

This is September 13, 2020...the 15th Sunday after Pentecost

Thank you for joining in this time of worship. Welcome!

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!”

Let’s begin with this *Call to Worship*:

Bless God, O friends: with all our strength and never forget God’s gifts--
bless the holy name and never forget God’s gifts--

For as the heavens are high above the earth, so great is God’s love and compassion for us.

Bless God, O friends: give thanks and never forget God’s gifts.

Matthew 18:21-35, The Message

A Story About Forgiveness

²¹ At that point Peter got up the nerve to ask, “Master, how many times do I forgive a brother or sister who hurts me? Seven?” ²² Jesus replied, “Seven! Hardly. Try seventy times seven.

²³⁻²⁵ “The kingdom of God is like a king who decided to square accounts with his servants. As he got under way, one servant was brought before him who had run up a debt of a hundred thousand dollars. He couldn’t pay up, so the king ordered the man, along with his wife, children, and goods, to be auctioned off at the slave market.

²⁶⁻²⁷ “The poor wretch threw himself at the king’s feet and begged, ‘Give me a chance and I’ll pay it all back.’ Touched by his plea, the king let him off, erasing the debt.

²⁸ “The servant was no sooner out of the room when he came upon one of his fellow servants who owed him ten dollars. He seized him by the throat and demanded, ‘Pay up. Now!’

²⁹⁻³¹ “The poor wretch threw himself down and begged, ‘Give me a chance and I’ll pay it all back.’ But he wouldn’t do it. He had him arrested and put in jail until the debt was paid. When the other servants saw this going on, they were outraged and brought a detailed report to the king.

³²⁻³⁵ “The king summoned the man and said, ‘You evil servant! I forgave your entire debt when you begged me for mercy. Shouldn’t you be compelled to be merciful to your fellow servant who asked for mercy?’ The king was furious and put the screws to the man until he paid back his entire debt. And that’s exactly what my Father in heaven is going to do to each one of you who doesn’t forgive unconditionally anyone who asks for mercy.”

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The title of my message today is: “Lose Count”

Pray with me: O Great Giver of every good and perfect gift, hear our prayers this day. As you continually offer to us the gift of forgiveness, let us know ways to offer forgiveness to one another. Thank you for hearing our desperate cries, for forgiving our every harsh word, bad choice and erring intent. Let us walk together wrapped in the grace of new life in Jesus Christ. Amen.

A man named Bob was upset with the manager of the local dry-cleaning store and expressed his anger quite forcefully, storming out and slamming the door.

Later that week, after he put a red pen in the pocket of his white shirt and forgot to put the cap on it, he found that it leaked a red stain all over the pocket. His wife said, “This will never wash out. I’ll take it to the cleaners.” Even though Bob said he would not return to that store, she took the shirt there.

The manager took a long, slow look at the dark red stain on the front of the shirt and then, with a smirk on his face, said quietly, “Good shot!”

When I first found that little story on a website I often use for sermon illustrations, I thought that it was not at all appropriate to tell in worship. But, the words, “good shot” came back to me when reading today’s lectionary scriptures.

Have you ever said something to someone that you later regretted; when, without thinking first, words just shot out of your mouth? Have you ever done something impulsive that, looking back at it has it kept you awake at night re-thinking what you have done? “How could I be so insensitive? What was wrong with me!” And so, ever since you stepped over that proverbial line, spewing out those words or acting in ways that you regret... it still gnaws away at you. Those unkind words and actions somehow get “filed away” and piled up in the attic of our life’s experience and enter the “bad-shot” file.

Several years ago, when I was asked to serve as organist for a wedding, a young couple wanted their soloist to sing a song by Rascal Flats entitled “*God Bless the Broken Road*.” At that time, I had never heard of the band or the song but, it has since become a favorite of mine. Here are some of the lyrics:

*I set out on a narrow way many years ago
Hoping I would find true love along the broken road.*

But I got lost a time or two, wiped my brow and kept pushing through.

*I couldn't see how every sign pointed straight to you. Every long, lost dream led me to where you are.
Others who broke my heart they were like Northern stars pointing me on my way into your loving arms.*

This much I know is true: that God blessed the broken road that led me straight to you

There are many ways to interpret those words. Scriptures oftentimes speak to me of the road that we each have traveled, sometimes broken, with mis-steps and wrong choices, but, with our loving and forgiving God at our side. Looking back, what do you see? Can you remember how many times God has escorted you over the bumps and gravel and switchbacks of that road. Have you lost count?

Let take a few moments and look back into one of the central stories in Hebrew Scriptures in the book of Exodus. It is one of the many stories of how God keeps promises. It is a story of how our ancestors in faith trust in God's promises.

Imagine now, what the Israelites were feeling as they were fleeing from their captivity in Egypt, the moment that they stood at the shore of the Red Sea. They were feeling desperate and trapped. The sea was in front of them and the Egyptian army was not too far behind. They had no boat, no raft. What they **DID have** was the power and presence of God.

I can’t help but think of the scene from the movie, “*The Ten Commandments*.” In it, Moses, played by Charlton Heston, is in a flowing robe, his hair blowing in the wind, and his arms lifted up with one hand holding the staff that God had given him. The sea suddenly heaves and parts, creating a path with rolling walls of water on either side. Then, the people of Israel are enabled to march through “the sea” on dry land. The entire army of Pharaoh was soon engulfed in the waters of the Red Sea as God saves these *chosen* ones.

