

Welcome!

First Congregational Church of Webster Groves
United Church of Christ

Seek Christ in each. Serve God in all.

September 13, 2020

Fifteenth Sunday After Pentecost



**“NOT
seven times,
BUT
seventy-seven
TIMES.”**

M A T T H E W 1 8 : 2 2 , N I V

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

Erin Prange

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 you announcer, Erin Prange. I've been a member of First Congregational my entire life I have experienced baptism, confirmation. I've been a member of the Youth Group, as well as its director. I have gotten married here in this sanctuary. My son has been baptized here. I have so many great memories within these walls, but, more importantly, so many great memories with my fellow Congregation members at home.

This is our worship for Sunday, September thirteenth, 2020, the fifteenth 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, church members Linda and Laszlo Kopetti, and volunteer recording engineers Herb Niemeyer, Sharon Love, Bob Borutta, and Linda Kopetti.

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

Novelette
Leon Burke III, organ

William Stickles

CALL TO WORSHIP (Responsive – Leader; **People**) from Psalm 103

Bless the holy ONE, O my soul and all that is within me, bless God's name.

Bless the holy ONE, O my soul, and do not forget all God's benefits – forgiving all your iniquity, healing all your diseases, redeeming your life from the Pit, crowning you with mercy and love, satisfying you with good as long as you live, so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's.

For as the heavens are high above the earth, so great is God's steadfast love for those who fear God; as far as the east is from the west, so far does God remove our transgressions from us.

As parents have compassion for their children, so the holy ONE has compassion for those who fear God.

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

Make Me a Channel of Your Peace
(A Prayer of Francis of Assisi)

arr. Sebastian Temple

Make me a channel of your peace.
Where there is hatred, let me bring your love,
Where there is injury, your pardon, Lord,
And where there's doubt, true faith in you.
Make me a channel of your peace.
Where there's despair in life, let me bring hope.
Where there is darkness, only light,
And where there's sadness ever joy.
O Master, grant that I may never seek
So much to be consoled as to console,
To be understood as to understand,
To be loved as to love with all my soul.

Make me a channel of your peace.
It is in pardoning that we are pardoned,
In giving of ourselves that we receive,
And in dying that we're born to eternal life.

***PRAYER OF APPROACH (Unison)**

Merrimon Boyd, *Student Minister*

O God, we come before you with praise on our lips. Sometimes, however, we have not felt praise and joy in our hearts. When times have been difficult, it's also been easy to forget that you were near. Help us to remember that you are on the journey with us. Remind us that you travel with us through fire and water and wilderness, and that there will be rejoicing once we're through. Help us to remember you are with us now. For remembering you, there is joy, there is love, and there is celebrating in the present as well. Hear our prayers, O God. Amen.

NOT FOR CHILDREN ONLY

Linda Kopetti, *Presenter*

Some of Laszlo's Stories

For the last few weeks we have been talking about compassion, and I want to share some stories of compassion told by my husband, a Hungarian immigrant, who came to this country as a child. I've been particularly impressed by some of the things that touched him and in turn touched me.

If you're a child, this first one may be a little scary. I'm going to ask all of our listeners to imagine that they are seven years old. You may be seven years old, yourself, and, as I say, this may be a little scary. But first, I want you to close your eyes and imagine your parents. They've come to you and told you that you all are going to leave your house right away and never come back.

Just let that sit with you for a minute. Imagine how you would feel. Would you feel like the very ground you walk on has been taken away? And then after that, as you leave your home, you're thrown into experiences you could never have imagined at age seven.

This was my husband's life as a child, a long time ago. What would you do if you knew that this had happened to someone you know, someone you had met at school or at church or in your neighborhood?

There were some people, both adults and children, who were mean. These were the bullies. They heard a foreign language, they saw unfamiliar clothing, and they made fun... or worse.

But there were others: A man in a market handed him an orange, the first orange he'd ever had. He didn't know what to do with it. He tried to take a bit out of it, like an apple. And then he wondered why people liked oranges.

And then there's my favorite. Once they came to the United States, they had taken an airplane from Europe, but then they took a train from New York to St. Louis. There was a lady on that train who saw a seven-year-old little boy, not knowing anything about where he was or where he was going, and she offered him a ball-point pen. Now right now, you'd think a ball-point pen wasn't much. But this was sixty years ago or more, and he had not experienced a ballpoint pen before, in war-torn Europe. He was amazed, and he proceeded to click the pen over and over again. But he was also amazed at what it could do.

