

This is September 27, 2020...the 17th 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!”

Announcements: In a Sept 21st email from the WI Council of Churches, there was this latest update on Returning to Church: “With eight Wisconsin cities occupying positions on a list of the twenty US cities with the fastest rising numbers of COVID cases as of mid-September, we continue to urge caution in gathering the church in physical locations. At this time, we do not advise gathering indoors. Outdoor events are much safer than indoors. Online options are preferred.”

Our Church Council met this past week. We will continue our online recorded Worship services; “live” Zoom Council meetings, 5 Practices Team Meetings, Faith Formation Time with Children on Sundays at 9:30, Sunday Coffee Hour at 10, “Cerebration” gatherings and our mailing of paper-copies of our Worship services.

We will begin with “A Word for the Day...” written by Rev. Cameron Trimble:

200,000. 200,000 lives. 200,000 precious lives. 200,000 precious lives lost.

This last week, (Today,) we mark the passing of more lives than our hearts can hold or minds can absorb.

We mark the passing of 200,000 people - as many as live in Fort Lauderdale or Grand Montgomery or Grand Rapids. We mark the passing of 200,000 people who had families that loved them, people who had plans for their futures, people who had dreams never to be achieved. 200,000.

We must remember their lives in all of their complexity. They were Republicans, Democrats and Libertarians; every race; rich, poor and getting by; kind, mean and messy depending on the day. They were all beautifully human and wonderfully made. 200,000 children of God.

We who carry on do so with sacred responsibility...As we look to our future, holding their legacies and concerned about the world unfolding before us...we are reminded to keep the faith. We will carry on, in the honor of all who have been lost, relentlessly in search for a more loving and just world for us all.

Let’s continue with a time of Confession:

Called to follow Christ, we are called to a life of humility. But what does that even mean? Do we seek to exalt ourselves? Does our sense of success depend on someone else’s failure? Do we twist service into convenience and leisure, ignoring the idea that to serve is to **be** a servant? (Silence)

Let us pray: Disturb the habits of our sin, O God. Rouse us from the sleep that cradles sin’s embrace.

In the name of Jesus, we pray – show us your ways. Highlight what *we* can change and change what we cannot. (Silence)

Words of Grace and Assurance:

Good friends: God is at work in us! God is alive in us!

Our sins are forgiven, through Christ, our Savior. Thanks be to God. Amen.

Matthew 21:23-32 “True Authority”

Then (he) Jesus, was back in the Temple, teaching. The high priests and leaders of the people came up

and demanded, “Show us your credentials. Who authorized you to teach here?” 24-25 Jesus responded,

“First let me ask you a question. You answer my question and I’ll answer yours. About the baptism of John—who authorized it: heaven or humans?”

25-27 They were on the spot and knew it. They pulled back into a huddle and whispered, “If we say ‘heaven,’ he’ll ask us why we didn’t believe him; if we say ‘humans,’ we’re up against it with the people because they all hold John up as a prophet.” They decided to concede that round to Jesus. “We don’t know,” they answered.

Jesus said, “Then neither will I answer your question.

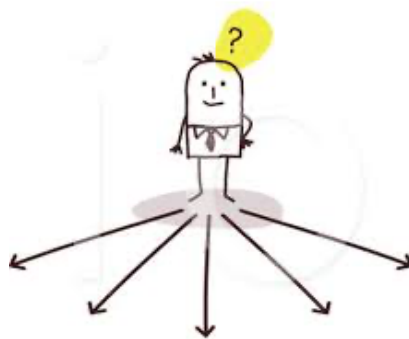
“The Story of Two Sons”

28 The, Jesus went on to say, “Tell me what you think of this story: A man had two sons. He went up to the first and said, ‘Son, go out for the day and work in the vineyard.’ 29 “The son answered, ‘I don’t want to.’ Later on he thought better of it and went. 30 “The father gave the same command to the second son. He answered, ‘Sure, glad to.’ But he never went. 31-32 “Which of the two sons did what the father asked?” They said, “The first.””

