

Welcome!

First Congregational Church of Webster Groves
United Church of Christ



Seek Christ in each. Serve God in all.

October 25, 2002

Twenty-First Sunday after Pentecost

UCC Higher Education Sunday
Reformation-Reconciliation Sunday



*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.*

Please note: Beginning Sunday, November 1, 2020, our worship service will be live streamed on our YouTube channel (<http://bit.ly/FCCWG-YT>) from the sanctuary at 10:00am Central Daylight Time, with preparatory music and Prelude at 9:55.

At this writing, a limited number of worshipers will be permitted to attend the worship service in person. **Make your reservation for November 1 at <http://bit.ly/Worship1101> or by calling (314) 962-0475, ext. 15, by Friday, October 30.** Those in attendance will be ushered as family groups or individuals both into and out of the building, and the usual measures to prevent viral transmission are required – namely, temperature and contact screening, masks at all times, and social distance. Worshipers are asked to arrive no later than 9:45am, in order to assure that the service may begin as scheduled.

Please be aware that the St. Louis County COVID infection rate may influence whether or not worshipers will be allowed on-site. If it becomes necessary to cancel the in-person worship option, those who have reserved seats will be informed on or after October 28 and a general announcement will be sent by email to the Congregation on October 31.

Order of Worship

Resignation

Leon Burke III, *Piano*

Felix Mendelssohn

PRELUDE

WELCOME AND ANNOUNCEMENTS

Herb Niemeyer, *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, Herb Niemeyer. Leading worship with me today will be Student Ministers Merrimon Boyd and Elston McCowan, Music Director Leon Burke III, and Pastor Dave Denoon. (Pastor's note: Volunteer recording technicians were Herb himself, Bob Borutta, Linda Kopetti, and Sharon Love.)

This is our worship for Sunday, October 25, 2020 – the 21st Sunday after Pentecost and that Sunday in our calendar when we celebrate the Reformation. On the thirty-first of October in 1516, Martin Luther presented ninety-five theses at the door of the cathedral in Wittenburg, Germany, which described reforms he thought the Church needed. This action on his part would begin a movement of Reform that took hold all across Europe. In England, some of that reform prompted the birth of Separatist and Puritan movements which eventually became known as the Congregational Church. More than five hundred years since the beginning of the Reformation, we of the United Church of Christ continue to pray that we may all be one.

Other celebrations this morning include UCC Higher Education Sunday. We rejoice at the inspiration of our predecessors in faith who began so many institutions of learning across the United States and the world – schools as diverse as Harvard and Oberlin, Toogaloo and Grinnell, and so many more. Their faculty and graduates have influenced history and continue to lead with challenge and confidence.

Last but not least among our celebrations is the start of our invitation to renewed stewardship for the year 2021. This week, pledge cards will be distributed to church members and friends encouraging generosity and commitment for the coming year. Pastor Dave Denoon will speak about that in his sermon, in a little while. The theme of this year's invitation is "Beloved, Love One Another" through the Three Great Loves – love of neighbor, love of children, and love of creation.

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.

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

You, O God, know our hearts.

Guide our hearts, O God.

You, O God, see our ways.

Shape our ways, O God.

You, O God, call our spirits.

Call us now, O God, as we call on you.

HYMN OF THE DAY

A Mighty Fortress Is Our God

Presented by Leon Burke III

Martin Luther
ad. Ruth Duck

A mighty fortress is our God, a bulwark never failing,
Our present Help amid the flood of mortal ills prevailing.
For still our ancient foe does seek to work us woe,
with craft and power great, and armed with cruel hate,
On earth without an equal.

Did we on our own strength confide, our striving would be losing,
But there is one who takes our side, the one of God's own choosing.
You ask who that might be: Christ Jesus sets us free!
With mighty power to save, victorious o'er the grave,

Christ will prevail triumphant!

***PRAYER OF APPROACH** (Unison)

Merrimon Boyd, *Student Minister*

Almighty God, you are one with Christ and the Holy Spirit, and we have much to learn from your unity. Division in your Church throughout the world causes pain rather than the love and care we ought to be offering. Earnestly, we repent of our divisions. We promise to build your Church universal, O God, that we may be your holy habitation, that you may dwell in our midst, for the sake of justice and peace. With your presence, we shall not fear, though the earth should change, though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea. You are with us, O God of hosts; you are our refuge. Thanks be to you, O God! Amen.

