

**This is July 26<sup>th</sup>, 2020...the 8<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost, 2020**

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

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.”

If you know someone who would appreciate receiving a paper copy of the weekly messages, please call me at 715-351-0450

**Community Needs:** Jessica, at the Taylor County Housing Authority, has a small food pantry in her office in the Court House, first floor, North East corner. She talks with many people every week who have different needs and has a small pantry to help out homeless people who need food. If you can, please help by bringing non-perishable, not-outdated food items to her office. Monday-Thursday 9-4 Thank you!

Next Sunday, August 2, we will share the sacrament of Holy Communion together...online or while you are reading this message in your hand. Start planning how you will get ready for it now. Find a worship space in your home and set a table, an end table or a coffee table with cloth and perhaps, a candle. Place your Bible and a cross there and perhaps, a small glass of wildflowers. Whenever you chose to Worship next weekend, remember to place a piece of bread and some juice for the communion elements on the table. Dress up in your “church clothes.” And begin. If you would like to share pictures of your home worship space, please send them to me. I am anxious to know “what it’s like!”



We will begin with this “Call to Worship”

Please repeat after me: We seek you, Holy One.

We seek your presence continually.

(Now whisper☺ Remember!

(Now, whisper a little louder☺ Remember!

Remember the works God has done...

God is with us. We give thanks.

**Today’s scripture** is from the Gospel of **Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52**, the New Revised Standard version of the Bible.

31 Jesus (He) put before them another parable. As you listen or read, how does it inform the church today? or, what does it awaken in you?

‘The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field;

<sup>32</sup>it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown, it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches.’

33 He told them another parable: ‘The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened.’

44 ‘The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.

45 ‘Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls;  
<sup>46</sup>on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it.

47 ‘Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and caught fish of every kind; <sup>48</sup>when it was full, they drew it ashore, sat down, and put the good into baskets but threw out the bad. <sup>49</sup>So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous <sup>50</sup>and throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

51 ‘Have you understood all this?’ They answered, ‘Yes.’

<sup>52</sup>And he said to them, ‘Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old.’

**The title of my message today is: “So, What’s it Like?”**

Pray with me: Holy One of many names, every day we see your handiwork all around us: the gardens are growing, the sunflowers turn their faces to you; peppers are forming and tomatoes are ripening heavy on the vines. Each started out as a tiny seed. We are never as amazed as we should be. Let us be breathless in the sight of these gifts, oh great Creator. Turn our attention to you as we stop to smell the flowers this week, all the while knowing that you are God, and we are not. Amen

So, what’s it like for you? The kingdom of heaven, that is... a mustard seed? Some yeast? A hidden treasure? A merchant? A net? Which one gets your attention? In the Message interpretation of today’s scripture, Matthew 13: 51 Jesus asked, ‘Are you starting to get a handle on all this?’ They answered, “Yes.”

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(What is your answer? Maybe this will help: at the end of the story-telling, <sup>52</sup>(Jesus) He said, “Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old.”

What *awakened in you* when you heard these stories? How have we been informed today...we, the church? (If you can’t answer that, go back and read the scripture again.) To be honest, the final lines of this passage of scripture awaken more in me than do the comparisons to the “kingdom of heaven.” True, there is a fascination in the facts that big comes from small; a treasure is found in something hidden; an empty net is suddenly full; old things taking on a new meaning. Each comparison offers us just the encouragement we need in days like these when something as tiny as a virus germ has grown into a pandemic that has disabled nearly every tradition that we hold dear. It has changed our very way of being; it has taken away personal touch, public worship and singing together. It has canceled celebrations, County Fairs, large weddings, Celebrations of Life, football, baseball and basketball games ...and has left us feeling lonely, depressed, angry, and frustrated. We have come to know this virus very well in these few months, without having even seen **it**. We find ourselves sitting back and waiting for it to be gone.

Something smaller than a mustard seed has figuratively outgrown any mature mustard tree, any loaf of bread that ever raised, any fishing net ever filled with fish, any treasure ever unearthed. The invasiveness of the virus continually threatens us all. Not one of us is safe from it. And this, too, is the kingdom of God. So, what’s it like for you now?

