

Welcome!

First Congregational Church of Webster Groves
United Church of Christ



Seek Christ in each. Serve God in all.

September 27, 2020

Seventeenth Sunday After Pentecost



MERCY

*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

Phil Shoulberg, *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 am your announcer for the day Phillip Shoulberg. This is worship for Sunday, September Twenty-Seventh, 2020 the seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost. Today is also American Indian Ministry Sunday in the United Church of Christ. This morning's worship has been prepared by our Seminarian Merrimon Boyd, Preacher Reverend Susan Leary, Music Director Dr. Leon Burke, Student minister Elston McCowan, and volunteer recording engineers Herb Niemeyer, Sharon love, and Bob Borutta. This service includes spoken responses and songs to sing. We encourage you to participate at home. 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.

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

The Souls of The Righteous
Leon Burke III, organ

T. Tertius Noble

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

from Psalm 78:1-4

Give ear, O my people, to my teaching; incline your ears to the words of my mouth. I will open my mouth in a parable;

I will utter dark sayings from old, things that we have heard and known, that our ancestors have told us. We will not hide them from their children.

We will tell them to the coming generation the glorious deeds of the Lord, and his might, and the wonders that he has done.

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

"Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing"
Leon Burke III

PRAYER OF APPROACH (Unison)

Merrimon Boyd, *Student Minister*

Spirit of comfort, Spirit of the desert places, As evening comes, may your golden rays sweep clean the dust and clutter of our melancholy and kindle the lamps of our minds that we may comprehend with setting joy the comfort of your grace in this day, in these words of scripture, in every place where we worship now. Amen

NOT FOR CHILDREN ONLY

Elston McCowan, *Student Minister*

THE WORD SHARED

From the Gospels

Matthew 21:28-32

NRSV, ad.

Read by Merrimon Boyd, *Student Minister*

A reading from the gospel according to Matthew, the twenty first chapter:

28. "What do you think? A man had two sons; he went to the first son and said, 'son, go and work in the vineyard today.' 29. He answered, 'I will not'; but later he changed his mind and went. 30. The father went to the second and said the same; and he answered, 'I go, sir'; but he did not go. 31. Which of the two did the will of his father?" They said, "the first." Jesus said to them, "Truly I tell you; the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you. 32. For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him; and even after you saw it, you did not change your minds and believe him."

Response.

Hear what the Spirit is saying to the people.

Thanks be to God.

ANTHEM

Return Again
Leon Burke III

Schlomo Carlebach

MESSAGE OF THE DAY

"Mercy"

Rev. Susan Leary, *Preacher*

Blessings and greetings to you all. It is a joy to bring the Word to you and to have the opportunity to say "thank you" for the launch into ministry this church gave to me.

I believe that all of us have been offered opportunities to serve God, to do God's will. All of us have been called to work in the vineyard. All of us serve by God's mercy and that all of us say "Yes" or "no" in a million ways to our call.

Many years ago, I said "Yes" to Rev. Jim Boler when he asked if I would finish out the Sunday School year when the second Director of Christian Education in that year had resigned. I said yes but just until June. I stayed in that position for several years. I agreed because my husband was running for City Council and I needed something to do that kept me mindful of what is important in my life. I knew the job because I almost always taught, and I had served on the Board.

That was the "yes". The "No" came while I was still at First Church. During a Christian Educators gathering I had a Holy Spirit encounter during communion. I do not remember where we were, but I remember what I read. I was handed a Henri Nouwen book with a marked passage. It read,

“Christian leaders cannot simply be persons who have well-informed opinions about the burning issues of our time. Their leadership must be rooted in the permanent, intimate relationship with the incarnate Word, Jesus, and they need to find there the source for their words, advice, and guidance. Through the discipline of contemplative prayer, Christian leaders must learn to listen again and again to the voice of love and to find there the wisdom and courage to address whatever issue presents itself to them. Dealing with burning issues without being rooted in a deep personal relationship with God easily leads to divisiveness because, before we know it, our sense of self is caught up in our opinion about a given subject. But when we are securely rooted in the personal intimacy with the source of life, it will be possible to remain flexible without being relativistic, convinced without being rigid, willing to confront without being offensive, gentle and forgiving without being soft, and true witnesses without being manipulative.

For Christian leadership to be truly fruitful in the future, a movement from the moral to the mystical is required.” From the book, *In the Name of Jesus*

Basically, it said if you want to be a church leader, if you want to work in the vineyard, you must give up control and a bit of yourself. You must establish a life of prayer and mystery. You must let go. I knew that I was being called to a new service. I said, “NO.”

