



Welcome!

First Congregational Church
of Webster Groves
United Church of Christ

Seek Christ in each. Serve God in all.

February 7, 2021

Fifth Sunday After The Epiphany
First Sunday of African American History Month

*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

PRELUDE *Adagio in F Minor* Le Chevalier de Saint-Georges
("The Black Mozart")

WELCOME Kedra Tolson

TOLLING OF THE BELL

CALL TO WORSHIP (Responsive – Leader; **People**) Psalm 147:1-11, 20c
Praise your God!

How good it is to sing praises to our God who is gracious; a song of praise is fitting.

Our God builds up Jerusalem and gathers the outcasts of Israel. God heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds, determines the number of the stars and gives to all of them their names.

Great is our Sovereign, and abundant in power, with understanding beyond measure.

Our God lifts up the downtrodden and casts the wicked to the ground.

We will sing to our God with thanksgiving, making melody to God on the lyre.

By God are the heavens covered with clouds that rain upon the earth, causing the grass to grow on the hills. God gives to the animals their food, as well as to the young ravens when they cry. God's delight is not in the strength of the horse nor in the speed of a runner.

No, our God takes pleasure in those who show respect and in those who hope in God's steadfast love.

ALL: LET US PRAISE OUR 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 *Sing Praise to God* Joachim Neander
tr. *New Century Hymnal*

Sing praise to God who has shaped and sustains all creation!
Sing praise, my soul, in profound and complete adoration!
Gladsome rejoice, organ and trumpet and voice!
Join in, God's great congregation!

Praise God, our guardian, who lovingly offers correction,
Who, as on eagle's wings, saves us from sinful dejection.
Have you observed, how we are always preserved By
God's parental affection?

Sing praise, my soul, the great name of your high God commending.

All that have life and breath join you, their notes sweetly blending.
God is your light! Soul, ever keep this in sight:
Amen, amen never ending.

PRAYER OF APPROACH

Merrimon Boyd, *Student Pastor*

God of majesty and humility, you came to us as a mighty liberator by sharing our life. Your word and your touch made many whole who had been broken and shunted aside. Afterwards, none could ignore them anymore. Faces once downcast were upturned, and the powerful were upset. In this month and in this moment, we will remember modern prophets and apostles who called and still call for the upsetting of power and the upturning of the downcast. Guide us, we pray in Christ's name, into a new day in which the downtrodden are indeed lifted up and the wicked cast to the ground so that all may go together into a future of love and hope. Amen.

NOT FOR CHILDREN ONLY

Halley Kim, *Pastoral Assistant*

THE WORD SHARED

Merrimon Boyd

From the Epistles 1 Corinthians 9:19-23 Common English Bible 1

Am I not free? Am I not an apostle? Haven't I seen Jesus our Sovereign? ...¹⁹ Although I'm free from all people, I make myself a slave to all people, to recruit more of them.²⁰ I act like a Jew to the Jews, so I can recruit Jews. I act like one under the Law to those under the Law, so I can recruit those who are under the Law (though I myself am not under the Law).²¹ I act like one outside the Law to those who are outside the Law, so I can recruit those outside the Law (though I'm not outside the law of God but rather under the law of Christ).²² I act weak to the weak, so I can recruit the weak. I have become all things to all people, so I could save some by all possible means.²³ All the things I do are for the sake of the gospel, so I can be a partner with it.

From the Gospels

Mark 1:29-39

Common English Bible

After leaving the synagogue [in Capernaum], Jesus, James, and John went home with Simon and Andrew. Simon's mother-in-law was in bed, sick with a fever, and they told Jesus about her at once. He went to her, took her by the hand, and raised her up. The fever left her, and she served them.

That evening, at sunset, people brought to Jesus those who were sick and demon-possessed. The whole town gathered near the door. He healed many who were sick with all kinds of diseases, and he threw out many demons. But he didn't let the demons speak, because they recognized him.

Early in the morning, well before sunrise, Jesus rose and went to a deserted place where he could be alone in prayer. Simon and those with him tracked him down. When they found him, they told him, "Everyone is looking for you!"

He replied, "Let's head in the other direction, to the nearby villages, so that I can preach there too. That's why I have come." He traveled throughout Galilee, preaching in their synagogues and throwing out demons.

Response.

Hear what the Spirit is saying to the people.

Thanks be to God.

ANTHEM

Balm in Gilead

Spiritual

Performed by Joyce Haynes McCowan

MESSAGE OF THE DAY

“What Is ‘Free’?”