*\*Rev. Theodore Wardlaw, president of Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary, Austin, TX has written this: There is something invasive and unpredictable about the kingdom of God. In the church, we want to be able to define what fits in and what does not. So, naturally, there are important formulaic things that we say. We have Scripture. We have Creeds. We have liturgy. We have tradition. We have convictions about Baptism and Communion. We have boundaries...nice neat rows of carefully tended doctrine and practice.*

I’ve not thought about the kingdom of God as being invasive and unpredictable until now. But, we are in God’s kingdom wherever we happen to be...and not just on Sunday mornings, not just inside the church building. And here we are, dealing with the loss of all that we have become accustomed to...inside of the church building. “They” say that online worship will satisfy the soul and will feed our hungry hearts but, we want to see our church family inside that holy space, we want to pass the peace, we want to check in with our friends, we want to sing the hymns together, we want to share Holy Communion and we want to stay awhile and share a cup of coffee and a donut.

You know, don’t you, that we have chosen to be separated from one another because Jesus calls us to love one another. This distancing is only one small way that we are loving one another right now. We can continue to keep in touch with members and friends of our church by sending a card, writing an email, making a call; we can help one another get groceries, pick up a book at the library or do other errands. Those small things can grow more appreciation and satisfaction than the **seed** of the idea could ever have grown just sitting there in your thoughts. We can be assured that the kingdom of God is still like the mustard seed, the yeast, the fish net, the treasure, the merchant...in so many ways that none of us could ever have predicted!

I am so over complaining about what we do not have and so over hoping to get back together next month. Are you there, yet? The sweet images of a tiny seed growing into a tree; a grain of yeast rising the dough; a net being thrown into the sea; a treasure buried in a field...are not much comfort to me just as they are. I am willing to venture a guess that each one of us has, deep down in our souls right now- an incredible hunger for things to be “the way they were;” an incredible hunger to be in the church building again on Sundays hearing the good news of the Gospel; an incredible hunger to feel and celebrate the redeeming, forgiving, sustaining love of God *together* within the sanctuary walls; an incredible hunger to be in the presence of God *with* our church family alongside us That’s what it is like now, but do not let that yearning continue to burden your spirit.

Rev Cameron Trimble wrote this in her devotional this week: “In moments of great desperation, we can manifest great innovation.” I cannot begin to list the ways that this statement has been true for me. Only you know what you have been doing differently, what you have learned, what creative means you have found to accomplish your work, your family time, your shopping, your recreation, your studies, your worship. What’s it been like for you, this time of the sowing of the virus?

I can speak for the groups of pastors that I gather with on Zoom and tell you *what it is like for us*. First of all, all would agree that much of what you are doing differently is the same for those of us who serve as pastors and our families. But there are some “hidden treasures.” Our list also includes these things: some have laughed to admit they have become “televangelists;” some have learned new computer skills; some have developed better self-care and have taken time for spiritual disciplines regularly; some have organized all of the church meetings, every week, and have learned how to be a “host” on Zoom; some have safely officiated at weddings, graveside services and baptisms; some have worked on better organizational skills; some have found ways to visit a whole congregation of “shut-ins,” from home. And then, we, as pastors, spend several days a week preparing a sermon for the upcoming Sundays, writing prayers and choosing music, recording the online worship service and printing/mailing the paper copies.

During this pandemic, today’s scripture gets me to think about the things that have changed and the things that have grown; the treasures we have discovered, the treasures that we have lost; the innovative plans that have risen up. The good news is that the kingdom of God can be found in the most ordinary days, in the most ordinary places and in the most ordinary things of life! And we all know that everything is not a “rose garden.” Families have lost loved ones to accident and storm, long-term illnesses, and the corona virus; people are jobless and homeless and need the assistance of the food pantries to feed their families. Travel has been restricted and banned. Businesses are closing. Hospitals are filling. Essential workers’ health is in danger. But, there is good news still: the kingdom of God can also be found in the Emergency Room, in the “air lift” helicopter; at the graveside.

