



Welcome!

First Congregational Church
of Webster Groves
United Church of Christ

Seek Christ in each. Serve God in all.

JANUARY 24, 2021

**THIRD SUNDAY AFTER THE EPIPHANY
WEEK OF PRAYER FOR CHRISTIAN UNITY
ECUMENICAL 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.*

Follow Me,
and I
will make you
fish for
people.



Mark 1:17, NKJV

Order of Worship

PRELUDE

WELCOME

Linda Kopetti, *Announcer*

TOLLING THE BELL AND LIGHTING THE CANDLES

PRAYER OF APPROACH AND CALL TO WORSHIP (Responsive – Leaders; **People**)

Siblings in Christ, this year the theme of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, chosen by the sisters of the Community of Grandchamp in Switzerland, is: “Abide in my love... you shall bear much fruit.”

It is the great desire of God, expressed by Jesus, that we might come to God and abide in God. God waits for us tirelessly, hoping that, united in love, we will bear fruit that will bring life to all. Faced with the difference of “the other,” we risk withdrawing into ourselves and seeing only that which separates us. So, let us listen to how Christ calls us to abide in his love, and to bear much fruit.

In peace let us pray to the Sovereign God:

Ruler of all, you are the vinedresser who cares for us with love. You call on us to see the beauty of each branch united to the vine, the beauty of each person. And yet, too often the differences in others makes us afraid. We withdraw into ourselves. Our trust in you is forsaken. Enmity develops between us. Come and direct our hearts toward you once again. Grant us to live from your forgiveness so that we may be together and praise your name. Amen.

You who call us to be praise in the midst of the earth: glory to you!

Let us sing God’s praise in the midst of the world and among all peoples.
Let us sing God’s praise in the midst of creation and among all creatures.

You who call us to be praise in the midst of the earth: glory to you!

Let us sing God’s praise among suffering and tears.

Let us sing God’s praise among promises and achievements.

You who call us to be praise in the midst of the earth: glory to you!

Let us sing God’s praise in the places of conflict and misunderstanding.

Let us sing God’s praise in the places of encounter and reconciliation.

You who call us to be praise in the midst of the earth: glory to you!

Let us sing God’s praise in the midst of rifts and divisions.

Let us sing God’s praise in the midst of life and death,
the birth of a new heaven and a new earth.

You who call us to be praise in the midst of the earth: glory to you!

RAISING THE COVENANT (Unison)

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

Jesus Calls Us

C. F. Alexander

Jesus calls us o’er the tumult
of our life’s wild, endless sea.
Day by day his sweet voice soundeth
saying, “Christian, follow me!”

As of old Saint Andrew heard it
by the Galilean lake,
Turned from home and toil and kindred,
leaving all for Jesus' sake.

In our joys and in our sorrows,
days of toil and hours of ease,
still he calls, in cares and pleasures,
"Christian, love me more than these."

Jesus calls us; by thy mercies,
Savior, may we hear thy call,
Give our hearts to thine obedience,
serve and love thee best of all.

NOT FOR CHILDREN ONLY

introducing Halley Kim, *Pastoral Assistant*

SCRIPTURE READINGS

Merrimon Boyd, *Student Pastor*

From the Gospels

Mark 1:14-20

New Revised Standard Version, ad.

¹⁴ Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, ¹⁵ and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the commonwealth of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news."

¹⁶ As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the sea — for they were fishermen. ¹⁷ And Jesus said to them, "Follow me and I will make you fish for people." ¹⁸ And immediately they left their nets and followed him.

¹⁹ As he went a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John, who were in their boat mending the nets. ²⁰ Immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and followed him.

Response.

Hear what the Spirit is saying to the people.

Thanks be to God.

ANTHEM

Softly and Tenderly

Will L. Thompson

Softly and tenderly Jesus is calling,
calling for you and for me;
see, on the portals he's waiting and watching,
watching for you and for me.

Refrain:

Come home, come home;
you who are weary come home;
earnestly, tenderly, Jesus is calling,
calling, O sinner, come home!

Why should we tarry when Jesus is pleading,
pleading for you and for me?
Why should we linger and heed not his mercies,
mercies for you and for me? *Refrain*

O for the wonderful love he has promised,
promised for you and for me!
Though we have sinned, he has mercy and pardon,
pardon for you and for me. *Refrain*

Last Sunday I began talking with you about the topic of whether or not God is irresistible by introducing you to the concept of *Universalist theology*. Universalism asserts that one can only hold out for so long before the love of God wins you. And this applies, even if you die an unrepentant sinner. A truly loving God, the Universalist says, would not punish someone for eternity. Such a God, they say, is not worthy of our praise. Such a God is not worthy of our love.

This puts the Universalist against Orthodox Christian theology. They insist that there is no such thing as committing a sin and failing to repent of it eventually, or else committing a sin that cannot be forgiven. And they say that there is no point at which the love of God may be removed from someone – not for sinning, not for being ignorant of the truth of God, not for practicing a religion other than Christianity. “Nothing can separate us from the love of God.” Nothing. So, if people go to hell when they die, they don’t stay there. Eventually, everybody gets to heaven.