The church paid for several classes at Eden because I wanted to know more. I became a licensed Church Educator (I don't know if they do that anymore). On the home front, we sold our entire neighborhood to Webster University and my family moved to Eureka. First Church was in the middle of tearing down and building up and I left I for various reasons and became DCE at Zion church in Union. I told the pastor there that I might have to leave and finish seminary. I knew that God was calling me to ordained ministry. As I neared 50, I thought it's now or never and I went to seminary full time. I said, “Yes” and have been in that mode for 25 years.

While I was in seminary, I had breast cancer and my husband died of diabetes complications. I graduated and went to St. Philips UCC in south county and served there for 13 years. Then for family reasons, I did a series of interim ministries, all in Eastern Association. I ended that part of my ministry in January of this year. I served at St. Peters in Washington as the only pastor of a 700-member church (too much for one person) and Ebenezer in Augusta with 70 members (almost too little but still going).

And here I am looking for ways to serve and bring love and mercy, compassion to life.

So, about those two brothers that Jesus talked about. I believe the answer to the questions, “Which of them did the will of God?” Is DUH! We all understand that God wants doers, not admirers. It is not how big a cross you wear, it's how you live your life that matters. I know I'm talking politics but only by coincidence or because it's true. I chose this scripture from the lectionary much for the same reasons that I first said “yes” to God and Jim Boler. I need to remind myself of what is important. I needed to remember that we can do the will of God even in the trying times in which we live. I believe we all feel small and helpless but together we are strong.

I titled this sermon, “Mercy” because I believe that serving God, doing God's will is all about love and mercy and compassion. So, let me share two stories.

I have a good friend who lives in Phoenix. She lived and worked among the Navaho people for many years and is retired and a docent at the Herd Museum of Native American studies. This year she got a call asking if she would do two or three tours for children on a Saturday. She almost said “No.” But she didn’t and found herself the center of attention to 150 black haired brown eyed tan skinned children who were in detention, separated refugee children. A compassionate group of “do gooders” had paid for the day trip with buses and lunch and guides. It was the first time they had been out for several months. They were thrilled. The big native American ovens reminded them of home and their mothers and grandmothers. The bigger boys who had been sent alone by their families wanted to show off their English skills. All of them were just happy to be free for a day. All wanted to see their parents. I don’t know who caused this to happen, but that day was mercy and compassion in action.

And this is my favorite church story. My favorite Faith in Action story.

I served briefly as a Student Pastor at the UCC church in Dittmer. They had a fabulous chicken dinner in the fall. I was there with a friend and she pointed out one of the fry cooks as the prosecuting attorney for Jefferson County. She knew him because she had three wild sons who had been in trouble. The next week at Council there he was, a member if not the chair. The matter under discussion was the lights on the church basketball court. There is a grade school nearby, but it had no basketball court. So — When kids wanted to play ball at night, they rang the doorbell at the parsonage and got the key to the light lock, played ball and turned off the light and returned the key. BUT several times they forgot to turn off the light and the church fathers, concerned about money and vandals decided to permanently lock the lights inside the education wing of the church and deny access. The problem was that one night, some kids decided to somehow hot wire the lights and two were hurt and there was a little fire. What should happen next? They could be prosecuted. Their parents could be charged for the damage to the lights. They could be punished in some way. The Prosecuting attorney of Jefferson County stood up. He asked if the kids were badly hurt. Then he gave an impassioned speech in favor of restoring the light switch so that anyone could use it. And that is what they did. They added a sign that asked them to please turn out the lights when they left. Everyone knew that the lights would be left on sometimes and that was not the problem. The church did not want any more children to hurt and the church could afford the cost of the electricity. There was nothing for kids to do in the community and this was what church is all about.

That moment has lived in my memory. It is foundational to my view of the church and of service to God and the community. It is not about protecting the building; it’s about living the faith. Amen

WE SHARE OUR BLESSINGS WITH OTHERS

“Teach me patients beyond work and, beyond patients, the blest Sabbath of Thy unresting love which lights all things and gives rest”. These words are from a poem by Wendell Berry a sincere fellow of mercy. What shall we do? We continue 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.

Our giving provides care and supports the ministries of our church that extends to the world for the sake of reconciling people, repairing a damaged creation, and honoring God—Creator, Redeemer, and Comforter.

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.

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Prayer of Dedication (Unison)

Elston McCowan

Gracious One it is right and good always and everywhere to give thanks to you; You who are present in every time and place. We give you thanks for the calling forth of creation by your word, And the way that you have woven together the dust of the Earth and your breath in the emergency of life. 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
Pastor Dave as he recovers from surgery and his family
Martin's brother Bill, who broke his leg
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

Merrimon Boyd

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

Reverend Susan Leary

Go out this day to serve and love God with confidence. Go forth because you are loved by God who created you are saved by the grace of Jesus Christ and you are given power by the Holy Spirit now and forever.

POSTLUDE

Symphony in B-Flat
Leon Burke III, organ

Nicolas Le Bague

DISMISSAL

Phil Shoulberg

That is 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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