

Welcome!

First Congregational Church of Webster Groves
United Church of Christ

Seek Christ in each. Serve God in all.

August 30, 2020

Thirteenth 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.



You shall love
your neighbor
as yourself.

Matthew 22:39



Order of Worship

WELCOME AND ANNOUNCEMENTS

Linda Kopetti

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, Linda Kopetti. And I've been a member of this church since my children were younger than my grandchildren are now, and that's... they... That's a long time!

This is worship for Sunday, August thirtieth, 2020, the thirteenth 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, our "Not for Children Only" presenter Garie Perry and young people of the congregation, and volunteer recording engineers Herb Niemeyer, Sharon Love, and myself.

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

Reverie

W. Faulkes

Leon Burke III, organ

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

from Psalm 105

O give thanks to the holy ONE, call on God's name, make known God's deeds among the peoples.

Sing to God, sing praises to God; tell of the wonderful works.

Seek the holy ONE and strength; seek God's presence continually.

Remember the wonderful works God has done – the miracles, the judgments. Let us praise our 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.

HYMN OF THE DAY

Lift High the Cross

George W. Kitchin, words

Performed by Leon Burke III

Sidney H. Nicholson, music

Refrain

Lift high the cross, the love of Christ proclaim!

Let all adore and praise that sacred name.

Come, Christians, follow where our Savior trod,
the Lamb victorious, Christ the Child of God. *Refrain.*

O Christ once lifted on the glorious tree,

your death has brought us life eternally. *Refrain.*

So shall our song of triumph ever be
praise to the Crucified for victory. *Refrain.*

PRAYER OF APPROACH (Unison)

Merrimon Boyd

God, you are made known to us in the rustling leaves as the wind blows, in the warmth of flames of a blazing fire, in the face of the good, in the deep of the unknown. We meet you here. We accept your greeting. We welcome your inspiration. We await the change you have in store for us. Draw us in to you. Inhabit our spirits. Focus our attention. Bring us to you – you who are already with us. Help us to be as you would have us be. Through Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, in every here and everywhere, now and always. Amen.

NOT FOR CHILDREN ONLY

Garie Perry, *Presenter*

[Garie Perry shares a moment with the White-Lenard family, sharing a devotion that she remembers her father telling at Christmastime. Rev. Perry served Congregational churches during his career, and his daughter passes along this meditation on stars and starlight and our own ability to share the light of Christmas with others year-round.]

THE WORD SHARED

From the Law

Exodus 3:10-15

Linda Kopetti

For the sharing of the Word, I am reading from an adaptation of the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible. The lesson concerns Moses, an Israelite who once was a leading official in the government of Egypt when most of his people were enslaved there. Moses has fled in fear for his life, after murdering another official (an ethnic Egyptian) whom he caught beating an Israelite. In exile, he has made a new life for himself as a shepherd in the land of Midian, where he has settled down and started a family.

The setting for this reading is Mount Horeb, where Moses has left his flock in order to investigate a bush he has noticed – burning but not consumed by the fire. He hears a voice in the midst of this vision, which identifies itself as the voice of his ancestors' God and the God of his oppressed people.

¹⁰ "Come," God said to Moses, "I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt."

¹¹ But Moses said to God, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?"

¹² The holy ONE said, "I will be with you; and this shall be the sign for you that it is I who sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God on this mountain."

¹³ But Moses said to God, "If I come to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is this God's name?' what shall I say to them?"

¹⁴ God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM," and said further, "Thus you shall say to the Israelites, 'I AM has sent me to you.'" ¹⁵ God also said to Moses,

“Thus you shall say to the Israelites, ‘I AM, who is the God of your ancestors – the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob – has sent me to you’:

This is my name forever,
and this my title for all generations.”

From the Gospels

Merrimon Boyd, *Student Minister*

A reading from the gospel according to Matthew, the sixteenth chapter. The translation is from *The Inclusive Bible*, by Priests for Equality:

²¹ Jesus began to explain to the disciples that he must go to Jerusalem, to suffer things at the hands of the elders, chief priests and religious scholars, and that he must be killed, and on the third day be raised to life.

²² Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. “Never, Rabbi!” he said. “This will never happen to you.”

²³ Jesus turned to Peter and said, “Get yourself behind me, you Satan! You are trying to make me stumble and fall. You’re setting your mind not on the things of God, but of mortals.”

