

This June 28th...the 4th Sunday after Pentecost, 2020

On behalf of our family of faith here at Community United Church of Christ in Medford, WI,
welcome to this time of Worship! I am Pastor Mary Jo Laabs.

It is our mission here to serve, to pray, to love, and to hold true to these words:

“No matter who you are or where you are on your life’s journey, you are welcome here.”

Please tell the children about our *Faith Formation Time with Children* on Sundays at 9:30am by Zoom. And, join us for a time of *Coffee and Conversation* on Sundays at 10am by Zoom. The links can be found in our weekly email.

Today’s scripture is taken from the Gospel of **Matthew 10:40-42** New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) These words were spoken by Jesus: *Rewards*

⁴⁰“Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. ⁴¹Whoever welcomes a prophet in the name of a prophet will receive a prophet’s reward; and whoever welcomes a righteous person in the name of a righteous person will receive the reward of the righteous; ⁴²and whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple—truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward.”

The title of my message today is: “*After all these years...*” Pastor Mary Jo

Pray with me: Holy One, we give you thanks and praise for the beauty of these days of summer. We were so busy worrying that we almost didn’t see it coming. The gardens now are whispering to us your deep, deep love. The warm breezes refresh our faces and remind us that you care, that we are in this together. The flowing streams and rivers ripple peace. Thanks! We need that. We need you. We know you are here and there in every place that our loved ones may be. We place our trust in you, even when our minds wander, now and forevermore. Amen.

Once upon a time two brothers who lived on adjoining farms fell into conflict. It was the first serious rift in 40 years of farming side by side, sharing machinery, and trading labor and goods as needed without a hitch. Then the long collaboration fell apart. It began with a small misunderstanding and it grew into a major difference, and finally it exploded into an exchange of bitter words followed by weeks of silence.

One morning there was a knock on the older brother's door. He opened it to find a man with a carpenter's toolbox. "I'm looking for a few days' work," he said. "Perhaps you would have a few small jobs here and there that I could help with? How could I help you?"

"Yes," said the older brother. "I do have a job for you. Look across the creek at that farm. That's my neighbor, in fact, it's my younger brother. Last week there was a meadow between us and he took his bulldozer to the river levee and now there is a creek between us. Well, he may have done this to spite me, but I'll go him one better. See that pile of lumber by the barn? I want you to build me a fence - - an 8-foot fence -- so I won't need to see his place or his face anymore."

The carpenter said, "I think I understand the situation. Show me the nails and the post-hole digger and I'll be able to do a job that pleases you."

The older brother had to go to town, so he helped the carpenter get the materials ready and then he was off for the day. The carpenter worked hard all that day measuring, sawing and nailing. About sunset, when the farmer returned, the carpenter had just finished his job.

The farmer's eyes opened wide, his jaw dropped. There was no fence there at all! It was a bridge -- a bridge stretching from one side of the creek to the other! A fine piece of work, handrails and all -- and the neighbor, his younger brother, was coming across, his hands outstretched.

"You are quite a fellow to build this bridge after all I've said and done." The two brothers stood at each end of the bridge, and then they met in the middle, taking each other's hands. They turned to see the carpenter hoist his toolbox on his shoulder. "No, wait! Stay a few days. I've a lot of other projects for you," said the older brother.

"I'd love to stay on," the carpenter said, "but, I have many more bridges to build."

Jesus said: “This is a **large work** I’ve called you into, but don’t be overwhelmed by it.” (MSG)

The older brother said, “Build me a fence.” The carpenter had something else in mind.

Last Sunday morning during our Faith Formation Time with the Children, we talked about miracles. If any of you are listening today, THIS story tells us one of those miracle stories. Something that was unimaginable... a bridge was built and the two brothers, in just a few minutes solved their differences.

Today’s scripture is a continuation of the instructions that Jesus was giving to his disciples. He knew that he would be leaving them on their own soon. The older brother, also was leaving the carpenter on *his own* to do the work that he had contracted. Think of the far-reaching effect that the work of the disciples has had... compare that, if you will, to the work of the carpenter. Both are stories of changing peoples’ lives. Both are stories of building bridges between people... of welcoming.

I am drawing this parallel because of an “aha” moment I had while reading them both. It all begin with offering hospitality to strangers (or the estranged) and what a difference receiving a warm welcome can make in peoples’ lives. WE do not know how long the two brothers’ relationship flourished, but, we know for sure that the work of the disciples has held on after all these years!