To illustrate this point, last week, I focused on how God’s love is just as particular as it is general. God knows each of us by name, and Jesus demonstrated this by calling his disciples each by name, or by giving them new names – like Rock for Simon and Twin for Thomas, Magdalene and Mom for the Marys.’ Some people he gave titles, like the Guileless for Nathanael and the Beloved for... Well, here’s the thing: according to the gospel of John, Jesus renamed the Beloved so effectively that we actually don’t know what that disciple’s name was!

He did all this naming, I believe, in order to assure us that God knows us within and without, that God knows even our secret selves and names us accordingly. God may have a special name for you, based in all likelihood on God’s relationship with you. Because, as I’ve said, Jesus calls each of us.

So, those are some examples of how particular individuals’ relationships with God can be: some very clever names. God presumes to love us in general and in particular, and loves us in some very practical ways represented by some very practical names.

Is God irresistible? The naming alone might convince us.

And for those who aren’t quite convinced that the charm of assigning us the right name and of calling us each by name makes God irresistible, there are the stories we have, today.

Jonah resisted God for most of the book that was written about him. He resisted God at home, he resisted God at sea, he resisted God in the hold of a ship, he resisted God in the belly of a fish, he resisted God in the sun, he resisted God in the shade... (Believe me, I tried to come up with rhymes and to turn this into a Dr. Seuss style narrative, but it didn’t work out.) And though he stopped resisting God just long enough to assure the repentance of the king of Nineveh and all its people and animals, before the story was over, he resisted at the end.

Resonant with this, but also contrasting, is the invitation Jesus expresses and which the fishers cannot resist.

A miracle? That’s the way Mark seems to want us to think about it. (Luke, who is far less inclined to such a miracle, insists that Jesus and the fishers had a previous relationship. John’s story conflicts entirely with this one. That doesn’t make either John or Mark any less true for our purposes; it just makes them different. We’re not here for facts, anyway, are we? We’re here for speculation: *Is God irresistible?* That’s what we’re asking. I don’t know what your answer is going to be; you don’t know what my answer is going to be. But, here’s our evidence, and never let facts get in the way of a good story.)

Here’s the fun part of putting the story of Jonah with that of the calling of Andrew, Peter, James, and John. You know that proposal Jesus offers to the fishers? “Follow me, and I will make you fish for people!” Jesus says to them.

Well, when I consider the story of Jonah and how God convinces that prophet finally to go to Nineveh (by having a fish swallow him and vomit him up on the seashore), might we not accurately also infer that God said to Jonah, “Follow me, and I will make you *fish* for people.” You know, if there’s one way to attract the attention of a crowd it’s by stinking really foully, don’t you think!

OK, I admit, that’s just silly.

But think about what Jonah accomplishes when he finally attempts what he’s been called to do: He preserves an entire city. The king clothes himself in sack cloth and pours ashes over his own head and then commands all the people to do the same. And they are so convinced that this will be an effective emergence

from out of their own damnation, that they not only adorn themselves in this way, they dress their animals in ashy sackcloth also!

And crazy as it sounds, it works.

Furthermore, it not only works, but Jonah *knew that it would work*, and this is the reason why he didn't want to do it in the first place. He didn't want to love his enemies. He didn't want God to love his enemies. He didn't want his enemies to love God back. He didn't want any part of it. That's how resolute his heart was.

Here, in answer to the question, *Is God irresistible?* we might actually have to say, *Yeah, but that doesn't mean we have to like it...*

Nineveh was the capital of the empire of Assyria. In the eighth and seventh centuries before the common era, it controlled all of what we now call the Middle East, subsuming northern Israel into its borders and making a vassal state of Judah.

Jonah was a patriot who wanted his people to live free. According to our modern mindset, Jonah was justified as far as his opposition to Nineveh's salvation was concerned. What colonized people wants their colonizer to be spared? What oppressed people wants their oppressor to receive absolution? Jonah wanted Nineveh to be destroyed, I assure you, because that would be the way out from under Nineveh's boot. Having Assyria make a sincere demonstration of humbleness before the Throne of Grace would not end Israel's occupation; it would extend it.

Should Jonah return home, word would certainly have gotten round of his successful mission, and he would be shunned. Right there is reason enough for him to have resisted God's call.

Similarly, think of where the fishers' call would lead. According to the season after Epiphany which we are now in, it would lead to the eventual conversion of the Gentiles. And what righteous Christian from Judea or Syria in the first century would have prayed for that?

Maybe conversion is what one would pray for, if it had taken the Roman foot off of the Palestinian neck. But that didn't happen. "Follow me, and I will make you fish for people." Well, all right, but *which people?*

Is God irresistible?

