



# First Congregational Church Highlights Newsletter July 2020

Beloved of God, Peace and blessings to you.

How are you holding up?

How is it with your soul?

How can the church help with that?

Our nation and world are continuing to undergo what seem to be compounding crises. Our faith roots us in a deep and broad reality of God. I pray this is allowing you to be both strong and flexible. And I pray that we as a church and I as a pastor are responding in a faithful way to these different crises, with as much wisdom and integrity and as little reactivity as we can, considering the flawed creatures that we are.

The Chinese character for “crisis” combines the characters for “danger” and “opportunity.” There is certainly a lot to grieve amidst these crises, the losses due to the dangers. But there are also opportunities for growth and healing. The church services the past few weeks have focused on the healing stories of Jesus. I've been trying to apply these stories to the issues currently calling for a faithful and thoughtful response. By the way, we've been mailing those services and sermons, along with these monthly newsletters to those who may not have access to our online videos.

Your church leadership is preparing plans and conditions for “Reopening with Care.” In general, we are committed to caution.

Members of our committees have also engaged earnestly with the issues around racism and policing that have come to the fore in our nation. From that challenging, instructive, and ongoing conversation, we have agreed to issue a statement on “Racism, Nonviolence, and Police Reform.” The statement is on the next page. Please let me know your thoughts and feelings - I am committed to the conversation.

*Let love be genuine. hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good. Love one another with mutual affection. Outdo one another in showing honor. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of your community. Extend hospitality to strangers. - Romans 12:9-13*

Peace,

Pastor Nathaniel

# Worship, Fellowship, Meeting, and Event Access Information



## Drive-by Blessings -Sundays 10:00 am-10:45 am

by the Masked Reverend

This is how it'll work:

I will be outside the parking lot entrance of First Congregational Church of Walla Walla, wearing a face mask.

[You can come by in your car.](#) Please wear face masks, travel only with family, and stay in your cars. As people come by I will offer you a blessing, at a safe social distance. It will be wonderful to see some of you.

Please enter via Alder Street and Marcus and exit via Palouse Street. This will keep a smooth flow East to West through the parking lot.

This idea is in keeping with guidelines from Governor Inslee, and in consultation with medical professionals. We are committed to doing church in a safe and responsible way. We are consulting with medical professionals and abiding by public health guidelines.

Things will not return to normal for a good while yet. Churches pushing to reopen are acting irresponsibly.

Peace

Pastor Nathaniel

## **Virtual Coffee & Prayer Time - Sundays at 11:00 am**

Chat & check in with you church friends. And pray together.

### **With computer, smartphone, or tablet**

Go to this link:

<https://zoom.us/j/638358688>

You may be asked for this password: **589720**

### **With landline or cellphone**

Dial (253) 215-2782

You may be asked for the meeting ID: **638 358 688** and password: **586720**

## **Weekly worship service videos on YouTube**

Lovingly produced by our worship team

You can access them via the link on our church's website: [www.firstchurchuccww.org](http://www.firstchurchuccww.org)

Or by going to Youtube.com, searching for:

**“First Congregational Church of Walla Walla,” and clicking “Playlists.”**

This link will also get you there: <https://bit.ly/36lN27m>

Please keep sending in photos of yourselves or your gardens or experiences in nature.

We use these for our music montages. It's a way for us everyone to stay connected.

## **Bedtime Prayers -Thursdays at 7:00 pm-7:30pm**

Close the day with a simple and comforting time of prayer with an Open & Affirming community of faith.

Bring a candle to light, if you like and feel free to have a beloved prayer or poem or piece of scripture to share. There will be a time in the service for that.

### **With computer, smartphone, or tablet**

Join us via Zoom: <https://uso2web.zoom.us/j/87477496096>

You may be asked for the meeting ID: **874 7749 6096** and password: **699678**

### **With landline or cellphone**

Dial (253)-215-8782

## **Sacred Silence Siting Circle-Mondays 12:10 pm-12:45 pm**

Our time of shared time of silent prayer is now online

Practice the ancient art of silent prayer with others from the comfort and safety of your home.

You can sign in or call in via Zoom:

**With computer, smartphone, or tablet**

Go to this link:

<https://zoom.us/j/638358688>

**With landline or cellphone**

Dial (253) 215-8782

You may be asked for the meeting ID: 868 0904 7475

## **New Instagram Account**

Our church is now on Instagram: <https://www.instagram.com/fccwallawalla/>

Please follow and contribute, if you're into that sort of thing.

Deepest thanks to Izzy Sherwood-Reid for getting this going.





# Moderator's Missive

Hello All,

Greetings across the social distance. It has been a difficult few months of physical distance for our faith community. This is hard. And yet through these challenging times, it seems we are managing to remain united and focused upon Jesus's call to "love one another" I take special encouragement from seeing some of you at the grocery

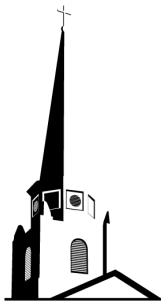
store; in the church parking lot for drive-by blessings; on virtual services each Sunday; and in hearing about how you are a vital part of the many initiatives our church is taking part in these unusual times. It hasn't been easy, but I am convinced with compassion, common sense, and care, we will get through this...together.

I wanted to check in this month and simply assure you all that despite our physical absence, the gears are still fully turning at First Congregational Church. In recent weeks our production teams has continued to churn out impactful online worship services; Pastor Nathaniel is leading nurturing and nourishing spiritual connection throughout the week (sitting circle, bedtime prayers, drive-by blessings); Wednesday lunches are being prepared for those who need them; and church leaders are keeping their eyes on the future so all will be ready when it's determined that we can safely gather again. The commitment that I am seeing from so many members of our church family convinces me that FCC has proven its strength in response to the adversity of this moment. Thank you everyone.

Your moderator is setting his sights on some important planning in the weeks to come. First, in early July I will be sending out an online survey that will serve as a review of Pastor Nathaniel, our church leadership, and how we are supporting the spiritual development of our church members. Once again, this will be an online *SurveyMonkey* poll that will look a lot like last year's. It will appear in your email account sometime in the first week of July. This is an important first step in our upcoming budget and stewardship planning process, so please participate. Second, very soon I will be convening a *Reopening with Care Task Force*. This temporary body will discern the safest, most appropriate course of action-and associated logistics- in any return to normalcy. Fortunately, we are receiving useful, careful guidance from Olympia, from our regional conference, and our community health professionals. We also want to have a deliberate body to help make this process as smart, compassionate, and effective as possible.

Finally, as Nathaniel has already made known in his weekly remarks, we are celebrating a critical milestone in the life of our church, the 20th anniversary of our life as an "open and affirming Church. Pastor Nathaniel will be meeting with a handful of church members to explore a fitting tribute to this core value of our church, and how to do it justice while we are physically distant due to COVID-19. there are other gears churning as well, although I think I will save them for others to address in this month's communication.

As you can see, God is still speaking and our church is still very much on the move. In many respects to adversity we are facing amidst a global pandemic, and a national dialogue about "race" and equity across our country, is further elevating the important role First Congregational Church serves within our valley. ~Blessings and hugs to you all ~ J.R.



# FIRST CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH OF WALLA WALLA UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST

73 S. PALOUSE ST. • WALLA WALLA, WA  
509-525-8753 • [OFFICE@FCCHURCH.NET](mailto:OFFICE@FCCHURCH.NET)

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## Statement Committing to Anti-Racism, Non-violence, and Police Reform

June 10, 2020

As people of faith and disciples of Jesus, our community at First Congregational Church of Walla Walla stands with those struggling for racial justice who are speaking out about racism and white supremacy in our culture and institutions. We declare that Black lives matter.

