

# Welcome!

First Congregational Church of Webster Groves  
United Church of Christ



*Seek Christ in each. Serve God in all.*

August 9, 2020

Tenth Sunday After Pentecost



*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.*



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## Order of Worship

### WELCOME AND ANNOUNCEMENTS

Sue Stepleton

Good morning and welcome to worship with the First Congregational Church of Webster Groves, United Church of Christ, located near St. Louis, Missouri. I'm your announcer for the day, Sue Stepleton. I've been a member of the church for a long time. I love it dearly, and although we can't get together in person, I'm glad that we can get together, this way.

Today is Sunday, August ninth, 2020, the tenth Sunday after Pentecost.

This morning's worship has been prepared by Pastor Dave Denoon, Music Director Leon Burke, and volunteer recording engineers Herb Niemeyer and Ian Didriksen. Our PowerPoint slideshow is being facilitated by Gwen Denoon.

Let our worship begin.

### PRELUDE

*Summertime*  
Leon Burke III, piano

George Gershwin  
arr. Anonymous

### CALL TO WORSHIP

based on Isaiah 40:31

(Responsive – Leader; **People**)

Those who wait upon our God shall renew their strength. They shall mount up with wings like eagles. They shall run and not be weary. They shall walk and not faint.

**From our God whose heart is compassion we receive this hope.**

O worship the holy One who meets you wherever you are. Yes, open yourselves to the God who lifts us up.

**We are gathered, though scattered, to worship. Here, we offer our hearts and minds, our spirits and strength, our bodies and voices to God.**

### RAISING THE COVENANT

*Covenant of 1977*

As the body of Christ, let us say together our covenant...

**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

*In Christ There Is No East or West*  
Performed by Leon Burke III

Oxenham/Stookey, words  
Tune: MCKEE

In Christ there is no East or West, in Christ no South or North,  
But one community of love throughout the whole wide earth

In Christ shall true hearts everywhere their high communion find;  
God's service is the golden cord close-binding humankind.

In Christ is neither Jew nor Greek, and neither slave nor free,  
For men and women live in God, and all are kin to me.

In Christ now meet both East and West, in Christ meet South and North;  
One joyous, true community throughout the whole wide earth.

### PRAYER OF APPROACH

Merrimon Boyd

**God of Presence, as you walked upon the water to meet the disciples, meet us in the midst of the storms in our lives.**

**God of Renewal, as you lifted Peter from the water, lift us from despair to hope, from distraction to focus, from death to life.**

**God of the Journey, direct us in your way, work out your purpose in and through our lives.**

**We pray in the name of Christ who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.**

**NOT FOR CHILDREN ONLY**

Rev. David Denoon, *Pastor*

[Pastor Dave talks with the young people about the Parable of the Prodigal Son, in keeping with the Sunday School lesson for the day which points out the importance of “compassion at the table.” How does the older brother respond to his father’s invitation to greet his long lost brother at the celebrative, family table? Will he share his father’s compassion despite his sibling’s questionable behavior?]

**THE WORD SHARED**

Sue Stepleton

*From the Gospels*

Romans 5:11-15

NRSV, ad.

<sup>11</sup> The scripture says,

“No one who believes in our God will be put to shame.”

<sup>12</sup> [In that statement] there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Ruler is Sovereign of all and is generous to all who call to God. <sup>13</sup> Indeed, “Everyone who calls on the name of the Sovereign God shall be saved.”

<sup>14</sup> But how is anyone to call on one in whom they have not believed?

And how are they to believe in one, of whom they have never heard?

And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him?

<sup>15</sup> And how are they to proclaim him unless they are sent?

As it is written, “How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!”