²⁴ Then Jesus said to the disciples, “If you wish to come after me, you must deny your very self, take up the instrument of your own death, and begin to follow in my footsteps. ²⁵ If you would save your life, you will lose it; but if you would lose your life for my sake, you will find it. ²⁶ What profit would you show if you gained the whole world but lost yourself? What can you offer in exchange for your very self?”

Response.

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

People: Thanks be to God.

ANTHEM

Comfort Me

Mimi Bornstein-Doble

Performed by Leon Burke III

Comfort me, comfort me, comfort me, O my soul.

Sing with me, sing with me, sing with me, O my soul.

Speak for me, speak for me, speak for me, O my soul.

Comfort me, comfort me, comfort me, O my soul.

MESSAGE OF THE DAY

*“Compassion and Covid, Part 3: Rev. David Denoon, Pastor
How Do I Love Me?”*

As the introduction of the eleventh step of the *Twelve Steps to a Compassionate Life*, author Karen Armstrong retells the story of Christina Noble, a woman who grew up destitute in Ireland. Christina spent her childhood and youth on the streets of Dublin, abandoned, hungry, and abused. The harsh realities of the story are impossible to tell with gentle or innocent listeners present.

But in her adulthood, because of a troubling dream she had had as a child, of victimized children in Vietnam, Christina Noble eventually found her way in 1989 to Ho Chi Minh City

and there met some children who looked very much the way she was sure she did when she was little. She says that there is very little difference between a gutter in Dublin, where she grew up, and a gutter in Saigon. So, in 1991 after petitioning some wealthy acquaintances for support, she returned to Vietnam and built what she would call the Children's Medical and Social Centre.

The eleventh step of Karen Armstrong's *Twelve* is "Recognition," the ability to see oneself in another and – having learned to love oneself – to embrace the other in love.

Last Sunday, I spoke of empathy and the attendant steps with it – learning how to speak with others and to listen, to be concerned about their welfare, and to get to know them genuinely and even intimately. And empathy is Armstrong's fourth step, after learning about compassion itself and about our world, but also after loving ourselves. Maybe I should not have skipped this third step before speaking about empathy, but there is so much of us in others, in the ways that we are shaped by others and our environment, that I was thinking also, perhaps knowing *why we should love ourselves* was critical to the understanding *that we should love ourselves*.

"Which commandment the first of all?" a legal expert once asked Jesus. (Mark 12:28; Matthew 22:36; in Luke, this question is the setting for the telling of the Parable of the Good Samaritan, but I'd like to use that somewhat, next Sunday, when I talk about loving our enemies, so I'm not going there now.)

Anyway...

"The first," he replied, "is *Shema, Yisroel: Adonai eloheinu, Adonai echod*. Hear, O Israel, your Sovereign God is the one God. And you shall love your Sovereign God with all your heart and soul and mind and strength."

I imagine the legal scholar beginning to reply in the affirmative and Jesus gently interrupting, saying, "But the second greatest commandment is like it: You shall love your neighbor as you love yourself. Every other scripture relies on these two commandments."

Oh, interestingly, in Matthew in the seventh chapter, while he's preaching the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says the same about another commandment (that business of the entire Bible being summed up in it). When he speaks the Golden Rule, "In everything, do to others as you would have them do to you," he adds, "for *this* is the Law and the Prophets." This is the Bible, he states, "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." This hails back to the first sermon in this series. The entire Bible in a single sentence, imagine!

So, look, you legal scholars (that's all of you, by the way), it's this simple: "as you would have them do to you" or "love your neighbor as yourself."

Simple?

No. I think that this is possibly the second most difficult step for all of us, to follow the implicit commandment of our Savior that enables us to love others (The *most difficult step*, incidentally, is to love our enemies. Again, that's next week, not now...).

We have to love ourselves. We have to figure out how to take care of ourselves, to comfort ourselves, to sing to ourselves, to speak for ourselves, as was just sung about.

And Jesus sometimes is confusing about this self-love, because he says elsewhere, "If you want to come after me, deny yourself, take up your cross" (in Luke, he says, "take up your cross daily"), "and follow." How does loving oneself lead to that level of sacrifice? Aren't we more useful alive than dead?

