

Welcome!

First Congregational Church of Webster Groves
United Church of Christ

Seek Christ in each. Serve God in all.

September 6, 2020

Fourteenth Sunday After Pentecost

Labor Day Weekend



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

Marilyn Davis, *Announcer*

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, Marilyn Davis.

This is our worship for Sunday, September sixth, 2020, the fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost and the Sunday of Labor Day weekend.

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 Herb Niemeyer, Sharon Love, and Linda Kopetti.

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

Let our worship begin.

PRELUDE

Lord, I Want to Be a Christian
Leon Burke III, organ

Traditional
arr. Diane Bish

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

Elston McCowan, *Student Minister*

based on 1 Thessalonians 5

Let us be at peace among ourselves.

And let us not repay evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to all.

Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances, for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for us.

So we will not quench the Spirit but keep the words of prophets and hold fast to what is good.

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.

HYMN OF THE DAY

There's a Wideness

F. W. Faber

Marilyn Davis, soloist; Leon Burke III, piano

There's a wideness in God's mercy
like the wideness of the sea.

There's a kindness in God's justice
which is more than liberty.

There's no place where earthly sorrows
are more felt than in God's heaven.

There's no place where earthly failings
have such kindly judgment given.

For the love of God is broader
than the measure of a mind,
And the heart of the Eternal
is most wonderfully kind.
If our love were but more simple,
we should take Christ at his word,
And our lives would be all sunshine
in the sweetness of the Lord.

PRAYER OF APPROACH (Unison)

Merrimon Boyd, *Student Minister*

We gather here and there in your name, O Christ, and you are already among us. Keep us open to your presence. Let us know you in us and around us that we may grow closer to you. When you call us, we want to be ready to go where you lead us. Sometimes, we have been too complacent to hear your voice, too reluctant to leave what is familiar, too satisfied with common boundaries. So, we thank you for your abundant grace, your never-ending love, your unwarranted patience, forgiveness, and blessing. Instill in us those same qualities and actions, so that we may be as you are. Amen.

NOT FOR CHILDREN ONLY *The Problem of the Good Samaritan* Rev. David Denoon, *Pastor*

You probably all have heard of the parable of the Good Samaritan. Do you remember it? Even if you don't think you remember it, I'll bet you remember it once I start telling it to you.

First of all, the setting: Jesus was teaching somewhere, when somebody came along who thought maybe Jesus wasn't as smart as everybody said he was. So, the challenger asked, "What must I do to be saved?"

Do you know what "saved" means? It means, for God's favor to rest on you, for God to think that you're pretty much the bee's knees, the cream of the crop. God love us, no matter what, we know, but this person was asking, what makes God proud of us?

Jesus asked the person a question. Jesus said, "What does it say in the Bible?" (He actually said, "What does it say in the Law?" but "the Bible" is more or less what he meant, that place where we learn how we should live.

The challenger answered with an answer you definitely know, because I've been repeating it weekly to everybody. "Love God, and love your neighbor," the questioner said.

"Correct," Jesus said. "That's what will save you."

But the challenger was feeling especially clever, that day, and asked, "But how do I know who my neighbor *is*?"

Jesus thought a moment and answered with a story: "There was this person who was on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho, walking. And some others saw the person and decided to beat the traveler up and take his clothes and his money. They left the traveler bruised and battered.

“A holy person came along and saw the traveler lying at the roadside... and walked on. A while after that, a teacher came along, saw the traveler lying there... and walked on. Eventually, a Samaritan came along.”

Now, at this point I should tell you about Samaritans. These were people who lived in the country between where Jesus lived and where the capital of the area was. And nobody on either side of them liked them. In fact, there are two gospels (Matthew and Mark) that say even Jesus himself wouldn't go through Samaria when he would go from his country of Galilee to the country south, called Judea. Even Jesus, Matthew and Mark say, avoided Samaritans! That's how nasty everybody thought they were! But Jesus tells his story about neighbors saying that people you might have expected to stop didn't, but someone you would have expected to go on by (and, frankly, someone that the injured person probably would have wanted to walk on by) *did stop*.

The Samaritan used the stuff he had with him to clean up the traveler's wounds, put the traveler on his own donkey, got him to the nearest inn, and paid the innkeeper a huge amount of money to take care of the traveler. “And if this doesn't cover everything, I'll be back in a few days and pay you whatever is owing.

