

**This is March 14, 2021...The Fourth Sunday of Lent**

On behalf of our family of faith at Community United Church of Christ, Medford, WI,  
welcome to this time of worship! A special welcome to our friends at First Congregational  
United Church of Christ in Park Falls, WI, who are joining us today!

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

**Call to Worship:**

Father of Glory and Architect of Creation, blessed be your holy name!

Son of God and Son of Man, Jesus, we praise you!

Holy Spirit, Comforter and Counselor, we are amazed by your presence!

Surround us now, Holy Three, as we gather.

Draw us deep into the mystery and glory of your eternal community.

**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, Linda R. will be read the scripture:**

This is a reading from the **Gospel of John 3:14-21**, Common English Bible

<sup>14</sup> Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so must the Human One be lifted up <sup>15</sup> so that everyone who believes in him will have eternal life. <sup>16</sup> God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him won’t perish but will have eternal life. <sup>17</sup> God didn’t send his Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through him. <sup>18</sup> Whoever believes in him isn’t judged; whoever doesn’t believe in him is already judged, because they don’t believe in the name of God’s only Son.

<sup>19</sup> “This is the basis for judgment: The light came into the world, and people loved darkness more than the light, for their actions are evil. <sup>20</sup> All who do wicked things hate the light and don’t come to the light for fear that their actions will be exposed to the light. <sup>21</sup> Whoever does the truth comes to the light so that it can be seen that their actions were done in God.”

Thank you, Linda! **My Message today is entitled,** “Twenty-Seven Words”

**Please pray with me:** Be still. Breathe in a breath of love and know that God is near to each one of us. Breathe out now and be still. Breathe in the breath of this life and know that it is good. Breathe out, and whisper, “Thanks be to God!” Amen.

John 3:16, is perhaps the most famous of all Bible verses: *For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.*

This passage has been called the “Christian Gospel in a nutshell.” It is the one Bible verse which may not tell us everything in the Bible, but tells us, in just twenty-seven words, how we have been saved through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

The good news is that God does not condemn the world. God loves us just the way we are. No matter who we are, where we have been or what we have done. No matter what other people think of us or, as we say here in the United Church of Christ, “wherever we are on our life’s journey,” God loves us all.

God's love is so deep that he sent His Son. By Christ's death on the cross, the love of God is shown for each one of us and for everyone. Yes, him, too. Yes, her, too. And yes, them! When we read the newspaper and watch the news, our spirits can get pretty low. Moses lifted up a bronze serpent on a pole so that the Israelites who were suffering from poisonous snakes could look upon this symbol of death and find life. They were about as low as they could go! We look at the cruel death of Jesus on the “pole” of the cross and see God's love for us and hear the promise of forgiveness of sins, new life and salvation.

In the Message interpretation of the Bible by Eugene Peterson, these are those same twenty-seven words, plus a few: *This is how much God loved the world: He gave his Son, his one and only Son. And this is why: so that no one need be destroyed; by believing in him, anyone can have a whole and lasting life. God didn't go to all the trouble of sending his Son merely to point an accusing finger, telling the world how bad it was. He came to help, to put the world right again.*

I'd like to share with you a favorite story of mine that puts these twenty-seven words into a yet, clearer perspective. It is entitled, "*The Rag Man's Story*" as told by Walter Wangerin, Jr.

I saw a strange sight. I stumbled upon a story most strange, like nothing my life, my street sense, my sly tongue had ever prepared me for. Hush, child. Hush, now, and I will tell it to you.

Even before the dawn one Friday morning I noticed a young man, handsome and strong, walking the alleys of our City. He was pulling an old cart filled with clothes both bright and new, and he was calling in a clear, tenor voice: "Rags!" Ah, the air was foul and the first light filthy to be crossed by such sweet music.

"Rags! New rags for old! I take your tired rags! Rags!"

"Now, this is a wonder," I thought to myself, for the man stood six-feet-four, and his arms were like tree limbs, hard and muscular, and his eyes flashed intelligence. Could he find no better job than this, to be a ragman in the inner city? I followed him. My curiosity drove me. And I wasn't disappointed.

Soon, the Ragman saw a woman sitting on her back porch. She was sobbing into a handkerchief, sighing, and shedding a thousand tears. Her knees and elbows made a sad X. Her shoulders shook. Her heart was breaking. The Ragman stopped his cart. Quietly, he walked to the woman, stepping around tin cans, dead toys, and Pampers.

"Give me your rag," he said so gently, "and I'll give you another."

He slipped the handkerchief from her eyes. She looked up, and he laid across her palm a linen cloth so clean and new that it shined. She blinked from the gift... to the giver.

Then, as he began to pull his cart again, the Ragman did a strange thing: he put her stained handkerchief to his own face; and then HE began to weep, to sob as grievously as she had done, his shoulders shaking. Yet she was left without a tear.

