

**This is August 16<sup>th</sup>, 2020...the 11<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost**

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.”

**Community Needs: ~our Church:** We are continuing to hold a Faith Formation Time with children on Sundays on Zoom at 9:30 am. Come, join in our Sunday Morning Coffee and Conversation time at 10am in a Zoom meeting format. Please call or email me and I will send you the links and passwords.

**~our Neighbors:** For a couple weeks now, I have been helping with the coordination of the efforts of Community Mission with Jesus. There is more need in the community of Medford than you can imagine. We cannot clear anyone’s debt, but we have been able to help out. Your donations help with these efforts. If you would like to donate money, please make out your checks to Community Mission with Jesus, and mail to our church office, 510 E Broadway, Medford.

We will begin Worship today with these opening sentences:

How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity! It is like a summer rain which restores the parched earth. It is like a cool breeze at lakeshore, at the top of a mountain or through the trees in the backyard. God meets us here.

Let us pray: Maker of Our Days, you created each of us unique beings with differing strengths and weaknesses. Help us not only to use our strengths to assist others but also to allow others to use their strengths to meet *our* weaknesses. Restorer of Our Souls, you have seen the parched places we have made in our lives, along with the devastation thrust upon us by the action or inaction of others. Meet us in the places of our deepest pain so that we might be drawn into a right relationship with you and one another. Breath of Our Lives, without you we are but a mound of clay. Fill us with your presence, and set us on fire so that others might be drawn into your light and nurtured by the warmth of your loving care. Amen

**Today’s scripture** is from the Gospel of **Matthew 15:21-28** from The Message interpretation of the Bible. As you listen, how does this story apply to us today?

<sup>21-22</sup> From there Jesus took a trip to Tyre and Sidon. They had hardly arrived, when a Canaanite woman came down from the hills and pleaded, “Mercy, Master, Son of David! My daughter is cruelly afflicted by an evil spirit.”

<sup>23</sup> Jesus ignored her. The disciples came and complained, “Now she’s bothering us. Would you please take care of her? She’s driving us crazy.”

<sup>24</sup> Jesus refused, telling them, “I’ve got my hands full dealing with the lost sheep of Israel.”

<sup>25</sup> Then the woman came back to Jesus, went to her knees, and begged. “Master, help me.”

<sup>26</sup> He said, “It’s not right to take bread out of children’s mouths and throw it to dogs.”

<sup>27</sup> She was quick: “You’re right, Master, but beggar dogs do get scraps from the master’s table.”

<sup>28</sup> Jesus gave in. “Oh, woman, your faith is something else. What you want is what you get!”  
Right then, her daughter became well.

**The title of my message today is:** “*Even We...*”

Pray with me: We arise today, praising you, O God, for the beauty of creation in these late summer days.

We thank you for family and friends nearby and those distanced from us. We ask that the words of our mouths would, from this day forward, be pleasing to you. Hold us back from belittling anyone because of their race, or beliefs or stature in society. Let us not sneer at anyone because of their voting or masking preferences. Let gossip no longer shoot out of our lips. Let us think before speaking and pray before acting.

We pray in the name of Jesus. Amen.

Listen to this... it’s a “A parable for our time” by Rev. Cameron Trimble:

*It was a bitterly cold winter and many animals were dying. The porcupines, realizing the situation, decided*

*to group together to keep each other warm. This was a great way to protect themselves from cold and keep each of them warm, but the quills of each one wounded their closest companions.*

*After a while, they decided to distance themselves, but they too began to die due to cold. So, they had to make a choice: either accept the quills of their companions or risk freezing to death. Wisely, they decided to go back to being together. They learned to live with the little wounds caused by the close relationship with their companions in order to receive the warmth of their togetherness.*

*This way, they were able to survive.*

*“Living in community,” Rev. Trimble writes, “makes our wounding one another inevitable, though hopefully never intentional. Even in the midst of our hurts, may we remember that we belong together. May we be generous in our welcome and kind-hearted in granting grace. We are in this together,”*

As I was reading and re-reading today’s scripture and waiting for some inspiration, this devotional came to my email box. It got me to thinking how much we are like those porcupines. We are tired of hearing... about people cutting each other down with racist remarks, about news flashes of new gatherings of people in protest; and reading headlines listing who said what today. Even we, find ourselves with short tempers, edgy nerves, sleepless nights. We continue to feel restricted and fearful; wondering what will be next. Have you shut down the TV and shouted, “Enough!” or screamed into your pillow? I have. The porcupines figured out that if they were going to keep warm in the winter, they might have to put up with a few pokes from each-other’s quills. The “poking” is getting a little ridiculous and I hate to say it: winter is coming.