We share the grief over the violent death of George Floyd, a fellow Christian dedicated to peace, and over the many other unarmed Black, Brown, and Indigenous people who have died at the hands of those we entrust to provide fair and equal protection under the law. Our faith compels us to confront racism as a false idol and a force that crucifies

We know that God's grace, as a gift, is free, but it is not cheap. It calls us to a change of heart and of actions, seeing clearly the role of sin in ourselves and our society. We are humbled to acknowledge the sin of racism and White supremacy in ourselves, in our institutions, and in our country's living history. We seek, with God's help, and with the confidence that nothing truly separates any of us from the love of God, to do our part to overcome racism and heal the injustices in our society.

To that end:

We are committed to better understanding our own White privilege and racism, for those of us who are White, and to address its subtle and overt manifestations in our church culture. To aid us, we will use small group curricula developed by our national leadership in the United Church of Christ, such as "White Privilege - Let's Talk: A Resource for Transformational Dialogue." We invite others in our community to this work, and gladly will share these resources.

We are committed to supporting and responding to the leadership of Black and Brown people in our city and state who are developing policy measures that can reduce the risk of police violence and increase democratic oversight and accountability.

We are committed to finding appropriate ways as a church to help bring our local police and political leaders into conversation with the Walla Walla Black Lives Matter movement, as well as the Walla Walla Immigrant Rights Coalition, as they request, to discuss meaningful reforms and reconciliation.

We are committed to peace and nonviolence in our ways, knowing all people are fellow children of God. We will do our part to reduce the level of violence in our society overall. This requires attending to larger injustices in our nation, largely impacting People of Color. This also requires attending to the seeds of violence in ourselves. A less violent society will reduce the level of risk for all, including police officers who too often must respond to violent situations.

We are above all committed to following the Way of Jesus with integrity, confronting the forces of violence and racism with love in our hearts and with our trust centered on the God of resurrection at work through history and beyond.

Rev. Nathaniel Mahlberg, Pastor  
J.R. VanSlyke, Moderator  
Jen Rickard, Vice-Moderator  
Dana Taggart, Chair, Board of Trustees  
Judy Chacon, Chair, Board of Deacons  
Heidi McFarley, Chair, Mission & Social Concerns Committee  
Dot Willis, Chair, Christian Education





## *Greetings from your Deacons!*

Dear church family,

As many of us feel unsettled, anxious and uncertain in these complicated times, you must know that you are loved. The Holy Spirit dwells in you.

May you also know that your church family cares for you, is praying for you and wishing you well.

May you feel the outstretched arms of this community saying, "Come." As a community of faith, we hope to be there in times of need, even when the need is in us, rather than in others. If you are having a difficult time, feeling adrift, know that many of us are as well. Reach out to your pastor, a deacon, a friend. We are on this journey together. We are stronger together. We are both lifted and grounded by the Holy Spirit in our midst. Amen

Check this newsletter for information on the new Prayer Chain offering! The deacons enthusiastically adopted Lucy's suggestion for this project. We believe this will be a blessing to each of us individually as well as collectively. Thank heavens we have wonderfully devoted and creative people among us.

The Deacons are continuing to meet regularly, examining and offering feedback on how we are doing with worship. Are we providing care and nurture of our congregation and friends? And can we find ways to be present and accessible to our community at large? Feel free to offer feedback yourselves as we are all learning together how to proceed in these unusual times.

May the Lord bless you and give you peace.

Judy Chacon,  
Chair, Board of Deacons

### ~~Prayer Craft for All Ages~~

Our Church Family is joining together to share our praises and concerns during this time of isolation. We have prepared a kit for each household to create a paper chain of prayers, and will be contacting you to ask if you want one. Each kit will contain the materials and an example.

Between now and Advent, express your thoughts on each prayer strip, and feel free to get creative. We hope and pray that by Christmas we will be able to gather together and decorate the church with our paper stories.

For questions, more materials, or if you don't receive a call, contact Lucy Linker at 509-240-0918 or Judy Chacon at 509-525-6618.



## Youth in Action



Theo (wearing the mask) stopped by to donate his hard-earned cash. His grandma gave him an allowance and he decided to gift it to the Blue Mountain Humane Society. Theo wants his donation to go towards the puppies and kittens—BMHS will make that happen! Nala looks pretty happy about that!

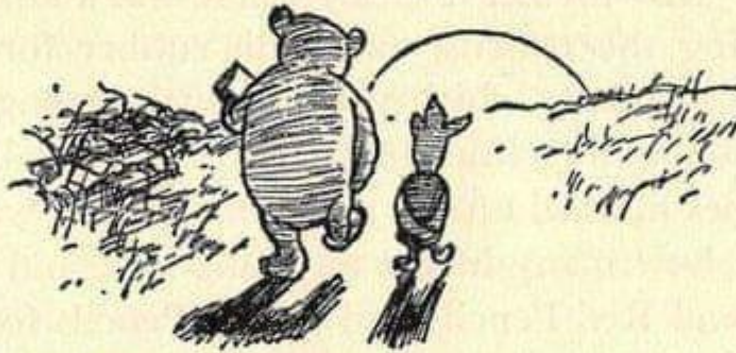
\*Pictured with Theo Gryler is Nala, a BHMS alumni who was adopted by a staff member!



"When you wake up in the morning, Pooh," said Piglet at last, "what's the first thing you say to yourself?"

"What's for breakfast?" said Pooh. "What do you say, Piglet?"

"I say, I wonder what's going to happen exciting today?" said Piglet.



Pooh nodded thoughtfully.  
"It's the same thing," he said.



# Christian Education



Christian Education and our youth leader, Margaret are continuing to try to keep our Preschool through Middle school youth involved with our church.

Our storytime on Tuesday at 7pm on Zoom continues for all age groups with a different story focus each event and an activity to join us all together.

J.R. has been presenting a Sunday School Lesson via email and post for the Intermediate age children since we did the COVID-19 closing. Sunday School is now finished at least for the Summer, and he has posted his last lesson for now for that age group. Cards have been going out to Preschool through Primary children including stickers or activity sheets so that we can stay in touch.

Stay tuned for other events CE is going to schedule, watch your email, and will hope to see lots of children on Zoom for storytime!

# Sacred Spaces

By Melissa Webster

There is a road we choose to travel at least once a year. When starting out we always have a special sense of the place where we are going. Both the landscape we travel through—mountains, high plateaus, tiny towns and grasslands—and that special place at the end never seem to change over some thirty years. But before we arrive, we are alert to the passing world, and we begin to see and remember the different birds along the road, flying in the air, sitting on the wires and fences or in the trees.

Each season brings a different variety of birds. On this trip the land is green, the sky is blue and white, and the sun is warm. Balancing on a fence post is a bird glowing with gold and black (Yellow-headed Blackbird); another, sitting on the wires above the road, is orange and blue-grey (American Kestrel), and flying between the trees on the mountaintop road is a glistening black and blue bird (Stellar's Jay.) Birds of the road know we are there and have become a hardy sort.

We reach our destination before sunset, in time to watch the Violet-green Swallows circle in the air catching flying bugs in the last light. Their green and violet backs are barely visible as they quickly turn and swoop over the water.