Jesus turned to his challenger and asked, “Who was the traveler's neighbor?”

The challenger was impressed with Jesus' answer and embarrassed to have been so much of a jerk, to have asked the question in the first place. “The one who showed the traveler mercy,” the challenger said, to answer Jesus' question.

“Go, and do likewise,” Jesus said.

Now, I'll tell you, I love that story. But there's a problem with it, and the problem is this: It's just a story. Although we hear people use the term “Good Samaritan” all the time, the fact is that we almost never hear of it as somebody who really, really disliked someone else helping that other person out. We see it in the movies, we read about it, but we never hear of it actually happening. *Even Jesus had to make this up!*

So, if we are Jesus People, don't you think we need to “Go, and do likewise”? I do. So, let's see what we can do as faithful people, to try get past the dislike and resentment and really love our enemies.

It's going to be hard, but I'm sure that one day somebody's going to make this happen. Yes, go, and do likewise.

Let us pray.

Dear God, you give us some pretty hard tasks to do. We know that you love us, and that we should love everybody, but it's difficult. So we pray that you would help us along our way. Remind us of the story of the Good Samaritan, that we may live and grow and be more the people you would have us be. Amen.

THE WORD SHARED

From the Law

Merrimon Boyd

Leviticus 19:17-18 New Revised Standard Version, ad.

You shall not hate in your heart anyone of your kin; you shall reprove your neighbor, or you will incur guilt yourself. You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am Yahweh.

From the Gospels

Matthew 5:38-39, 43-48

NRSV, ad.

Jesus told his disciples, ³⁸“You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ ³⁹But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer.

⁴³“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ ⁴⁴But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, ⁴⁵so that you may be children of a heavenly Parent, the One who makes the sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous.

⁴⁶“For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? ⁴⁷And if you greet only your siblings, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? ⁴⁸Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Parent is perfect.”

Response.

Hear what the Spirit is saying to the people.

Thanks be to God.

ANTHEM

Help Us Accept Each Other

Fred Kaan

Marilyn Davis, soloist; Leon Burke III, piano

Help us accept each other as Christ accepted us;
teach us as sister, brother, each person to embrace.
Be present, God, among us, and bring us to believe
we are ourselves accepted and meant to love and live.

Teach us, O Lord, your lessons, as in our daily life
we struggle to be human and search for hope and faith.
Teach us to care for people, for all, not just for some,
to love them as we find them, or as they may become.

Let your acceptance change us, so that we may be moved
in living situations to do the truth in love;
To practice your acceptance, until we know by heart
the table of forgiveness and laughter’s healing art.

MESSAGE OF THE DAY

*“Compassion and Covid:
“No, Seriously, Love Your Enemies”*

Rev. Denoon

There are a few stories in the Bible that have become iconic in our society. If I refer to them, you immediately know them. The Fall of humanity (Adam and Eve and the serpent), Noah and the Flood, David and Goliath. Each of these conjure images familiar to virtually anyone in our society, religious or not.

Of New Testament stories, probably the most familiar is the parable of the Good Samaritan. The problem with the way our society associates the story is that we usually don’t understand the context in which it was told. As I mentioned to the children a moment ago, the Good Samaritan isn’t just about some hero helping somebody else without being asked, or any compassionate person answering a need that others refuse to. The Good Samaritan begins with

someone who thinks they know the answer to their question asking Jesus, “Who is my neighbor?” and Jesus then answering (and I’m summarizing here), “Be careful about your own assumptions. Your neighbor might just be your enemy.”

A few weeks ago, for the second sermon in this series, Doug Miller was supposed to read a couple of verses which I had decided not to preach about at the time. You remember the scripture from Romans 12, in which he rattled off a whole series of proverbs by Paul for that curious group of Romans who had become Christians and how they should live together? Well, the verses I edited out of his reading went like this:

¹⁹ Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.” ²⁰ No, “if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads.” ²¹ Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.
(Romans 12:19-21)

That phrase, “you will heap burning coals on their heads,” was something I just didn’t want to try to unpack in a sermon about loving one’s neighbors. It reads as if we’re supposed to do nice things to our enemies in order somehow to humiliate them or to signify to God that these folks are worthy of a hell-bound destiny. But that’s not really so much what Paul was telling those early Christians.

