

# Welcome!

First Congregational Church of Webster Groves  
United Church of Christ



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

August 23, 2020

Twelfth Sunday After Pentecost

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**CHARTER FOR  
COMPASSION**

*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

Doug Miller

Hello and welcome to worship with the First Congregational Church of Webster Groves. We are a member church of the United Church of Christ, located near St. Louis, Missouri. I'm your announcer for the day, Doug Miller. I've been a member here at first church from 1982 to 2004. We then left town for ten years, returning in 2014, and I've been a church member again since then. I have a wife, three children, and eight grandchildren. That's my background.

Today is Sunday, August twenty-third, 2020, the twelfth Sunday after Pentecost.

This morning's worship has been prepared by Pastor Dave Denoon, Music Director Leon Burke, our Student Ministers Merrimon Boyd and Elston McCowan, and volunteer recording engineers Ian Didriksen, Herb Niemeyer, Linda Kopetti, and Sharon Love.

This service includes spoken responses, and hymns to sing. The words for these are accessible from an order of worship document you can download from our website or from the description of this video on Facebook or YouTube. I encourage you to participate with the worship leader.

To prepare for worship, I invite you to center yourself by taking a deep breath and exhaling, close your eyes and greet God's Spirit here with me and there with you.

Let our worship begin.

**PRELUDE**

*Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing*  
Leon Burke III, piano

Traditional  
arr. Lavawan Riley

**CALL TO WORSHIP** (Responsive – Leader; **People**)

based on Isaiah 51

Remember with me the word of God through the prophet Isaiah, who said, “Hear me, my people, and listen to me, my nation! For Instruction comes from me, and my justice will be a beacon to the peoples.

**“My vindication draws near, my deliverance approaches; my arm will bring justice to the people, and the islands will put their hope in me. They will put their future in my hands.**

“Lift up your eyes and look to the skies, then look to the earth below:

**“My liberation will last forever, and my vindication will never fail.”**

Come, let’s worship the God who sets us free and holds us fast.

**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.**

**HYMN OF THE DAY**

*Jesus, the Very Thought of Thee*  
Mark Cereghino, soloist; Leon Burke III, piano

Bernard of Clairvaux

Jesus, the very thought of Thee  
With sweetness fills my breast;  
But sweeter far Thy face to see,  
And in Thy presence rest.

Nor voice can sing, nor heart can frame,  
Nor can the memory find  
A sweeter sound than Thy blest Name,  
Savior of humankind!

O Hope of every contrite heart,  
O Joy of all the meek,  
To those who fall, how kind Thou art!  
How good to those who seek!

But what to those who find? Ah, this  
Nor tongue nor pen can show;  
The love of Jesus, what it is  
None but Christ’s loved ones know.

**PRAYER OF APPROACH**

Merrimon Boyd, *Student Minister*

**On the day any one of us has called, you answered, O God; you increased our strength of soul. High above all, you watch over us, every one. Though we walk in the midst of trouble, you preserve us; you stretch out your hand and deliver. Though we sin by what we do or what we leave undone, you do not forsake us. When we cry to you, you answer.**

**Answer us now with your compassion, and guide us in ways so that we may extend that same compassion to others from our own hearts. In Christ’s name we pray. Amen.**

**NOT FOR CHILDREN ONLY**

Linda Kopetti

When I was a child, I was really pretty mild mannered, but occasionally I could become pretty obstinate. I could really dig my heels in.

One thing I had trouble with was “Thank you” notes. I had a great aunt who lived in another city. I’d never met this lady, but she would send me little gifts from time and again. My mother always insisted that I send a “Thank you” note. (I really didn’t like sending “Thank you” notes.) Still, my mother told me I needed to, and she really insisted, so I did.

And she told me that I could say whatever I wanted to in those “Thank you” notes. Well, I did. So, to my surprise this aunt wrote me back, and I was sure that she was going to tell me that I was an impudent, awful child, but she didn’t. Instead, she shared a poem with me that meant a lot to her, and she thought that it might mean something to me at that time. This poem was written by Mark Twain, and you can get it yourself on your computer by simply typing in the first line (That’s how popular it is.) and it starts like this:

A little bit more kindness, a little less creed,  
A little more giving, a little less greed.  
A little more smile, a little less frown,  
A little less kicking a man when he’s down.  
A little bit more we, little less I,  
A little more laugh, a little less cry.  
A little more flowers on the pathway of life  
And fewer on the graves at the end of the strife.

