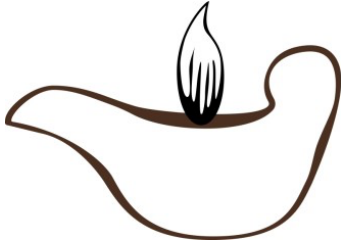


This is November 8, 2020...the 23rd Sunday after Pentecost

On behalf of the family of faith at Community United Church of Christ, Medford, WI,
welcome to this time of worship!

“No matter who you are or where you are on your life’s journey, you are welcome here!”

Call to Worship



O God, you summon the day to dawn, you teach the morning to waken the earth.
Great is your name, great is your love!

For you the valleys shall sing for joy, the trees of the field shall clap their hands.
Great is your name, great is your love!

For you, the monarchs of the earth shall bow, the poor and persecuted shall shout
for joy.

Great is your name, great is your love!

Your love and mercy shall last forever, fresh as the morning, sure as the sunrise.

Great is your name, great is your love!

Hymn: “Amazing Grace” vs. 1& 2, Hymn #422 (Public Domain)

1. Amazing grace, How sweet the sound
That saved a wretch like me.
I once was lost, but now I am found,
Was blind, but now I see.
2. 'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear,
And grace my fears relieved.
How precious did that grace appear
The hour I first believed.

Matthew 25:1-13 New Revised Standard Version, “*The Parable of the Ten Bridesmaids*”

“Then the kingdom of heaven will be like this. Ten bridesmaids took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. ² Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. ³ When the foolish took their lamps, they took

no oil with them; ⁴ but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps. ⁵ As the bridegroom was delayed, all of them became drowsy and slept. ⁶ But at midnight there was a shout, ‘Look! Here is the bridegroom!
Come out to meet him.’

’

⁷ Then all those bridesmaids got up and trimmed their lamps. ⁸ The foolish said to the wise, ‘Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.’ ⁹ But the wise replied, ‘No! there will not be enough

for you and for us; you had better go to the dealers and buy some for yourselves.’ ¹⁰ And while they went

to buy it, the bridegroom came, and those who were *ready* went with him into the wedding banquet; and the door was shut.

¹¹ Later the other bridesmaids came also, saying, ‘Lord, lord, open to us.’ ¹² But he replied, ‘Truly I tell you, I do not know you.’ ¹³ Keep awake therefore, for *you* know neither the day nor the hour.

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.

My message today is entitled, "A Precious Commodity"

Please pray with me: Gracious God, we come before you with regrets. You know them well.

We give you thanks for the many second chances you have, in your grace, given to us.

Help us to offer that same grace to those around us, without a second thought.

We pray in the name of Jesus, who showed us how...again and again. Amen.

Did you hear about the Christmas parade in North Carolina a few years back?

Many elaborate floats passed by, when suddenly a simple hay wagon pulled by a tractor came into sight.

On the wagon are several fraternity brothers from a local University. They were madly sawing boards and nailing them together. The puzzled expressions of the onlooker's faces changed to laughter when they read the sign on the back of the wagon. It read: "**We thought the parade was next week!**"

Isn't that just how it is? There is a time to prepare, and there is a deadline. Either you're ready or you're not!

Stephen M. Crotts, Sermons for Sundays after Pentecost: Music from Another Room, CSS Publishing Company, 2003,
0-7880-1968-6e There Is a Deadline

Maybe one of the fraternity brothers said, "Well, there was supposed to be a blizzard. Why go through all that work when the parade could have been canceled?"

When you think about it, it seems as though we are always getting ready for something. We all can think of at least one thing. An exam. This week's football game. The birth of a baby. Graduation. An interview. Hunting season. Your next term in office.

Here's what I've learned about plans: God has amazing ways to *interrupt them* with something far better.

When Jesus tells the parable of the wise and foolish bridesmaids, what stands out to you?

Before I tell you what I think...I will tell you a little about Jewish weddings 2000 years ago. They had three stages. **First**, there was the formal engagement, which was almost always arranged by the parents of the future bride and groom. **Second**, up to a year or more later, came the formal religious ceremony in the bride's home.

And, thirdly, there was the wedding feast, generally at night, at the house of the groom.

This elaborate affair generally lasted about seven days and was a social event to which friends and family were anxious to attend. The bridesmaids would take part in a 'welcoming ceremony' by lighting the way for the bridegroom with oil lamps. It would be a major mess-up for anyone in the wedding party not to be by the road, ready to welcome the bridegroom when he arrived.

In today's Gospel, we look in upon **ten young women** whose specific responsibility in the wedding celebration is to **be there** to meet the bridegroom and to escort him into the wedding. He came later than expected, and meanwhile, the bridesmaids fell asleep. At midnight, someone cried, "Here he comes!" Hurriedly, they trimmed their lamps. The wise ones had brought extra oil. The *foolish* did not... and their lamps had gone out.

While they were away getting **more** oil, the other bridesmaids went into the wedding feast with the happy couple and the door was shut.

When the five foolish bridesmaids returned, they were not allowed in. They planned for this day for a long time. They were honored to be among the bridesmaids. They had their lamps ready...but, they didn't have the foresight to think they may run out of oil. What are you thinking at this point? They were entrusted with this one important task...and they "blew it!"