Maybe we could argue that *a willingness to be sacrificed* is what Jesus speaks of here,

and I don't want to deny that. That is one way that we have rationalized the apparent conflict between loving ourselves and taking up our own personal gallows. But we ought to bear in mind that what Jesus definitely is not saying is that we ought to allow ourselves to be overcome by the trappings of mortality and this world's ways of dealing death. We do that, and we'll fear our own loss rather than to love our own life. That's probably what he meant by, "If you would save your own life, you'll lose it; but lose your life for my sake, and you'll find it."

We have to make peace with the fact that our lives are fragile and that we are always just on the brink between living and death, and that, further, we will spend much more time existing as the dead than we are spending as the living. Therefore, if we are to be of any use to ourselves or others who are living or dead, *we must love ourselves*. Not cling desperately to life and persevere the most to remain alive, but to love who we are... to live in Godly love, not mortal fear.

Our culture does not make this easy. Our prevailing culture puts in a lot of time, asserting the superiority of the powerful and the status quo. And lovers of it are rather persistent in telling us how much we'll lose if we don't support it. That is very much the business of the colonizer and the oppressor, vindicating themselves while disparaging everything and everyone outside their norm. And, furthermore, it is very common for those who are unassimilated either to desire to be assimilated into that level of entitlement and privilege with the powerful, or else to rebel against existing systems, destroy them, and seek their overthrow in hopes of establishing a new culture.

But neither assimilation nor destruction can lead us to love ourselves. Neither helps us to love one another. Not that the prevailing culture doesn't deserve to be upended but that attending to it systemically and not destroying ourselves and others in the process means we must be examining, reflecting, being mindful (Armstrong's fifth step), appreciating the breadth and depth of others, and truly loving ourselves.

Case in point: Prof. Armstrong tells the story of the late rabbi Albert Friedlander who was a child in Germany in the 1930s when that country rebuilt itself around the chauvinism of the National Socialist Party. He heard daily the lies that were being told about his own ethnic group, how they were to blame for the country's economic struggles, how they plotted against the government, how some of them rose to prominence out of all proportion to their actual abilities and thereby revealed a conspiracy to undermine a virtuous Germany. Friedlander was told daily that he and his people were worthless, shiftless, wicked. He would spend years in a concentration camp receiving treatment that reinforced this message. Armstrong relates something Friedlander told her about himself, when she marveled that, despite all this, he was "one of the kindest people [she] had ever met; almost pathologically gentle":

One night, when he was about eight years old, he deliberately lay awake and made a list of his good qualities. He told himself firmly that he was *not* what the Nazis said, that he had talents and special gifts of heart and mind, which he enumerated to himself one by one. Finally, he vowed that if he survived, he would use those qualities to build a better world.

(Armstrong, *Twelve Steps*, pp. 75-76)

He would not be persuaded by mortal fear but pursued divine potential.

I regret to say that, sometimes, it seems to me as though young people like that are in an isolated and powerless minority.

On Wednesday of this week that's just past, I learned of two circumstances in which

young people actively decided not to love others and, by extension, also actively indicated how poorly the adults in their lives have done to help them to love themselves.

My daughter Gwen is in eighth grade, and her classes began this week virtually. On the third day of class, a Zoom bomber (Do you know what that is? It's when someone who has no business in a Zoom meeting disrupts the meeting)... and this was someone whom I perceive to have been a young man, was admitted into two of Gwen's classes and, as the classes began, shouted slurs and profanities for minutes before the teacher could eject him from the session.

He called in with telephone connections that identified him first as an obscene abbreviation and then as "Jaylen." So, the initial impression was that he was a Webster Groves School District student playing an unfortunate prank. But further investigation revealed that this was someone outside the District who had somehow acquired credentials and passcodes to my daughter's classes. The grade level principal at Hixson assures me that more strict measures of admittance to class were immediately established, and we imagine that this won't happen again.

But what values is our culture communicating to this person that he in any way imagines that kind of disruption should be appropriate? If he had the appreciation of either his own lovability, or even acceptability in the eyes of his culture and his God, would he have used what clearly are some considerable technological skills in this way? Rather than loving as widely as he was able, because he loved himself, he disrupted and damaged to the fullest extent he could entire classrooms of 13- and 14-year-olds.

But there is another incident that struck me to my core on Wednesday, when in Kenosha, Wisconsin – in the wake of a young father being shot seven times in the back by that city's police while his children watched, and violence and looting ensued overnight on Sunday and Monday – a White 17-year-old with a gun shot and killed two people and injured a third, on Tuesday night, while presuming to protect a used car lot with adults and even police who encouraged his vigilantism.