The lakes, streams and wetlands here are the home of nesting birds and the stop-over for large flocks of migrating birds. Over the years we've seen thousands of Ruddy Ducks, Northern Shovelers, Grebes, and American Coots spread over the still water, resting after long flights to their nesting places in the north. Sometimes in early wet springs, when the heavy snow melt flows down from the mountains and fills the landlocked lakes, rafts of migrating ducks cover the water from shore to shore. This place is a refuge. Here they can find food and protection. Some individuals choose to stay and make their nests in the wetlands and reeds along the lakes.

Here is where we see the beauty and mystery of the bird's life. Everyone is busy. Busy puffing up bright, attractive feathers, busy finding food for the young, busy chasing away the Crows and Northern Harriers who soar over the nests eager to snatch away the young. And inside the shells, the invisible chicks are busy pecking, pushing to free themselves and live the life of a bird.

It's the eternal story of life. And it is revealed over and over again in this wide and quiet space where the Jackrabbits and Red-tailed Hawks are at home.

Edging slowly along the canal we see a rare and beautiful sight between the reeds. A female Common Merganser duck, red head and bill, grey and white stream-lined body swims with the current, her neck stretched and watchful. Tight around her in a moving cluster are her young--twenty or more tiny balls of red and white spotted feathers.

A gentle rain begins to fall, bringing out the flies. This is a good feeding time for the swallows and flycatchers, like Say's Phoebes and Willow Flycatchers. But another, larger bird joins them bug-chasing in the air—an elegant Black Tern. It flies quickly through the air, back and forth above the wet grass. Truly a heavenly sight!

Now we return to the road home; we hold the memory of the many sights and sensations these few days have brought. As always, we walked silently in the tall grass beside the lake to see the roosting Great Horned Owl sleeping in the Cottonwood tree. We recognized the long-necked white bird far away on the lake--a nesting Trumpeter Swan(!)--and found the rare Bobolink, a black bird with a white hat standing in a bush watching for bugs. And we can't forget the Western Meadowlark that flew over and sang to us. It's the same—but not the same. For it has met us at a different time. The experience has touched us in new ways. When we were starting out, we yearned for the sameness of the years before, but now as we return, we are refreshed by a new spirit sensed in this place we love. We are thankful for its sameness and its continuing life of change.

## TALES FROM CEDAR LAKE I

In a small bay with a few rocky islands halfway down Cedar Lake a hidden stream flows in-to the lake. Each year the stream is reshaped by beavers, and so it is always an adventure to navigate by kayak. This morning, with Chip as my co-pilot and lap-warmer, I set out to explore the stream. A gentle breeze was at my back, and the three miles of paddling passed quickly. As I entered the mouth of the stream, I saw something floating in the water. Glancing to the right, on top of a smooth rounded boulder about 10 feet high, there was a commotion of movement. It was a family of otters. One by one they slid down the rock into the water. Suddenly the stream entrance was filled with a half dozen swimming and playing otters. Occasionally one would lift half its body out of the water and grin. (Otters are **SO** cute.) Then they parted and let us paddle by. Chip was so entranced that she forgot to bark or try to jump out of the kayak. We paddled on around turns and broken dams, led on by a female Gadwall and a soaring bald eagle. About a half mile up the stream, we encountered a good solid beaver dam. Time to turn around. Near the stream mouth, one otter lifted his head out, smiled at us, and the family playtime resumed. Back on the lake the gentle breeze had turned into a white cap gale. We headed for the leeward side of three islands, and then had to cross the open water. Chip hunkered down as I battled the waves and slowly gained the quieter shore. It was then a two mile windy paddle back to our base. What a perfect morning.

I've been watching the loon-nest island about a mile down the lake. One day a loon was on the nest. The next day the nest was empty, but both loons were quietly swimming nearby. For the last week I have paddled toward the nest and both loons are quietly swimming in the area ... but neither is on the nest. I hope they will re-nest, and I will continue to watch and wonder.

After several days in the 80s, the last four mornings have been in the 30s with frost warnings. The lake water is about 60 (that is pretty cold), but I continue to swim each morning to "get warm". The hardest part is getting out of the water into the cold wind. Motto: what doesn't break you makes you stronger!

Two of my grandkids drove with me to Minnesota. We left on May 23 and made the trip in two days. Jackson is 17 and Katie, 16, and they are both drivers. They could make the trip since their school is on line. Each morning for a week they kayaked the half mile across the lake to use the WiFi at a friend's year round home. They were welcome 24/7 and had their own "office". Now back at home they are eager to tell their future kids how they kayaked to school. Beats the school bus.

Last week I drove to Grayling, Michigan, to see my friend who has been on Hospice care for lung cancer after a three year battle. We have been best friends for 63 years, and the visit was a blessing for us both. She passed away several days after our visit.

I have loved the on-line services and feel so connected to you all. Thank you, stay well, and come to visit us on Cedar Lake, a place that is currently virus-free.

~ Lee...& Chip too

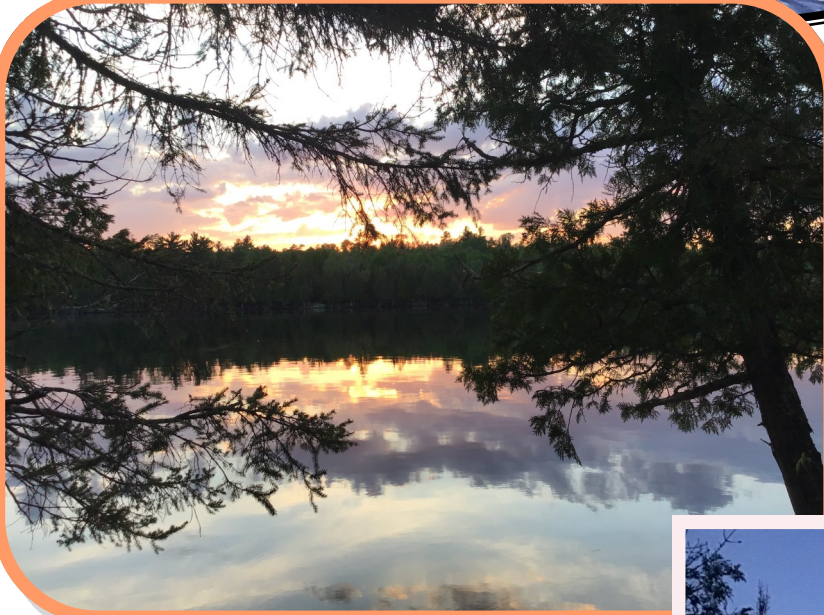


# Cedar Lake

Katie



Jackson



Cedar Lake at Sunset

Who wouldn't love to be  
there!?

















# *Our Church in Action*



## White Privilege...Let's Talk



Upholding our commitment to understanding our own White Privilege and racism, we would like to offer an opportunity to explore these issues in a safe and supportive way with others in our church community. Several years ago a group explored these issues using the UCC's curricula called, "White Privilege...Let's Talk". We would like to take up the work again and offer the same exploration for those who are interested. We will work through the same lessons as before with a new lease and new perspective as we navigate these powerful times of social change and reform and outcry in our nation and in the world. If you previously took the class, you would be welcome again!



















For more information and to express your interest in participating, please contact Heidi McFarley, [heidimcfarley@gmail.com](mailto:heidimcfarley@gmail.com), and/or Pastor Nathaniel. We are anticipating the class over Zoom. If access to technology is a hindrance to your participation, please do let us know and we will work with you to find a solution.