She sent me this poem, I think, to let me know that it’s important to do things not because you have to, but because it’s the right thing to do in the end, and it makes you feel differently by reaching out to that other person, or those other people, when you’re doing something you don’t have to do.

I’d really like for you to think a minute about something that you’ve done you didn’t have to do. You did it just to make that other person feel better, to reach out to that person, to make them feel that they weren’t alone.

Now, if you can think of something like that, then also take a minute to think about how it made you feel. That’s what we’ve been trying to talk about in terms of compassion. Dave’s written weeks of sermons having to do with compassion. But it’s something that all of us can experience, all of us have felt from time to time.

And I hope, maybe you’ll go to your computer, type in that first line, and see what you think yourself about that simple poem.

## THE WORD SHARED

*From the Epistles*

Romans 12:2-5, 9-16a

Doug Miller

NRSV, ad.

<sup>2</sup> Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.

<sup>3</sup> For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. <sup>4</sup> For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, <sup>5</sup> so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another.

<sup>9</sup> Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; <sup>10</sup> love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. <sup>11</sup> Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve your God. <sup>12</sup> Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer.

<sup>13</sup> Contribute to one another’s needs; extend hospitality to strangers.

<sup>14</sup> Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. <sup>15</sup> Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. <sup>16</sup> Live in harmony with one another.

## ANTHEM

*When I Am Frightened*

Shelley Jackson Denham

Mark Cereghino, soloist; Leon Burke III, piano

When I am frightened, will you reassure me?  
When I'm uncertain, will you hold my hand?  
Will you be strong for me? sing to me quietly?  
Will you share some of your stories with me?

If you will show me compassion,  
then I may learn to care as you do, then I may learn to care.

When I am angry, will you still embrace me?  
When I am thoughtless, will you understand?  
Will you believe in me, stand by me willingly?  
Will you share some of your questions with me?  
If you will show me acceptance,  
then I may learn to give as you do, then I may learn to give.

When I am troubled, will you listen to me?  
When I lonely, will you be my friend?  
Will you be there for me, comfort me tenderly?  
Will you share some of your feelings with me?  
If you will show me commitment,  
then I may learn to love as you do, then I may learn to love.

**MESSAGE OF THE DAY**

“*Compassion and Covid:  
Beyond ‘Love Thy Neighbor’*”

Rev. David Denoon, *Pastor*

Step Four of Karen Armstrong’s *Twelve Steps to a Compassionate Life* is the practice of empathy. In the chapter in which she addresses this necessary quality of human compassion, she offers insights from ancient Greek tragedies – *The Oresteia*, *Eumenides*, *Oedipus at Colonna*, and *Medea*.

She describes the origin of ancient Greek tragedy, an annual theatrical event in Athens. Playwrights would meditate upon the struggles of the city-state during the prior twelve months and then express those struggles in dramatic form using familiar myths. For example, I mentioned Medea, who is definitely NOT the personification of “Mother Dear” in Tyler Perry’s comedies. *Medea* was a tragedy written by the playwright Euripides.

Medea in mythology was the first wife of Jason captain of the Argo. It was Medea who figured out for Jason the location of the Golden Fleece. Sometime after that adventure, according to Euripides’ play, Jason leaves Medea and their children in order to marry another woman. The brilliant and vengeful Medea reacts not only by murdering Jason and his new wife but then, in a tragic stroke of cold-hearted logic (spoiler alert!), concludes that she also must take the lives of the three children she and Jason had together... this, in order to thoroughly obliterate Jason from the world. Logically and critically, she understands that her revenge is complete only when all these biological calculations have been accomplished.

The problem with her reasoning, Euripides hopes we notice, is that she not only has failed to include her own memory in the calculations but also the heroic epic of Jason and the Argonauts. Thus, the playwright argues, not only did Medea purpose to destroy Jason’s life and legacy, but she failed in her attempt. She sorely underestimated the thoroughly embedded connections of any human life as it is spiritually woven in and among others’ lives. We are not only biological, familial or tribal units; we are spirits and souls who cannot be bound only by blood and flesh.

The Athenian philosopher Aristotle pointed out that tragedy was a great unifier:

a small-minded person would see his own troubles in perspective and an arrogant person would learn to feel compassion for the unfortunate. (Armstrong, p. 96, referring to Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* 1385b.11 - 1386b.7)

Yes, there is a commonality to our humanity that overcomes any apparent division. These brains, these hearts, these bodies, this DNA, even with all the variation we manifest, affirm that we are one species, one flesh, joined together by one Spirit.

