



It's August 29, 2021: the 14th Sunday after Pentecost

On behalf of our 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. Welcome to those who are with us on Facebook "Live" and those who are worshipping at other times this week, who are watching the recording of this service on our website!

Next Sunday, worship will be held outside. We will share the Sacrament of Holy Communion and Steve Strasman will be with us again to provide music. Students, bring your back packs for a backpack blessing.

Hymn: "Blessed Assurance" 426

1. Blessed assurance, Jesus is mine! Oh, what a foretaste of glory divine!
Heir of salvation, purchase of God, born of His spirit, washed in His blood.

**Chorus: This is my story, this is my song, praising my Savior all the day long;
this is my story, this is my song, praising my Savior all the day long.**

2. Perfect submission, all is at rest, I in my Savior, am happy and blest,
Watching and waiting, looking above, echoes of mercy, whispers of love. **Chorus**

3. Perfect submission, all is at rest, I in my Savior am happy and blest,
watching and waiting, looking above, filled with his goodness, lost in his love. **Chorus**

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**Call to Worship: One: Don't play games with God. All: God knows us better than we think God does.
One: God is waiting for us. All: Let our lives be in you, O God.**

Hymn # 466, "Take My Life and Let It Be" vs. 1-2

1. Take my life and let it be consecrated, Lord, to thee; take my hands and let them move
at the impulse of thy love, at the impulse of thy love.
2. Take my feet and let them be swift and beautiful for thee; take my voice and let me sing
always, only for my King, always, only for my King.

One: O God, we come to you, seeking your healing mercy.

All: We come before with humble hearts. Let our lives be in you, O God.

Hymn # 466, "Take My Life and Let It Be" vs. 3-4

3. Take my lips and let them be filled with messages for thee; take my silver and my gold,
not a mite would I withhold, not a mite would I withhold.
4. Take my love, my God, I pour, at thy feet its treasure store; take myself and I will be
ever, only all for thee, ever, only, all for thee.

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**Prayer of Confession: Great and loving God, here we are again, asking for forgiveness,
trusting that you hear our prayer:**

**All: Dear God, you call us to be doers of the Word, not hearers only. You call us to love
the world with your passion, and to let that love be expressed in justice, forgiveness, peace.
Forgive us when our hearts are constricted with fear and do not let your transforming grace
open us to the world you cherish. Forgive us when we honor you
only with our lips and not with our actions.**

**Assurance of Pardon: Pastor: Even if we have done what we know to be wrong, remember that God will
heal and forgive us. God will send us on our way to be persons of peace, hope, love and justice. Be at peace
knowing that God is with us. In the name of Jesus Christ our sins are forgiven. All: Thanks be to God.**

**Response: refrain, Hymn #492: Spirit of the living God, fall afresh on me.
Spirit of the living God, fall afresh on me.**

Melt me, mold me, fill me, use me. Spirit of the living God, fall afresh on me.

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Passing the Peace

We will Pass the Peace of Christ to one another by sharing the words, “Peace be with you;” then turn and wave a greeting of peace to others around you... later, call or text someone and continue this “peace passing” throughout this week. **“Peace be with you!”**

Scripture: Mark 7:1-8 Common English Bible “*What contaminates a life?*”

¹ The Pharisees and some legal experts from Jerusalem gathered around Jesus. ² They saw some of his disciples eating food with unclean hands. (They were eating without first ritually purifying their hands through washing. ³ The Pharisees and all the Jews don’t eat without first washing their hands carefully. This is a way of observing the rules handed down by the elders. ⁴ Upon returning from the marketplace, they don’t eat without first immersing themselves. They observe many other rules that have been handed down, such as the washing of cups, jugs, pans, and sleeping mats.) ⁵ So the Pharisees and legal experts asked Jesus, “Why are your disciples not living according to the rules handed down by the elders but instead eat food with ritually unclean hands?”

⁶ He replied, “Isaiah really knew what he was talking about when he prophesied about you hypocrites. He wrote, *This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far away from me.*

Their worship of me is empty since they teach instructions that are human words. Isaiah 29:13

⁸ You ignore God’s commandment while holding on to rules created by humans and handed down to you.”