*Response.*

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

**People: Thanks be to God.**

**MESSAGE OF THE DAY**

*“Compassion and Covid:  
What Is Compassion?”*

Rev. Denoon

We have a saying in Christianity:

*Do unto others as you would have them do unto you. (Jesus of Nazareth)*

And there is a saying in Judaism:

*Do not do to others that which you would not want done to you. (Hillel)*

Interestingly, in the third Abrahamic religion, Islam, there is a saying:

*As you would have people do to you, do to them;*

*and what you dislike to be done to you, don't do to them. (Muhammad)*

And this same principle not only exists in the three great religions born of the Middle East. In one form or another, this Golden Rule stretches across every religion in the world.

*Practice compassion, we are saying.*

*Understand that we are all carrying heavy burdens or suffering*

*and that in all that we do we should seek lighten others' burdens as well as our own,  
to relieve our and others' suffering.*

Karen Armstrong, a scholar of religion who has dedicated her life to bringing forward the underlying purposes of religion, in 2009 began a process toward devising and affirming what she would come to call “The Charter for Compassion.” With nine other leading religious thinkers from a variety of traditions, Prof. Armstrong composed a document which she invites all people of faith, as well as conscientious agencies, businesses, and governments to consider signing onto. It goes like this (and it’s four paragraphs long, so please bear with me):

## THE CHARTER FOR COMPASSION

The principle of compassion lies at the heart of all religious, ethical and spiritual traditions, calling us always to treat all others as we wish to be treated ourselves. Compassion impels us to work tirelessly to alleviate the suffering of our fellow creatures, to dethrone ourselves from the centre of our world and put another there, and to honour the inviolable sanctity of every single human being, treating everybody, without exception, with absolute justice, equity and respect.

It is also necessary in both public and private life to refrain consistently and empathically from inflicting pain. To act or speak violently out of spite, chauvinism, or self-interest, to impoverish, exploit or deny basic rights to anybody, and to incite hatred by denigrating others—even our enemies—is a denial of our common humanity. We acknowledge that we have failed to live compassionately and that some have even increased the sum of human misery in the name of religion.

We therefore call upon all men and women to restore compassion to the centre of morality and religion ~ to return to the ancient principle that any interpretation of scripture that breeds violence, hatred or disdain is illegitimate ~ to ensure that youth are given accurate and respectful information about other traditions, religions and cultures ~ to encourage a positive appreciation of cultural and religious diversity ~ to cultivate an informed empathy with the suffering of all human beings—even those regarded as enemies.

We urgently need to make compassion a clear, luminous and dynamic force in our polarized world. Rooted in a principled determination to transcend selfishness, compassion can break down political, dogmatic, ideological and religious boundaries. Born of our deep interdependence, compassion is essential to human relationships and to a fulfilled humanity. It is the path to enlightenment, and indispensable to the creation of a just economy and a peaceful global community.

I want to talk with you today and for the next four Sundays about just how crucial compassion is for our world, right now especially, as we are facing a crisis that seems to have a almost a personality of its own.

As we react to the coronavirus – in good conscience and questionable – we are doing good things and questionable things, both of them potentially leading us from the principle of compassion which is at the core of our religious understanding and practice.

We are practicing distancing ourselves safely, which necessarily keeps us apart as we seek to avoid inadvertently infecting each other. And we are finding ourselves asking what acceptable risks might be, so that we can either be together or at least feel less restrained and constrained ourselves. This is dividing us ideologically, as we try to discern whether privilege or good faith ought to be in the ascendant.

But we really can afford neither. If compassion is required us, literally *suffering together*, then we cannot afford *not to be together*. Prof. Armstrong has worked with others to establish practices – twelve of them, not unlike the twelve steps of recovery groups – designed to make us more conscientiously and practically compassionate. And at least in the meantime, I want to bring these practices forward. I'm going to gloss over some and concentrate on others. And hopefully, when we're done in a few weeks we'll have had chances to reflect on how we might engage these practices ourselves.

That's not to say we don't already engage them.

