for the group.

The February Book Talk Tea is on Friday, February 9, at 1:00pm in the church library. Mary Ellen Steele-Pierce is hosting. Please sign up at the kiosk in the back of the sanctuary.



LADIES' LUNCH OUT – Neoma Remiger

February's lunch out theme will be "Welcome Back Snowbirds- Soup and Sandwich" and will be on Thursday, February 15, at 12:00noon at the church in Faith Hall. It will be a soup, sandwich & dessert luncheon. You are asked to bring a sandwich (of your choice) to be shared with the group. We will need four (4) ladies to bring soup (of your choosing), and two or three to bring dessert. Please sign up at the kiosk in the back of the church and be sure to put it on your calendar.

SOCIAL JUSTICE MINISTRIES

A small group of interested members have formed the Social Justice Ministries Committee. It is a sub-committee of Discipleship on the Leadership Team.

We are looking at the UCC.org website and gaining information about the denomination's stance on social justice issues.

One current and local issue was the CIW boycott of Wendy's on January 18. (More information will be forthcoming.) Another issue is human trafficking. Our church library contains a book titled "The Slave Next Door" by Kevin Bales, which presents helpful information on this topic.

Please join us in the action steps that our committee is developing!

LIVING THE QUESTIONS

The Living the Questions classes are starting Monday, February 5, in Faith Hall from 3:30p – 5:00 pm. The topic is Prophetic Faith. If you are interested in attending, please feel free to join us. All are welcome.

GREAT DECISIONS

The Great Decisions classes will be starting on February 6 from 1:30pm to 3:00pm in the library. If you have questions or need more information, please call Lori or Gerry Larson (941-624-5378).

FROM THE CHURCH SCRIBE – Joyce Schenk

MEDAL WORTHY PERFORMANCES

In a few days, the world's attention will once again be focused on men and women from around the globe as the best of the best compete to be recognized at the top of their sport.

We'll watch breathlessly as these amazing athletes demonstrate skills honed over years of dedication and practice. We'll be cheering for our country's representatives as they strive for the treasured medals, whether gold, silver or bronze.

Those of us who are not of the athletic persuasion are, unfortunately, left out of this heady loop. We may, in our own right, be outstanding in some area of activity, but alas, our accomplishments haven't earned Olympic recognition.

But, if they did...

If music was part of the medal-earning competition, our Minister of Music, Tim Sperber, would surely take home the gold for his ability to bring the music of the angels into every service.



Another winner in our church family is our own Linda Greenfield. As anyone who knows her will report, Linda's area of expertise is in the kitchen. If baking ever becomes an Olympic event, Linda would be assured a spot at the top of the podium. Unfortunately, the world doesn't recognize her field of endeavor, except when samples of her menu magic are passed out to fortunate taste testers. Then, the contented smile on Linda's face indicates her efforts have been amply recognized.

Another of our church family who has a medal-worthy gift is Clif Trudeau. His skill in restoring the storm-damaged stained-glass windows saved a beautiful section of our sanctuary from being lost forever. A gold medal would be small recognition for his meticulous work.

And no one could deny that our Lady of the Books, Sandy James-Nogaj, easily qualifies for a gold medal in the field of Church Librarian. Our library may not be quite as vast as the Library of Congress, but Sandy treats the collection with the same love and respect as that esteemed national treasure.

Each of us has God-given gifts as well as areas of expertise we can be proud of. Oh, we may not nail a complex jump on the ice, score one for the team in hockey, or have an outstanding ski run for the record books, but our type of knowledge and experience adds fulfillment and satisfaction to our lives.

So, in the days ahead, as we watch the young, the swift, the graceful and the athletic representatives of our great nation compete with their international counterparts, we can enjoy the show, while recognizing we, too, are winners.

FEBRUARY CELEBRATORY DATES

FEBRUARY BIRTHDAYS

February 1	Mary Farnquist Robert Zitti
February 4	Gerry Blandford
February 8	Meghan Piotrowski
February 23	Ron Jankowski
February 24	Judy Wood
February 26	Joanne Arvid Whitney Swift

FEBRUARY ANNIVERSARIES

February 2	Mike & Kelly Ford
February 24	Denny & Kathy Reed



Did we miss a birthday or anniversary? Please email the office, and we will try to make sure it doesn't happen again: office@puntagorda-ucc.com