~Heidi McFarley



## The Birds and the Bees



If you haven't been to our physical church space in a while, or even if you have, you may not have noticed a little project I have been working on at the east end of the labyrinth parking lot....What began as a place to plop my extra veggie starts has grown into a full-fledged gardening effort. First a couple of strawberry plants, some herbs and flowers. Then tomatoes and tomatillos, winter squash and cantaloupe. A gracious gift of a water spigot from neighbor Lawrence Paoella, golden currants and choke-cherry saplings from Mary Koch Campbell, and an enormous pile of pine mulch from Andy Asmus have the space looking pretty nice... Now I only have a few weeds to contend with in the asphalt, and we will have a proper ritual space for our upcoming Rising Ceremony for our rising 6th and 9th graders! [I invite you all to bring by any extra garden goodies you might be trying to find a home for...](#) We will see what grows and flourishes as we bless that little strip of land with beauty, forage and habitat for the "birds and the bees." ~ Margaret Thomas



# Isolation Well Being

Even though we are no longer in isolation, these suggestions may still help with our moods.

- ♦ Shower
- ♦ Medication
- ♦ Drink Water
  
- ♦ Clean one thing/space
- ♦ Tend to something growing/living

Be Mindfully Present To:

- ♦ A sound or song
- ♦ A sensory feeling
- ♦ Something you see
- ♦ A spiritual practice
  
- ♦ Reach out to a human outside your home
- ♦ Do one thing to get your heart rate up
- ♦ Do one thing that you will be glad you did later
- ♦ Do one thing just because you want to
- ♦ Get in at LEAST one good laugh

\*One other thing that I have done is stayed off of most social media that is negative. I joined a page, which was started in Walla Walla, but has gone international. The rules are simple - no politics & no controversy. It's given me a break from everyday burdens and has helped me appreciate even the small things...the good things.

~Gayle

# Phone Tree

## Stay Connected With Each Other

Want to call others in our church community? Want to receive calls?

Becky Kirtley and Jan Eyestone have worked with Pastor Nathaniel and our Church Council to set up people to call each other. If you want to call or receive calls, give us a call!

Becky at 509-301-0583

Or

Contact the Office at 525-8753 {leave a message} or [office@fcchurch.net](mailto:office@fcchurch.net)

Or

Pastor Nathaniel at 608-469-1406 or [pastornathanielmahlberg@gmail.com](mailto:pastornathanielmahlberg@gmail.com)

### WORSHIP SERVICES

– **online videos and call-in video-conference meetings**

Contact Pastor Nathaniel with any questions! You don't need a computer to participate in some of our offerings.

### EVERY SUNDAY

**10:00 am** - Video of the worship service will be available on our [YouTube channel](https://bit.ly/39M7pLa):  
<https://bit.ly/39M7pLa>

**11:00 am** – Prayer and Fellowship meeting

**With computer, smartphone, or tablet**

Go to this link: <https://zoom.us/j/638358688>

You may be asked for this password: 589720

**With landline or cell phone**

Dial **(253) 215-8782**

You may be asked for the meeting ID: 638 358 688  
& the password: 586720

**The connecting info does not change Sunday to Sunday**

# July 2020

## Trustees Meeting

Thursday, July 16th, 6:00 pm

## Council Meeting

Sunday, July 26th, 12:30 pm

## Deacons Meeting

Wednesday, July 8th, 6:30 pm

Sun	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat
			1	2	3	4
5	6	7	8	9	10	11
12	13	14	15	16	17	18
19	20	21	22	23	24	25
26	27	28	29	30	31	

## VOUCHERS

Please have your vouchers turned in by the dates indicated above.

Thanks!

## Newsletter Deadline

Tuesday, July 21st

Please have your submissions in by that date



## Christian Aid Dinners

It has been anticipated that we could possibly resume our monthly dinners at the Christian Aid Center in July. It's a goal but not a certainty. We will update as soon as we know for sure.

Volunteers who are interested, please contact Courtney Kress Van Slyke at [courtneykress@yahoo.com](mailto:courtneykress@yahoo.com)

*For I know the plans  
I have for you,  
declares the Lord,  
plans to prosper you,  
and not to harm you,  
plans to give you  
hope and a future.* 🔍

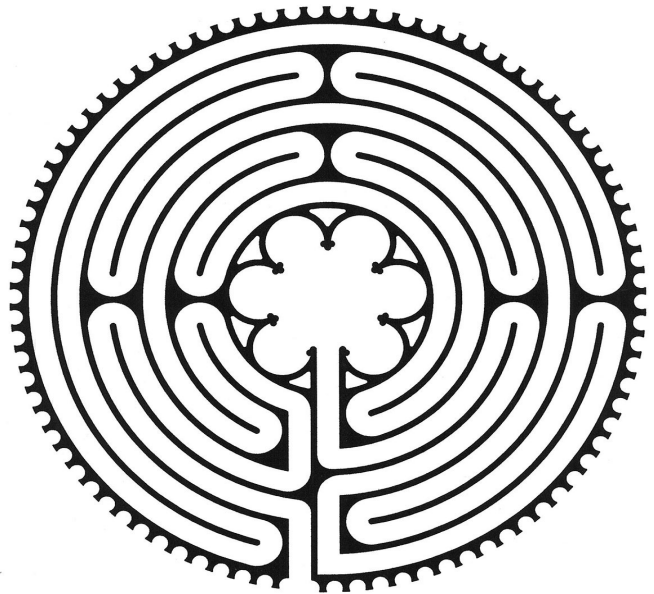
Jeremiah 29:11

## When this is Over, May We Never Again Take for Granted....

A handshake with a stranger  
Full shelves at the store  
Conversations with neighbors  
A crowded theater  
Friday night out  
The taste of communion  
A routine checkup  
The school rush each morning  
Coffee with a friend  
The stadium roaring  
Each deep breath  
A boring Tuesday  
Life itself.

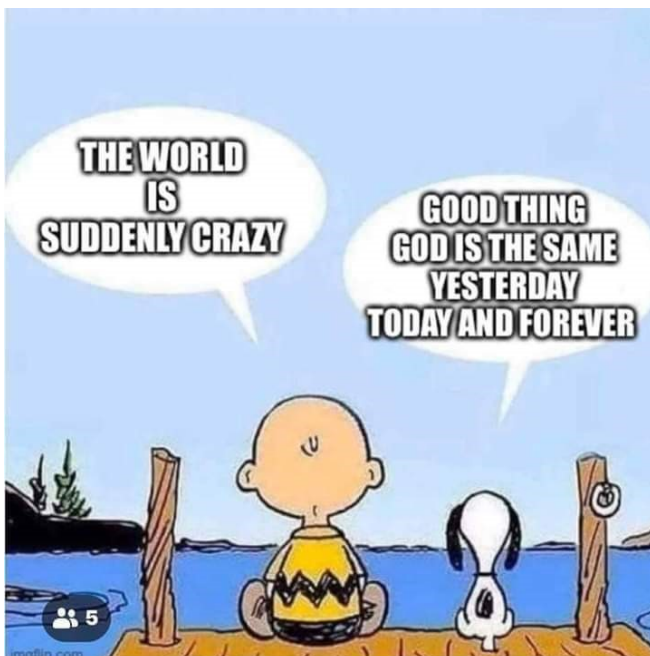
When this ends  
may we find  
that we have become  
more like the people  
we wanted to be  
we were called to be  
we hoped to be  
and may we stay  
that way — better  
for each other  
because of the worst."

[Laura Kelly Fanucci](#)



Sometimes I just want it to stop. Talk of Covid, protests, looting, brutality. I lose my way. Become convinced that this "new normal " is real life.

