

Welcome!

First Congregational Church of Webster Groves
United Church of Christ



Seek Christ in each. Serve God in all.

May 17, 2020

Sixth Sunday of Easter

Ascension Sunday

Mental Health Awareness Sunday (UCC)



*We respond to God's call by welcoming everyone
regardless of ability, age, ethnicity, race, gender identity,
sexual orientation or socio-economic background.*

*To proclaim in word and deed the love of Christ,
we affirm that all may share in the full life, ministry, fellowship,
responsibilities and blessing of our congregation.*

*No matter who you are
or where you are on life's journey, you are welcome here.*

Order of Worship

WELCOME AND ANNOUNCEMENTS

Rev. David Denoon, *Pastor*

Good morning and welcome to worship with the First Congregational Church of Webster Groves. Today is Sunday, May seventeenth, 2020, the sixth Sunday of Easter and the Sunday before the feast of the Ascension. In the United Church of Christ, this is also Mental Health Awareness Sunday.

Worship has been prepared today by myself, Tracey Harris, Merrimon Boyd, Linda Smith, Leon Burke, and Ian Didriksen. Our soloist for hymns is Jennifer Jones. Our PowerPoint slideshow is being facilitated by Gwen Denoon. Some parts of this worship were pre-recorded by Conference Ministers and national executive staff of the United Church of Christ. Our anthem today is a recording by the Chancel Choir of Christ Church UCC in Summit, New Jersey – *I Believe*, an original piece composed and directed by their Minister of Music Mark Miller.

OPENING WORDS

Luke 24:44, 48-53

Merrimon Boyd, *Student Minister*

[In the Upper Room on the night of the Resurrection, Jesus appeared and, after sharing food with his disciples,] said to [them], “These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you—that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled... You are witnesses of these things. And see, I am sending upon you what our God has promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.”

Then he led them out as far as Bethany, and, lifting up his hands, he blessed them. While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven. And they worshiped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy; and they were continually in the temple blessing God.

PRELUDE (VIDEO)

St. Elizabeth
(Leon Burke III, *Organ*)

Diane Bish

CALL TO WORSHIP (Responsive)

Rev. David Popham, *Conference Minister*
Hawai'i Conference, UCC

When we feel isolated and alone, O God, your Word comes to us,

“I will not leave you orphaned.”

When we face an uncertain future, the Bible reminds us,

“We walk by faith, not by sight.”

Rev. Franz Rigert, *Conference Minister*
Wisconsin Conference, UCC

When we are scared and anxious, we hear your whisper,

“Be not afraid, for I am with you.”

We come to this time of worship, remembering the promises of our God, strengthened in hope and saturated in holy love.

Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia!

RAISING THE COVENANT

Covenant of 1977

We who are called of God into this Christian community covenant together: to seek to know the will of God, to experience the joy and struggle of discipleship, to proclaim in word and deed the love of Christ, and to work for peace and justice among all people. We trust God's promise of grace and forgiveness and the presence of the Holy Spirit in our trials and rejoicing.

GATHERING HYMN

Fairest Lord Jesus
(Jennifer Jones, *Song Leader*)

Anonymous (Schönster Herr Jesus)
Tune: ST. ELIZABETH

Fairest Lord Jesus, Ruler of creation,
Thou of God and Anointed One,
Truly I'd love thee, truly I'd serve thee,
Light of my soul, my joy, my crown.

Fair are the meadows, fair are the woodlands,
Robed in the flowers of blooming spring,
Jesus is fairer, Jesus is purer
Who makes the sorrowing spirit sing.

Beautiful Savior, Lord of the nations,
Thou of God and Anointed One,
Glory and honor, praise and adoration
Now and for evermore be thine!

PRAYER OF APPROACH (Unison)

Erick Falconer, *Youth Minister*

O God, we are yours and you are ours. You created each and all of us for your glory and pleasure. So, we pray your forgiveness for those times when we have failed to uphold your glory; when we have submitted to a spirit of slavery rather than freedom; when we have, even inadvertently, supported systems that have oppressed or injured others.

Forgive us for ignoring the prompting of your Spirit, for trivializing your purpose for our lives, and for placing our will above yours. Grant us courage to share in Christ's sufferings, to be his witnesses, and to carry your loving compassion to a hurting world.

As we prepare our hearts to say farewells and welcomes, make us truly ready – by your grace and with your power – to renew and restore as your people, your community, your church in Christ's name. Amen.