Rev. David Denoon, *Pastor*

When I was in high school, and we came to February each year, invariably upon the announcement that we would be honoring Black History Month, some white smart aleck would stand up in one of our all-school observances and sarcastically ask, “If there’s a Black History Month, why isn’t there a White History Month?”

On one occasion, I remember, when we had a speaker who was addressing us on the importance of maintaining our annual 28-day observance, one such wiseacre rose to make the standard demand. And (I’ll never forget this for as long as I live) the speaker, a serene African American professor from an area university, replied placidly as he looked down at the podium and turned a page, “Oh, my. By all means, if you perceive that somehow your race has been under-represented in the telling of American history...” next he removed a handkerchief from his suit’s breast pocket, then his spectacles from his nose, and began cleaning them, looking now only at the progress with his glasses, “you should absolutely demand of this faculty and administration that they provide sufficient time for all to reflect on the contributions of White Americans to the general welfare of our great nation.”

When he had finished his reply, he returned his glasses to his nose and squinted out into the audience to see where the question had come from, but the objector had already reseated himself at the behest of a teacher, and the post-presentation questions continued.

Whenever I ponder that moment, it reminds me of another occasion when I saw a Black man cleaning his glasses, or acting as though he was cleaning his glasses. In this case it was my third year attending Garrett Seminary near Chicago. I’d been accepted into the ordination process of the United Church of Christ, and I had a meeting at the Chicago Metropolitan Association office, which was at that time in a building on Sheridan Road near Congress Parkway in downtown Chicago. So, it was the first time I’d gone there.

I don’t know why I’d decided to drive, but I did, even though I was intimidated by downtown traffic (as anyone should be). Anyway, I needed to get to the parking structure that served the CMA office. To do that, you had to take Congress west from Sheridan Road and then enter from the corner of Congress and Wabash, which was the next street west of Sheridan. I had all of this in mind as I approached the traffic light at Sheridan and Congress, which had a green arrow. But there was plenty of oncoming and cross traffic, so I hesitated. Horns sounded behind me; I could hear a police whistle blowing, and I became even more tense as, now, the arrow turned red.

As I braked, for the first time since I had arrived at the corner, I noticed that the police whistle was in the mouth of a white-gloved African American traffic cop who was insistently waving with well-coordinated, gloved hands for me to go ahead and turn, punctuating this with a rhythmic chirp from his whistle. And he must have been doing this for a while because, just as I began to accelerate, he shook his head emphatically and opened his right palm toward me to stop, because oncoming left turners were now entering the intersection where I should have been moments ago.

I braked again, to a chorus of horns behind me, as the cop performed a pantomime for me and me alone. He removed from his face the glasses he wasn't wearing, holding them up to the sunlight, cleaned them with one glove, and replaced them on his face. He then lowered his eyes and met mine, quite seriously.

I mouthed the words, "I'm sorry. I didn't see you." He smirked and shook his head disappointedly, never breaking eye contact. When the light changed, he waited a moment for me to begin, but by now I was embarrassed and waiting for his permission. Horns again sounded, and he made an resolutely pointed a finger in the direction I was supposed to be going... before!

"I didn't see you."

I don't think I ever realized until that moment the importance of those four words in African American history. And I've revisited those words and their importance many, many times since, usually daily, especially since becoming the White father of a Black daughter.

I mean, that phrase (I didn't see you) doesn't just evoke thoughts of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*; it speaks to why we really must honor African American history (or Hispanic American history or Native American history or Asian Pacific Islander history or Women's history) with a month... unto itself. It's because if we don't, then history will continue to be told with minorities' histories being mere footnotes or outliers, and we will continue to affirm White male supremacy in the grounding of our nation's identity. We simply won't see them unless we force ourselves to pay that attention.

You see, if we failed to recognize the importance of minorities – especially African Americans – to the collective of American history, would be lying... to ourselves, to our children, to people from other places and cultures...

And you mustn't lie.

Not about this.

And about this and so many other things in our collective conscience, lying is easy. We have to recognize this. Here's an example: Those of us who identify as White will lie to ourselves about how, because we have felt moved to affirm all people as equal, then that's enough. We'll imagine that where we go to eat or to vacation or to work or to just take a little time out is OK (wherever we want to go), because we ourselves rationalize somehow that even the places which are physically or emotionally hazardous, even dangerous, to people who don't look like us or act like us, should somehow be acceptable for us. And if you have trouble imagining which places these are, do what I do when you get there. Count the number of people of color who are there in that place. The lower the number, the less safe Black or Brown folk feel when they're there.

The existence of such places is part of the meaning of the term, "White Privilege." White people can go anywhere, do anything, and furthermore, we imagine that we *should* be able to do so. Access, we have come to think, is a basic human right. Well, it's a basic White right...

