

This is February 28, 2021...The Second Sunday of Lent

On behalf of our family of faith at Community United Church of Christ, Medford, WI, welcome to this time of worship! We will be sharing the Sacrament of Holy Communion today. Please prepare a piece of bread or a cracker; some juice or wine in a cup.

All are invited to share in the Sacrament.

"No matter who you are or where you are on your life's journey, you are welcome here!"

Call to Worship: "Walk before me, and be blameless," said God to Abram, "And I shall make my covenant between me and you." (Genesis 17: 1-2, paraphrased) Quite openly, we've measured that distance. Quite honestly, we've stayed away.

Quite openly, we've distanced ourselves. Oh my, have we ever!

Quite openly, we didn't want to be closer. Quite honestly, we are not blameless.

Quite openly, we are here today, trying again to open ourselves to you, O God.

A Time of Repentance: Let us pause now in silence and repent our sins of thought, word and deed; what we have done and what we have left undone.

Receive this Assurance of Pardon and Grace as written in John 3:16

"For God sent the Son into the world, not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him" In Jesus Christ, we are forgiven. Amen.

Now in our "virtual" Worship, Jeff P. will be read the scripture:

This is a reading from the **Gospel of Mark**, chapter 8, verses 31 through 38, the New International Version *Jesus Predicts His Death*

31 He then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again.

32 He spoke plainly about this, and Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him.

33 But when Jesus turned and looked at his disciples, he rebuked Peter. "Get behind me, Satan!" he said. "You do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns."

The Way of the Cross

34 Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. 35 For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it. 36 What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? 37 Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul?

38 If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of them when he comes in his Father's glory with the holy angels."

(Thank you, Jeff!) **My Message today is entitled,** "Gaining the World"

Please pray with me: Gracious God, you have blessed us with shelter from the cold, food on our tables, water to drink and to bathe in. Thank you! You have given us talents and have called us to love one another. Thank you for the comforts that we enjoy and help us to be better *sharers* of these benefits. Let our satisfaction with what we have be shaken as we shoulder up your cross and envision a different sort of "gaining the world" attitude. Let our gains be found in extravagant generosity, compassionate caring and in justice-seeking for all. Thanks in advance. Amen!

What will it profit us if we gain the world?

I can't help but think of what our answers to that question would have been a year ago when we had never heard of the COVID virus. Last year, in February, I had recently returned from a week's vacation in Florida and was already thinking of making plans to return in 2021. What plans were you making? What plans had to be rearranged or canceled? I can tell you this: we, as a church family, had a whole list of plans for projects inside of the church building: putting *on-demand* water heaters in the bathrooms; getting estimates on a dishwasher for the kitchen; planning a March soup supper and a basket raffle (the baskets are still set in the

Fellowship Hall!) planning an Easter breakfast and ordering the palms and Easter lilies. Our idea of “gaining the world” then was deeply seeded in our minds with traditions that we had always enjoyed and that we assumed would be no different in 2020.

What we assumed and what actually came about did not happen. We had to start over and make new plans for everything from work, to school, to appointments, to shopping and to traveling; to attending “church” meetings and Bible studies; to being in Worship, to planning weddings, baptisms and memorial services.

What will it profit us if we gain the world...now? Life has been so different. We still cannot get used to it. Some of what we want and what we yearn for has been changed. We just want to be together again. Our hearts ache when we think of being able to hug our families and friends again and when we think of those who will be missing. “Gaining the world” today means having enough vaccine for all and the numbers of COVID cases being less or none; being freed from the worry of catching the virus. When that evolves and we look back upon the many reminders that this life of ours really IS precious, what will we do “first?” Think on these things.

I would like to believe that one of our mutual priorities out there in the spring or summer is wrapped in the hopes of sharing worship within the walls of our beloved church building again. One year ago, that was not even close to being on our list of “wildest dreams.”

In our scripture today, Jesus was nearing the last week of his life. He was speaking plainly to his friends about his future and their future. He wanted them to know that it would include his suffering and his dying on a cross. Peter didn't like what he was hearing. “You've got to be kidding! You're not going to die...that could not be! Don't say that...it is not good for our morale. We are going to be with you and fight 'til the end if we need to. We will throw these godless Romans out of Israel! And then, you will ascend to the throne and we will be on your right and left hand as new leaders in Palestine!”