Jesus speaks these words: “Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me.” **Matthew 10:40**

In Paul’s letter to the **Hebrews 13:2** he encourages his readers to be hospitable to “strangers for thereby, some have entertained angels unawares”

In **Matthew 25:31-40** these, too, are the words of Jesus: “36 I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.’ 37 Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? 38 And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? 39 And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?’ ... Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.”

Listen again to the words of Jesus as interpreted by Eugene Peterson, *The Message*: **Matthew 10:40-42**
⁴⁰⁻⁴² “We are intimately linked in this *harvest work*. Anyone who accepts what you do, accepts me, the One who sent you. Anyone who accepts what I do accepts my Father, who sent me. Accepting a messenger of God is as good as being God’s messenger. Accepting someone’s help is as good as giving someone help. **This is a large work I’ve called you into, but don’t be overwhelmed by it.** It’s best to start small. Give a cool cup of water to someone who is thirsty, for instance. The smallest act of giving or receiving makes you a true apprentice. You won’t lose out on a thing.”

The Message (MSG) Copyright © 1993, 2002, 2018 by Eugene H. Peterson

Perhaps we do not think of any of these words when we are welcomed in as guests, or when we get ready to be the hosts. We have learned since we were young, that when company is coming, we clean the house, make special food. We get ready.. Sometimes, we do not have much time to get ready. After all these years, we know that welcoming needs to be learned and practiced.

Jesus tells us not only to welcome one another but encourages us to be hospitable to strangers. He was an expert at that, wasn’t he? His life modeled what we should be doing: to be more aware of showing kindness to those who are sick, those who are hurting, those who are lost, those treated unjustly, those who are grieving, those who have lost their homes, those who are hungry, and those with little hope.

We, in the United Church of Christ, say, “No matter who you are or here you are on your life’s journey, you are welcome here.” If you are on vacation or just visiting for the weekend, you are welcome here. If you have been here all of your life, you are welcome here. If you are looking to renew your spiritual journey, you are welcome here. If you are searching for a church, you are welcome here. Want to join a Bible study? You are welcome here. All are welcome. Always

Consider if you will, the times you have been welcomed into someone’s home... or have been welcomed into another church. What did you feel? How were you treated? Would you return?

Now, think about what we do to get ready when company's coming? Isn't it funny how you begin to see things you never saw before...the piles of magazines that are there to read when you get around to it, suddenly need to be recycled. The weeds in the gardens are looking bigger now. You begin to notice the rain spots on the windows, the fingerprints on the refrigerator and the dust on the end tables. You take out the good dishes and cut fresh flowers from the garden for the table.

How the furniture is arranged and how shiny the floor is, is important, but it is more about how we welcome...how kind we are in the face of meanness, how humble we are in the presence of a God who knows our inmost thoughts and loves us and our guests unconditionally... just as we and they are!

In an issue of Sojourners magazine, American Theologian, Stanley Hauerwas, reminds us that unlike earthly kingdoms with borders and boundaries, checkpoints and crossing guards, God's kingdom knows no boundaries.

Nationality? -- It doesn't matter.	Ethnicity? -- It doesn't matter.
Language? -- It doesn't matter.	Skin color? -- It doesn't matter.
Political affiliation? -- It doesn't matter.	Economic status? -- It doesn't matter.
Liberal? Conservative? -- It doesn't matter.	Theological position? -- It doesn't matter.

“This is a large work I've called you into, but don't be overwhelmed by it.” But, Jesus, it IS overwhelming. The problem is that our church still “closed to public gatherings. Now, how do we welcome the stranger?”

If we were to “open” we would all be wearing masks. We would be removing the pew cushions and would be sitting 6” or more away from each other. There would be no more hugging or hand-shaking. There would be no hymn-singing, no unison prayers, no children gathering on the altar steps and no Sunday School. Communion would be individually wrapped and handed out by gloved, masked servers. There would be no coffee hours. The restrooms would be locked.

Welcoming as we once knew it is gone for now! Wait...but is it really?

We have come together as a family of faith in this building named “Community United Church of Christ.” Have we forgotten the part of our membership promise that calls us to be Christ's disciples, to continue to follow in the way of our Savior, to resist oppression and evil, to show love and justice, and to witness to the work and word of Jesus Christ as best we are able? Let's say together: I promise, with the help of God. Have we forgotten the words of the United Church of Christ Statement of Faith...You call us into your church to accept the cost and joy of discipleship, to be your servants in the service of others?