When we come down the road and face “crossing a sea” in our personal lives, it is imperative to put our trust in that same power and same presence of God. God will make a way when there seems to be no way when we face...

- The *sea crossing* of a new school year, with new teachers and classmates; worries of who will get sick and how long in-person classes will be held.
- The *sea crossing* of a new job or no job and the challenges of working from home.
- * The *sea crossing* of retirement, with nowhere to go now and no one to go with.
- The *sea crossing* of storm and fire, with feelings of fear for our loved ones’ safety.
- The *sea crossing* of a serious illness, with no visitors allowed in.
- The *sea crossing* of a death in the family, with confusion and grief.
- *The *sea crossing* of changes in our church, with challenges concerning “what’s next”?

Through all of these *crossings*...more than we can even begin to count, the promise of God to us is still: "When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you." (Isaiah 43:2)

And now we arrive at the Gospel Lesson. Peter came to Jesus one day, asking him a question: "Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" And Jesus gives his famous answer, "Not seven times, but I tell you, seventy times seven."

And then, Jesus tells the not-so-easy-to-listen-to parable about *how* the Kingdom of Heaven is like a King who wanted to settle accounts with his servants - and how one of these servants - even though he is forgiven a massive debt by his master- fails to be equally forgiving of a fellow servant who owes him just a small debt. The master shouts, "You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me.

Should you not have had mercy on your fellow-slave, as I had mercy on you?"

Jesus warns, "So, my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart."

Just when we thought life couldn't get any harder. Think about it. Offering forgiveness is something we try to avoid; but God loves us and us forgives us even before we ask. God's forgiveness is unconditional. Look back down the road that you have traveled to get to this time and place. Then, give thanks for the grace of God that opens up the sea and lets you pass on to new territory in his name.

- instead of punishing us for our sin
- instead of keeping us at arm's length
- instead of turning his face away from us,
- out of love for us, **God forgives us.**

As a family of faith, a community of people who believe in God and who SAY we trust in the words of the gospel; we, who profess to be disciples of Jesus; let us commit to renewing our faith in God's grace and to attempting to rethink our words and our actions toward one another in the light of forgiveness.

I dare say that we have grown so accustomed to receiving God's grace and have felt forgiveness so often that we do not appreciate it and thus, it doesn't even occur to us to offer it to others!

If you are worried about being unable to forgive someone one time, let alone seventy times seven times, *there is* something you can do about it.

->First, stop thinking about getting even. Stop trying to take the BEST SHOT and start re-thinking what you say. Can we do it? YES! Then trust God and ask God to help. (Romans 12:19)
Remember the Old Testament way of "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth....no longer stands.

->Second, starting today, offer forgiveness and you will experience overwhelming relief.
Can we do it? YES. The New Testament way is to overcome evil with good; pray for both those whom we have hurt and those who have hurt us. (Romans 12:21; Matthew 5:44).

->Third, repeat these steps as often as necessary. **Lose count.** (Matthew 18:21-22 NIV).

With God's help, we won't be tempted to look back so often over the broken road.
No one said that this is easy, but it is possible.

There were two little boys who were arguing.
One of them yelled at the other, "I'll never speak to you again."
The other one said, "Me, neither."

With that, they turned and ran to their respective homes.
The next day, they were back out playing as if nothing had happened.
One of the little boys' mothers asked him why they were speaking to each other now.
He responded, "Me and Johnny are good forgetters."

As you travel down a new road this week, go and do likewise. And then, give thanks to God!

Let's spend a few moments in silence.

Take a deep breath, and savor this fresh air. Breathe out slowly now.

Our prayer begins today with this, entitled, "*For the Children*" by Gary Snyder

The rising hills, the slopes of statistics lie before us.
The steep climb of everything, going up, up, as we all go down.
In the next century or the one beyond that, they say,
are valleys, pastures, we can meet there in peace if we make it.
To climb these coming crests one word to you, to you and your children:
stay together learn the flowers go light

Gracious God, in this world where goodness and evil continue to clash, instill in us and in all people, the discernment to see what is right, the faith to believe what is right, and the courage to do what is right. Keep us and preserve us, body, mind, and soul. (-from the Iona Community)

We lift our prayers to you in the silence of our hearts...for those who have lost their loved ones and their home in the States that are on fire and hurricane ravaged... in the name and in the words of Jesus we pray:

**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 debts as we forgive our debtors.
And lead us not into temptation, but, deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom
and the power and the glory, forever. Amen**

This is our time of Offering.

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.

**Let us pray: Loving God, receive our offerings and unite us
into a community of mutual caring, where the light
of your love shines through all of our efforts
to share of our time, talents and treasures.
We pray in the name of Jesus. Amen.**

Benediction:

**Go now in peace; and... “love deeper, speak sweeter,
and offer the forgiveness you've been denying.”**

(“Live Like You’re Dying” ~Tim McGraw)

The blessing of God, Creator, Redeemer and Comforter is with us.

This time of worship has ended, let our service never stop... for any reason.

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Visit CUCC webpage: uccmedford.org For video-recorded Worship, click on “media”

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

Listen to “The Summons” by John L. Bell, on YouTube: (in our Hymnal: #350)

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