

This is October 18, 2020...the 20th Sunday after Pentecost

Thank you for joining in this time of worship. Whether you have been invited here by mail or email or phone call or word of mouth, welcome! Welcoming is harder now than it was in January 2020. Still, you are welcome here, even though we are physically separated.

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!”

You are welcome to check out our website: uccmedford.org You are welcome to join in our Zoom coffee hours on Sundays at 10. Your children and grandchildren are welcome to pop in to our Zoom “Faith Formation” time on Sundays at 9:30. (One Bible story a week!) You are welcome to “take out” or “add to” the non-perishable food items in our Blessing Box. You are welcome to ask for a copy of our newsletters. You are welcome to join in our book study and our “Page Turners” book club. You are welcome to pop in for Zoom office hours Thursdays from 10-12. You are welcome to pray with us for the health and safety of friends and family and to ask us to pray for you. You are welcome to join us in the safe practices of wearing masks, staying physically distanced and staying home as much as you possibly can. You are welcome to find creative ways to stay in touch with one another. Let’s pause now and welcome ourselves into this time of worship.

We will begin...with knowing that every good and perfect gift comes to us from God.

(Repeat after me) **Thanks be to God for the beauty of creation.**

...with thanking God for our family and our friends.

(Repeat after me) **Thanks be to God for the children.**

...with gratefulness to God for placing our neighbors close enough to offer a wave.

(Repeat after me) **Let us praise our loving God!**

Take a deep breath right now...and let it out slowly.

Notice one thing you see, one thing you hear, one thing you are touching.

You are here in this place. God is here with you, too! (d365, 10-13-2020)

The Hebrew Scripture reading today is from the book of **Exodus 13: 17-22** “*The Pillars of Cloud and Fire*”

¹⁷ When Pharaoh let the people go, God did not lead them by way of the land of the Philistines, although that was nearer; for God thought, “If the people face war, they may change their minds and return to Egypt.”

¹⁸ So God led the people by the roundabout way of the wilderness toward the Red Sea. The Israelites went up out of the land of Egypt prepared for battle.

¹⁹ And Moses took with him the bones of Joseph who had required a solemn oath of the Israelites, saying, “God will surely take notice of you, and then you must carry my bones with you from here.” ²⁰ They set out from Succoth, and camped at Etham, on the edge of the wilderness.

²¹ The LORD went in front of them in a pillar of cloud by day, to lead them along the way, and in a pillar of fire by night, to give them light, so that they might travel by day and by night. ²² Neither the pillar of cloud by day nor the pillar of fire by night left its place in front of the people.

Take a deep breath and let it out.

Pray with me: Holy One of many names, you are in front of us and behind us. When we are talking to each other on Zoom, you are in the unseen “zoom space.” With family around the table, you fill the empty chair.

You are with us in our every good or bad decision. Forgive us when we forget. Amen.

I am calling this message today, “Trapped?”

Hear these words of assurance inspired by the Exodus passage you have just heard:

God grows with you. Look upon her face, as she speaks sweetly to you, saying, I will do the very thing you have asked; for you have found favor in my sight, and I know you by name.

When I think about the Israelites and the journey they are experiencing, I think, “Wow! They’re so lucky to have God traveling with them!” I wonder if the Israelites thought so. Scripture tells us that they were *prepared for battle*. It was what they were accustomed to. They woke up every day, as they traveled through the wilderness, “ready.” **Maybe there were days when they kind of dreaded being known as God’s people.*

That came with a lot of requirements that other ancient-people-groups didn't have. The other groups had many gods and, in comparison, very few guidelines for living and worshiping. Did the other groups think: "Oh, there go the Israelites and their One God again! Why are they committed to this God who makes them wander around in the wilderness?! That's just weird!" (*Idea borrowed from d365, 10-13-2020, Erin Spengeman Hutchison)

Moses knows that he and the Israelites are perceived as different and that they *have* to be. When I read this scripture passage, it encouraged me to think about us as *different*, too. We have been called to be different! I suppose there are those that are saying about us, "What's wrong with them? They STILL are not open for public Worship!?" Think of it this way: we have come out of our own "Egypt", that place where we were somewhat comfortable being. Life was predictable back there. We worked and played and learned together and separately. And then, we, too, but, not by our own choosing, had to step away. We, too, were facing the unknown. We had no idea of the battles that were ahead of us when we turned the calendar from February to March, 2020.