And before someone objects that he was protecting the livelihood of a used car lot owner, please hear me say that my own morality tells me that a livelihood once taken can be rebuilt. A life once taken cannot, so I will always favor human life over humans' property. If you disagree with me, then you do. But now four Black families, which before were only *oppressed* by a system of entitlement and privilege favoring White people, have been devastated by defenders of that system.¹ And one of those defenders – a child, let's be honest, pretending to be an adult by taking up arms – might have had it communicated to him by any system of compassion that you are not adult because you can kill; you are an adult when you can love.

What part of his psyche was enabled to disrespect life so much, or what misrepresentation of humanity was communicated to him, that he should have come to understand that another person's property should have more value than yet another person's life?!

If we would but love ourselves, esteem ourselves, take care of ourselves, and teach *or just embody* those ethics and behaviors to every person around us, then wouldn't we have something! Then we could hear Jesus saying, "Do to others as you would have them do to you"

¹ It was learned, later in the week (the service was recorded on a Thursday afternoon for the following Sunday), that the two protesters shot dead by the teenager were actually White men. This, of course, does not remove the harm done by the boy but does beg a more accurate depiction of the event, acknowledged here.

and “Love God, love your neighbor, love yourself,” and *live the implied commands* as well as the direct ones.

If we would but love ourselves, esteem ourselves, take care of ourselves, we could enable others to practice compassion effectively and not just seem as though we’re spouting platitudes. And don’t imagine that we somehow have succeeded in Webster Groves just because that disruptive non-student was *not* from here! (I can’t speak to whether you’ve succeeded with this yet in Rockport, although I do hear very good reports from Pastor Derek!) But we *here* know that equity and dignity for all, in a former slave state, are still mere goals rather than achievements. And it’s been *157 years* since the enactment of the Emancipation Proclamation... which, because Missouri stayed in the Union, didn’t become law in this state until six months after it went into effect elsewhere in the South... but for 157 years, with an occasional positive moment, anything like restorative justice has languished!

So, there’s work to do, lot’s of work to do: this is what I’m saying. Plenty to achieve in accomplishing that implied command to love ourselves.

Our God and Savior calls us, commands us, to be ready to sacrifice ourselves for others (the very opposite of what my Wednesday morning news indicated the child disrupter and murderous youth have been taught). But that is not to say that our God and Savior’s call and commandment cannot be. It means only that we have chosen on the whole to disregard them.

Love yourself, so that you may love others. Care for yourself, so that you may know how others might be cared for. Appreciate yourself, so that you may know what sacrifice can mean. Our God’s name is “I am.” What more evidence could we possibly need than that, to affirm for us the inherent brilliance of simply being!

Such knowledge, for Rabbi Friedlander *at age 8*, explained to his heart that he had the capacity to do great things. It made clear to Christina Noble at age 45 just how much good she could do for others who were abused and neglected by their society exactly as she had been by her own. So, no matter our age, there’s still time to learn to love ourselves.

There was a moment for me on Wednesday that served to counter the news of our evidently hopeless world. Our Office Administrator Debbie Tolstoi and I climbed the steps of the bell tower, just before twelve o’clock that day, and at noon we tolled the bell nineteen times to signify the centennial of the certification of the 19th Amendment to the Constitution which made Woman Suffrage the law of the land. Even for all the missteps of the Woman Suffrage Movement – as it sustained a segregated and supremacist vision for our country – in 1920 there came the culmination of almost a century’s work to enfranchise American women alongside American men. We have learned that, despite our sinfulness, we can put systems in place that will dismantle our social sins. We must simply learn to love ourselves so successfully that we will take steps to stop cooperating with evil and embrace righteousness and justice.

You see? A compassionate world is possible. We have but to believe in it, to believe in God’s vision of compassion for us and our earth, to set our sights on divine goals rather than on mortal fears, and to love accordingly – others and ourselves.

Amen.

SHARING OUR BOUNTY (REPAIRING THE WORLD)

Linda Kopetti

What shall we do, in order to love ourselves and our community? We shall be the Church of Christ, caring for our siblings, and leading in ways that promote life and self-worth. And we do this together through the ministries of our church – ministries of spiritual formation and growth, of outreach and witness, of care and compassion.