There's a lot in the press lately about a crew of people who seized the U.S. Capitol, a month ago, claiming that it was their house. Barricades and police were there to prevent them access to the halls of government, and they pressed past. They then proceeded to break windows, damage property, and to defecate and urinate in open areas, waving Confederate battle flags and banners that claimed a Christian basis for their attitude and behavior. This licentious behavior is an extreme example of the presumption of privilege that is unmistakably White, but it is only extreme. The insistence of White Americans upon access to places where our brothers and sisters may not or ought not go for fear of their safety is to my mind only a subtler example. But "subtler" doesn't mean we should ignore it; it means we should sensitize ourselves to it. Because

places where we can go but others cannot go? Kind of one of those justice things we're talking about when we give lip service to "work[ing] for peace and justice among all people."

Believe it or not it was in those verses from First Corinthians that Merrimon read a moment ago, that brought me to realize just how pervasive *through time* the notion of one group of people exercising privileges over and above others has been. The author of that letter was the apostle Paul, whom the book Acts of the Apostles claims was both a Jew and a Roman citizen. He'll be my prime example. In the ninth chapter of his letter to the church at Corinth, Paul very explicitly asserts his exercise of privilege.

I first noticed this because of the preponderance of the English word "free" in any translation of the Bible I could find. "Am I not free?" he begins. Not long afterward, he speaks of being "free from all people." Then, he talks about his preaching being uncompensated and, thus, his efforts and the gospel itself being "free of charge." In addition to these, in the seventh chapter he's used a word which in Greek means "free from care." There are at least three different kinds of freedom there, therefore, as well as a freedom from anxiety which I infer (and will talk about in a bit) and finally freedom as his presumption of privilege as far as relating to Jews and Gentiles is concerned.

I'll also admit at this point that there is a question in verse 1 which follows, "Am I not free?" which caused my spiritual ears to prick up. Did you notice how Paul followed "Am I not free? Am I not an apostle?" with "Haven't I seen Jesus?"

Because I have to tell you something. The answer to the first two of those questions is "No." "No, you *are* free. No, you *are* an apostle." But the answer to the third is *not No*. It's yes. As in, "Yes, indeed you have *not seen Jesus*."

The book of Acts does in fact say that Paul was a Jew and a Roman. But it also pretty explicitly states that his calling on the Damascus Road did not include seeing Jesus. He *heard* Jesus' voice saying, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" but there was no vision associated with it. In fact, Acts further states that he was struck blind by the incident, so he *couldn't have seen Jesus*.

And not out of ignorance, like my situation with the traffic officer. He just purely and simply didn't see Jesus. Consider that. He didn't. *But in First Corinthians he said he did!* So, either Acts is wrong, or Paul is lying, or there's something else to consider. I'm going to go with that last one.

First of all, let me talk to you for a moment about *What is 'free'?* In reading about this passage, I found that our unnuanced word, "free," although it appears again and again in the passage, is nowhere to be found in Greek. The occurrence of the English word "free" in verses 1 and 19 (*Am I not free?* and *I'm free from all people*) means, "unenslaved" or "unrestrained." And "free of charge," about which we might otherwise say "free," might as well be translated, "without expense." In the one case, free-ness is a cultural or relational concept, in the other it's an economic one. In both ways, Paul's question *Am I not free?* and statement *I'm free from all people* indicate that by rights he gets to claim privilege.

To illustrate his privilege, then, Paul speaks of how reasonable it is for him to presume to associate as equally among Jews as among Gentiles. I don't think this is arrogance, but a deep appreciation of his own privilege as a Roman citizen who grew up Jewish. Not only is he able to negotiate the boundaries between "worlds," *he knows that he must be as well understood by one as by the other, if his word is to be received as authentic!*

In other words, Paul understood privilege, and he didn't take any of it for granted. The apostle went to the places and among the people where his privilege could be applied, and he used it. He preached and healed and spoke truth to power, for the sake of saving at least some of "all people" to whom he had become "all things." Doing so, he followed the example of his

Sovereign who had used *his own* privilege and power to remedy the dis-ease in Simon's mother-in-law and so many others... and to set them free.

But notice something about Paul's testimony and Mark's narrative. Neither presumes that the protagonist's power (or power position) with regard to others – their privilege – granted them any special consideration. As Paul would write about Jesus elsewhere: *He did not count equality with God as something to be exploited but emptied himself, taking the form of the slave and being found in human likeness* (Philippians 2:6-7). This was an example Paul sought to emulate himself by his own ministry, according to his testimony here in First Corinthians. And, for those of us with privilege, I have come to believe we must emulate Christ's example also, to either exploit it on behalf of others or to set it aside for the sake of others.