We, as Christians, had been following Jesus "back there" and "back then." We Christians have been following the One who walked this earth and shared our "common lot..." many of us for as long as we can remember. We have chosen Jesus because we have learned that he is different and he thinks differently. We follow even though Jesus was not well-accepted by the religious authorities back in first Century Palestine. We know very well that "they" feared his power, his line of thought. **We cling to it.** We are counted among the followers of Jesus who also know that we would not have it easy. We, in 2020, know very well what it is like to leave our old life behind, but, still find ways to cling to his "way"...to the "truths" that he speaks and to the "life" that he lived. It is a new "different."

Do you think that the Israelites, at times, might have felt trapped by their situation? Yes, they did! Should we trust in God or turn around and **go back to Egypt**? Moses, with the help of God, guided their impatience, gave them just what they needed when they thought they were doing to die of thirst or starve and more than once. Pick up your Bible and read the rest of the story in the Book of Exodus this week. You will notice that God was truly doing something different with them, even though they, at times, could not discern what it was.

Listen now to the Gospel reading for this day, from the book of **Matthew 22:15-22**, NRSV

"The Question about Paying Taxes"

¹⁵ Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap Jesus (him) in what he said. ¹⁶ So they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying, "Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with truth and show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality.

¹⁷ Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?"

¹⁸ But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, "Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? ¹⁹ Show me the coin used for the tax." And they brought him a denarius. ²⁰ Then he said to them, "Whose head is this, and whose title?" ²¹ They answered, "The emperor's."

Then he said to them, "Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's." ²² When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away.

New Revised Standard Version Bible, copyright © 1989, 1993, 1995, the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

The Pharisees hoped that Jesus would support paying taxes to Caesar so that the Jewish people would see him as a Roman sympathizer. The Herodians hoped Jesus would oppose paying the tax to Caesar so that they could accuse him of treason against Rome. No matter which way Jesus would answer the question, it seemed as though they had him *trapped*. People were clinging to different sides of the question.

But Jesus turned his answer into a life-changing reason for more people to take note of "his way, his truth and his life." "Render... to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's." Jesus was suggesting that his followers have a dual allegiance...and that their challenge would be to constantly be hinged on the decision "what do we owe and to whom?"

Look around. Listen closely. How would **we** answer that question? We have exactly the same dilemma,

don't we? Is it lawful to pay taxes? (Well, it MUST be.) We pay federal, state, county and city taxes; sales tax, room tax, fuel tax and highway usage tax; hunting and fishing taxes, cigarette and liquor taxes. We also pay to support our church's expenses. No one makes us do that. Our church does not require a percentage of our income in order to be a member. We believe in faithful and voluntary giving. We give when we want to and we chose how much and what we will give. Wouldn't it be interesting if we had that same choice in paying taxes?

It is not exactly a trap as much as a distraction, but, I think that we are sometimes so blinded by our own needs and wants, the campaigns and the voting, the pandemic and every other dilemma that surrounds us....that we can't tell which side of the coin we are on, nor can we tell where is God leading us in all of this! It certainly is a wilderness. One thing I know for sure is that **God is leading us through it all** and is giving us what we need. Sit back. Listen and watch more closely for the signs. Wait more patiently and pray all the while.

I believe that instead of counting the days that we have been where we are, instead of ignoring that *Jiminy Cricket* conscience that keeps us awake at night and is sitting on the bedstand when we slap the alarm clock... take account of how this passage touches our hearts. What do we yet owe? What can we, as Christians do? Should we as Christians remain silent in the face of war, racial injustice, violence; voter fraud, homelessness, unemployment, masks or no masks? Should we as Christians let peer pressure and separation anxiety guide us? Or should we, as Americans, protest? Steal a few political signs? Throw our masks on the ground when we leave Walmart? Should we, as Americans, work for equal rights, fair pay and healthcare for all? How can we, in rural WI or wherever we happen to be... make a difference?

If the actions of our government and the teaching of our faith seem to be at odds, what can we do? Ignore one or the other? This has never been an easy issue. Rev John Dorhauer, President of the United Church of Christ, in a recent podcast, invites us to: "...ground your choices in the teaching of your faith. Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you. Exercise your rights with spiritual integrity...for the common good."

These scriptures come to our attention today in perfect timing. I know I needed to hear it. Did you? What we all need to do goes back to the basics of our faith. Love one another as you would like to be loved.