It is totally possible that God is showing us very clearly where the “hidden” kingdom of heaven is. It is not in any of the places that we think we are sure to find it, but, in the last place that we might even think to look...our own homes! Yes, around the kitchen table, on the porch or in the family room, in the garage or in the basement and out on the sidewalk.

Jesus, the master teacher, has taken these “homey” images, and everyday people like us, and is telling us to be aware, to be on the lookout to experience God right where we are. We need not wait until the seed grows any bigger. We need not attempt to fill the fishing net any fuller. We need not hunt and hunt for just the right place to dig for the treasure. We need not search any further. We do not even have to open our eyes.

Today’s story of the mustard seed, the yeast, the treasure in the field and the net cast in the sea is a lesson of hope, that has come to us in the Holy Spirit’s perfect timing, to wake us up to the fact that our faith is sustaining us and that nothing is impossible with God.

The church is not a building. The church is a people right here and right there and now. So, what’s it like today?

Let us spend a few moments in silence looking back in our minds at the days of this past week.

Forgive us, O God, the times that we have been too small of mind to see beyond our own needs.  
Forgive us when we didn't heed your call to use this time of distancing and caution to creatively imagine  
your kingdom on earth as you would have it be today in this time and in this place.  
Spend a few moments asking forgiveness, with every good intention to do better.

**Breathe in new life.**

**Breathe out frustrations.**

Today, we will pray together a "*Prayer for America*" by Marianne Williamson, in "*Illuminata*"

Dear God, we join in prayer to celebrate this nation and surrender its destiny to You. We give thanks for the founding of this country. We give thanks for and bless the souls of those who came before us to *found* this nation, to nurture and save it. We ask that God's spirit now fill our hearts with righteousness.

May we play our parts in the healing and the furtherance of our country. May we be cleansed of all destructive thoughts. May judgment of others, bigotry, racism, and intolerance be washed clean from our hearts. May our minds be filled with the thoughts of God. His unconditional love and His acceptance of all people. May this nation be forgiven its transgressions against the African-American, the Native American, the nation of Vietnam, our men and women who should not have suffered or died or there, and all others. Please bless their souls.

May we learn from our mistakes, that the people who have died shall not have died in vain.  
May our lives be turned into instruments of resurrection, that the sins of our fathers might be reversed through us. May the beauty and the greatness of this land burst forth once more in the hearts of its people.

May the dreams of our forefathers be realized in us, that we might live in honesty and integrity and excellence with our neighbors. May this country once again become a light unto the nations of hope and goodness and peace and freedom.

May violence and darkness be cast out of our midst. May hatred no longer find fertile ground in which to grow here. May all of us feel God's grace upon us. Reignite, dear God, the spirit of truth in our hearts. May our nation be given a new light, the sacred fire that once shone so bright from shore to shore.

May we be repaired. May we be forgiven. May our children be blessed. May we be renewed.  
Dear God, please bless America as we pray in the name and in the words of Jesus:

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, the power and the glory forever. Amen.

**Offertory:** The message today encourages us to listen experience the kingdom of heaven right where we are. Let us not ignore God's nudges to take what is small and let it grow and prosper! We each, as members and friends of this church family, are called to minister to one another and to the world around us. Thank you, to all of you whose various gifts have enabled Community United Church of Christ to faithfully serve.

**God of mercy and of kindness, help us to be good stewards of all that we have and all that we are. We dedicate our offerings of time, talents and treasure as we take part in the grace of sharing, through Jesus Christ. Amen**

**Benediction:** "*We Look with Uncertainty*" by Anne Hillman

We look with uncertainty beyond the old choices for clear-cut answers  
to a softer, more permeable aliveness which is every moment at the brink of death;  
for something new is being born in us if we but let it.

We stand at a new doorway, awaiting that which comes...  
daring to be human creatures, vulnerable to the beauty of existence,  
Learning to love. (in new ways! mj)

This hour's worship has ended, let our service carry on in as many ways as we can imagine.

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

Trinity UCC, Chicago, IL has a membership of 8500 people!

The Trinity UCC Choir was present for the General Synod Meeting of the UCC in Milwaukee in Summer 2019. Here they are, singing “This Little Light of Mine”