This nice woman stayed in touch with them through the train trip, and made sure they made their connections, once they got to St. Louis. She was so kind. She reached out, and she didn't have to. They didn't speak the same language, but she was able to tell him that she saw him, that she cared.

Sometimes, compassion is just that simple – letting someone know that you see them and that you care.

THE WORD SHARED

From the Law

Genesis 50:15-21

New Revised Standard Version, ad.

Read by Merrimon Boyd

This reading takes place near the end of the book of Genesis. It concludes the story of Joseph and his brothers, who in a fit of spite sold him into slavery and told their father Jacob that his favorite son had been killed by a raging bull. Joseph would eventually wind up in Egypt, interpreting the dreams of the Pharaoh and placed in charge of that country's emergency food storage. In a time of famine, his brothers would come to Egypt, pleading for assistance, and unexpectedly they would find that their fates and those of their families would lie in the hands of the brother whom they had wronged:

¹⁵ Realizing that their father was dead [and could not therefore appeal on their behalf],

Joseph's brothers said, "What if Joseph still bears a grudge against us and pays us back in full for all the wrong that we did to him?"¹⁶ So they approached Joseph, saying, "Your father gave this instruction before he died,¹⁷ 'Say to Joseph: I beg you, forgive the crime of your brothers and the wrong they did in harming you.' Now therefore please forgive the crime of the servants of the God of your father."

Joseph wept when they spoke to him.¹⁸ Then his brothers also wept, fell down before him, and said, "We are here as your slaves."¹⁹ But Joseph said to them, "Do not be afraid! Am I in the place of God?²⁰ Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as he is doing today.²¹ So have no fear; I myself will provide for you and your little ones." In this way he reassured them, speaking kindly to them.

From the Gospels

Matthew 18:21-22

NRSV, ad.

Read by Elston McCowan, *Student Minister*

A reading from the gospel according to Matthew, the eighteenth chapter:

Once, Peter came and said to Jesus, "Teacher, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?"

Jesus said to him, "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times."

Response.

Hear what the Spirit is saying to the people.

Thanks be to God.

MESSAGE OF THE DAY

"Truth and Reconciliation"

Rev. David Denoon, *Pastor*

This will be a political sermon. Actually, it's a sermon that includes me talking about politics. So, you might want to strap yourselves in. Still, it's a message about truth-telling, forgiveness, and reconciliation, so don't strap in too tightly.

I perceive that, in just a few weeks, we are going to be faced as individuals, as a church, and as a nation with the necessity of figuring out how to be reconciled with one another.

I don't want to entertain thoughts of the alternative to reconciliation. As a person of faith I want to be faithful, and reconciliation is the only possibility I can see to be faithful with someone with whom I disagree, if we are to avoid a devastating polarization. The Church through the ages has been a people characterized by just... how... different... all of us are and how genuinely we might all agree. Not "agree to disagree": *agree*.

For more than twelve years now (really, for about twenty, but especially during the past twelve years), our nation has been faced with a reckoning over a particular divide among us that could best be characterized as between white European descendants and virtually everyone else in our country. Maybe it's racism, maybe it's classism, maybe it's arrogance, maybe it's cultural centrism. Call it what you will, it's definitely an unjust system of power, and we're all in it, and it cannot be allowed to survive us, or else our kids are going to have to deal with it because we couldn't. We're dealing with it, after all, because our parents couldn't.

And the only genuine solution *I can see* is telling the truth, telling your truth and my truth and our truth, accepting one another, and then... having forgiven ourselves and one another who are so immersed in our truths, to move forward intentionally with reconciliation.

Our readings for today come from Genesis and Matthew. In Matthew Jesus speaks about forgiveness in a way he often does about it, in terms that at first seem to be somewhat equivocating about the necessity of forgiveness. He says that Peter, and by extension any of us, must forgive another church member not seven times but seventy-seven times.

It sounds a lot like other occasions when Jesus speaks about what God expects of us. For example, at the table of the Last Supper, when he says about the wine he is pouring that it is "for you and *for many* for the forgiveness of sins." To modern ears it can sound, when he says "for you and *for many*" as if our Savior is saying, "Ah, well, you can't win 'em all! *Many* will do." And I think, to contemporary Christians, given a world full of competing religions, or at least religions and religious people *and even non-religious people*, we can't be blamed for failing to win them over with the Good News. There's just too many.