This week, the WI Council of Churches has called upon Faith Communities in WI to band together in our commitment to keep our communities safer during these days of pandemic. On behalf of Community UCC, Medford, WI, and with our Church Council's approval, I have signed this mutual document:

"Together with other Wisconsin faith leaders, I offer this pledge: We are faith leaders, representing diverse faith communities, with varying practices and theologies. We pledge to do all in our power to keep our congregations and communities healthy and safe in the midst of this pandemic. All our traditions hold life as sacred and believe the imperative to protect and preserve life outweighs all other considerations. Our state is facing a crisis and we must meet this challenge together. As people of faith, we trust in a higher power to help us through crises, but we must also trust science and what the medical experts are telling us. Wearing masks, washing hands, and staying physically distanced are all very important. But the best way to slow the spread of COVID-19 is by reducing our contacts with anyone beyond the people we live with. It is crucial that we stay home as much as possible to protect ourselves, our neighbors, and especially first responders and other health care workers who risk their lives to care for us. As a faith leader, I pledge to steward the health of all by prioritizing remote worship and other community activities until the crisis has passed.

As a faith leader, I pledge to do what I can to keep our community safe."

Please join me and our brothers and sisters in faith around the State of WI to do **all that we each can to care for one another**. No matter what your political affiliation, no matter where you are on your faith journey, no matter where you work or where you pray, we are in this together.

We have been called by Jesus to love God, to love another, to love creation. The one “small way” of helping one another to be safe will make a huge difference in every one of our futures.

We may be limited by what we can do. But, let’s take what we have been given and CAN do... and by the grace of God, use it to make the best choices and do the best we can to keep ourselves and those around safe and encouraged and connected. Our lives and the lives of those we love depend on it.

We absolutely cannot and must not put our hope for salvation in anyone or anything else — not wealth, not popularity, not even a politician. It must be God only, because God is our true hope and guide today and God is still up to something different with us ...everyday. Consider this as being “blessed” not, “trapped.” Amen.

Let’s spend a few moments in silent prayer. Take a deep breath. And breath it out.

This is the time to share our prayer collection and to lift it to our loving and merciful God

If you would like to add your prayer requests, please call/email me.

Let us pray: Holy God, you are greater than we can imagine. You are deserving of the very best we have to offer — the devotion of our hearts, the place of honor in our priorities. We have come to this time of worship, knowing that you are with us speaking your message of love and mercy, conviction and challenge to us. Help us to see beyond what we call our “limits” and those that others impose upon us. Help us to trust in you even more when our world appears dark and our troubles seem so large. Hear the sobs of those who weep and let them know some comfort.

We thank you for giving us this new day and welcome your Spirit, knowing that in so doing, we abandon control and open ourselves in faith and trust to your purposes and plan, rather than to our own.

We lift to you those who serve our country in near and far away places; those who seek public office that they might have the strength and courage to do what is best for the common good of all the people; those who have given their lives as missionaries, whose giving cannot be measured in dollars and cents; those who have received good news and those who wait for the results of medical testing.

We lift to you, Loving God, these, our brothers and sisters: those who are living with the tragedy of fire and hurricane and violence; the leaders in local and national government. We lift our prayers of concern for Matt and Nevada; for all those recently diagnosed with the COVID virus and those who are recovering; those who are suffering quarantine restrictions; for each one of us, that we will be enabled to do our best to keep one another safe; for the children and teachers engaged in online and in-person classes; for all the pastors and congregations in our communities; for those who have lost their jobs; those who are searching for a home and for their next meal; for those who live with mental illnesses.

Let us pray together now, in the name and in the words that Jesus taught us: **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 looks upon our faces. God assures us when nothing else can. “My presence will go with you”, God says. “I will give you rest”, God prays. Let us carry this spirit into our giving and praise God with our offerings.

Let us pray: Creator God, you are the source and the giver of all good gifts. We thank you for the abundant blessings of your love, your forgiveness and your grace. Accept our gifts of time, talent, and treasure as our thankful response to your blessings in our lives. Amen.

Benediction: Go now, and remember these words of Jesus: (Matthew 28:20)
“Look, I myself will be with you every day until the end of this present age.”

Go in peace to love one another in the name of Jesus.

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](http://uccmedford.com). “Like” us on Facebook: Community United Church of Christ, Medford, WI