NOT FOR CHILDREN ONLY

The Invisible String
(Read by Rev. Linda E. Smith)

Patrice Karst

THE WORD SHARED

From the Gospels

John 14:15-21

Tracey Harris, *Student Minister*

The Inclusive Bible

A reading from the gospel according to John, the fourteenth chapter. Jesus is presiding at the table of the last supper, and says to his disciples,

“If you love me and obey the command I give you, I will ask the One who sent me to give you another Helper to be with you always – the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot accept since the world neither sees her nor recognizes her; but you can recognize the Spirit because she remains with you and will be within you. I won't leave you orphaned; I will come back to you. A little while now and the world will see me no more; but you'll see me; because I live, and you will live as well. On that day you'll know that I am in God, and you are in me, and I am in you. Those who obey the commandments are the ones who love me, and those who love me will be loved by Abba God. I, too, will love them and will reveal myself to them.”

Response.

Reader: Hear what the Spirit is saying to the people.

People: Thanks be to God.

ANTHEM

I Believe

Mark Miller

(Performed by the Chancel Choir of Christ Church UCC, Summit, New Jersey
under the direction of the composer, Christ Church's Music Minister)

MESSAGE OF THE DAY

“Loneliness and Solitude”

Rev. Denoon

Prayer of Preparation

Dear God, we do believe in you and thank you for always being present with us. You've given us such an example, so that we might be present for one another and for all those around us, even if we cannot be "there" in person. Keep teaching us, leading us, and guiding us. And speak to us with your Word, in Christ's name. Amen.

Message

I've titled today's message "Loneliness and Solitude," and I kind of connect it with last week's message, "Alone Together." With both of them what I've been trying to do is to find something positive to say about this enforced isolation that we've been dealing with, these last couple of months and (really) for the foreseeable future.

By "the foreseeable future" what I mean to say is that, even when we're back together again there's going to be a new ordering of things from how we've been together before.

You know how, with the advent of mobile phones becoming more and more mobile and versatile in what they could do (Now, our smart phones are really just small personal computers.), there has been a whole industry of experts expressing their concerns that we've been "alone together" for a while. You'll see people walking down the street either seeming as though they're talking to themselves (but they've really got a very small ear-mounted device connected to their phone) or else staring into their hands as they go, reading or watching some favorite movie or TV show.

These experts have been worrying about us doing that. When I was a kid, they used to crow about us watching too much TV, not getting enough outside time. In either case, the worry was that we weren't interacting with others enough.

Now, of course, the concern is that we're interacting with others too much, or in unhygienic ways – with mouths uncovered or hands unwashed, or we're not observing proper social distancing. As church, as a responsible social institution designed to set an example for others – not to bemoan the intrusion of government and science into our lives, but to abide their wisdom and knowledge in a time when we depend on their wisdom and knowledge for our very survival as individual members of a species beset by disease and illness – we aren't going to be able to gather in the old ways... with pews arranged in unsafe distances and patterns, some of them almost impossibly long and forcing us to step over each other in order to fill them.

And that's just one aspect of our new time that will need to be rethought. But it's enough for an example of how we shall be "alone together" in a new way, with strangely positive undertones and overtones.

Until then, we're doing this... isolating in place. Is there a positive outcome here for ourselves, who are so accustomed to being interactive in person? and who really do benefit from groups and gatherings and closeness? This is, after all, how we do ministry. "We are the body of Christ and individually members of it." Paul, in Romans chapter 12, asserts this most surely.

And there will continue to be such opportunities. We just need to reimagine how it is that we'll be able both to comply with that call upon us to be God's people – that "God's people – a priestly and holy nation" we read about, last Sunday – and also comply with health restrictions... so that the body and its members doesn't become sick or cause others to suffer.

We're working on that.

But, as you already know, isolating runs us the risk of loneliness.

It was interesting for me, listening to Krista Tippett interviewing Stephen Batchelor, a few weeks ago. He's a Buddhist who lived for a while as an ascetic, a monk, away from society in order to concentrate more completely and to meditate more purely. That was when he was a young man. In his middle age now, Stephen shares with others his knowledge of the benefits of aloneness, especially for what it means that we are able to accomplish when brought together again. There's joy and purpose to be found, when we self-isolate for the purpose of meditation and contemplation and reflection.