NOT FOR CHILDREN ONLY

Rev. David Denoon, *Pastor*

THE WORD SHARED

Merrimon Boyd

From the Epistles

1 John 4:7-12

New Revised Standard Version, ad.

⁷ Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. ⁸ Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. ⁹ God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent the only Child begotten of God into the world so that we might live through that Child.

¹⁰ In this is love: not that we loved God but that God loved us and sent that Child who was the atoning sacrifice for our sins. ¹¹ Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. ¹² No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and God's love is completed in us.

From the Gospels

Matthew 22:34-40

NRSV, ad.

³⁴ When the Pharisees heard that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, ³⁵ and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. ³⁶ "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?"

³⁷ Jesus said to him, " 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' ³⁸ This is the greatest and first commandment. ³⁹ And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' ⁴⁰ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."

Pause.

Hear what the Spirit is saying to the people.

Thanks be to God.

ANTHEM

I Will Sing of Your Love, Love, Love

Christopher Grundy

(Performed by Leon Burke III)

Originally commissioned by the 2018 Missouri Mid-South Conference Annual Gathering which focused on "The Three Great Loves: A Just World for All," this song has become a favorite across the United Church of Christ. For us it will be used weekly during our Invitation to Generosity 2021, as members and friends of First Church commit together to our great purposes – Love of Neighbor, Love of Children, and Love of Creation.

I will sing of your love, love, love,
Of your steadfast love for as long as I live.
And I will sing of your love, love, love, for as long as I live.

I will sing of a love so wide
That it welcomes the neighbor and will not divide.
And I will sing of your love, love, love, for as long as I live.

I will sing, "Let the children come
Do not hinder them," for you love everyone.
And I will sing of your love, love, love, for as long as I live.

I will sing of the trees so tall,

Of the oceans so deep, and your love for them all.
And I will sing of your love, love, love, for as long as I live.

Your love is stronger than the mountains,
It's no wonder that I'm answering your call.
Whenever someone needs a neighbor
We'll be working on a just world for all.

MESSAGE OF THE DAY

“Three Great Loves and One Great Faith”

Rev. Denoon

I don't mean to bail on you, as I fail to focus very centrally on the historic event of the Reformation. But Herb referred to it in our opening sentences, this morning, and so you know some of the original history of the movement that eventually prompted the United Church of Christ. But I'm not going to go there, today.

I will touch on one thing about it: I think that, when Martin Luther hammered his ninety-five demands onto the door of the Cathedral at Wittenburg, he was most poignantly suggesting that the Church in which he was a priest had forgotten how to love. They'd figured out how to exercise power and spiritual oppression. There can be no doubt that the Church had figured out how to raise funds for major building projects, like Saint Peter's Basilica which was under construction as Luther's hammer resounded against that nail on the Cathedral door. But love? Faithful, unfailing love for neighbors, children, a world in need? Not so much, he thought.

But although I will be speaking of love, I should say that I also don't mean to bail on you, avoiding preaching on the gospel reading for this week, but that's not really going to be my primary focus today. “Loving God and loving one's neighbor as we love ourselves” I used as a foundation for my sermon a couple of months ago, when I shared with you Jesus' own insight at the end of his interaction with the Pharisees that “on this hang all the law and the prophets.” As I said then, if you want to be able to memorize the Bible, Jesus says that's what you need to know. When he says, “on these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets,” for him “the law and the prophets” were the Bible.

So, there you go.

No, today, I'm here to help out the Stewardship Committee with a slightly longer Stewardship Moment than those you'll be hearing from them in the next few weeks. Margaret Gustafson, Phil Shoulberg, and John Paci will be telling their own stories about stewardship based in a theme that the United Church of Christ introduced for our General Synod in 2017: *The 3 Great Loves*.

We've been using the Synod's imagery of a swirling blue comma next to a numeral 3, and a mysterious hand uplifting them both, over the words, “A Just World for All,” in many of our own publications and graphics ever since. We haven't explained that much, up until now.

Sorry about that. You must have been living in wonder, all this time...