We'll imagine that Jesus is saying, "Forgiveness of sins may not be everybody's cup of tea. Don't worry. I'm not going to blame you for failing to change their minds or their hearts."

Then Peter asks, “Should I forgive my faith-based sibling *seven times*?” “No,” says Jesus, “*seventy-seven times*.” Or, in that passage the way I learned it, “seventy times seven...” Four hundred ninety times.

Whichever interpretation of the number you accept, the frequency of forgiveness is extreme, it would seem, but it isn't limitless. If somebody wrongs you for the seventy-eighth time or the four hundred ninety-first time, according to this interpretation, Jesus appears to be saying, “You're done. You tried.” You don't have to forgive them *anymore*.

I hope, however, that you will understand with me that *understatement* was a quality of the ancient Aramaic language Jesus spoke... and from which the evangelists were translating the Good News into ancient Greek. The idiom that Jesus used was intended to indicate humility, not equivocation. By “for you and for many” the Nazarene carpenter still meant “for everybody.” And by “seventy-seven” or “four hundred ninety” he still meant for us to develop such a habit of forgiveness – forgiveness so profound, so redundant, that no one should ever despair for a... well, in Jesus' and Peter's case, a Jew; in our case, a Christian... no one should ever despair for a faithful person failing to forgive them. By extension, they should be so conditioned *by our forgiving spirit* to expect that God would forgive them too.

When he would hang upon the cross and pray, “Abba, forgive them, for they don't know what they're doing,” bear in mind that Jesus' prayer would not only apply to his tormentors and executioners. Forgiveness according to Jesus' understanding would have been limitless and would just as well have applied to humanity in general as it would to the few human beings who witnessed his death and did nothing, or those who prompted and realized his mortal ending. *If he could forgive there*, we can forgive anywhere

This is an amazing principle! We're talking here about forgiving always, forgiving everyone, not withholding grace but applying it liberally.

It can be done interpersonally.

It can be realized in a group.

It can be generalized to entire populations.

Forgiving can be initiated by a genuinely remorseful person seeking a new state of relationship with someone they have wronged.

It can be used preemptively by a community member toward those around them.

It can be applied by one category of people toward another who have caused them to be disenfranchised.

This doesn't remove the necessity of truth-telling, of continuing to report that sin is being committed or that injustice is marching on. It doesn't take away the requirement of the wrongdoer to empathize with the one they have wronged and to stop it.

Forgiveness must not be received as a means by which a sinner might ignore their behavior. It is not an invitation to a wrongdoer by the one who has been wronged, to continue or resume an abusive relationship. When God applies grace, it is not an invitation to the trespasser to continue trespassing. Grace may be applied, but the intention of God is to prevent the sinner from being so burdened by guilt that they cannot redirect themselves. God's gracious action toward us is to make clear that love will never be removed, that we are beloved of God, and that, therefore, our lives can always be restored, renewed, refreshed.

Jesus in that passage from Matthew intends to tell Peter this when he says that Peter must develop forgiveness as an ongoing habit. As an illustration Jesus then launches into a parable which I will paraphrase in modern terms. It's about an employee whose boss has graciously advanced the employee wages that the employee will never be able to earn in a lifetime and still be able to support themselves. So the boss forgives the debt entirely. But the worker, apparently thinking that debt forgiveness should only apply to a rich person who can afford to do so, then turns around and immediately demands of a co-worker that they pay back a large sum of money that the recently-forgiven employee had loaned to them. When this proves impossible, the first person has the second arrested and thrown into prison for theft. The boss learns of this and then has the first employee also thrown into debtors' prison, but in a section where the guards are known to ignore prohibitions against brutality. “And,” Jesus continued, “what the employer did towards the employee that was forgiven is what the God of forgiveness will do to anyone who does not forgive just as extravagantly.”

That's a paraphrase. Jesus spoke of a king and slaves.

That idea there, of someone who can afford to forgive another, and of the less affluent person or less powerful person somehow not being required to forgive... misses the point of the story. Furthermore the idea that forgiveness should have its limitations is absurd, if we are faithful followers of a faithful God.

We must tell the truth. We must speak plainly of the evil or injustice that is before us. And we must forgive.

We must forgive down, and we must forgive up, and we must forgive directly ahead and behind and to the side and in any direction from which comes the sin.