But, then I meet an 87 year old who talks of living through Polio, diphtheria, Vietnam, protests and yet is still enchanted with life. He seemed surprised when I said that 2020 must be especially challenging for him. "No", he said slowly looking me straight in the eyes, " I learned a long time ago to not see the world through the printed headlines, I see the world through the people that surround me. I see the world with the realization that we love big. Therefore, I just choose to write my own headlines. "Husband loves wife today. " "Family drops everything to come to Grandmas bedside." He patted my hand " Old man, makes new friend". His words collide with my worries, freeing them from the tether I had been holding tight. They float away. I am left with a renewed spirit. My headline now reads " woman overwhelmed by the spirit of kindness and the reminder that our Capacity to love is never ending "







In order to protect the privacy of our members and friends, we do not display personal information in the web version



## First Congregational Church United Church of Christ

### Ministerial Leadership

Minister Rev. Nathaniel Mahlberg

### 2020 Church Officers

Moderator	J. R. Van Slyke
Vice Moderator	Jennifer Rickard
Clerk	Larry Frank
Treasurer	Kim Croft
Financial Sec.	Bernie Newman
Asst. Fin. Sec.	Jonathan Webster
Head Usher	Galen Unruh
Diaconate	Judy Chacon
Christian Ed	Dot Willis
Trustees	Dana Taggart
Mission/Social Concern	Heidi McFarley
Music	Open
... and Affirming	Open

### Staff

Admin. Asst.	Gayle Kubrock
Bookkeeper	Kim Croft
Youth Leader	Margaret Thomas
Custodian	Art Davila
Pianist	Jackie Wood
Choir Director	Julie Jones
Webmaster	Izzy Sherwood-Reid

### Church Office Hours

Monday- Friday  
9 am - 2 pm

### Pastoral Assistance

Church Office 525-8753  
Rev. Nathaniel Mahlberg  
(608) 469-1406

You can read Pastor Nathaniel' s sermons in his online blog at:  
<https://thedandelionwayblog.wordpress.com>  
Or hear them on our website at:  
[www.firstchurchuccww.org](http://www.firstchurchuccww.org).

*We celebrate our diversity as an expression of God's Creative love. We welcome persons of all age, race, gender, sexual orientation, marital status, and physical and mental ability.*



# Worship Services

June 7 - June 28



June 7, 2020

**“Our Nation Need Not Fear Repentance:**

**One White Christian Minister’s Reflections on Racism, Violence, & Power in America”**

**OPENING PRAYER      from Rev. Mike Denton, Conference Minister of the Pacific NW  
Conference United Church of Christ**

"Today, we join our prayers with yours. We pray for the tragedies birthed through racism that have been unfolding for centuries. May that which needs to be broken remain broken and may that which needs healing be healed. May our community pause, reflect, listen to each other, pray together, and find a way forward together. Amen"

**WELCOME**

We welcome you in peace.

May you enter this place knowing God has made you good and worthy of love.

May you feel safe to bring your light and your love and your messiness.

Use them to bless our sacred gathering.

May you in turn be blessed here in the presence of the Holy One our God.

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It is our mission to enable personal Spiritual growth, collective outreach to the community and stewardship of God’s creation.

We are an open and affirming church.

Because of who you and where you are on life's journey,

You are welcome here.

**READINGS FROM SCRIPTURE**

*ADONAI*, I call to you from the depths;  
hear my cry, *Adonai*!

**Psalm 130**

Let your ears pay attention  
to the sound of my pleading.

*Holy One*, if you kept a record of sins,  
who, *Adonai*, could stand?

But with you there is forgiveness,  
so that you will be feared.

I wait longingly for *ADONAI*;  
I put my hope in God’s word.

Everything in me waits for *Adonai*  
more than guards on watch wait for morning,  
more than guards on watch wait for morning.

Israel, put your hope in *ADONAI*!

For grace is found with *ADONAI*,  
and with God is unlimited redemption.

God will redeem Israel  
from all their wrongdoings.

## 1 John 1:8-9

If we say that there is no sin in us, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, God may be trusted, in God's justice, to forgive us our sins and purify us from wickedness.

### **SERMON** "Our Nation Need Not Fear Repentance:

One White Christian Minister's Reflections on Racism, Power, & Democracy in America"

There is so much pain and strife that's now surfaced in a way no one can ignore (at least for now) - it's been here all along, for as long as racism has been on these shores, but it's unmistakable now, along with beautiful illustrations of humanity and moral courage. These are times of crisis as well as times of urgent opportunity.

I pray that what I offer here may be of some benefit, especially to my fellow White American Christians. These are some of my reflections as a White Christian Minister on racism, power, and democracy in America which I hope show that it is a matter of discipleship to be dedicated to overcoming racism not only in ourselves, but in our churches and our public democratic institutions.

Your thoughts and comments and questions and criticisms are most welcome. I hope for us to keep working through this together.

I'm going to try to lay things out step-by-step, build from a foundation.

The foundation for us as Christians in this, as in all things, is the saving reality of God's Grace, which we've come to know through Jesus Christ. A Grace that is not a cheap and easy grace, but a Grace that calls us to change of heart, repentance, seeing the hard truths about ourselves and our society, grieving the pain of it and courageously seeking a better way.

To ground us in that, here are some of the words of Archbishop Desmond Tutu, from his book about the truth and reconciliation process in South Africa after the fall of apartheid. The United States, I should say, has not remotely done something like that with our living legacy of racist violence and policy. Here is Desmond Tutu on Grace:

"What we are, what we have, even our salvation, all is gift, all is grace, not to be achieved but to be received as a gift freely given... Ultimately no one is an irredeemable cause devoid of all hope. No situation in this theology is irredeemable and devoid of hope.

"God does not give up on any one, for God loved us from all eternity, God loves us now and God will always love us, all of us, good and bad, forever and ever. God's love will not let us go for God's love for us, all of us, good and bad, is unchanging, is unchangeable ...

"Those who think this opens the door for moral laxity have obviously never been in love, for love is much more demanding than law." - (Desmond Tutu, "No Future Without Forgiveness," p.85)

The knowledge of that love and grace of God, I find, allows us to be free from self-absorbed guilt or reactive judgment as we embrace the demands of that love to be to be completely honest with ourselves and with others about the reality of sin in our individual lives and our collective lives. This way we can approach repentance and reconciliation in a forthright, upright way, by the light of the love of God.

So, let that be our foundation.

The second step is about the reality of that sin.

It may seem old fashioned to talk about sin, it's a word that's too often used in a damaging way. Remember: Grace has taken the guilt out of it, and we do all bear the image of God in ourselves. I think our natures incline us to *both* the good and the bad. But as I've lived, I've found that the Christian idea of sin at its best is good and wise and helpful. We need to be really honest about those forces in humanity and in each of us that are morally corrupting.

But the big problem with sin is that it easily amplifies with power. Power really can corrupt

There have been psychological studies that show that even just with a pretend sense of power over someone else, people are more inclined to dismiss other people's needs, to think we're better than other people, hold ourselves to double standards, and be more inclined to be cruel.

And when we're with a group it can get even worse, especially if we have power. We are very clever at giving each other excuses and denying responsibility for the bad things we do, of being blinded by our own sense of righteousness and entitlement.

"A bad apple spoils the bunch" is folk wisdom about how group psychology can allow sin to spread. A group of regular people can do far more harm than an evil individual.

This is why the prophets in the Bible, and Jesus, and his followers are concerned not *only* with the individuals' sin, repentance, reconciliation, and righteousness, but also with their nation's *collective* sin, repentance, reconciliation, and justice. That's why they all pay special attention the people in their society who do *not* have power, do not have social standing – how are they being treated? This is also why the prophets and Jesus also pay special attention to the people in their society who *do* have power and standing – how do they treat others? How are they using or abusing their power?