There is an opinion among scholars that what he really was saying was that doing kindnesses to one’s enemies will so confuse them that, as we might say today, their heads would explode, their minds would be blown. Unilateral peacemaking, Paul seems to be assuring them, will be unexpected.

That’s the context underlying the parable of the Good Samaritan. As I’ve said before, “*Good Samaritan*” was an oxymoron for Jews in Roman-occupied Palestine. In *The Cottonpatch Gospel*, the retelling of Luke and Acts by Clarence Jordan of the Koinonia Farm near Americus, Georgia, and one of the founders of Habitat for Humanity, Jordan reset the Gospel in Georgia and pictured the Samaritan as a Black man who rendered aid to a white supremacist who had been robbed and left for dead on the roadside, and then bypassed by a preacher and a deacon on their way to church.

In every instant in which Jesus and early Christian writers approach the matter of our attitude toward people we hate (and Karen Armstrong points out in her Twelfth Step – “Love your enemies” – that this is not mere dislike or distaste we’re referring to, here, when we are imagining an enemy but that we’re talking about genuine loathing or fear complicating an ideological distance between us and the other), unconditional love must outweigh hate for us and impel us to do good. There has to be a point at which hostility ends. That point, Jesus and Paul and Karen argue, is with the compassionate person.

Whatever it may take for us to rationalize our compassion we need to do. Imagine the perverse environment that must have caused your enemy to oppose you, to intimidate or threaten you. Was it abuse upon them? Was it cruelty? Have they been lied to, about you or what you believe in?

You don’t bear any obligation to try to change their mind, or to confront them about why

you consider them to be wrong. You'll notice that Jesus doesn't say, when he imagines a *good Samaritan*, that the victimized Jew wakes up with an entirely new attitude toward his benefactor.

I mean, he probably does. Certainly, the unlikely actions that saved the victim's life would warrant that. And Jesus' challenger who asked him, "Who is my neighbor?" by all evidence in Luke's retelling of the parable was brought down a notch or two by Jesus and had his mind blown, had burning coals heaped on his head!

Love your enemies. No, seriously, love them.

Because we know that the world and the way we are living it cannot survive as it is, with ideological opposites and cultural or economic elites standing off against their tribal antagonists. The way we are is not OK, and somebody has to break this system.

People of other religions have noticed this as well. It's not so much that the Christ was so well advanced beyond other holy thinkers, but Christianity grew up as a countercultural phenomenon while most other religions came together as perspectives of the majority and the powerful. Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism, as well as Confucianism and Taoism, all were founded by princes and warriors. We just happened to emerge from the perspective of the oppressed. Our assertion that Jesus is King or, indeed, that Jesus is the incarnation of the ineffable and eternal God is our justification for him not having exacted the overthrow of the earthly order.

Why *we haven't managed since then* to turn earthly kingdoms and governments upside down but simply maintained the power-based status quo through the ages in which Christianity has been in power, that's a discussion of another time... even though it probably has a lot to do with the reinterpretation of the Good Samaritan into somebody who just happens to be an unexpectedly nice guy rather than *the last person you would want to render you aid!*

Still, power-religions come around. The Hindu Mohandas Gandhi said, after all, "An eye for an eye only ends up making the whole world blind." Mind you, historically speaking, "an eye for an eye" had its time... *That* saying was a response to the human predisposition to escalate a situation. We are naturally inclined to do worse to someone who has done wrong to us. And as we are seeing at the basis of protests against police violence and looting of businesses and neighborhoods and deadly force by citizens whom our society claims are "standing their ground" or "exercising their Second Amendment rights" while protecting their property and families, escalation never ends a cycle of hatred. "An eye for an eye" is actually designed to prevent that sort of thing.

But even "an eye for an eye" doesn't end retributive justice; it only balances it.

Martin Luther King, Jr., said in this vein another saying familiar to us: "Only goodness can drive out evil, and only love can overcome hate." When he said this, he was pointing to the moment in the gospels in which Jesus, crucified and languishing on the Cross, forgave his executioners.

And although we might recognize hate as a natural reaction to people who oppose or oppress us or who so offend us that we refuse to bear them being anywhere near us and push them away, love is counterintuitive with its charity and can only be practiced with intentionality and effort... like an innocent person accepting execution and forgiving those who put them there.