And this I say, even though I understand how unusual, practically unheard of, it is for those who have understood privilege to relinquish it. And, like those wiseacres I went to high school with, it is not uncommon, either, for privileged people to deny that they have it in the first place. Truly uncommon is for anyone with privilege to exercise it on behalf of those who did not.

Paul of Tarsus and Jesus of Nazareth are historic personalities precisely because *they did exercise and relinquish their privilege in the cause of justice...* and then invited others to follow their examples. Rare other exceptions in historic memory are David Livingstone, Oskar Schindler, Teresa of Calcutta, or Michael Pfleger (Don't know who I'm talking about? Look them up.).

For privileged people, this is the very definition of repentance, to change the direction in which you are going.

In my case – and I admit, I've had a mixed history with this – repentance has meant something that I at first failed to recognize in myself, my privilege. In fact, I denied it, the way that so many White people deny any existing racism or bias in themselves. Mind you, it took a couple of people cleaning their glasses when they didn't need to, and many others since, to help me to know that I don't have the acuity of vision I'd thought I did.

And now that brings me to Paul's question. "Haven't I seen Jesus my Sovereign?" Because with all that I've considered about free-ness, I think today that the freeing of privileged people – from care, from our chains, from unnecessary expense, from anxiety and fear, from isolation from those on whose behalf we may act – may actually be the supplying to them (to us) of the ability to recognize our Sovereign among us. It is not outside the realm of possibility, as far as I am concerned, that Paul's own repentance with regard to privilege brought him to the very places I have been.

I'm learning how to see: to see those who otherwise might well remain invisible to my privileged eyes and to forsake my privilege or to make use of it for crossing boundaries and to inviting others across with me. I'm learning how to insist that others who are like me, in other words others who are needing to practice some ongoing repentance, ought to do the same.

That is what "free" will be to me.

So, I invite you to consider what "free" is for you. Does it mean to be unfettered? Uncharged? Able to move without restraint across customary social boundaries but with respect of those you encounter?

As much as those other nuanced understandings, "free" for us means "freedom *from* privilege" rather than the licentious behavior because we *have privilege*.

Whatever it means, we all have a long way to go, even though we've come a long way thus far (two thousand years, we've been pondering this).

By God's grace and gracious power, we will be granted the strength to persevere.

Amen.

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

Joys and Concerns

Elston McCowan, *Student Pastor*

- We rejoice this week with our sister Tracey Harris who received official word that she has concluded her seminary studies; her graduation take place in May
- We also learned that Eden United Church of Christ in Affton, where the Rev. Paul Porter served until his death in 2019, has called the Rev. Kelly Archer Johnson to their pulpit. Some may remember that Kelly served as an interim office manager here, a few years ago.
- Our prayers of concern are for our residents in assisted living and skilled care
- 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
- Front line workers and their loved ones; with a special prayer for medical personnel who are working with COVID patients
- For our governmental leaders, and for healing for our country and all its people
- Peace with justice

Prayer of the Day

O Divine Healer

A prayer of Ginnie Brown Daniel

(Video by Work of the People)

MMS Conference Minister

O Divine Healer, we confess that sometimes
we yearn for you to wave a magic wand on
our wounded lives to remove our pain,
illness, and suffering.

We hear the gospel story of the one seeking healing from
Jesus and assume you will perform a similar miracle for all of
us – if we just pray hard enough!

And we do pray!

Open our eyes to recognize the teachings and
tools you have given us with which to seek
healing in the midst of our afflictions and dis-
eases.

You whisper to us that wholeness requires self-care and rest;
You nudge us toward caregivers who can support and advise us;
You breathe into us energy to move and stretch and reach toward
health; You place in us an urgency to seek justice so that all may enjoy
adequate health care;

Renew our spirits in the midst of our dis-eases and afflicting spirits.
Transform us, O Whole-y One, for the health of your creation. 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 BLESSINGS WITH OTHERS

Kedra Tolson

Invitation

Prayer of Dedication (Unison)

**Creator and Redeemer, you are the One who sustains us in every moment. Without your grace, none of the gifts we present now would have been possible. Thank you for being there for us, now let our offerings help your servants to be where they are needed for us and for others, in Christ's name.
Amen.**

BENEDICTION

Rev. Denoon

Go in peace: to know the strength, the power, the fortitude of God; to understand your own privilege if you have it and to set it aside where you're able.

Go forth: make peace.

Repent!

Amen.