This brings us to the third step – grace, sin – and now, the need for democracy and accountability. Reinhold Niebuhr, the great public theologian, wrote, "[Hu]man[ity]'s capacity for justice makes democracy possible, but [hu]man[ity]'s inclination to injustice makes democracy necessary."

Because sin is an ingredient in humanity, societies do need some laws. That means we need people to make laws and we need people to enforce those laws.

But there is tremendous power in being able to make laws and being able to enforce them. That power can be used in good ways and it can be used in bad ways.

Because sin is an ingredient in humanity, and because sin can easily amplify with power, we can expect that the power to make laws and enforce laws is easily abused.

Democracies developed because people got fed up with, you know, sometimes you get a king who's just, sometimes you get a king who's cruel, sometimes you get a king who likes your tribe, sometimes you get a king who wants to rid the land of your people. And all the king's horses and all the king's men make that all happen.

Democracy is about making power accountable to the people, all the people. Democracy says there is enough goodness in human nature that we can work together to be sure the power to make laws and the power to enforce laws is used in a way that is just and fair for everyone.

But the sin part of human nature doesn't go away when we have some democratic structures. It's going to keep seeking out ways to abuse power. This is an ongoing struggle for real democracy.

Law enforcement is at a particular risk because it's empowered to use force to detain people, sometimes violent force, which are things that are illegal for the rest of us to do, for good reason. That's a lot of power.

Then add to that, police regularly go into dangerous and stressful and at times confusing situations. There are traumatic experiences. They're exposed to the worst of what people can do to each other.

Who among us - if we have the courage to step into such a position - who among us can guarantee that the worst of ourselves wouldn't break loose sometimes? And who among us can guarantee that our own racial prejudices wouldn't at times flash out?

So, when it comes to policing the question isn't "Are police officers good people or are they bad people?" Of course, it's like with any position of power and responsibility: there will be people who do it out of the highest integrity and dedication to public service, and personal discipline. And, there will be some people who are seeking out a power trip.

That's the reality for clergy. That's the reality for any position of responsibility.

But that's not the core question here.

The core question isn't even, are there police departments with good culture or police departments with corrupt culture? By the way, from what I know, it seems our Walla Walla Police Department has a relatively good culture. I'm speaking of course as a White clergyperson who owns property. A Mexican-American friend of mine here has had experiences that seem like racial profiling. But the point is that we can't really evaluate things without developing and exercising rigorous public civilian oversight.

The core question is, are we as a democratic society doing enough to hold the power of law enforcement accountable, to support its moral health, and to ensure that it's used everywhere in a responsible, fair and just way?

The answer is, No.

And it's our Black and Brown siblings who have been trying to get that across for a long time.

That leads to the last step in what I have to offer today.

The reason it's our Black and Brown siblings who have been sounding the alarm about the deadly lack of democratic accountability in law enforcement in our country, is because of that living legacy of America's original sin of racism. The institution of slavery helped to build this country and it, and Jim Crow and the multiple evolutions of racist policy have helped to shape this country and the severe exclusions from how and for whom its institutions work.

Black folks have had to fight and struggle to even have a chance to be at the table in the democratic workings of power in our country. For so long the law-making powers and law enforcement powers have not just excluded Black and Brown folks, but have been explicitly or implicitly about dominating them. This hasn't somehow magically gone away.

As Christians, we need not fear being honest about this living legacy of our country's original sin and the ways it pervades our lives. Because we are rooted in God's grace we can be upright and forthright in being honest about this sin, and sincerely seeking repentance and reconciliation, and struggling for the transformation of our democracy and society.



We will all benefit from this process. Just as we have all benefitted from the contributions of Black Americans to our culture, to our institutions, and indeed to our very understanding and expression of our Christian faith.

I began with a word about Grace from Desmond Tutu. Let me end with another:

"This is a moral universe, which means that, despite all the evidence that seems to be contrary, there is no way that evil and injustice and oppression and lies can have the last word. For us who are Christians, the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ is proof positive that love is stronger than hate, that life is stronger than death, that light is stronger than darkness, that laughter and joy, and compassion and gentleness and truth, all these are so much stronger than their ghastly counterparts." (Desmond Tutu, "No Future Without Forgiveness," p. 86)

For this I give God thanks.



**June 14, 2020**

**“Everyone We Meet Is Broken & Beloved Before God”**

## **OPENING PRAYER**

Holy! Holy! Holy!  
Holy! Holy! Holy!  
Wellspring of all being  
Source of our souls  
You are One, O God  
And in You we are whole.  
Amen

## **WELCOME**

We welcome you in peace.  
May you enter this place knowing God has made you good and worthy of love.  
May you feel safe to bring your light and your love and your messiness.  
Use them to bless our sacred gathering.  
May you in turn be blessed here in the presence of the Holy One our God.

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## **READING FROM SCRIPTURE      Luke 7:2-10**

A captain in the Roman army had a servant who was precious to him, and who was seriously ill – almost to the point of death. And, hearing about Jesus, he sent some Judean elders to him, with the request that he would come and save the servant’s life. When they found Jesus, they earnestly implored him to do so, “for he is devoted to our nation, and himself built our synagogue for us.”

So Jesus went with them. But when he was not far from the house, the captain sent some friends with the message:

“Do not trouble yourself, sir; for I am unworthy to receive you under my roof. That was why I did not even venture to come to you myself. But speak, and let my attendant be healed. For I myself am a person under the orders of others, with soldiers under me; and if I say to one of them ‘Go,’ he goes, and to another ‘Come,’ he comes, and to my slave, ‘Do this,’ he does it.”

Jesus was surprised to hear these words from him; and, turning to the crowd which was following him, he said: “I tell you, nowhere in Israel have I met with such faith as this!”

And, when the messengers returned to the house, they found the slave recovered.

## **SERMON** "Everyone We Meet Is Broken & Beloved Before God"

Healing stories are not tidy. Healing stories are often as uncomfortable as they are triumphant, as much about struggle as about peace.

The next few weeks we'll be looking into some of the healing stories in the Bible. What we'll see is how Jesus really steps into the messiness and complexity of the lives of the people he encounters, the people who come to him in need of healing.

Jesus witnesses the brokenness and beloved-ness of each person before God, the vulnerability and the strength of their hearts. They then come to see their brokenness and beloved-ness by the light of that love and power of God that Jesus embodies.

Jesus is in fact very clear in these stories that what heals them is this trust in God's love for them as broken and beloved children of God. It's almost a litany in the gospel of Mark – "Your faith has made you well."

That's Jesus has an eye for: the brokenness, the belovedness, and the faith of his fellow humans

The healing stories taken as a whole make it very clear just how indiscriminate the love is that Jesus embodies. The kinds of people who come to Jesus for healing through the course of the four gospels read like a catalogue of all the different classes and kinds of people walking around 1<sup>st</sup> Century Galilee and Judea. This actually can be scandalous, it was part of his spiritual & peaceful insurrection against the forces of domination and idolatry in his time. There doesn't seem to be a boundary that Jesus doesn't cross out of lovingkindness for people's brokenness and beloved-ness.

This is beautiful and inspiring, and it's challenging, and it's also, I find heartbreaking. Especially with all the pain and heartbreak these days, as I read through Jesus' healing stories, the stories of the people who seek out his love, it just opens my heart more to feel the entire landscape of human suffering – then and now.