We, like the disciples and the carpenter building the bridge, are “on our own” now for awhile...but, still being the “church” in our homes, where we work, at the hardware store, at Walmart and the grocery stores; at the farmer's market and the Doctor's offices, and wherever you may find yourself during these days of pandemic summer. We are called yet again to be welcoming, friendly and gracious. We wear masks because we care for one another and want each other to be safe. We continue our outside-of-the “Brick Church” walls missions: giving to the food pantries and our own blessing box and supporting the work of the church by our donations. We are keeping in contact with each other by phone, email and notes in the mail. We are sharing our garden produce with one another. Some are seeing one another in our backyards and by means of Zoom meetings on our computers. We are not only “on our own now,” but, always have been...we are just not inside the doors of the church building. We are still able to reach out , to make a difference in one another's lives...to build some bridges.

My friends, we are called every day to welcome one another in the name of Jesus. Let that great joy sustain us and help us to find more ways to serve one another “out here.” Let it be known that we are still welcoming *after all these years!*

(Ask Alexa to play some meditative music.)

Let us spend a few moments in silence imagining what our discipleship will look like this week.

Breathe in good intentions. Breathe out those things we have left undone.

Let us pray: Welcoming One, who knows us each by name, we call ourselves your disciples. We believe that we've been called to offer your welcome, but, it's a little different now. Inspire us! Please.

Forgive us for the cup of water that we didn't offer. Forgive us for the ones we didn't call. Forgive us for the deeply imbedded racism that we each have inherited. Forgive us for the nudge to be generous that we

ignored. Call us once again to be prophets of your welcome even as our gatherings are few and far between. O God thank you for always being ready to hear us and to forgive us. *(Time of silent prayer.)*
Friends, believe this good news: In Jesus Christ, we are forgiven and free to try again to get it right!

Take a deep breath. And let it out.

Merciful God, we trust that those who serve our country are in your loving hands. Protect them as they protect us. Bless them and their families for the selfless acts they perform. Bless them when they are welcomed home.

We lift to you those whose lives have been changed because of earthquakes and storms...bring generous and caring hands to help them recover and rebuild. Give them reason to be encouraged as they are wondering what their future holds. We are a world of people shaken in many different ways, help us as we pray for one another...

For those who are recovering from surgery and accident; those who face medical testing, rehabilitation, and therapies. Ease their pain, merciful God, and give them courage to face the coming days.

We give you thanks gracious and loving God, for giving us the wisdom and courage we need as we strive to be your disciples as best we can. We lift our prayers to you for those who are on our hearts this day: our families and friends, those mourning the loss of loved ones, especially the family of Leona Brink; those who are mourning racial injustice. Let justice begin with us, O God.

Holy God, we come before you today with concerns and cares, with joys and sorrows...these things already known to you! Help us to realize your presence here as we lift our prayers to you. Help us to continue to serve and welcome each other in your name.

We pray in your words and in your holy name:

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. And lead us not into temptation, but, deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen

“All Are Welcome” by Marty Haugen

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=js8RtT0mJpc>

Offertory: The message today, encourages us to welcome one another, even though we may disagree. Let us not ignore God's nudges to be kinder and more generous. We are once again reminded that we, as members and friends of this church family, have committed to minister to one another and to the world around us. That ministering looks different now, but, it still being carried on. Thank you to all of you whose various gifts have enabled Community United Church of Christ to faithfully serve!

Benediction: Build a bridge and get over it, church. Through Jesus the Christ, we can live the two together. The church of Jesus Christ can do this. The body of Christ is called to do this. Break the walls down. Build the body up. Bring the people together. Bridge the gaps across.

Go now. Welcome someone, somehow, today!

>>>New links, as of June 14: **Please join us for Sunday coffee hour on Zoom at 10 am each week.**

<https://us02web.zoom.us/j/83105711931?pwd=MGMMySDJGZzJydDZUSUpbcTloYmJIUT09>

Meeting ID: 831 0571 1931 Password: 275883 Or by phone: 1 312 626 6799

>>>**Tell the children about the Faith Formation Time with Children on Sundays at 9:30 am**

<https://us02web.zoom.us/j/84072750591?pwd=dWk4aS9SSXpSeXd0TS9BTDVWVWM5QT09>

Meeting ID: 840 7275 0591 Password: 315870 Or, by phone: 1 312 626 6799

If you know someone who would appreciate receiving a paper copy of the weekly messages, please call me at 715-351-0450 or email me: believe417@gmail.com God bless us one and all.

"The world will give you that once in awhile... a brief timeout; the boxing bell rings and you go to your corner, where somebody dabs mercy on your beat-up life." - Sue Monk Kidd, *The Secret Life of Bees*

Someone has said, “Spiritual journeys can be like the exercise equipment we buy and leave in the closet. Without coaches and workout partners, most of us won't stick with it.” We need to keep reminding ourselves of that.