

This is September 6, 2020...the 14th Sunday after Pentecost, Pastor Mary Jo Laabs

It is the last Sunday of Summer! Welcome to this time of Worship!

It is our mission at Community United Church of Christ in Medford, WI,
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!”

Today, we will be sharing the Sacrament of Holy Communion. Take a few minutes to prepare your worship space now...with a piece of bread, a cracker or a muffin; a cup of juice, or water or wine; a candle, a cross.



Let’s begin today by singing or reading the words of the hymn,

“How Great Thou Art” (Hymnal #51)

O Lord, my God, when I in awesome wonder
consider all the worlds thy Hands have made,

I see the stars, I hear the rolling thunder,
thy power throughout the universe displayed.

Then sings my soul, my Savior God, to Thee:

how great Thou art, how great Thou art!

Then sings my soul, my Savior God, to Thee:

how great Thou art, how great Thou art!

When through the woods and forest glade I wander
and hear the birds sing sweetly in the trees,
when I look down from lofty mountain grandeur,
and hear the brook and feel the gentle breeze.

Then sings my soul, my Savior God, to Thee:

how great Thou art, how great Thou art!

Then sings my soul, my Savior God, to Thee:

how great Thou art, how great Thou art!

And when I think of God, his Son not sparing,
sent Him to die, I scarce can take it in,
that on the Cross, my burden gladly bearing,
he bled and died to take away my sin.

Then sings my soul, my Savior God, to Thee:

how great Thou art, how great Thou art!

Then sings my soul, my Savior God, to Thee:

how great Thou art, how great Thou art!

When Christ shall come with shout of acclamation
and lead me home, what joy shall fill my heart!

Then I shall bow with humble adoration,
and then proclaim, my God, how great thou art!

Then sings my soul, my Savior God, to Thee:

how great Thou art, how great Thou art!

Then sings my soul, my Savior God, to Thee:

how great Thou art, how great Thou art!

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The title of my message today is: “Keen Eye”

Pray with me: Good and gracious God, we believe that you are watching us. Forgive us when we totally forget that...when we are doing what we want and complaining about what our brothers and sisters do or say. And then, we talk about one another, we judge one another and then we argue:

about masks and presidential nominees; about schools and businesses and crazy drivers. Yet, you still have your eyes on us. Forgive us. Lead us. Nudge us to think more like you think, to love one another like you love us, to treat one another as we want to be treated. We pray in the name of Jesus. Amen.

Long before COVID; long before Presidential campaigns became everything but “duels” in the street; human beings were facing truths and falsehoods and have been known to make amazing choices! No matter what history has told us about war, famine, peace and prosperity; Christians like us were trusting God, trusting the guidance of the Holy Spirit, following Jesus and have been always praying.

The Bible tells us that Jesus began his public ministry when John the Baptist baptized him in the River Jordan. From that moment when he stepped out of the river and into the last three years of his life, he was dedicated to loving everyone he met, everyone he called to follow him, every stranger, and every person who feared him or despised him. He taught and healed and invited people to join him on his journey. He said, “I am the way, the truth and the life.” *“Believe me: I am in my Father and my Father is in me. If you can’t believe that, believe what you see—these works. The person who trusts me will not only do what I’m doing, but even greater things, because I, on my way to the Father, am giving you the same work to do that I’ve been doing. You can count on it.”* John 14:11-12, The Message

We are descended from a long line of people who believe this to be true! We have some work to do here.

When someone tells you what it is like inside a hospital that has no more vacant beds, and in which the medical staff has gotten the virus; where people are on ventilators and some have passed away...do you believe it? “Depends”...you say. “Who said it? What television channel broadcast that? Wait, what newspaper were you reading?” The truth can be found, talking to the workers.

I was watching CNN one morning when a “fact-checker” was being interviewed. You know what that is, don’t you? someone whose job it is to double-check the news; what is real and what is fake. His advice to his viewers was this: we should never trust everything we hear. Ads about presidential candidates have been spliced: sentences have been rearranged and re-inserted and then re-recorded. Social media sites are attempting to identify un-true facts. “Watch for the glitches,” the fact-finder recommends, “when it appears as though the recording has skipped.” Now, isn’t that just great? Would your great-grandparents believe it if you could tell them that?! We need to work harder to uncover the truth!

We would like to think that the news can be trusted. How about these news items:

The COVID vaccine will be ready by November.

Boneless chicken wings aren’t really wings.

25% of Pastors surveyed in August in WI, are thinking of retiring early or of leaving their positions.