When we can understand that, when we can accept that, when we can make that connectedness part of ourselves, we can accept each other and practice empathy.

There is a theology that’s developed out of southern Africa, “Ubuntu.” This word literally means, “I am because you are.” This is the beginning of our religion, such Christians claim. And it is.

In Paul’s letter to Rome, he affirms the many and expansive differences between persons who are part of faith communities... and the world’s persistence that those differences divide. “Do not be conformed to this

world,” he responds, “but be transformed by the renewing of your minds.” Then, he launches into a series of proverbs designed to remind his readers of their mental renewal which has erupted out of a heart-centered and spirit-based regeneration. Any of these we would do well to memorize.

We recollected, many of us, last week about how we were instructed in our youth to memorize portions of the Bible – the twenty-third Psalm, the Beatitudes, Micah’s call of the people to justice (“What does the Lord require of you?”). I remember the race in my own Sunday School classes, when we would be asked the open-ended question of our favorite Bible verse, hands immediately shooting into the air, ramrod straight to get the teacher’s attention, and to be the first one to blurt out John 11:35 (“Jesus wept.” Our favorite because it was also the briefest.). Always the second, always(!), was the one most commonly posted at football games, John 3:16 (“For God so loved the world...”).

But in Romans 12 are some better verses. Paul offers a series of proverbs for the making of a strong community, verses encouraging empathy:

Let love be genuine; hate what is evil; hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. Do not lag in zeal; be ardent in spirit; serve your God. Rejoice in hope; be patient in suffering; persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of your sibling church members; extend hospitality to those outside the fold.

Or memorize this, and apply it to your heart: how when Peter finally perceives in the gospel according to Matthew that his rabbi also happens to be the Messiah, Jesus recognizes,

Flesh and blood have not revealed this to you but my heavenly Parent... I will give you the keys of the kingdom (I will give you access to the commonwealth) of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. (Matthew 16:17, 19)

Now, that last part is what I think we should learn by heart, because what he is saying is that whatever we do as his partisans, as Christians, as members of the Church (unlike and yet one reconciled body), whatever we do, whatever we say, we have to treat it as though it has eternal consequences.

*What you bind here will be bound there, and what you loose here will be loosed there.* Consider that, and you always affirm your relationship with, your childhood in, the Creator and Redeemer and Sustainer of all and therefore your relationship with *everybody else!*

We are all irrevocably bound not only to one another but to everyone who has ever been or will ever be and bound to the One from Whom we emerge, in Whom we have our being, and Who has given us the Word of life. What we do here, *everything we do here*, matters. I have an effect on you, and you on me, and it is utterly essential that we learn to treat one another acknowledging that.

We didn’t learn this by flesh and blood, by biology; we learned it in the Spirit, by heaven!

Our first priority is to truly perceive the other. That’ll cover Steps 4, 8, 9, and 10 of a compassionate life – empathy for, speaking to, having concern about, and getting to know – those with whom we come into contact.

The Buddhists have a saying acknowledging the importance of empathy, “The Buddha in me greets the Buddha in you.” We might just as well say, “The Jesus in me greets the Jesus in you.” And indeed, Ubuntu’s second favorite saying is, “I see you.” The spirit of these four steps is similar: “I feel you. I hear you. I need to love you and get to know you fully.” That’s how we must live.

Just loving our neighbors or those we acknowledge as our spiritual or social or political siblings is insufficient in this mindset.

Recall, in the Sermon on the Mount, how Jesus said to his listeners, “If you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Any tax collector can do that!”

We live tribally, settling into neighborhoods where people think or look or earn as we do. We gather in sacred communities according to the same attitude and principles.

But these are patterns we cannot afford. We have been called to compassion, to live in and with one another’s sufferings. And we cannot do that if we continue to separate ourselves from those who appear to be different from us. And we can only prevent the appearance of difference by recognizing the similarities. And we can only recognize the similarities by moving intentionally to feel, hear, love, and know one another. Only then will we truly accept one another.

Let's be honest. Life is (on the whole) miserable as we are living in it now. Maybe not for us ourselves, but in general it is. It's gotten that way because of our divisions, our separation, and that we're afraid or resentful of one another, or else we're worried that something we say inadvertently is going to trigger the other. We do not do that which we ought to do, and we leave undone that which ought to be done.