Now remember, just because Jesus' love was indiscriminate, and it was so broad that he called us to love even our enemies, even those who persecute us, that didn't mean that he avoided having enemies. He was bold, and very clear that his ministry was to "bring good news to poor people, proclaim release to captives and restoration of sight to the blind, to set the oppressed free, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor" This call to justice and jubilee outraged a lot people.

The healing story for today is pretty extraordinary, I think- there's a lot going on here.

This is the story of a captain in the Roman army, an officer called a centurion, who came to Jesus to ask him to heal a young man, who, we are told, is the captain's beloved or precious servant. We'll talk more about what that may mean.

For now, let's talk about what it means in the first place for this Roman army captain to come in need to Jesus.

This is a big deal.

Jesus' people are under Roman occupation, right? The violence of that and the threat of violence is very real. That's part of what crucifixion represents. The Romans could be horrifically cruel.

During Jesus' time there was tremendous political tension among the Hebrew people because of the occupation. Just like happens throughout history with imperialism:

Some people ally with the more powerful occupiers, and find ways to benefit from that. King Herod in Jesus' time, and then his son. The high priests, the priests of the temple.

Some people openly rebel or secretly plot rebellion. This was the Zealots in Jesus' time.

And a lot of people just keep their heads down and cope the best they can.

And there's tons of internal strife and power contests among the occupied people that the occupiers play off to their advantage. That was definitely true in Jesus' time – complex politics, as always.

Jesus, it seems, did not fit neatly into any camp.

One of Jesus' disciples, Simon, we are told, is a Zealot. These are the radicals, right?, fighting to kick out the Romans. Another of Jesus' disciples, Matthew, used to be a tax collector. They're the collaborators, the ones extracting the taxes from their neighbors for the Romans. The Zealots hate the tax collectors. Now, Matthew quit being a tax collector and gave away all his money to follow Jesus. But one of the reasons why Jesus upset people so much is that he hung out with tax collectors, as well as other outcasts and sinners.

Those charges were trumped up, but Jesus was obviously up to something truly dangerous to the powers that be. But his insurrection on behalf of the upside-down Kin-dom of God was not of a violent kind. When the soldiers came to take Jesus he told his disciples to not take up the sword because the vicious cycles of violence are not of the kind of Kin-dom Jesus serves. There is something much deeper afoot.

The captain in the Roman army who comes to Jesus in need of healing seems to know that Jesus is up to something far beyond the fabricated walls of politics. He doesn't show up in a way that inspires fear or anger or resentment or servility, as you would expect when a centurion enters the scene. No, the captain approaches Jesus through intermediaries in a way that demonstrates his deep respect and reverence for Jesus and for God, for the God of the people whose land the centurion's people occupy.

The captain also demonstrates his deep care for this servant of his whose health he so strongly wishes to restore. "A servant who is precious to him, dear to him." One word that's used here is "doulos", which means "servant" or "slave." The other word is "*pais*," which can mean both those things but also boy or young man, and it has another connotation.

Centurions and enlisted soldiers were not allowed to marry until after their tours of duty. During those tours of duty, it was known for centurions to enter into a kind of sexual relationship that existed in the Greek and Roman world between an esteemed man, such as a centurion, and a young man of lower-class, servant or slave class. The young man was referred to as *pais*.

It's possible that this is what's going in this gospel story. There are biblical scholars that make a good argument for it – the young man is called "a precious *pais*." There are smart people who argue against it. Part of the challenge is that it's only been recently that classical scholars have dared to get a clearer picture of the full spectrum of sexuality in the ancient world.

Certainly, if the relationship here is sexual, we'd now say there are big power issues here - we couldn't say that this was consensual or ethical. The very practice of slavery and indentured servitude is rotten to its core. Slavery itself is problem that's *not* addressed in this story, which is a problem. This healing story has a lot that remains at loose ends.

But what we do know is that this centurion cared so deeply about this young servant that he crossed tense boundaries to ask for healing from a Jewish Rabbi whom a lot of people did not dare associate with. And we do know that when he dared to reveal to Jesus his brokenness, Jesus saw his beloved-ness as a fellow child of God, and he was moved by his faith in God. And Jesus helped him and healed the young man.

All of the tensions and complexities at play in this story don't map onto our contemporary world. I hope we can appreciate it on its own terms in the historical context.

But at play here is something that is universal: that all of us are broken and beloved before God, and in need of healing by love and power of God, which Jesus embodies.

Now, this story doesn't map onto our modern society, as I said. But it does make me imagine:

Suppose in Minneapolis, say, a police officer who is White and is gay asks to meet with a Black minister who is a leader in the struggle for the dignity and equality of Black lives before the law. Suppose this officer comes to this minister and says to him, "Reverend, can I talk with you? My beloved partner is sick and is dying. I'm scared. Will you pray for him?"

That minister would pray for him, wouldn't he? They would pray together. And Christ would be in the midst, healing power would pour fourth. This sort of thing happens a lot, by the way. Two people praying together in their shared brokenness and beloved-ness. It takes humility on the part of the person who has more political power. It takes sometimes a Christlike grace on the part of the person who has less political power – and it's something none of us have the right to demand of someone.

It doesn't cure any of the larger problems of power and injustice and racism and homophobia in America. This doesn't take the place of needed social and policy change to make this country a safer and less violent and fairer and more just place where everyone's lives and dignity are honored.

But it's how we can pray together and pray for each other, to keep God at the center, recognizing our brokenness and beloved-ness, the brokenness and beloved-ness of our neighbors, and the brokenness and beloved-ness of those who may seem to be our enemies, all broken and beloved before the light and the power and the love of God.

## **BENEDICTION**

May the Lord bless you and keep you.

May God's face shine upon you and be gracious unto you.

May God give you the grace never to sell yourself short;

grace to risk something big for something good;

grace to remember that the world is too dangerous for anything but truth and too small for anything but love.

So, may God take your minds and think through them;

may God take your lips and speak through them;

may God take your ears and hear through them;

may God take your hearts and set them on fire.

Amen

- William Sloane Coffin





**June 21st, 2020**

**“When Healing Means Learning You Weren’t Sick in the First Place”**

### **INVOCATION**

Holy Mother you have birthed us into life,  
Holy Father you have nurtured us along our way,  
In you we live and move and have our being.  
To you we bring our offering of praise and thanksgiving.  
We open ourselves to your presence in this time of worship.  
Fill us with resolve and purpose, to be your community  
and to expand our boundaries until all of creation is renewed  
and all people are welcomed and blessed.  
This we ask through the risen and ascended Christ  
who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit,  
one God, now and forever.  
Amen.

### **WELCOME**

We welcome you in peace.  
May you enter this place knowing God has made you  
good and worthy of love.  
May you feel safe to bring your light and your love and  
your messiness. Use them to bless our sacred gathering.  
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**READING FROM SCRIPTURE    Mark 2:1-12**

When Jesus returned to Capernaum after some days, it was reported that he was at home. So many gathered around that there was no longer room for them, not even in front of the door; and he was speaking the word to them.

Then some people came, bringing to him a paralyzed man, carried by four of them. And when they could not bring him to Jesus because of the crowd, they removed the roof above him; and after having dug through it, they let down the mat on which the paralytic lay.

When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, "Son, your sins are forgiven."

Now some of the scribes were sitting there, questioning in their hearts, "Why does this fellow speak in this way? It is blasphemy! Who can forgive sins but God alone?"

At once Jesus perceived in his spirit that they were discussing these questions among themselves; and he said to them, "Why do you raise such questions in your hearts? Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Stand up and take your mat and walk'? But so that you may know that the Son of Humanity has authority on earth to forgive sins"—he said to the paralytic— "I say to you, stand up, take your mat and go to your home."