POSTLUDE

Variations on "Lift Every Voice and Sing"

DISMISSAL

Kedra Tolson

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. All of us here hope to see you there! The Virtual Coffee Fellowship link is on the homepage of our website.

This week's Fellowship will begin with something like communion. If you would care to take part, then please prepare a bit of bread and something to drink with it (a sip of wine or juice or water) and keep them handy for partaking with the pastor's direction.

Next week's worship has a number of observances in it. On our liturgical calendar, February 14 this year is the solemnity of the Transfiguration. It's Racial Justice Sunday in the UCC, as well as Science and Technology Sunday. It's also the weekend of Presidents Day, and it's Scouting Sunday, not to mention Valentines Day. Please plan to be with us then for a day of days.

But, as for today...

Our worship has ended. Let our service begin.

RITUAL FOR VIRTUAL COMMUNION

Invitation

Here, at our tables, we come believing that we are fed here by the gracious hand of God. Aware of an unquenchable thirst for peace and for justice, we reach for

the cup of God's love and life. We come to this table in the confidence that God will meet us here, and that we will be nourished.

Reminder of God's Provision Isaiah 40:21-31 ²¹

Have you not known? Have you not heard?
Has it not been told you from the beginning?
Have you not understood from the foundations of the earth?

²²

It is your God who sits above the circle of the earth,
and its inhabitants are like grasshoppers;
who stretches out the heavens like a curtain,
and spreads them like a tent to live in; ²³
who brings earthly sovereigns to naught, and
makes the rulers of the earth as nothing. ²⁴

Scarcely are they planted, scarcely sown, scarcely
has their stem taken root in the earth,
when your God blows upon them, and they wither,
and the tempest carries them off like stubble. ²⁵

“To whom then will you compare me, or who
is my equal?” says the Holy One. ²⁶

Lift up your eyes on high and see:
Who created these?

The One who brings out their host and numbers them,
calling them all by name;
because God is great in
strength, mighty in power, not
one is missing. ²⁷

Why do you say, O Jacob,
and speak, O Israel,
“My way is hidden from YHWH, and my right is
disregarded by my God”? ²⁸

Have you not known? Have you not
heard? YHWH is the everlasting God,
the Creator of the ends of the earth.

Our God does not faint or grow weary;
whose understanding is unsearchable; ²⁹
who gives power to the faint, and
strengthens the powerless. ³⁰

Even youths will faint and be weary,
and the young will fall exhausted; ³¹

but those who wait for YHWH shall renew their strength,
they shall mount up with wings like eagles,
they shall run and not be weary,
they shall walk and not faint.

Prayer of Consecration

Sovereign Jesus Christ, present with us now, for all that you have done and all that you have promised, what have we to offer? Our hands are empty, our hearts are so often full of wrong things. We are not fit to gather up the crumbs from under your table.

But with you is mercy and the power to change us. So as we do what you did in an upstairs room, send down your Holy Spirit on us and on these gifts of bread and cup that by our refreshment with them we may become for you your body, loving and caring in the world until your commonwealth may be established. Amen.

Distribution of the Elements

All is ready. Let us find communion in bread and cup.

The elements are consumed.

Prayer of Thanksgiving (Unison)

We give you thanks, gracious God, that you come to us by the grace of incarnation, and that we may see and honor you among us in one another, in all our siblings who assemble with us now, and in every body we encounter as we go about our lives. Now, as you send us forth from our tables a nourished and empowered people, grant that we may live your love, speak your peace, and sing your hope, as you make our bodies whole, safe, and strong in your love. Amen.



10 West Lockwood Avenue
Webster Groves, MO 63119
314-962-0475
www.FirstChurchWG.org

Contact Information

Moderator – Mark Edwards
marke@wustl.edu

Pastor – Rev. David A. Denoon
DDenoon@FirstChurchWG.org

Pastoral Assistant – Halley Kim
Halley.Kim@FirstChurchWG.org

Office Administrator – Debbie Tolstoi
Admin@FirstChurchWG.org

Director of Music & Organist – Dr. Leon Burke
Leon.Burke@FirstChurchWG.org

Facilities Manager – Chip Isringhaus
cti1234@FirstChurchWG.org

Custodian – Darrell Lakies

Assistant Custodian – Gus McLean

Director, Center for Counseling & Healing
Rev. Linda E. Smith, BCRN, HTCP/I
lesrhs@sbcglobal.net

Director of MICA – Rev. Cliff Aerie
cliff.aerie@gmail.com

Student Minister – Merrimon Boyd
merrimon.boyd@gmail.com

Student Minister – Elston McCowan
emccowan@eden.edu

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