I think about First Church, and I am immediately caused to think about compassion. Some of you know that one of the favorite stories of some members of this church is about the devastation they experienced upon the death of their teenage son in an automobile accident. They were living in Indianapolis after having lived and worked here in Webster Groves for many years and having endeared themselves to this faith community. And the car crash happened out of state also, but this community's sense of connection with them did not end when they moved away. The response of the church to their tragedy was to organize carloads of members and to drive to Indianapolis for the day of the young man's funeral.

"If we ever get back to St. Louis," the family said, "no matter where we may live, that will be our church." And move back they did, and our church is theirs.

Although their story is special, it is not unique among us. One of the features of the binding Spirit of God that enlivens and energizes this congregation is the common tragedy among so many of us of being parents whose children have preceded them in death. You have been cared for by your siblings in Christ here, and you have also given care.

Now, it is not as though our congregation is unique in our affirmation of connections with one

another through the compassion that we have shown one another in times of tragedy and beyond them. We are not somehow unique in the fact that it does not take a tragedy or a crisis for us to act on behalf of other individual members or groups within the church or on behalf of people beyond our faith community. There is among us, and every congregation I have known, regardless of creed, a sense of obligation toward compassion.

We visit and talk, provide meals or treats, send greetings, go on service trips for days at a time, build handicap access ramps or entire houses. All of these activities are central to who we are and how we define ourselves. We seek to practice selflessness, unconditional love, open-heartedness, according to the example of Jesus.

I have directed the families of the younger children in our congregation to take a look at the curriculum, *Compassion Camp*, designed by a Sunday School publisher called Illustrated Ministry. In their home settings, our young people will be thinking about how compassion is practiced in some very practical terms:

- at the table (using the Prodigal Son as an example),
- to the neighbor (reminding them of the Paralytic and his friends),
- for oneself (teaching the third part of “Love God, love your neighbor, love yourself”),
- along one’s way (making another’s way one’s own as Ruth made Naomi’s way hers too), and
- to the world (introducing the radical transformation suggested by the year of jubilee in Jewish thought).

Similarly, beyond this introduction I will be speaking with you about how the purpose of compassion is transformation –

- transformation of the self through open-mindedness and open-heartedness,
- opening of the self to the other and to one’s world,
- serving the other while not forgetting oneself, and
- showing charity not only to ourselves and our dear ones but also to our enemies.

Prof. Armstrong delineates her process to more compassionate living in this way:

#### **TWELVE STEPS TO A COMPASSIONATE LIFE**

1. Learn what compassion is (and what it is not).
2. Become aware of the environment in which you are located.
3. Have compassion for yourself.
4. Practice empathy.
5. Practice mindfulness.
6. Make compassion part of your daily routine.
7. Practice open-mindedness and open-heartedness (You are not the best informed person in the room.)
8. Pay attention to the ways in which you speak with others and seek to be charitable toward them as you do.
9. Set aside tribalism.
10. Allow your mind to be changed (Everything is more complex than you imagine.).
11. Recognize the universal (the face of God) in everyone you encounter.
12. Love your enemies.

As we go, I hope that you will consider how you have encountered compassion in your own experiences. What have been the examples that others have set for you, and why do you follow them? Where are the limits of your compassion, and how did those get set? What transformation are you ready to experience? These questions are critical to our approach to compassionate living.

Speaking of compassion in terms of God’s generosity, Paul wrote to the Romans:

*There is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Ruler is Sovereign of all and is generous to all who call to God.*

He would say this also in other writings, about enslaved people and free, women and men. Christianity is a great equalizer when practiced rightly and conscientiously. Jesus most notably suffered as we do, from the greatest to the least, and his suffering, his compassion and the ways in which he has met us and “did not count equality with God something to be grasped” remains the central story of our religion.

So you see, compassion is not a principle or a practice for the faint of heart, and I invite you to journey with me into an examination of it and of ourselves... a journey which, truly, all people of good faith are on.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.

### **SHARING OUR BOUNTY (REPAIRING THE WORLD) Sue Stepleton**

The purpose of worship is not only to praise God for the grace we have received for our daily living – a grace we continue to receive. Worship also reminds us of our common humanity and our obligation to show compassion to others and to serve them. One way to do this is to support others who serve directly.