In his introduction to “The 3 Great Loves” theme back in 2017, General Minister and President John Dorhauer wrote:

“Three Great Loves” is a response to our denomination's newly articulated purpose, mission, and vision statement which reads:

- *We will love the Lord our God with our whole heart, mind, soul and strength; and our neighbor as ourselves. (Purpose)*
- *United by the Holy Spirit and inspired by God's grace we love all, welcome all, and seek justice for all. (Mission)*
- *A just world for all. (Vision).*

These words are intended to articulate why the United Church of Christ is called by God into being – and unless we can operationalize them into mission that matters, they are just words. Therefore, we are inviting and calling the United Church of Christ into mission. We are challenging the entire denomination to engage in Three Great Loves:

The love of Children

The love of Neighbor

The love of Creation.

Every setting of the United Church of Christ (he continued) is invited to make two commitments:

First, discover ways in which you can engage the members of your faith community in mission that

serves the needs of children, responds to the suffering of your neighbor, and/or honors the call to be good stewards of God's creation.

Second, find a way to narrate the impact of your commitment and tell the story to the rest of the denomination. We will create a web presence that archives and details not just the stories of your shared mission in this collective effort, but the details about the difference these commitments make.

Begin today talking with your board, council, consistory, deacons, youth group or any other relevant body about what you are willing to do to demonstrate a love for children, a love for neighbor, and a love for Creation.

Now, let me bring you up to date with our own stewardship program.

The theme the national setting of the Church chose for our annual campaign to encourage stewardship, is “Beloved, Love One Another.” Our scripture from First John echoed this command from an early apostle to the entire church at that time. It’s the scripture on which our stewardship theme has been created. “Beloved,” the apostle says, “love.” We repeat the apostle’s words, which you may recall are also Jesus’ words (not only in today’s gospel reading but again and again throughout his teaching), in fact so often that we may have come to take the saying for granted ourselves. We say and hear and read it that often. “Love one another.”

But remember the repetition of the verb “love” in that reading from First John. The repetition is not intended to make the term mundane or common or ordinary with overuse. You can imagine that the writer had found just exactly the word needed and that the repetition was due to the fact that no other word will do. It’s *agapé*, of course – meaning, *unconditional love* or *unmerited love* or *unfailing love* – not the standard loving we think about.

By contrast, we think of “love” and we think of family. The church is a family. Our workplaces are families. Schools are families. Youth sporting teams and other extracurriculars are families. The friends that we gather with, when we’re apart from our relatives, are “family.” If I’m honest, I get rather familied-out with all the families we claim to have. Because the love of family is a love that implies obligation and connection in ways that *agapé* certainly does not. In fact, *agapé* assumes that the person or persons we are loving are people to whom we have no obligation and with whom we have no connection other than that we happen to be in the same place in the same moment. You know?

Or we think of “love” as that which attracts one of us to another. We fall in love. We feel the fire and the heat of love. We glow with such love. This romantic love or erotic love is what makes the wedding couple so profoundly beautiful and all the events leading up to a wedding so memorable. We’ll have stories to tell, but they are definitely not the stories that we’re looking for, or the commitments that we’re seeking in our stewardship moments.

No, *agapé*, in the way that it’s found in First John and throughout the New Testament, and in the way that Jesus presents it as a commandment, even *a requirement* for his followers... to love as He loves... is love unlike the familial connections or romances that our culture usually associates with the word.

It’s repeated for effect, in order to make a lasting impression. It’s repeated so that it may settle so deeply within us that we cannot possibly forget it.

It reminds me of the story you’ve probably heard of the layperson who, when asked by the pastor to offer a witness, one Sunday, stepped up to the lectern and said, “Love. Love. Love. Love. Love.” and kept repeating the command, the exclamation, the state of being in such a way and with such subtlety and emphasis... until the entire congregation was on their feet with applause and raised hands and shouts of “Amen” and “Hallelujah.” When the parishioner sat down and the sanctuary stopped ringing, the pastor professed that the message of the day had been preached and decided just to go on to the pastoral prayer.

That may not be exactly what the national setting is asking of us, as far as a witness is concerned, as we consider our stewardship and care for neighbor, child, and planet. Perhaps what they intend is something more like what we’ve enjoyed for the past couple of weeks, with our worship based in a “Journey through Creation” – the anecdotes and facts and lore shared by Jean Ponzi and Valerie Tutson, and, yes, Cliff Aerie. That may not be exactly what they’re hoping for.