It is then that Jesus silences Peter, and perhaps makes all of those nearby drop their jaws when he says, “Get behind me, Satan, for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”

Any dreams of privilege and rank and power are wiped away as he tells them, *“If any of you want to be my follower, you must put aside your own pleasures and shoulder up your cross and follow me.”* (Living Bible)

Any dreams we might have had of privilege and power; any plans that we had made for the year 2020 and right up until now, were also wiped away. And Jesus said to us, *“If any of you want to be my follower, you must put aside your own pleasures and shoulder up your cross and follow me.”*

As Black History month comes to a close today and as the days come closer to the end of our time of social distancing, the words of this American spiritual comes to my mind:



*I 've got a crown in a 'that Kingdom, ain 'a that good news?
I've got a crown up in a 'that Kingdom, ain 'a that good news?
I'm going to lay down this world, gonna ' shoulder up a ' my cross
Gonna ' to take it home to Jesus, ain 'a that good news?*

What will it profit you, Peter, if you gain the world?
What will it profit us if we gain the world?

As humans, it is hard to stop thinking that way! Remember that we are much more than just material beings. We are spiritual beings with a soul that, by the grace of God, will survive even the grave.

Jesus is telling us today to take care of our souls by setting our minds on divine things. He is not some wishing-washy guy coming to us hoping to sell us something, softly saying, “We need to talk.” He is coming to us as our Redeemer, telling us in no uncertain terms, “Take up your cross and follow me.”

Maya Angelou once said, “The need for change bulldozed a road down the center of my mind.”

That is what taking care of our souls might just look like for us. It involves changing our goals and living for something greater. It is a realization that being lowly and being the least, being on level ground with one another at the foot of the cross is best.

When our lives feel out of control; when our strivings seem unattainable; when disasters continually blow in; when injustice is as commonplace as water flowing out of the faucet; when we feel hopeless and lonely and depressed, we are called to cling to our faith and remember, “*Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.*” God will make a way when there seems to be none. God is making arrangements right now for others to catch us when we fall; for someone to support us when we are in distress and for us to be there for someone whose worst nightmare seems to have come true.

To gain the world, we do not need more money or more storage sheds. It has never been written that Jesus has said: “Go ahead, get what you can in exchange for your soul. I’ve got you covered.” But he did say this: “You do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns.”

We are human. That challenge is not easy, but it also is not complicated. Let’s spend some time *taking inventory* of what ***we think*** we have gained lately. Have we brushed off saving our souls and have we spent the better portion of our time gaining the world?

As Jesus sees it, and says it and does it, “laying down the world” begins by loving one another.

That, my friends, is exactly how to gain it all! Now...isn’t that good news?

Take a deep breath... and let it out.

Time for Prayer: Let’s spend a few moments in silent prayer. Merciful God, we thank you for bringing us a little further into the season of Lent, with its opportunities to return to you for spiritual renewal. Help us to hear with new ears, the story of our salvation, the good news of the world’s redemption through Jesus Christ. Help us see with new eyes the light that streams from the cross. In that light may we see ourselves for what we are and for what we can be. Help us to stand with new strength in the grace that you give.

Gracious God, remind us to look beyond what we feel is “nothing” and look more closely at what we have and who we hold dear to us. We give you thanks and praise for each blessing that we have received, even though arriving in unexpected wrappings.

Lay your healing hand upon those who struggle with illness and pain, those who have very little to look forward to...those whose food has run out, those who are thirsty, those who are cold and who have no place to call home. Give your comfort and peace to those who are depressed and confused. Bring caring and compassionate companions to those who are lonely...lead us and guide us to be your hands and feet .

We lift our prayers for your church that you would guide and lead us in our planning, in our mission efforts, in our call to welcome one another as you have welcomed us. We pray for the people we have hurt and for those who have hurt us. Make us bold to reach out to forgive where we can and to trust your power where we cannot.

We thank you for loving families and forgiving friends. We pray, O God, for those you have placed upon our hearts and in our minds today... Maggie M, Tom N, Dan, Albert, Tamara C, Phil G, Christine D, Dale and Jackie, Cathy S, Rick and Teresa G, Jamie H, Angie, Shelly B, Mike G-P and Matt L; for those who are grieving the loss of loved ones, especially Rev Deb K’s family during this time of grieving since the passing of her mother. We pray in the name of Jesus. Amen

Hymn: “When I Survey the Wondrous Cross” #261

1. When I survey the wondrous cross on which the Prince of glory died,
My richest gain I count but loss, and pour contempt on all my pride
2. Forbid it, Lord, that I should boast, save in the death of Christ, my God;
All the vain things that charm me most, I sacrifice them to His blood.
3. See, from his head, his hands, his feet, sorrow and love flow mingled down,
Did e’er such love and sorrow meet, or thorns compose so rich a crown?

4. Were the whole realm of nature mine, that were an offering far too small;

Love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all.

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The Sacrament of Holy Communion

We begin in the name of our One God, the Holy One who made us, the Christ who calls us to follow him and the Spirit who makes all things new. Now, listen to the story of how this sacrament began.

On the night on which Jesus was betrayed, he sat at table with his friends. While they were eating, he took a piece of bread and said a blessing, broke it and gave it to them with the words,

“This is my body, given for you. Eat this, all of you, to remember me.”