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 – 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)

Rev. Denoon

With you, O God, we occupy the holiest of ground. May the gifts we commit to your church's ministry be a blessing to all that you have made. May the organizations and people who also receive them act as your hands. May needs be seen and met, and may the giving fit the need. Through Christ, who models infinite giving. Amen.

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

We Lift Our Joys and Concerns

Elston McCowan, *Student Minister*

Let us remember those people and situations for whom we are praying today. These are prayers that came to light in our Prayer Gathering, this past Wednesday:

Joyce in her new home

Paul back at home

Carol and Bob in her recovery and their new life setting

Bob as he struggles on with cancer and approaches his 80th birthday

Becky with all of her and David's challenges

Jaymie, who after surgery is undergoing treatment for cancer of the thyroid

Earl, who recently had open-heart surgery

Peter, living with cancer

Dave and his family, as they get ready for his upcoming surgery

Paul, who is feeling better with dialysis treatments

Rita, living with ALS

another Rita, living with dementia, and all those who are living with dementia; and for their caregivers

Joan, out of the hospital and living for now in the comfort of her daughter's home

Eden Seminary students whose academic year begins on Monday
the people of Kenosha, Wisconsin, and the victims of this week's violence there
the 100th anniversary of the certification of the 19th Amendment, August 26, 1920
Peace with justice

this faith community, as we seek new staff to lead our ministries for children and youth
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 justice and righteousness, for whom the Cross twisted the power and message of an ancient system of domination into nothing and nonsense: you know we live in a twisted world with similar systems which oppress and kill. We are still a world in need of your healing, your intervention, your restoration. As we care for our world, for our siblings, for ourselves, we pray that your Word might uproot injustice and despair, and plant seeds of compassion and hope.

But guide us to commit to self-care. Help us to know that being self-oriented is not to be selfish or self-centered. If we are going to attend to the needs of others, we must also be attending to our own needs – heart, mind, spirit, and body. Guide us into being our strongest and our best selves.

Then, may your words be in our mouths. May our meditations and actions reflect the compassionate ministry into which you call us. Make us human messages of your good news of love and salvation.

And should we need reminders of our own participation in corrupt and oppressive systems, be clear; challenge us; don't hold back. We can bear it, with you on our side.

What's more, dear and gracious God, don't stop with us. Wherever your Spirit may intervene to straighten our twisted world, let your name and reputation be asserted and established, and let your will be known. Before your majesty, let unjust systems and unrighteous regimes tumble down and your new order be established.

Your world is waiting, and all of us are willing. In the name of Jesus the Messiah, our first sibling and Redeemer, who lived for us the full impact and meaning of his words, 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

Rev. Denoon

It is well established by now that each and every one of us can recite the entire Bible by heart. And what is it? "Do to others as you would have them do to you." Another version goes, "Love God, and love your neighbor as you love yourself." That's the entire Bible, right there. Jesus said so.

So, do that. Practice compassion. And remember that the grace of God, the love of Christ, and the oneness of the Holy Spirit will aid you in your every effort. Amen.

POSTLUDE

Lift High the Cross (Reprise)

Leon Burke III

DISMISSAL

Linda Kopetti

That's our worship for this week at First Church. We're glad you could worship with us. Members of the First Congregational Church of Rockport, Massachusetts, it's been a pleasure to have members of The Old Sloop with us, last week and this week. Hopefully, we'll meet again soon.

Please, join us for our Virtual Coffee Fellowship, Sunday at 11am on Zoom.

Our worship has ended. Let our service begin.



10 West Lockwood Avenue
Webster Groves, MO 63119
314-962-0475
www.FirstChurchWG.org

Contact Information

Moderator
Mark Edwards
marke@wustl.edu

Pastor
Rev. David A. Denoon
DDenoon@FirstChurchWG.org

Office Administrator
Debbie Tolstoi
Admin@FirstChurchWG.org

Director of Music & Organist
Dr. Leon Burke
Leon.Burke@FirstChurchWG.org

Facilities Manager
Chip Isringhaus
cti1234@FirstChurchWG.org

Custodian
Darrell Lakies

Assistant Custodian
Gus McLean

Director, Center for Counseling & Healing
Rev. Linda E. Smith, BCRN, LCSW, HTCP/I
lesrhs@sbcglobal.net

Director of MICA
Rev. Cliff Aerie
cliff.aerie@gmail.com

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