Today’s scripture comes to us with the blessing of God: the Holy One who has created us, the One who has called us to follow him, and the Spirit who makes all things new. We drop in on Jesus spewing out a mouthful of First Century racist words. Even he might have had a very human slip of tongue when he said: “It’s not right to take bread out of children’s mouths and throw it to dogs.” (That’s the “The Message” interpretation.) What were you thinking when you heard this or read this? (That can’t be right. Where did she find **that one**?) I thought so. Here is what I found in two other versions of the Bible: In the New Revised Standard Version that we have in our pews: <sup>26</sup> Jesus answered, “It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” In the King James Version: <sup>26</sup> But he answered and said, “It is not meet to take the children's bread, and to cast it to dogs.”

If you have never heard this story before, were you shocked at that reaction of Jesus to the woman, calling her a dog? If you have heard it, did you cringe a little...again? I did.

At first, I thought I would ignore this scripture and just leave it in the Revised Standard Lectionary where I found it. But then, after our Tuesday night Creation Care discussion, and a chat with the Merrill District UCC Clergy, I changed my mind. The story perhaps is challenging us today...challenging the words that we have found spewing out of our mouths. Yes, even us! Have you spoken “tongue in cheek” words about those whose efforts of caring for creation seem hopeless? Have you called someone a disrespectful name if they fail to follow guidelines that you consider to be “loving your neighbor?” Is the racism that has been nurtured in you, even if you didn’t realize it, coming out now, when you least expect it? Have you thought about taking your family and moving to Canada as soon as the border is open, seeking better ways to love your children there? Even the hummingbirds are cranky right now, pushing and shoving to get the best nectar; and the squirrels are so frantic that one chewed up my garden hose in one spot. I heard a lady swearing in Walmart loud enough to be heard two aisles away... she couldn’t find graham crackers. We have heard about enough, haven’t we? And now, Jesus jumps into 1<sup>st</sup> Century name-calling. To be called a dog back then, wasn’t good.

Dock Hollingsworth, a Professor at McAfee School of Ministry in Atlanta, GA wrote this: “Inside this story and inside our own stories, Jesus does not always conform to what we hope for.” That is the lesson. It is, perhaps, that *shock factor* that we don’t even notice anymore as we speak to one another or listen to the news. But, this is Jesus! And even the disciples tell him to ignore her, “Tell her to go away,” they plead. But she persists. The woman ignores their rudeness and begs Jesus to cure her daughter. This is what we were waiting to hear. It is then that he turns around remembering, perhaps, who he was... why he is

there...and tells the woman that her faith is strong. (Yes, even if she is a Samaritan.) And he cures the daughter.

Jesus is showing us now, that we need to cling to our faith, that the church never was meant to be in a building...it is out on the streets, it is in the park, in our workplaces, on the internet, on the telephone and in our homes. Jesus has shown us time and time again what this pandemic has shown us in just a few months. The living presence of the church is where we are. It is experienced by the giving and taking of compassion between us and our friends and neighbors, our children and our extended families.

Alice Walker, in her book, "The Color Purple" wrote this: "...tell the truth, have you ever found God in church? I never did. I just found a bunch of folks hoping for him to show. Any God I ever felt in church, I brought in with me. And I think all the other folks did too. They come to church to **share God, not find God.**

Now that we are getting used to being "out there" rather than "in here," we are called over and over again to follow Jesus and to model his mercy, embody his kindness and to walk humbly with our God. Even we will have moments when we blurt out derogatory comments, and scream in desperation, "have mercy on me, help me!" We, the porcupines, need to pay attention to the wounds: the illnesses, the grief, the despair, the anger, the depression, and find ways to turn those wounds into gifts of grace and hope and love. It is not easy...be merciful anyway. Be kind in any way that you can. We are not in control of the path ahead of us...but, each of can make a difference where we are in own corner of "history in the making."

I believe that the absolutely best thing to do at a time like this, in a pandemic like this, in these cities and this country that we call home is this: remember that God's covenant promises stretch the length of the cross for everyone. All nationalities. All religions. All races. All Political affiliations. Everyone. We, the current recipients of God's promises, have been pointed away from our corrupted words and thoughts today to focus on what the United Church of Christ calls "The Three Great Loves:"

1. Love of Creation. (This is not just looking around and saying, "Oh, isn't this a pretty sunset?" but it is in finding ways to physically care for creation a little bit at a time.)
2. Love of Neighbor. (Yes, that means loving even those with whom we definitely, with no doubt, disagree; and saying a prayer for them while going about our mission of helping our neighbors whenever we can and in as many ways as we can.)
3. Love of Children. (This means not just our own children, but, caring about all children, with their best interests in mind, not our own.)