Mail-in voting ballots will get to the City Hall in time to be counted. There will be 25mph winds today.

David Blaine held onto 52 helium balloons and traveled across the Arizona desert.

What do you believe? Who can we trust?

Remember these words of Jesus in John chapter 14: “...believe what you see—these works.”

Maybe, in the stark confusion of the media, and the unending game of “telephone”... “who said what?” that we find ourselves in, we should be looking for the *results of the work*.

Just find something to believe in...that is the result of the “work” or could eventually be the result.

Is it good? Is it bad? Will it ugly?

We say that we trust God. We believe in the Holy Spirit. The foundation of our faith is in Jesus.

Paul, in his letter to the Romans, chapter 8, verse 28, wrote this: “We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.” NRSV

Or, in the Message, this interpretation: “That’s why we can be so sure that every detail in our lives of love for God is worked into something good.”

Here is what Jesus has to say as recorded in the Gospel of **Matthew 18:15-20**:

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¹⁵⁻¹⁷ “If a fellow believer hurts you, go and tell him—work it out between the two of you. If he listens, you’ve made a friend. If he won’t listen, take one or two others along so that the presence of witnesses will keep things honest and try again. If he still won’t listen, tell the church. If he won’t listen to the church, you’ll have to start over from scratch, confront him with the need for repentance, and offer again God’s forgiving love.

¹⁸⁻²⁰ “Take this most seriously: A yes on earth is yes in heaven; a no on earth is no in heaven. What you say to one another is eternal. I mean this. When two of you get together on anything at all on earth and make a prayer of it, my Father in heaven goes into action. And when two or three of you are together because of me, you can be sure that I’ll be there.”

So, what do you think of that? How can that possibly be the good news for today? Well, it is! God is here right now wherever you are. God is speaking and we can trust what Jesus says!

But, I have to say that the first paragraph sounds like something that would never work. If we would take these words of Jesus literally every time our brothers and sisters hurt our feelings, every time we disagree with one another, every time someone lies to us, then, we would all masters at the “collaboration style” of conflict management! Come face to face and talk about it. If that doesn’t work, try again and bring someone with you. No progress? Then bring the church.

Honestly, some people do come to “the church” to tell me their story of conflict. They sometimes cry all the while, as they lay down their problems on the table; but they come alone. And then, they tell me that they feel better just talking about “it.” We brainstorm ideas and put away the Kleenex. We may not have settled a conflict, but it has been the initiation of a new search for the truth and the good.

The second paragraph sounds more attainable to believe. **Matthew 18:18-20** NRSV

¹⁸ Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. ¹⁹ Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. ²⁰ For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.” Truly I tell you...

Jesus plainly tells us that life will not be easy and that there will always be disagreements, and that we have some work to do here. I believe that this scripture speaks to us today in perfect timing, when we really need a little truth, when we really are longing for a little love, when we really could use a ray hope! We know very well that we alone cannot solve world hunger, racism, climate change and the results of the presidential election on our own.

I believe that this scripture today has brought to our attention how Jesus, the Master Teacher once again speaks the truth in love. There is nothing harder than that. The truth is that life has not been easy during these COVID days. There are voices of truth and voices of lies so comingled that we cannot even *begin* to check the facts.

This is what we can do: trust in God’s faithfulness and trust in the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Follow Jesus in what you say and do and pray continually that we will be able to see with a keener eye and listen with more attentive ears. Let this mind be in us that is also in Jesus.

Pay attention to sources of hope. Look for honesty, goodness and joy. Listen for stories of peace, patience and self-control. Reach out in gentleness and kindness, if even at a distance. Cling to faithfulness and speak the truth in love. This is what Jesus wants us to do! Let these “fruits of the Spirit” be so prominent in you that those around you will be so busy noticing... that they will no longer be grumbling! Just maybe, your keen eye will start to see something quite believably wonderful.

We are in this together! Thanks be to God.

Let’s spend a few moments in silence.

Take a deep breath and savor this quiet time. Breathe out slowly now.

Pray with me: O God of hope, we turn our faces to you, as the sunflowers look for the sun.

Let us not be dragged down by the tragedy and sickness and disagreement among us.

Lead us, O God to find the good in each new day. Let us filter out what we consider to be most difficult and let us see our way through to the other side of these confusing days of unrest and mistrust.

Let us feel your presence in the in the words that we speak to one another and bless the decisions that we make. Let us see our labor as a “called” blessing. Help us to persevere and find some rays of hope in this crazy world around us. Thank you, that in Jesus, we can!