The title of my Message today is: “Answer the Question”

Please pray with me. Loving God, we do not know which way to turn. *Back* is out of reach, *forward* is not looking so good either...and the “*here and now*” is just plain scary. We come before you this day as storms continue to rattle around us; as hundreds of people are dealing with floods; as the air that we expect to be so crisp in days of autumn smells like smoke and is hard to handle; as brothers and sisters in areas of forest fires are leaving their beloved homes behind; as siblings in Afghanistan are fleeing in fear and are dying mercilessly; as 1000’s of people are again being diagnosed with COVID and hospitals are overflowing. We spend sleepless nights as anxiety wears us down. You know this very well, O God. We come to you on this, your day, asking you to hear the prayers that we humbly offer from the depths of our hearts in Jesus’ name. Amen.

One Sunday morning, a mother was pounding on a bedroom door. “It’s time to get up and go to church,” she called. “I’m not going!” came the voice from inside. “Why not?” demanded the mother. “I don’t like them and they don’t like me,” came the voice through the door. “But you *have* to go!” said the mother. “Why?” came the plaintive voice. “Because,” she said, “You are the pastor!”

I don’t know if that is a true story, but it was in my *sermon-idea* file under the heading of “questions.” On Sunday mornings, I am usually up at 5am and am in the church building by 8:30. I love our family of faith and can honestly say that I never have asked, “Do I have to go to church today?”

No one has pushed, pulled or dragged me here. It is something that I promised to do when I became a member of the church and it is something that the 3 Confirmands promised last week. This was one of the questions: Do you promise to participate in the life and mission of this family of God’s people, sharing regularly in the worship of God and enlisting in the work of this local church as it serves this community and the world?
The answer: I will, with the help of God.”

Our Church Council does not keep track of who is here on Sundays and does not make it a practice to remove someone from the member list if they have not been around for a couple months. There might have been other plans. Travel. Sleep. The decision to be here is between us and God.

The author, Anne Lamott, once told why she made her teenage son, Sam, go to church ...

I make him go because I can ... I outweigh him by nearly 75 pounds. But that is only part of it. The main reason is that I want to give him what I found in the world, which is to say a path and a little light to see by. Most of the people I know who have what I want — which is to say, purpose, heart, balance, gratitude, joy —

are people with a deep sense of spirituality. They are people in community, who pray, or practice their faith — people banding together to work on themselves and for human rights. They follow a brighter light than the glimmer of their own candle; they are part of something beautiful.

— Anne Lamott, “Why I make Sam go to church” in *Traveling Mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith* (Anchor, 2000), p. 100.

There are 613 Jewish rules or commandments that cover many issues, including instructions about food, and how God should be worshipped. Jews agreed to follow these rules. I would venture a guess that teenagers might protest some those rules, too. In today’s scripture, the Pharisees, who were always trying to trap Jesus and spent a lot of time trying to prove that he was wrong, ask Jesus a question concerning his disciples and one of these rules: “Why are your disciples not living according to the rules handed down by the elders but instead eat food with ritually unclean hands?”

What came to mind when you heard this? “So what, they didn’t wash their hands.” It made me wonder what people will say about us in 1000 years when they read about us being skeptical about taking necessary health precautions to avoid a pandemic, when we also have heard that we should?

Jesus said to the Pharisees, ⁸ *You ignore God’s commandment while holding on to rules created by humans and handed down to you.*” As Jesus quoted Isaiah’s prophecy, perhaps it was far more encompassing than just to that day and those people. I dare say that we, too, are ignoring the greatest commandment to Love One Another we are ignore the rules created by humans that have been handed down to us!

We need to give some serious thought to returning to revisiting the promises that we made on the day of our Confirmation or when we joined in the membership of this Christian Church. Can you honestly and with the best of intentions, answer these questions today?

Do you renounce the powers of evil and desire the freedom of new life in Christ?

Do you profess Jesus Christ as your Savior?

Do you promise, by the grace of God, to be Christ’s disciples, to follow in the example and teachings of Jesus, to resist oppression and evil, to show love and justice, and to witness to the good news of the Gospel as best you are able?