But ultimately also, the purpose of all that truth-telling and of that forgiving is that we be reconciled. As far as I am concerned, this may be the prime purpose of the Church of Christ at all, United Church of Christ or otherwise. We are here to reconcile the world and the people in it with our God, people with the world, and people with people. Reconciliation is the Church's stock in trade.

So, what will reconciliation look like? Well, it might look like Reconstruction. We tried that for about twelve years, from 1865 until 1877, and then the white people got frustrated with it, so we stopped. Why continue ahead if it's hard and it demands that you change your mind and your heart? And we've reapproached this in fits and starts ever since, though lately some graffiti at our entrance and some guy in a pickup truck cruising Webster church parking lots would indicate that there are some who are getting antsy again.

It might look like Reparations. You know, they tried that in South Africa with some very mixed results. People are people, and just because you provide the immediate means for them to improve their lot, that doesn't mean that their lot will improve.

What reconciliation most probably will look like for us Americans – whether we're Christian and think that reconciliation ought to be the order of the day, or we're not and our other faith draws other conclusions, or we're not subscribers to any religion and we just want people to get along and for the disenfranchised to be able to exercise some agency – we who elect our officials democratically and then expect them to operate in a republican fashion for the sake of designing laws and programs that protect and benefit everyone... what reconciliation will look like for us... is people telling their truths and... listening... and giving a little... and gaining a little... and arriving at a new place, new ground, maybe even a new order.

And what reconciliation can look like for us as individuals in a group, is to accept that – if we really want to be part of that group – we can let our egos get out of the way, extend some grace, ask forgiveness, and persevere together for the purposes we have set before us.

And what reconciliation can look like, as locally as you can get, with partners and friends and even ourselves, is to pay attention, try to understand what is keeping our hearts apart, say together what we observe, and believe in and practice, as I say to everyone I marry, “the grace of unmerited forgiveness.” (Of course, *merited forgiveness* is preferable, but sometimes *unmerited* will do.)

Our God has done it for us. It's the least we can do, and the very least! to spread it around.

See? Politics. You may safely remove your seatbelts now, and you are free to move about the cabin.

Amen.

WE SHARE OUR BLESSINGS WITH OTHERS

We are a Church, the body of Christ, directed to forgive and to guide people to reconcile with God, with nature, and with one another. This takes a lot of effort – 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)

Elston McCowan

You have shown us, O God, your pre-emptive forgiveness through the life and love of Jesus Christ. Make us a people who speak the truth and reach out for the sake of reconciliation, as he has called us to do. Receive and bless our gifts to your purposes, in Christ's name. Amen.

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

Joys and Concerns

Let us remember those people and situations for whom we are praying today:
our residents in assisted living — Joyce, Paul, Sharon, Bob and Carol
people we love who are living with cancer — especially Bob, Jaymie, and Peter
Becky and David, and all those the world regards as disabled
Dave and his family, as they get ready for his upcoming surgery
all those who are living with dementia; and their caregivers
peace with justice
this faith community, as we seek new staff to lead our ministries for children and youth
forgiveness for those who do us wrong
(and here we are thinking of the graffitist
and of a certain pickup truck driver trying to intimidate
our church and others)
people in the Western states fleeing fires

Prayer of the Day (Litany)

We Begin Again in Love
Rev. Denoon and Leon Burke III

Rob Eller-Isaacs

Response to each petition

We forgive ourselves and each other; we begin again in love.

For remaining silent when a single voice would have made a difference...

For each time that our fears have made us rigid and inaccessible...

For each time that we have struck out in anger without just cause...

For each time that our greed has blinded us to the needs of others...

For the selfishness which sets us apart and alone...

For falling short of the admonitions of the spirit...

For losing sight of our unity...

For those,

and for so many acts both evident and subtle which have fueled the illusion of separateness...

Prayer of Our Savior (Unison)

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

Hear this benediction:

That prayer we just said together, that prayer in which we seek the forgiveness of God names different reasons and different ways of speaking it: trespasses, sins, debts... We are forgiven. So, now, forgive. Love one another. Seek reconciliation. Be at peace. Amen.

POSTLUDE

Toccata
Leon Burke III, organ

Flor Peeters

DISMISSAL

Erin Prange

That's our worship for this week at First Church. We're glad you could worship with us. Please, join us for our Virtual Coffee Fellowship, Sunday at 11am on Zoom. Our worship has ended. Let our service begin.



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