Certainly what they are seeking is something like what we are beginning to experience weekly led by the Stewardship Committee in our eNews and in Stewardship Moments, and which will be arising weekly in worship from now until our pledge in-gathering on November 15th. What we are encouraged to be doing is to be

thinking about ways in which our church is effective, how we feel empowered, to work in the world for the sake of love. Because when we do so, when we go to work in the world, we bear witness to an unconditional love, an unmerited love, an unfailing love... maybe (maybe?) an unexpected love which we have come to know through the Spirit and the actions of our Savior Jesus Christ... and others, the body of Christ acting since his own historical moment.

Love, love, love, said the apostle. Love, love, love, said the Messiah. Love, love, love, say we all. Repeating and repeating for the sake of remembering our task always. When we consider our stewardship and care for neighbor, for child, for planet, as we reflect on our community's effect on all of those around us, let us be reflecting on the love we have known and received and *can share, are obligated to share* for the sake of all. We have one great faith expressed in so much love and only expressed in that love.

Luther reminded all the Church that the most beautiful artistic and architectural expressions, even when those are done in praise of our God who has blessed us so well, if they are made causing the neglect or omission of loving kindness and restoration and empowerment of people on the margins, done to the ruination of the world, well, that's not church.

What is church is love. And God is love. And our faith is love. Three great loves in one great faith. Amen.

RAISING THE COVENANT (Unison)

Herb Niemeyer

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.

WE SHARE OUR BLESSINGS WITH OTHERS

Herb Niemeyer

The Church is the body of Christ in the world, no matter the denomination. We are here for the sake of love – love of neighbor, love of children, love of creation.

This is your invitation, to serve and support our ministries of love 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)

With what you see before us, God, we demonstrate our deepest love. Receive our gifts – our very best – as sweet offerings before you. May they be the blessing to others that they have been for us. Amen.

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

Joys and Concerns

Elston McCowan, *Student Minister*

We remember these members, friends, situations, and conditions, as we offer our hearts to God in prayer:

- Our residents in assisted living: Joyce Berger, Paul Davis, Sharon Beal, Bob and Carol McCoy
- People we love who are living with cancer: especially Bob Moody, Jaymie Woodsmall, and Peter McHugh
- Becky and David Scott, and all those the world regards as disabled
- Dave as he recovers from surgery
- All those who are living with dementia; and their caregivers

- This faith community, as we seek new staff to lead our ministries for children and youth
- Margaret, whose hemoglobin level is the highest it's been since her leukemia diagnosis (a positive outcome!)
- Bruce as he seeks new employment
- Erick Falconer who has recovered from COVID and returned to work
- The memory of the victims of the 1921 Tulsa massacre as that community remembers and also seeks restorative justice
- Peace with justice
- People braving their way through depression
- Webster Rock Hill Ministries, as that organization enters a new phase, and the recently retired Executive Director Ed Johnson
- Martin's brother-in-law is recovering well
- COVID-19 patients
- People with mental illness, family, friends, caregivers, and roommates
- First responders, frontline workers, teachers and their loved ones; some whom they work with do not follow protocols very well
- Jane Porchey's best friend forever died
- Emmanuel Episcopal Church and Mother Jennifer Hulen, as they end their relationship and travel separate paths
- The memory of Susan Hunt
- Elston, whose birthday was yesterday

Prayer of the Day

Rev. Denoon

Dear God with joy in our hearts for the joys that you bring and for those we know and love and share this life with, we give thanks. We pray as well for new discoveries about the world and how we should be living in it – whether it's seeking justice for other people, or seeking new and better ways to live for the sake of our environment. We lift to you our prayers for all of those we've named and for others whose names or situations are simply upon our hearts right now. And all of these we lift to you, confident of your care, confident of your love, and your healing and your strength.

Dear God, you surround us in Spirit. Let our world learn of you. And where by grace we might be able to offer that teaching, let it come through us. In this church, in this time, by your grace, help us to love our neighbor, to love all your children, and to bless your planet. We offer these prayers mindful of the one who taught us how to be, how to love, and who commanded us that if we were to be with him, we should love one another: Jesus the Christ, our Brother, your blessed Child, who leads us ever in prayer and praise saying,

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

“Beloved, let us love one another because love is from God. Everyone who loves is born of God and knows God.” Go forth to bless all children, to bless your neighbor, to bless your world, in Christ's name. Amen.

POSTLUDE

A Mighty Fortress Is Our God
Leon Burke III, *Organ*

Johann Pachelbel
arr. Hal Hopson

DISMISSAL

Herb Niemeyer

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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