Do you promise, according to the grace given to you, to continue to grow in the Christian faith, to be a faithful member of the church of Jesus Christ, and to share the love of God with all those that you meet?

If you have said, in your heart, “Yes, I promise, with the help of God,” then do not blame God or anyone else if you fall behind or fail to live up to these promises. Try again. Do better the next time. Let “being the church” become second nature for you. Our parking lot sign gives us the unwritten laws, fewer than 613. Let the greatest commandment of loving one another take high priority in your life. Let every decision be made in love.

It just may be that Jesus is asking us this question today: Are you “playing church” or “being the church?” He is challenging the Pharisees and challenges us to line up the external with the internal. Following the external rules sometimes is much easier than actually behaving differently because we have lifted our lives to God as part of our offering.

Take some time today to read the rest of the story, Mark 7:9-23, as Jesus continues in verse 9: ⁹ ... “*Clearly, you are experts at rejecting God’s commandment in order to establish these rules;* as he goes on in verse 18: ¹⁸ *Don’t you know that nothing from the outside that enters a person has the power to contaminate?* ...and sums it up in verse 23: ²³ *All these evil things come from the inside and contaminate a person in God’s sight.*” (Common English Bible)

When we, in humility, give ourselves to God, we will begin to notice that great things will begin to happen through us and for us--greater than we can ever imagine. We will not get any “cash for the clunkers” right where we are, here in God’s kingdom. When we have to be *pushed, pulled and dragged* to go somewhere unknown or to do something we don’t want to do, we need to remember that our God is the God of the past, the God of the present and the God of the future and is already *there* waiting for us.

And the question each and every day should be this: How will I accomplish “loving one another” today?

Breathe in a resolve to do the right thing. Breathe out the hesitation.

Morning Prayer: Pray with me: Compassionate God, we like to think that all we have to do is be on a church member list and to speak the right words, but haven't given much thought to "walking the walk." We get so caught up in ritual and rules, that we forget what really is your will for us. We forget that we are called to live lives of compassion and hope. So many times life has challenge us to "take sides," one against the other; but that is contrary to your will. We ignore your call to us to stand for justice, love, forgiveness, and peace. Help us to care more deeply and to be ready to joyfully serve you, O God. Free us from the burden of self-centeredness. We lift to you the children and the teachers and all who begin classes this week.

We trust that you are with those who are hurting and healing, those who have been newly diagnosed with the COVID virus, those recovering from surgery; those awaiting the results of medical testing and those undergoing difficult treatments and rehabilitation; those who struggle with mental illness and addictions. Hear our prayers for those who lives have been changed by fire and flood and hurricane. Calm the storm again, O God, bring rain to the places plagued by drought; let those who seek to do us harm experience a change of heart. Give wisdom and courage to the leaders of this country in the words they speak and in the decisions they make. "God, give us grace to accept with serenity the things that cannot be changed, courage to change the things that should be changed, and the wisdom to distinguish the one from the other."
-Reinhold Niebuhr

Let's pray now in the name and in the words of Jesus: 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, the power and the glory forever. Amen.

Time of Intention and Thanks:

We each, as members and friends of this church family, are called to minister to one another and to the world around us. Thank you, to all of you whose various gifts electronically, through the mail and those given in person have enabled Community United Church of Christ to faithfully serve.

Let us dedicate our gifts and in so doing offer our lives to God this day:

All: Loving God, receive our offerings and unite us into a community of mutual caring, where the light of your love shines through all of our efforts as we share of our time, talents and treasure. We pray in the name of Jesus. Amen.

Hymn: "God Be With You" 716

1. God be with you till we meet again, by his counsels guide, uphold you, with His sheep securely fold you; God be with you till we meet again.
2. God be with you till we meet again, 'neath his wings protecting hide you, daily manna still divide you, God be with you till we meet again.
3. God be with you till we meet again, if life's perils should confound you, God will put his arms around you; God be with you till we meet again.

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Benediction Go now with the resolve to ask yourself this question: "Am I doing the right thing today?"

...from d365.org: "God of Grace, be the light that guides us.

God of Peace, be the strength that carries us. God of Love, be the tie that binds us. Together."

Go in peace & continue to be safe.



Pastor Mary Jo