Yeah, but that doesn't mean we're gonna like it. I mean, what use is there in divine irresistibility if the heart changes but not the results? We have to ask of our religion, no *demand*, what's the point of saying, "Love the sinner, hate the sin" when the effect of that love is only to perpetuate the sin? (And, believe me, I hesitated to use this example, because the statement has been so often weaponized against queer people. So, I assure you, I'm not saying it that way. Instead, I am saying that we need to part with that mentality, but not for the reason you may have traditionally thought. I am saying that we need to part with that statement because, in the context of Jonah and Nineveh, and the fishers and the Gentiles, it's absurd.) You see, God may be irresistible. But without positive consequences in the lives of those who are loved, both the powerful and the weak, what's the point?

If Universalism only leads us to the conclusion that God loves everybody, but not that everybody therefore needs to *do something that demonstrates their knowledge and acceptance of that love*, then the theology is worthless. Maybe believing in a God who would condemn someone to punishment for eternity doesn't make sense, but neither does believing in a God who lets the powerful off the hook because they humble themselves for a moment. Jonah knew that. And, furthermore, you and I know that.

Continuing on, I believe that Jesus knew that... *knows* that. And he invites us along *because of that*.

Is God irresistible?

I'm not saying. This is only Part Two. But if God is irresistible, I think it had better mean something. If we are going to embrace this One who calls us, it had better be to a purpose greater than just saying, "I'm sorry."

Don't you think so?

What do you think?

Amen.

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

Rev. Denoon

We Lift Our Joys and Concerns

- Our residents in assisted living and skilled care, for Andrea's friend Debbie, and especially Fred Kaul whose birthday is on Tuesday and whose living situation prevents him from having visitors
- And as we mention Fred, we pray for all people who are living with dementia, their families and their caregivers
- People we love who are living with cancer
- All those the world regards as disabled
- People with mental illness, as well as their family, friends, caregivers, and roommates
- People who are lonely or alone
- Those whose employment and businesses are at risk
- COVID-19 patients, especially Audrey & Bob Franzer, and Pastor Terrell Carter
- Front line workers and their loved ones; with a special prayer for medical personnel who are working with COVID patients
- Joanne, recovering from a recent fall
- Joy for our incoming Pastoral Assistant, Halley Kim
- For the new administration in Washington, for all our governmental leaders, and for healing for our country and all its people
- Peace with justice

Prayer of the Day

And now let us add to our own petitions and intercessions these prayers, on this Sunday in the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity...

For all Christian Churches and Faith Communities, that they may continue to show one another extraordinary kindness in guiding them towards reconciliation and unity in Christ...

For all Christian Churches and Faith Communities, that they may be faithful witnesses to the Gospel call to reconciliation...

For church leaders everywhere during this Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, that they may work together and promote unity among Christians ...

For the Church, that God would inspire God's people to continue the quest for Christian Unity and that our hearts be filled with the gift of Jesus' love for all ...

For the leadership of the Church throughout the world during this Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, that they may witness to Christ's prayer "That All May Be One" ...

For an end to the divisions among Christians: that they work together in bringing about healing and promote reconciliation as signs of God's reign

For the various ecumenical dialogues between our church and other denominations, that they bear witness to the quest for Christian unity in Jesus' name ...

For those who participate in the works of ecumenism and interreligious dialogue, that they always treat one another with extraordinary kindness seeking the unity that is found in Christ and a true openness to the giftedness found in each other.

For all these, and for the joys and concerns of this community and people, we lift our hearts before you in gratitude and praise. Hear our prayers, O God, in Christ's name. Amen.

Prayer of Our Savior

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy 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. Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil; for thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever. Amen.

WE SHARE OUR GIFTS WITH OTHERS

Linda Kopetti

Invitation

Prayer of Dedication (Unison)

God of the one vineyard, you call us to abide in your love in all we do and say. Touched by your goodness, grant every Christian and all the Church to be a reflection of that love in our homes and in places of work and leisure. May the gifts we give today and every day pave the way for bridging rivalries and overcoming tensions. In Christ's name, Amen.

BENEDICTION AND COMMISSION (Responsive)

Spirituality and solidarity are inseparably linked. Prayer and action belong together. When we abide in Christ, we receive the Spirit of courage and wisdom to act against all injustice and oppression. The following words are recited daily by the Sisters of the Grandchamp Community. Let us now say together:

Pray and work that God may reign. Throughout your day let the Word of God breathe life into work and rest. Maintain inner silence in all things so as to dwell in Christ. Be filled with the spirit of the Beatitudes: joy, simplicity, mercy. Amen.

POSTLUDE

DISMISSAL

Linda Kopetti

Next week, we will mark the one hundred fifty-fifth anniversary of our church; we call it Heritage Sunday. The pastor's message will conclude his series about how we encounter the Christ and then present our Savior to the world. He asks one more time, "Is God Irresistible?" We've already considered Jesus as one who presumes and persuades. Now the pastor asks the question in the context of how "Jesus Commands."



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