Think about that. Think about the one-sidedness of that.

Because in a moment that act of acceptance and forgiveness is not going to change a

system from unjust to just. But it might well change a heart, enlighten the mind of a Roman guard (“Truly, this man was God’s son!”) or challenge one’s prejudice (“Which one of the three was a neighbor to the injured man?” “The one who showed him mercy.”).

Of the *Twelve Steps to a Compassionate Life*, Karen Armstrong argues, the ultimate step is, “Love your enemies.”

You know that sign in drinking establishments, “A stranger is a friend you haven’t yet met”? Our Savior instructs us that we ought to take that concept a good deal further. Paul speculated that people doing this would blow other people’s minds, especially those of the enemies we might actually help: “It’ll heap burning coals on their heads.”

Because that is just about as far as one can go in the development of an existence for oneself that endeavors to slip in alongside others and, not just see their suffering, but endure their suffering with them. At that point, you’re going to know that you don’t just pity another, feel sympathy for them, but you identify with them, that you can cry with their cries, sob with their sobbing, laugh with their laughter, and rejoice with their rejoicing. It means that not only will another be set free, but you might be freed with them. And it will give the world the glimmer of a new outlook and a whole host of renewing possibilities, all of which are better than the state of things now.

That challenger of Jesus’, that guy who thought he knew the depth and breadth of the Law and who inquired of Jesus about being saved and then about who his neighbor might be, at the end of the parable of the Good Samaritan had to admit that one’s neighbor might be the person one least expects, the one who shows mercy no matter the antipathy and bridges the divide with love. “Go, and do likewise,” Jesus replied.

That kind of love is what will save you.

So, love your enemies. No, seriously, love them.

Amen.

WE SHARE OUR BLESSINGS WITH OTHERS

Marilyn Davis

It’s a curious thing to be a people who intentionally do good to all, whether they love us or not. We are a Church of Christ, and we must lead others in ways of peace and well-being. We can do this 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)

To you, O God, who welcome all in love, who forgive beyond our understanding and who would have us practice the same grace, we present these gifts for the reconciliation of the world, the good of the church and the concerns of those in need. Receive and bless our gifts, we pray in Christ's name. Amen.

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

We Lift Our Joys and Concerns

Elston McCowan

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:

our residents in assisted living — Joyce Berger, Paul Davis, Sharon Beal, Bob & Carol McCoy people we love who are living with cancer — especially Bob Moody, Jaymie Woodsmall, and Peter McHugh

Becky & David Scott, and all those the world regards as disabled

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

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

the people of Kenosha, Wisconsin, and Portland, Oregon

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

Pastor Dave

I have one more prayer request. We came to the church today (Thursday, September 3, 2020), and there was some graffiti on the walk that leads to the church's door – racist graffiti. And, considering that we have been talking about loving our enemies, I imagine that the person who did this presumes to be our enemy. So, I want to be sure that what we are doing is holding that person in prayer, that they may come to a new understanding of the world, and salvation too.

Prayer of the Day

Rev. Denoon

Dear God, we do pray for our divided world, a world of tribalism and ideology and narcissism and hatred. And we ask for your inspiration to come upon us and upon all those with whom we live as siblings in this world; that our family may be finding its way to peace and that we may be seeking only to please our Parent – you, our God. We pray for our leaders and those who serve us and for those who protect us. We pray for ourselves that we might be more Christian, as we claim to be. Make us Christians in our hearts, in our lives and in our acts, in our words and in our deeds. We pray this in the name of our Savior who slipped in alongside us, so long ago, to show us your love, your care, your compassion, and your knowledge and dream that that things might change, *can change*, and 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

Paraphrasing Karen Armstrong who
paraphrases M. L. King

“Only goodness can drive out evil, and only love can overcome hate.” Loving our enemies means that we have to accept “the necessity, over and over again, of forgiving those who inflict evil and injury on us.” There is no more to be said. We know what we have to do.

This is the end of our worship, but our work is just beginning.

So, love your enemies.

Seriously love them. And be at peace. Amen.

POSTLUDE

Postlude in C
Leon Burke III, organ

J. G. Frech

DISMISSAL

Marilyn Davis

That’s our worship for this Sunday at First Church. Please, join us for our Virtual Coffee Fellowship at 11 o’clock on Zoom. Our worship has ended; let our service begin.



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