So, here is our invitation to you, to serve and support in a monetary way. While this health crisis continues, until a vaccine is found, we won't be passing plates or collecting in person. If you are able financially, and you would like to support First Church with a monetary 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](http://FirstChurchWG.org) – and to our “Donate” page.

Our giving spreads the bounty we have received and supports the ministries of our church that extend into the world for the sake of reconciling people, repairing a damaged creation, and honoring our God – Creator, Redeemer, and Comforter.

*Prayer of Dedication (Unison)*

Rev. Denoon

**Sovereign of all, of enemies and of neighbors, we know that you call us to suffer alongside our siblings and in so doing to show compassion to your world. So that your own Christly example may be extended, we make this offering from the fruit of our labors. Receive and bless our gifts to your service, in Christ's name. Amen.**

### **PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE**

Rev. Denoon, assisted by Mr. Boyd

*We Lift Our Joys and Concerns*

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

**Joyce Berger**, who is in the process of moving to a new residence, at Cape Albeon

The Rev. Dr. **Paul Davis**, back home after a short stay in hospital

**Carol McCoy**, in need of prayerful support in the aftermath of a stroke

**Bob Moody**, undergoing treatment for skin cancer, with a positive prognosis

**Ken Perry**, who is fully recovered after a bout with cancer at the beginning of the year

**Becky Scott**, with health challenges

**Jaymie Woodsmall**, scheduled for thyroid surgery this week

Those whose **livelihoods** are threatened

Those **lonely and alone** and the need for connection

**Peace with justice**

**Ourselves and all people of faith** that we may come to understand truly and faithfully

God's call for compassion

For those making decisions about our safety

*Prayer of the Day*

Great God of justice, of peace, of compassion, you have called us to walk your path of compassion. You have made peace with us by the willing and sacrificial life of Jesus the Messiah. We who would ourselves be your instruments on earth seek to compose a body for the Christ in the world. We offer you our hearts and souls and minds and strength that we may love the world as you do.

Hear our prayers this day and be active with us in their accomplishment... our prayers

- \$ for peace in a world consumed by violence;
- \$ for fearlessness in a world consumed by horror;
- \$ for others who may not believe as we do, who may not think as we do, who may not even know you as we do, but also those who *may*: people who are servants for the greater good, who seek to keep the peace against all odds by the command of governments and societies. Be with them and in them so that they may act in wisdom and with a spirit of mutuality and caring rather than of dominance;
- \$ for those who walk the halls of power; let your light be shining so that they cannot fail to see it and be drawn to it, to govern for the sake of compassion and peace;
- \$ for those whom we have named this day, those joys and concerns of our hearts; even those who have gone unspoken in this time but whom we hold before you in prayer. Grant that they may find their lives full and whole, to celebrate your love with us and all your faithful.

And as we remind ourselves of your faithfulness and love, and seek to practice compassion that takes us beyond the bounds of even divine or human law and into oneness with you, we raise our voices as one in the prayer your Child our Savior Jesus the Christ taught us we might pray with boldness and confidence as your children too...

*Prayer of Our Savior*

**Our Father, who art in heaven: hallowed be thy name; thy kingdom come; they 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; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory for ever. Amen.**

**BENEDICTION**

*World Peace Prayer*

Satish Kumar

composed for Hiroshima Day observance, 1981  
phrased for singing, by the Rev. Marty Haugen

Lead us from death to life, from falsehood to truth,  
From despair to hope, from fear to trust.  
Lead us from hate to love, from war to peace;  
Let peace fill our hearts, let peace fill our world,  
Let peace fill our universe.

**POSTLUDE**

*Après un Reve*

Gabriel Fauré

Leon Burke III, organ

**DISMISSAL**

Sue Stepleton

That's our worship for this Sunday at First Church.  
Thanks for sharing this time with us, today.  
Our worship has ended. Let our service begin.