He reminded me as he spoke of the direction of Father Richard Rohr, a Franciscan friar who runs the Center for Contemplation and Action. Richard, this past week in his organization's weblog, has focused on the work of Julian of Norwich. Julian was a 14th Century ascetic who lived in a cell in St. Julian's church in Norwich, England. Her name wasn't Julian; we actually don't know her name, we've just preserved her memory according to the name of the church.

What we know of her is that, during the time of the Black Death, when she became ill herself but recovered, she kept herself safe by isolating in that cell – a simple, little room with a window its only exposure to the outside. She would counsel passersby and congregants through that window, and she would write her visions down. She actually

wrote the first book in the English language that has survived, by a woman, *Sixteen Revelations of Divine Love*.

Stephen Batchelor pointed out in that interview that the translators of his book into other languages had some difficulty with the book's title, *The Art of Solitude*. In languages other than English, there are not so many words as we have for aloneness here. And the same word they would use for "solitude" they must use also for "lonesomeness" or "loneliness" or "isolation" – none of which is positive. He notes that in German, the four words of his title doubled into eight, *Die Kunst mit zie selbst allein zu sein* — literally, "The Art of Being Alone with Oneself."

Still, the trick to solitude is crafting it into an art – not to indicate that we lack anything by being alone, but that we might actually be gaining something: the way that prisoners become bodybuilders or musicians become virtuosi or prayerful people become contemplatives.

For weeks now, Joan Musbach has been encouraging us to write this stuff down that we're experiencing. And we're actually getting to read about one another's experiences of gardening and collecting and other matters of self-improvement or finding new ways to connect. Tomorrow, as every Monday, a new one comes out. I can't wait.

This week, Marilyn Davis talked about the addition of routine to her life, while Joan herself referred to all her "Someday when..." projects and opportunities staring back at her now. This reminded me of Laura Cooper's observations, a few weeks before, about de-cluttering.

In past weeks, I've been frustrated with Marj Courtney over how much she misses her family whom she'd hoped would be visiting. Kay Roush, ever the historian, observed how life has changed for herself and others – from electronic meetings to self-styled haircuts. Joan Whitford and Faye Dyer and the Edwards have shared about their walks in parks while George Conlee and Roger Barnes have actually ventured into wilderness, pursuing their hobbies in earnest.

Janet Fales' recollections of childhood and youth – replete with photos of her gardening grandmother and rhubarb bonnets – sparked my own reminiscences of summers in the country.

Tom and Linda Waltz, who traveled to the Holy Land in March, came back with COVID-19 and reminded us of the perils we face, now that they're safely home and recovered.

And Diane Weber's, as she puts it, "love affair with Jesus" brings all of this back around, for making the most of isolation by turning it into solitude. (Those poor Germans and others whose languages aren't versatile enough to allow them to disassociate loneliness from solitude!)

I was brought to considering all of this by the words of Christ which Tracey read earlier – words of assurance for his disciples that, yes, he was going away finally – at least in the flesh. "I will not leave you orphaned," he told them... words like those we tell ourselves and our children at funerals. *As long as you keep them in your memory, they're never gone.* Or in that book *The Invisible String*... "No one is ever alone."

Or, as you heard it in the anthem today, "I believe in God even when God is silent."

Each of us needs to hear this. And considering the way that our hearts and minds can tell us threateningly that, when we're alone we are actually unconnected, we have to help ourselves and one another to disbelieve that, to know how present God is and how present we can be for one another! (In this Mental Health Awareness Week, we *really need to be conscientious about this!*)

If we can settle into such knowledge and wisdom, it may help us abide more effectively and purposefully the wisdom and knowledge of our scientists and officials who warn us to stay at home... and more surely defy the lack of wisdom or knowledge of those who insist that, despite the warnings, we should re-engage and disregard those who know more than we do.

I am praying for you in this time. Please, pray for me too, and for all our siblings in Christ and in the world, that we may have the fortitude and the courage in isolation to turn from loneliness to solitude and live in new ways the love we've seen in Christ our Savior.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.

PRAYER HYMN (VIDEO)

I Love to Tell the Story

W. H. Parker

I love to tell the story of unseen things above,
Of Jesus' radiant glory, of Jesus' endless love.
I love to tell the story, because I know it's true;
It satisfies my longings as nothing else can do.

I love to tell the story, and when I am in glory
I'll tell the old, old story of Jesus' endless love.

I love to tell the story; more wonderful it seems
Than all the golden visions of all our golden dreams.
I love to tell the story, I tell it now to you
Because I want to share it, because I know it's true.
I love to tell the story, and when I am in glory
I'll tell the old, old story of Jesus' endless love.