"This IS a wonder," I breathed to myself, and I followed the sobbing Ragman like a child who cannot turn away from mystery.

"Rags! Rags! New rags for old!" he cried.

In a little while, when the sky showed grey behind the rooftops and I could see the shredded curtains hanging out black windows, the Ragman came upon a girl whose head was wrapped in a bandage, whose eyes were empty. Blood soaked her bandage. A single line of blood ran down her cheek. Now the tall Ragman looked upon this child with pity, and he drew a lovely yellow bonnet from his cart.

"Give me your rag," he said, tracing his own line on her cheek, "and I'll give you mine."

The child could only gaze at him while he loosened the bandage, removed it, and tied it to his own head. The bonnet he set on hers. And I gasped at what I saw: for with the bandage went the wound! Against his brow it ran a darker, more substantial blood - his own!

"Rags! Rags! I take old rags!" cried the sobbing, bleeding, strong, Ragman.

The sun hurt both the sky, now, and my eyes; the Ragman seemed more and more to hurry.

"Are you going to work?" he asked a man who leaned against a telephone pole. The man shook his head. The Ragman pressed him: "Do you have a job?"

"Are you crazy?" sneered the other. He pulled away from the pole, revealing the right sleeve of his jacket - flat, the cuff stuffed into the pocket. He had no arm.

"So," said the Ragman. "Give me your jacket, and I'll give you mine." Such quiet authority in his voice!

The one-armed man took off his jacket. So did the Ragman - and I trembled at what I saw: for the Ragman's arm stayed in its sleeve, and when the other put it on he had two good arms, thick as tree limbs; but now... the Ragman had only one. "Go to work," he said.

After that, he found a drunk, lying unconscious beneath an army blanket, and old man, hunched, wizened, and sick. He took that blanket and wrapped it round himself, but for the drunk he left new clothes.

And now I had to run to keep up with the Ragman. Though he was weeping uncontrollably, and bleeding freely at the forehead, pulling his cart with one arm, stumbling for drunkenness, falling again and again, exhausted, old, old, and sick, yet he went with terrible speed.

On spider's legs he skittered through the alleys of the City, this mile and the next, until he came to its limits, and then he rushed beyond.

I wept to see the change in this man. I hurt to see his sorrow. And yet I needed to see where he was going in such haste, perhaps to know what drove him so.

The old Ragman - came to a landfill. He came to the garbage pits. And then I wanted to help him in what he did, but I hung back, hiding. He climbed a hill. With tormented labor he cleared a little space on that hill. Then he sighed. He lay down. He pillowed his head on a handkerchief and a jacket. He covered his bones with an army blanket. And he died.

Oh, how I cried to witness that death! I slumped in a junked car and wailed and mourned as one who has no hope - because I had come to love the Ragman. Every other face had faded in the wonder of this man, and I cherished him; but he died. I sobbed myself to sleep.

I did not know - how could I know? - that I slept through Friday night and Saturday and its night, too.

But then, on Sunday morning, I was wakened by a violence. Light - pure, hard, demanding light - slammed against my sour face, and I blinked, and I looked, and I saw the last and the first wonder of all.

There was the Ragman, folding the blanket most carefully, a scar on his forehead, but alive! And, besides that, healthy! There was no sign of sorrow, nor of age, and all the rags that he had gathered shined for cleanliness.

Well, then I lowered my head and trembling for all that I had seen, I myself walked up to the Ragman. I told him my name with shame, for I was a sorry figure next to him. Then I took off all my clothes in that place, and I said to him with dear yearning in my voice:

"Dress me." He dressed me. My Lord, he put new rags on me, and I am a wonder beside him.

The Ragman, the Ragman, the Christ!

Friends, we are not perishing... we will be healed many times over, we will be lifted up and turned around as God calls us and encourages us in these ragged times... in these our ragged lives.

In God's love, we have been truly blessed. Look around and see God's love and grace lifting us still.

Look around and see our brothers and sisters in Christ lifting one another's burdens. Look around for ways to continue the work that Jesus has begun in us. Look around to find ways to "be the church" in this *transitional* time, between what has been, what is and what is to come...with God loving us all the while.

In the words of Aram Bae: *'God so loved the world, that God gave each and every one of us the gift of Jesus, our confidant and friend. God so loved the world, that God gave us the gift of the Holy Spirit, our ever-present Counselor. God so loved the world, that we can live a life of blessing, purpose, and eternity. God so loved the world, that we are called to love one another. Thank God for this thing called love.'*

“God so loved the world that he gave his only Son so that everyone who believes in him may not perish ... but may have eternal life.”

Thank God over and over again that we can trust these twenty-seven words and keep them nearby. Amen!