We lift to you all those who are at home and in the hospitals recovering from the COVID Virus; those who are recovering from surgery and accident; those who have lost loved ones; those are picking up the pieces of their fire-ravaged and hurricane-blown lives. Merciful God, you know our every need. Hear now the joys and concerns that we hold in our hearts... Help us to listen more closely to what you have to say to us this and every day!

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 and
the power and the glory, forever. Amen**

The Celebration of Holy Communion, written for Labor Day Weekend
by Rev.Maren C. Tirabassi, UCC Pastor and Author

We make a joyful muffled noise –rhythm and blues, country, rap, a masked, distanced,
sweet response to the voice of God:

“I relieved your shoulder of the burden and your hands were freed from the basket.” Psalm 81

We pick up the tambourine and the bass guitar –we Zoom, Livestream and sit-spaced!

The first Exodus released those treated unjustly and worked to bring them to a new and safe place.

This is a new Exodus time, a time to give attention to domestic workers, migrant workers, food service folks heading to the curbside, housekeepers keeping motels COVID-clean, to those in mandatory overtime, those jobless and waiting, those who work in dangerous conditions.

We experience the voice of God, saying: “I will give you finest wheat; from the rock, I give you honey.”

Prayer of Consecration

In the bread we eat, we honor farmers and bakers; we honor truck drivers, and those who stock grocery shelves. In the cup we drink, we honor those who pick fruit, often endangered by pesticides, and those who work in bottling plants. In bread and cup, we honor those who have written, translated, printed, sold, given, and taught the Good News of the new covenant.

(Each person laying hands on bread and cup)

Holy One, this is the Sacrament we share, because others have passed it on – spiritually and physically – to each of us. We pray that your Spirit of life and love, of tenderness and power, rest upon every bread and every cup, so that they may feed our inmost needs and pour forth a grace that can change the world.

Risen Christ, live in us, that we may live in you. Amen.

Words of Remembering ~ adapted from Henry Van Dyke's Hymn for Labor Day in public domain ...

Jesus, our divine companion, by a lowly human birth, surely came to join the workers, burden bearers of the Earth –known as carpenter of Nazareth, gathered those who fish for food, promised – “raise the stone and find me, I am here, just cleave the wood.”

In these times of fires and flooding, here Christ is to claim and own; where the virus finds a victim, no one shall be left alone. Christ the peace which passes knowledge dwells within the daily strife; in the bread of Heaven broken in the sacrament of life.

My friends, we remember a Passover in Jerusalem when Jesus borrowed an upper room, soaked and scrubbed the tired feet of others, and explained that there is a God-shaped hole in everyone's belly and Jesus would fill it with love. And on Easter afternoon in Emmaus, Jesus reminded us that the bread of welcome on anyone's table, on everyone's table, is blessed to be a holy sacrament, sending us out to find the cup in the world around us.

Sharing of the Elements

The bread on your table is blessed and broken. As long as it is open to all, it is holy.

Please repeat after me: Sharing love, we will never be hungry. (Eat it now.)

The cup on your table is blessed and shared like the overflowing of tears and joy.

Please repeat after me: Drinking deeply, we will never thirst. (Drink it now.)

O Holy One, we give you thanks for honey from rocky times, hope from fearful thoughts and burdened shoulders, bread and roses from the labor of hands and minds, and your blessing as we receive this sacrament in the holy dispersion of virtual worship to reach out and change your world one foot-washing servanthood at a time, one Emmaus joy at a time. Amen

This is our time of Offering.

I invite you now to think about what you have to offer as you read or listen to these words of Paul in his letter to the **Ephesians 3: 20-21**

Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, ²¹to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, for ever and ever. Amen. New Revised Standard Version

We each, as members and friends of this church family have made a commitment to be faithful to our church and faithful to our calling as we follow Jesus.
Thank you, for each gift that you have given.

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

Benediction: This past week, we received a letter from the National office of the United Church of Christ. Rev John Dorhauer, Rev, Traci Blackmon, Rev Georgia Thompson, and Yvette Wynn, signed it in this way:

At this moment in our nation's history, when the world seems to have paused at the intersection of courage and compassion, people of faith are poised to live justice out loud in new ways. It is in this moment that the church is called to go deeper. And we will not go alone. The same God who has guided our incredible journeys in years past is the God who guides us now! And that is the truth! Amen.

This time of worship has ended, let our service continue...and as you do, be safe. Be well.

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"Like" us on Facebook: Community United Church of Christ, Medford, WI

Listen to "How Great Thou Art" on YouTube:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tXQpDDcrN-w>