I love to tell the story; it's pleasant to repeat
What seems, each time I tell it, more wonderfully sweet.
I love to tell the story, for some have never heard
The message of salvation from God's own holy Word.
I love to tell the story, and when I am in glory
I'll tell the old, old story of Jesus' endless love.

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

We Lift Our Joys and Concerns to God

Let us remember those people and situations for whom we are praying today:

Joyce Berger, a senior member living at home with support of family and friends

The Rev. Dr. **Paul Davis**, in rehab after a bout with poor health

Margaret Gustafson, with a chronic health condition

Carol McCoy, in need of prayerful support

Bob Moody, undergoing chemotherapy treatment with a positive prognosis

The Rev. **Jack Newsome**, isolated in assisted living

Ken Perry, whose radiation treatment with a positive prognosis

Becky Scott, with health challenges

The family of Marshall Brooks, who died on Tuesday at age 97,
at his residence in Rogers, Arkansas

Loretta Landis, hospitalized this week with non-Covid pneumonia but home again now

Those who are worried about their business or their employment

Young people and their teachers, studying and teaching remotely

Those lonely and alone

People with stressed home situations which are intensified by quarantine

First responders, healthcare workers, and delivery personnel

Prayers from Congregants Online

Answered prayer at Eden Seminary

Blessings to all of our 2020 graduates

Blessings to all of those turning loneliness into solitude

Blessings for Erick Falconer, who had to be substituted in his part this morning,
when Zoom caused his microphone to fail

Prayer of the Day

Rev. Denoon

Dear God, we thank you for loving us and for never leaving us. It is not within your nature, we know, to ever leave us. We know that One who is eternal must always be present. But we are thankful

for that, anyway, because sometimes it doesn't feel that way, doesn't feel as if you are here, and we need reminders.

Jesus was one reminder, so long ago. The Holy Spirit is our reminder, even now, and we are thankful. We pray your constancy with us, and your patience with us if we are having difficulty realizing just how you are in our midst, hearing our prayers and seeking to answer them.

We pray for all those we have mentioned today aloud, and for all of the prayers of our hearts which we are offering to you in silence at this time. Guide us by grace into a new time, a new way of being. And help us continue to be your Church, as we seek your will and seek to do your Word. We remain attentive to you, just as Jesus drew our attention to you and to your Spirit — Jesus, our Brother, the One who came to save us, to guide us, and to let us know that we are all your children and might with boldness pray before you, “**Our Father...**”

Prayer of Our Savior

Our Father who art in heaven: hallowed be thy name; thy kingdom come; thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven; give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil; for thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.

BENEDICTION

UCC National Executive Ministers

Rev. Traci Blackmon, *Associate General Minister*

Friends, as we have gathered in diverse places and spaces today for worship, we offer you this closing prayer: May God bless you and keep you. May God's face shine upon you and be gracious unto you and give you peace.

Rev. Karen Georgia Thompson, *Associate General Minister*

Siblings in Christ Jesus our Lord, we are one body united across time and space, walking in the calling, in the anointing, and in the power of the Holy Spirit. We are one body, sharing our hopes and dreams for the kin-dom of God, being salt and light in these days. And as one body we leave this virtual space — united in love, united in hope, and united in our commitment to serve God, to our communities, to serve the world, and to love each other.

Rev. Dr. John Dorhauer, *General Minister and President*

Go therefore, having received the blessing of the living God who in love created you; the blessing of the risen Christ who in love redeems you; and the blessing of their Holy Spirit who continues to abide in, and broods in, and is the lifeblood of the Church that we love. Because you are blessed, become a blessing, as you proclaim the love of God in word and deed to all the ends of the earth. Amen.

POSTLUDE

L'Ascension: 4. Prière du Christ

Olivier Messiaen

DISMISSAL

That's our worship for this Sunday at First Church. Be sure to join us, next week, when our Student Ministers Tracey Harris and Merrimon Boyd offer Messages of the Day, reflective of their experiences in life and leadership at First Church, this past academic year.

If you would like to support First Church with a financial donation, please either send a check to First Congregational Church, 10 West Lockwood Avenue, Webster Groves, Missouri 63119; or go to our website – FirstChurchWG.org – and go to our “Donate” page.

Again, thanks for being with us. Our worship has ended. Let our service begin.



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