But, I say again with Paul and Jesus and even Euripides, there is a commonality to our humanity that overcomes any apparent division. These brains, these hearts, these bodies, this DNA, even with all the variation we manifest, affirm that we are one species, one flesh, joined together by one Spirit.

When we can understand that, when we can accept that, when we can make that connectedness part of ourselves, we can accept each other and practice the compassion God has practiced with us.

*Something* has to change.

And the something is some *one*.

And the someone is each of us.

Fortunately, we are partisans of a religion that believes we really can move beyond "Love thy neighbor," that we *can change* and that, with God's grace and power all along the way, we will... change... to see, to hear, to love, to know, to accept, and willingly suffer alongside, one another.

It'll be a new world, once compassion is in it.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.

### SHARING OUR BOUNTY (REPAIRING THE WORLD)

Doug Miller

The purpose of worship is only partly to praise God. Worship also reminds us of our common humanity and our obligation to show compassion to others and to serve them. We show compassion together through the ministries of our church.

This is your invitation, to serve and support these ministries in a monetary way. While the 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 provides care 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)

**God, you are our Maker, you are our Mother, building and guiding us so that we may be reconcilers in your world. Cause your Church always to form the structure in which your praise is heard and your justice begins. Send your Spirit upon us and our gifts, so that, gifts and all, we are consecrated to your will and your work in Jesus' name. Amen.**

### PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

*We Lift Our Joys and Concerns*

Elston McCowan, *Student Minister*

These are prayers that came to light in our Prayer Gathering, this past Wednesday:

**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

**Becky Scott**, with health challenges

**Jaymie Woodsmall**, Carolyn Woodsmall's daughter-in-law who had thyroid surgery to address cancer, last Thursday – surgeon discovered some had spread to lymph nodes

**Earl Rinne** had open-heart surgery recently, is recovering well at home

**Peter McHugh**, living with cancer

**Nancy & Jerry Hayes**, Laurel Hayes' parents who are needing to make decisions about their residence  
**Wynn's family**; Wynn (she/her/hers) was a lifelong friend of Laurel Hayes who recently died after three years  
living with glioblastoma

**David Denoon**, having back surgery on September 14

**Paul Wentzien**, who has dialysis several times a week and is feeling much better because of it

**Cedric Clarkson's family and friends** grieving his death and celebrating his life

**Those living with dementia** and their caregivers

**this faith community**, as we seek new staff to lead our ministries for children and youth

**children and other students** whose academic year is beginning

**Peace with justice**

**Ourselves and all people of faith**

that we may come to understand truly and faithfully

God's call to compassion

*Prayer of the Day*

Rev. Denoon

God of compassion and mercy, we are thankful for both. In Christ you demonstrate the depth of your compassion. In him you have met us in flesh and blood. And your mercy flows, for he has shared your Spirit with us. Now like him, what we bind on earth is bound in heaven; what we loose on earth is loosed in heaven. This is how we participate in your commonwealth. This is how we shall practice compassion, this is how we shall love.

We pray for a world divided and for ourselves as agents of reconciliation. Keep our heads clear, our eyes alert, our mouths full of truth, and our hearts discerning. And to whatever extent your power will allow, come in alongside those who bear power that they may exercise it with compassion and with grace.

Protect those whose business is caring and serving. Make labor productive and business profitable but not to the detriment of any person or environment. As we make decisions about leadership, in this and the coming months, help us not to be rancorous or haughty in the positions we take or the candidates we support.

Watch over those who are beginning their studies in this season of sickness, and help us all to follow doctor's orders and advice.

For how can we love you if we do not love our neighbor? And how shall we love our neighbor if we do not love all and everything you have created? Teach us again your compassion that joins flesh and blood with spirit and binds us and sets us loose. Cause us always to bear in mind the example of your Child Jesus, our Brother and Deliverer who taught us to pray, saying,

*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**

selected verses from Romans 12

Rev. Denoon

<sup>9</sup> Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; <sup>10</sup> love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. <sup>13</sup> Contribute to one another's needs; extend hospitality to strangers.

<sup>14</sup> Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. <sup>15</sup> Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. <sup>16</sup> Live in harmony with one another.

**POSTLUDE**

*Awake! The Dawn Appears*  
Leon Burke III, organ

Steven Scott

**DISMISSAL**

Doug Miller

That's our worship for this Sunday at First Church. Please, join us for our Virtual Coffee Fellowship at 1:00am on Zoom.

Our worship has ended. Let our service begin.



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

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