Jesus said, “Yes, and I tell you that crooks and whores are going to precede you into God’s kingdom. John came to you showing you the right road. You turned up your noses at him, but the crooks and whores believed him. Even when you saw their changed lives, you didn’t care enough to change and believe him.

The Message, © 1993, 2002, 2018 by Eugene H. Peterson

The title of my message today is: “*Choices*”



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Pray with me: Loving God, we are constantly faced with choices...nudge us when we need help with doing the right thing. Let your still small voice give us the courage and strength we need to make it through these trying days of ours...I should say, “yours”! If we can envision being in the palm of your hand, then we should be good to go. Thanks. Thanks. Thanks again. Amen.

Pastor Norton woke up to a beautiful, sunny, fall Sunday morning and realized that there would not be many more days like this before the weather changed. He just *had* to play golf.

He called the Associate Pastor and told her that he is sick and convinced her to preach for him that day. Then, he headed out of town to a golf course about

50 miles away thinking that he wouldn’t run into anyone he knew from the congregation.

On the first tee, he noticed that he has the entire course to himself. "Everyone else is in church!" he thought.

Watching from heaven, Saint Peter turns to God and asks, "You're not going to let him get away with this, are you?" And God sighed, "No, I guess not."

Just then, Pastor Norton hits the ball and it flies through the air, lands and rolls across the green into the cup.

It was a 420-yard "hole in one"!

Astonished, Saint Peter looks at God and asks, "Why did you let him do that?" God's reply was this: "Well, who's he going to tell?"

This story is a great illustration on the subject of "choices." Today's scripture lesson speaks to me of choices that we all have made, some poor and some very good ones.

If you spend any amount of time watching the news or reading local papers, you are very surely aware

of countless stories of the choices people, businesses, cities, nations and churches are making.

When someone came to my door one day this week, a flock of geese was flying overhead. There were 100's of geese up there and some not all going in the same direction. If you were a member of a flock of geese, I imagine it would take a little "doing" to come up with the yearly consensus, "Shall we go now?" "Shall we wait until next week?" The choices we make are usually not coin-toss decisions like that, or like the ones football players make, but some do affect the whole team...and everyone around us.

Let's consider the choices in this morning's scripture.

We look in on Jesus in the temple with the chief priests and elders. These religious authorities believe that Jesus is a threat to them insofar as they fear his popularity and his ability to heal and to perform miracles. In their eyes, Jesus was preaching heresy and leading people away from the religious traditions that defined the Jewish faith. The Pharisees were determined to expose him as a *fraud*. But while talking with Jesus, they were probably wondering how they had ever gotten themselves into this head-spinning conversation. As Jesus confronted them and he called them to faith. Then, he changed the subject.

Jesus told a story about a man who had two sons...with a choice before them: to work or not to work.

The Father went to his first son and said, "Son, go out and work today in the vineyard."

"The son answered, 'I don't want to.' Later on, he changed his mind and went to work.

Then the father went to his other son and said the same thing: "Son, go out and work today in the vineyard."

This one answered, 'Sure, glad to.' But he never got around to going out to the vineyard.

Then Jesus asked the Pharisees to answer a simple question: "Which of the two did what his father wanted?"

The chief priests and elders answered: "Definitely the first,"

It was then that Jesus delivered the punch line, "Truly I tell you, the tax-collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you. For John came to you in the way of

righteousness and you did not believe him, but the tax-collectors and the prostitutes believed him; and even after you saw it, you did not change your minds and believe him.” These were people who had heard of John’s mission and message and were the same people who ignored the opportunity to make a difference or to BE the difference.

The point is that God’s grace is sometimes shocking...and sometimes comes to us as gently as a leaf falling from a tree. No one, no matter who they are, saint or sinner, is left out of God’s grace...no matter what choices they have made.

The Pharisees wanted a kingdom that was reserved for themselves and only *their kind*. Jesus wanted a kingdom that was big enough for everyone.

He knew that what he had said offended them and it didn’t bother him. What he cared about was the defense he was building. Jesus sided with the tax-collectors and prostitutes NOT because of what they were, but, because of what they had become.