My grandmother used to say, "If you can't say something nice. Don't say it." I've slipped up a few too many times. Maybe Jesus' grandmother told him that, too. And maybe yours did. And if not, I am here to tell you that advice is for us all. We are in this together and we will survive, prickles and all! Yes, even us!

**Let's say what we believe in the words of The United Church of Christ Statement of Faith:**

We believe in you, O God, the Eternal Spirit, God of our Savior Jesus Christ and our God, and to your deeds we testify: You call the worlds into being, create persons in your own image and set before each one the ways of life and death. You seek in holy love to save all people from aimlessness and sin. You judge people and nations by your righteous will declared through prophets and apostles. In Jesus Christ, the man of Nazareth, our crucified and risen Savior, you have come to us and shared our common lot, conquering sin and death and reconciling the world to yourself. You bestow upon us your Holy Spirit, creating and renewing the church of Jesus Christ, binding in covenant faithful people of all ages, tongues, and races. You call us into your church to accept the cost and joy of discipleship, to be your servants in the service of others, to proclaim the gospel to all the world, to resist the powers of evil, to share in Christ's baptism and eat at his table, to join him in his passion and victory. You promise to all who trust you forgiveness of sins and fullness of grace, courage in the struggle for justice and peace, your presence in trial and rejoicing, and eternal life in your kingdom which has no end. Blessing and honor, glory and power be unto you. Amen.

Let's spend a few moments in silence and recall the worse words that we have ever spoken. (?\*\##!//)

Forgive us, merciful God and let our faith push, pull and drag us into a time of healing  
those hurts that we may have caused.

*For God alone my soul waits in silence. God alone is my rock and my salvation, my fortress;  
I shall never be shaken. — Psalm 62: 1a, 2*

Rock and Refuge, Stronghold of Souls, Unshakeable One, infuse your strength into the places where  
we feel the greatest weakness. Permeate the parts of our lives that continually challenge our patience.  
Increase in us an ability to accept those who seem to be most unacceptable. Lessen any tendency in our  
spirits that gives way to a loss of hope. Reinforce an awareness of the daily manifestations of your presence.

Boost our spirits when we think we cannot manage what is ours to be and do.

Provider of Purpose, Firm Foundation, Enduring Love, support our determination to give the best of  
ourselves to others. Fortify the forgiveness you have placed and nurtured in our hearts

Sustain a solid belief that I can get through what appears insurmountable. Bolster our efforts to be the  
people who reach out to those who suffer. Foster greater trust in you when worries and anxieties attempt  
to prevail. Impart the courage we need to change what appears to be unchangeable.

In you we find sufficient strength, abounding love, and secure serenity.

~Taken from "Prayer Seeds: A Gathering of Blessings, Reflections, and Poems for Spiritual Growth" ©2017 by Joyce Rupp.  
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**Breathe in strength.**

**Breathe out anger.**

Gracious God, we trust that you are near to those whose lives have been changed due to natural disasters  
and those that have been caused by human hands. We trust that you will keep safe those who serve our  
country in faraway lands and nearby, and that you will guide the leaders of our world so that they may be  
just and merciful in all that they do. We trust that you are near to you those who are hurting and in need  
of healing, those who have been diagnosed with the COVID virus, and those recovering...those awaiting  
the results of tests and those who struggle with mental illness.

We ask your blessings on those who have lost loved ones.

We give thanks for unexpected joys and blessings sent our way... for good news  
and good friends, the love of family and the concern and care of those around us. We give thanks for kind  
words that warm our hearts and for each time you nudge us to be more compassionate toward one another.

Close your eyes now and imagine God reaching out to us 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.

**Offering** I invite you now to consider what gifts you will give this week...to support our General Fund as  
we pay pay the bills that keep on coming or to assist our mission efforts on behalf of Community Mission  
with Jesus. Will you drop off some non-perishable items to fill our Blessing Box? Will you bring a soup  
to someone who is recovering from surgery or in quarantine with the COVID virus? Our gifts, no matter the  
size or shape... will make a difference. 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.

Praise God from whom all blessings flow, praise God all creatures here below, praise God above ye  
heavenly how, Creator, Christ and Holy Ghost. Amen

**Benediction:** We have been reconciled with Christ.

Go now, and do the work of Christ in the world: extend support to those in need,  
speak up for those cast aside, build bridges of reconciliation, strengthen bonds of community,  
knowing that the Maker of Our Days, the Restorer of Our Souls  
and the Breath of Our Lives will be with us this day and ever more. Amen.

This time of worship has ended, let our service continue.