Later, he took a cup of wine, saying,

“This cup is God’s new covenant, sealed with my blood.

Drink it, all of you, to remember me.”

So now, following Jesus’ example and command, we take this bread and this juice, the ordinary things of the world, which Christ will make special.

And as he said a prayer before sharing the food with them, we will too.

Let us pray: For this time and this place and those around us, let’s say together, **thank you, God.**

For the freedom to worship you and name you, let’s say together, **thank you, God.**

For these gifts before us, let’s say together, **thank you God.**

For the grace of forgiveness and letting us be made new again, let’s say together: **thank you, God.**

So now, we do in this place, what you did in that upper room...we ask you to send down your Spirit on these gifts and on all of us here, that in our eating and drinking we may become more loving and caring until your kingdom comes. Let us pray together 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.

Take and eat the bread now and remember that the body of Christ was given for us.

Drink from the cup now and remember that the blood of Christ was shed for us.

Prayer of Thanksgiving: Lord Jesus Christ, you have put your life into our hands; now we put our lives into yours. Take us, renew us and remake us. What we have been is past; what we shall be, through you, still awaits us. Lead us on and we will follow.

We give you thanks for the blessing of life, for our homes, our families, those that are around us in person and in our hearts.

We give you thanks that we have been able to share this holy meal today. Amen.

This is our time of intention and thanks

Let us turn our thoughts to what we will give for the support of our church’s ministries. No matter the size or the shape, every gift of time, talent and treasure does make a difference. Thank you to all who have made it possible for bills to be paid and for our outreach into the community to continue!

Let us dedicate our gifts: As we share what we have received from your hand, O God, we dedicate all that we offer in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen

Benediction: Go now and may the Lord bless you and keep you, the Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you. The Lord look upon you with favor and give you peace...

This time of worship has come to an end, let our service continue. **Peace be with you and be safe!**

Wednesday Devotional, March 3, The Thirteenth Day of Lent (not counting Sundays!)

It is good that we can be together, even though apart, in this "Time for Pause!"

Let's sing a hymn: "Forgive Our Sins as We Forgive" #382

1. "Forgive our sins as we forgive," you taught us, Lord, to pray,
but you alone can grant us grace to live the words we say.
2. How can your pardon reach and bless the unforgiving heart
that broods on wrongs and will not let old bitterness depart?
3. In blazing light your cross reveals the truth we dimly knew:
What trivial debts are owed to us, how great our debt to you!
4. Lord, cleanse the depths within our souls and bid resentment cease;
Then, bound to all in bonds of love our lives will spread your peace.

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Listen now to a passage from the Gospel of Matthew 18:21-22, that draws our attention to forgiveness:

~from the Common English Bible: Then Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, how many times should I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Should I forgive as many as seven times?"

Jesus said, "Not just seven times, but rather as many as seventy-seven times."

What is harder to say: "I'm sorry" or "I forgive you"?

Jan Richardson wrote this, in a Lenten devotional: "Beloved Is Where We Begin"

If you would enter into the wilderness, do not begin without a blessing.

Do not leave without hearing who you are: *Beloved*, named by the One who has traveled this path before you. Do not go without letting it echo in your ears, and if you find it is hard to let it into your heart, do not despair. That is what this journey is for.

I cannot promise this blessing will free you from danger, from fear, from hunger or thirst, from the scorching of sun or the fall of the night. But I can tell you that on this path there will be help. I can tell you that on this way there will be rest. I can tell you that you will know the strange graces that come to our aid only on a road such as this, that fly to meet us \bearing comfort and strength, that come alongside us for no other cause than to lean themselves toward our ear and with their curious insistence whisper our name:

Beloved. Beloved. Beloved.

Jesus came up out of the waters of Baptism and God called him, "Beloved." Maybe it is harder to call those we have forgiven, "Beloved," but God knows them by that name, too! At least, think about it.

Let us pray: Merciful God, hear our thoughts and words of forgiveness now. Enfold us in the good news that we can trust in your forgiveness! Let these days of Lent be spent in realizing that it is possible, with your help, to "turn around" and to offer the forgiveness we have been denying. Hear our prayers for those who are hurting, for those who are mourning the loss of loved ones and for those who wouldn't think to ask us to pray for them. We ask your blessings to be showered on us, who have a hard time forgiving; knowing that you love them as much as you love us.

Lead us and guide us in the words we speak and in the results that come about by these feeble words that we offer. We humbly bring to you the stress that accompanies those words of forgiveness. You are already there ahead of us, watching and waiting for us to turn to you again! We pray that you will nudge us when we need it most, in the name of Jesus. Amen.

**The blessing of God, Creator, Redeemer and Comforter is with us
during these days of Lent and always!**

Pastor Mary Jo

715-351-0450