And so...God whispers in our souls and speaks to our hearts. Sometimes when we don’t have time to listen, God has to “speak” a little louder. It’s our choice to listen or not. It is our choice to be the difference we would like to see in this world.

We have been blessed to have heard the stories of God’s power and God’s presence and we won’t have to think back very far in our lives to recognize those times when God has spoken to us in that small voice inside... or through the voices of the ones who love us...or through the words of scripture.

What should we do when we face a seemingly impossible choice? Moses asked, “Why me? Find someone else.” Even Jesus cried, “My God, why have you forsaken me?” Have you found yourself saying, “What next?”

First it was a virus, then hurricane after hurricane, 100’s of acres of forest fires that are spreading fast, people disagreeing about the “politics of everything,” should we wear masks or not, and worse than that, no Worship inside our building! How have we gotten ourselves into this liminal time? Choices. Years and years of choices.

And Jesus is still calling people to faith. God has not forsaken us or the 200,000 people who have died. God has not forgotten the rich or the poor, the workers, the jobless, the homeless. And God has not forgotten you and I. You know, we are not 420 yards away from God, with hopes of our prayers getting straight to her this time... we are withing whisper range!

By faith, we believe that God knows the challenges we are facing and that God understands the choices we must make, right? Well, I am here to tell you today that although we sometimes may not understand where God is leading us, we need to continually ask for guidance.

What choices will face us this week?

Look around, assess each choice you make, make plans, and with the help of our God, let the same mind be in you that was also in Jesus. Be not afraid to choose. Choose smiles not shouts. Choose compassion,

not obstinance. Choose honesty, not trickery. Choose to be attentive, not to be ignorant. Choose love and justice not hate. Choose... to be the hands and feet of Jesus this day and every day.

**Let's spend a few moments in silence.
Inhale the possibilities of this liminal time. Exhale yesterday.**

Our prayer collection today is overflowing! If you would like to add your prayer requests, please call/email me.

Let us pray: We lift to you, Loving God these, our brothers and sisters: the survivors of fire and hurricane and violence; the families who have lost loved ones in recent days; those who lead us in local and national government; those who are in the race for public office. We offer our prayers of concern for Erin, Vicki, Mallory, Meriam, Mike, Jasmine and Nick, Shirley, Rev Cameron Trimble, Rev Will Nelson, Maggie, and Ashley; those who are suffering with the COVID virus; those who have received new diagnoses of illnesses of other kinds; those who are living with cancer and Parkinson's disease;

those recovering from accident and surgery; foreach one of us, for our health and safety; especially the children in our schools, college students and teachers; those who must travel for work or leisure; for Post Office employees; all the congregations in our communities; for truckers and farmers and those who work in restaurants and hotels; for all those who work in crowded spaces; those who serve as Doctors and Nurses, Pharmacists and Scientists, EMTs, CNAs and caregivers; those who have lost their jobs and are searching; those who are homeless and hungry and are searching for a home and for their next meal; for those who suffer with mental illness, anxiety and fear.

We lift our thanks and praise to you Gracious God for every blessing, in the silence of our hearts ...in the name and in the words that Jesus taught us, 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 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

This is our time of intention and thanks:

God's blessings rain down on us like manna from heaven. Sometimes we recognize them and sometimes we don't. Keeping in mind the ways in which God has provided for our needs,

I invite you now to consider what gifts you will give this week.

Many thanks for all 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 each of our efforts to share of our time, talents and treasures. We pray in the name of Jesus. Amen.

Benediction:

Go now! Do not be dismayed by the brokenness of the world. All things can be mended, not with time, but, with intention. Love intentionally, extravagantly and unconditionally.

The broken world waits in darkness for the light that is you! (L.R. Knost)

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.

Pastor Mary Jo Laabs, 715-351-0450 believe417@gmail.com

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

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

Listen and sing along to “Be Not Afraid” (In our hymnal, #430

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2oSiX1WKg4w>

Help us to be ever faithful gardeners of the spirit, who know that without darkness nothing comes to birth, and without light nothing flowers. ~ May Sarton