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

**Time for Prayer:** Let's spend a few moments in silent prayer. God of grace and God of glory, we give you thanks and praise for bringing us together by means of our thoughts and prayers today. We lift before you those who have lost hope, those who are lonely, those who are newly diagnosed with the COVID virus, those who are recuperating from surgery and those who are in places that are unfamiliar. Let your presence be known to those who suffer because of war and injustice.

We give thanks for those who have heard good news this week and those who have possibilities of new job offers, new housing and new relationships.

We pray, O God, for those you have placed upon our hearts and minds this day... we lift our prayers for pastors and congregations in the WI Conference and all faith communities around us; for those who serve in the medical profession; for those who keep us safe; for those who serve in local and national government; for teachers and students; for all the children; for those in assisted living and in nursing facilities; for our families and our friends; especially for Maggie M, Tom N, Dan, Albert, Tamara C, Mark D, Phil G, Christine D, Jackie, Cathy S, Rick and Teresa G, Jamie H, Angie, Shelly B, Mike K, Mike G-P, Matt L, Jeff and Cindi, Mary Kay's husband, Trudy's mother, Audrey, Nancy, Teresa's Aunt Mary and Rob M.

We lift our prayers for all those who mourn this day, especially the family of Rev. Dr. Dale G. Kuck. Let your peace and comfort be with them in these difficult days. Let them be assured in knowing that “Eye has not seen, ear has not heard, nor human imagination envisioned,” 1Cor. 2:9, what you have prepared for us all.

We lift our prayers for your church that you would guide and lead us in our call to mission and in our call to be loving one another as you have loved us. We pray in the name of Jesus and in his words: 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 and 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.

### **Solo: “Amazing Grace (My Chains are Gone)” by Mark Donner, Park Falls, WI**

Song # 4768151; words: John Newton; words and music: Chris Tomlin and Louie Giglio  
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Amazing grace! How sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me! I once was lost but now am found;  
was blind, but now I see. 'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear; and grace my fears relieved.  
How precious did that grace appear the hour I first believed.

My chains are gone, I've been set free. My God, my Savior ransomed me.  
And like a flood his mercy reigns, unending love, amazing grace.

The Lord has promised good to me; his word my hope secures.  
He will my shield and portion be as long as life endures.

My chains are gone, I've been set free. My God, my Savior ransomed me.  
And like a flood his mercy reigns, unending love, amazing grace.

The earth shall soon dissolve like snow, the sun will cease to shine. But God who called me here below,  
will be forever mine, will be forever mine. You are forever mine.

**This is our time of intention and thanks** Let us turn our thoughts to the privilege we have as members and friends of our church families to be able to worship together here, though separately. We are invited as one body in Christ to give what we can toward the support of our churches' ministries. Remember that no matter the size or the shape, every gift of time, talent and treasure makes 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:** As we go now, God will bless us and keep us, God will lift up and guide us, God's face will shine on us and give us peace. Until we meet again God will hold us in the palm of his hand.

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

### **Wednesday Devotional, March 17, The Twenty-fifth Day of Lent (not counting Sundays!)**

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

#### **Listen now to a passage from the letter of James 5:13, that draws our attention to recognizing and giving thanks:**

~ Common English Bible: If any of you are suffering, they should pray.  
If any of you are happy, they should sing.

If you could release your suffering and pain or at least find a little comfort, what would you do? Would you talk to the friend who listens best?

If you have experienced loss or grief, what do you do? Clean cupboards wash windows and cry? Take a long walk then, read the page you open the Bible to? If you are separated from family and friends and have been that way for over a year, how have you coped? Make lots of phone calls? Knit scarves? write letters?

**What reminds you most of God's grace in times like these?**

**Focus and recognize it. Now give thanks...**

If any of you are suffering or if any of you are happy, you should do both: sing and pray! Thank you, God!

#### **"How Can I Keep from Singing" #424 Worship & Rejoice/ Chalice Hymnal #619**

My life flows on in endless song; above earth's lamentation,  
I catch the sweet, though far-off hymn that hails a new creation.

**Chorus: No storm can shake my inmost calm while to that rock I'm clinging,  
Since Christ is Lord of heaven and earth, how can I keep from singing?**

Through all the tumult and the strife, I hear that music ringing.  
It finds an echo in my soul. How can I keep from singing?

**Chorus: No storm can shake my inmost calm while to that rock I'm clinging,  
Since Christ is Lord of heaven and earth, how can I keep from singing?**

The peace of Christ makes fresh my heart, a fountain ever springing!  
All things are mine since I am His! How can I keep from singing?

**Chorus: No storm can shake my inmost calm while to that rock I'm clinging,  
Since Christ is Lord of heaven and earth, how can I keep from singing?**

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

You will find these *recorded services* at [uccmedford.org](http://uccmedford.org)  
Click on "media." 715-351-0450