This reminds me of a wedding that I officiated 10 years ago. The procession was beautiful. Organ music filled the high-ceilinged sanctuary. Bridesmaids and groomsmen walked down the aisle together, while the flower girl tossed flowers. The bride came in with her father. As the "wedding party" was getting settled into their places atop the altar steps, I began by welcoming the guests. It was then, that the best man whispered something to his brother, the groom, and ran down the steps, down the aisle and out the church doors! We looked at one another amazed. The crowd was murmuring. The best man had left the wedding rings in his pre-wedding pants pocket and locked them in his car. A few minutes later, he returned just a little out of breath. The groom whispered to his brother, "You... had... one... job... to... do..." We were ready now.

As it is with many stories that Jesus has told, there is a double meaning in this story of the bridesmaids and their lamps. The lesson was not about getting to a wedding on time, having enough oil or being sure that you have the rings. The wedding banquet is the kingdom of God. The bridegroom is Jesus Christ. The ten bridesmaids symbolize the followers of Jesus. The lamp is the Christian life... as in "let your little light shine." **The oil is the stuff of Christian living...discipleship.** And the sudden call that went out while everyone was asleep? Traditionally, this is the unexpected return of Christ. The Point: be ready!

Does this story remind you of a time in your life when you were not quite ready? Maybe it sounds to you exactly like today...5 days after the 2020 election. What does "being ready" mean for us in this time...

of pandemic...in this time of awaiting the new term of the American President?

I believe that this old, old story is true today: we need to be awake and alert, and to meanwhile, shed the light

of Christian discipleship wherever we go in the following days and during the next 4 years... in our schools, in our neighborhoods, at the food pantry, at the bank, in our workplaces, in the nursing home, in Zoom meetings, in our family circle. Jesus tells us very clearly that the foolish ones will not be ready.

Let's not miss any chance...to let our little corner of the world be a better, brighter place.

Do you think that the foolish bridesmaids would take extra oil next time... after learning the "hard way," that they were not welcome at the wedding feast, that is: God's kingdom.

If we think we are ready enough for God's kingdom of justice, then we would act justly today; ready for God's kingdom of peace, then we would be peacemakers now; ready enough for God's kingdom of love, then we would love one another now; ready for God's kingdom of plenty, then we would be much more generous now; ready for God's kingdom of mercy, then we would show mercy now.

We could put "following Jesus" on our bucket lists...but, isn't loving God and loving our neighbor worth our freshest energy and imagination NOW? My friends, we have some work to do.

The precious commodity of oil, discipleship, that is... is right where we are.

William Barclay once said, "The best way to prepare for the coming of Christ is never to forget his presence."

Be ever ready for the cost and joy of discipleship!
Don't wait 'til next week to keep your lamps filled and burning!

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

Let us pray: Holy God, we take this moment to be still, to listen and to wait.
We give you thanks and praise for this day and for the many blessings we have received.

We lift to you those who have been close by our side when problems have arisen, those who have helped brighten our paths when days were dark and there seemed to be no hope. Help us to always have enough "oil in our lamps" to be ready when we are called upon to show others mercy and lend them a helping hand.

We lift to you those who have served our country...the Veterans...and those who are serving today in locations nearby and far away. Let them feel your presence.

We pray for the safety of the hunters who will meet you *in their own ways* in the quiet of woods and field. We lift to you all those who have been elected to public office, that they may be equipped to always do their best to promote justice and peace for all the people.

We commend to your care those who are grieving the loss of loved ones.
Bring healing to those who are recovering from illness or surgery and those who face medical testing.
Hear our prayers for Alice and Mike; Barry and Jane; Amber; Matt and Nevada.

Thank you for forgiving us when we mess up and for guiding us as we offer forgiveness.

Merciful God, we bring our joys and concerns to you, knowing that you hear the prayers we have spoken
as well as those we hold in our hearts.

We boldly pray in the name of Jesus, his prayer:

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:

Let us give as if we were responding to the invitation to join in a party given in the kingdom of God...giving freely...in gratitude and praise. **Let us pray:** Gracious God, receive our gifts of time, talent and treasure as our love offerings to you, With thanks for your many blessings and in the name of Jesus. Amen.

Benediction: Go now and be ever-ready
to let our worship and our service continue
throughout the coming days.

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

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

webpage: uccmedford.org “Like” us on Facebook: Community United Church of Christ, Medford, WI

Erma Bombeck *once wrote “If I Had My Life to Live Over...”*

I would have burned the pink candle sculpted like a rose, before it melted in storage.

I would have talked less and listened more.

I would have invited friends over to dinner, even if the carpet was stained.

I would have taken the time to **listen** to my grandfather ramble about his youth.

I would **never** have bought anything just because it was practical or guaranteed to last a lifetime.

There would have been more “I love yous.” More “I’m sorrys.”

But mostly, I would seize every minute... look at it and really see it... live it... I would stop sweating the small stuff... and think about how God HAS blessed me ...and how I am doing each day to improve myself mentally, physically, emotionally, as well as spiritually.

Life is too short to let it pass you by, Erma Bombeck says.