And he stood up, and immediately took the mat and went out before all of them; so that they were all amazed and glorified God, saying, "We have never seen anything like this!"

**SERMON    "When Healing Means Coming to Know You Weren't Sick in the First Place"**

There are times when healing means waking up to the fact that you weren't sick in the first place.

Now, I'm not talking about literal sickness here.

I'm talking about the deeper more damaging kinds of "sickness" that are basically saying that somehow there's something fundamentally wrong with some kinds of people – that somehow there's something disordered, unworthy, shameful, unforgivable about some of the ways that people are created to be.

Now, this can be because of all too common and casual racism.

This can be because of all too common traumatic experiences, of any kind, especially early in life, that can instill in a young psyche the belief that somehow there's something fundamentally wrong with you that makes you unworthy of basic human dignity and safety, respect and care.

But, in particular today I want to name the spiritual damage that can be done to folks who discover that you've been created to seek and share love with someone who is of your same gender, or that you've been created with a sense of your gender that doesn't fit into the strict categories that our society says are normal; the spiritual damage that can be done through all the ways that someone can be barraged with messages that there is somehow something sick or malformed about who you've been created to be.

As a Pastor of an Open & Affirming church, I have been entrusted with the stories of so many LGBTQ Christians who have shared with me the ways the churches and religious leaders told them that there was something even unforgiveable about the sexual orientation or gender identity that God saw fit to imbue them with.

All these messages can lead to someone having deep pain in one's soul, a sense of dislocation from oneself, shame, confusion, as well as a general sense of fear, as well as frustration and anger. All of this can lead to actual sickness, and self-harm, self-medication, paralysis.

Healing, then, real healing, means waking up to the fact that you are not sick in the first place.

There are times when healing means discovering that there has been this script running in our heads telling us this nasty negative story about who we are and who we aren't; discovering that that this script is just a swarm of lies, a figment of a bigoted imagination that someone else has infected us with.

There are times when healing means discovering that we can get out from underneath that script, step outside of it, and discover who we actually are underneath the light of truth,

discover that you are wonderfully made,

Come home to yourself, to the goodness and worthiness of who it is your Creator has created you to be.

You are a beloved child of God,

an exquisite manifestation of the endlessly colorful creations springing from the Holy Source of All Being

You are a child of the true God, whose eternal creative power is far, far beyond the boundaries of petty human prejudices,

At your heart burns a soul that's a spark from the Eternal Spirit, the fierce and fabulous Love Supreme.

There are times when healing means waking up to the fact that you weren't sick in the first place. And helping others discover this too.

Aimee Stephens was one of the plaintiffs in the recent case before the Supreme Court that found that workers who are LGBTQ are indeed protected from discrimination under the Civil Rights Act.

Aimee was a trans woman who came out later in life. She had worked for many years at a funeral home, presenting as a man.

She had already come out and been accepted as a trans woman to her wife and her friends. But there was an agonizing struggle within her about the split life she led, due to a deep fear of being her true self in all aspects of her life.

This agony got so great that Aimee came to be poised on the brink of taking her own life.

She said, she felt like she couldn't go backwards, she couldn't go forwards.

<https://www.advocate.com/transgender/2019/10/01/aimee-stephens-fired-being-trans-decided-live-and-fight-back>

She discovered that fundamentally, at her core, she was valuable, and that the story that she was anything less was simply untrue. She realized she wasn't sick in the first place. This freed her from her paralysis. Thank God.

And so, she wrote a heartfelt and thoughtful letter to her coworkers and her bosses at the funeral home letting them know that she had to be fully and honestly herself as a woman.

The owners of the funeral home fired her, invoking "God's commandments."

But Aimee had become freed from the voice of that false god of judgment and fear that said that she was sick for being who she was.

She stood up for her dignity and her right to not be discriminated against. And thank God she did, because that knowledge of her own value and worth led her and those who joined in to help her fight against her unjust firing. Her case became key to the case before the Supreme Court that has now won protections for the value and dignity of countless LGBTQ folks for generations to come.

Sadly, Aimee did not live to see the day. Aimee died just last month of kidney disease that was not properly treated because she lost her health care when she was fired for being who it is God created her to be. Prejudice can lead to real illness.

These weeks at church we're learning from Jesus' healing stories. One of the amazing things that Jesus does sometimes in these healings, is forgive people. The healing is almost like an after effect of Jesus telling someone that their sins are forgiven.

As we heard in our story today from Mark where Jesus heals a man who was paralyzed, it's Jesus' emphasis on forgiveness that actually gets him in trouble with the religious authorities.

Because this isn't just day-to-day forgiveness that Jesus is doing, where you forgive someone for some offense they've done to you. In those days, and still often in these days, illnesses were seen as God's punishment for the ways people have sinned against God. Illness is the mark of a much deeper and more shameful kind of sin that somehow you must have committed against God.

For someone to presume to speak for God in granting forgiveness for that kind of sin, was blasphemy. But Jesus did just that.

He was a child of humanity and the Son of God, whose nearness to God led him to embody God's grace. And so, he has the power to deliver people from the paralysis of guilt and shame, and to help us know God and trust God in such ways that lead us to become who it is we are created to be, all children of the living God.

So, if you're gay or lesbian, bi, or trans or queer in anyway, and you need to hear this from someone ordained to preach the good news, because of healing that's needed from the damage too often done in the name of God:

You weren't sick in the first place. You were never guilty for being simply who it is God has created you to be. You are dearly Beloved of God.

Thanks be to God.



## BENEDICTION

Beloved in Christ, God has granted you strength and worth.  
Go with the courage of knowing that  
God's holy love and power makes you worthy  
To share the Good News with those who  
Hunger and thirst for all that is  
Good & True,  
Whole & Holy.  
In Jesus' name we pray.  
Amen.



**June 28th, 2020**

“The House of Grace: Healing for those Crowded Out, Healing for those Crowding Out”

## **OPENING PRAYER**

Inflame the light of our senses,  
Pour love into our hearts,  
The weakness of our bodies  
Strengthen with lasting power.  
Come, Holy Spirit,  
And send out a ray  
Of your heavenly light.  
O most blessed light,  
Fill the innermost hearts  
Of those who believe in you.  
Wash what is unclean  
Water what is arid  
Heal what is wounded  
Bend what is stiff  
Warm what is cold  
Guide what has gone astray.

From Veni Creator, 9<sup>th</sup> cent. hymn, author unknown.

## **WELCOME**

We welcome you in peace. May you enter this place knowing God has made you good and worthy of love. May you feel safe to bring your light and your love and your messiness. Use them to bless our sacred gathering. May you in turn be blessed here in the presence of the Holy One our God.

## **STATEMENT OF IDENTITY**

We at First Congregational Church are a congregation of diverse Christian believers empowered by love and guided by the Holy Spirit. It is our mission to enable personal Spiritual growth, collective outreach to the community and stewardship of God's creation. We are an open and affirming church. Because of who you are and where you are on life's journey, you are welcome here.

## **READING FROM SCRIPTURE     John 5:1-9**

There was a festival of the Jews, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. Now, in Jerusalem by the Sheep Gate there is a pool, called in Hebrew Bethesda, which means House of Grace, or House of Mercy. This pool has five porticoes, porches with columns.

In these porticoes lay many invalids— folks who were blind, lame, and paralyzed. This was because an angel went down at a certain time into the pool and stirred up the water. And then whoever stepped in first, after the stirring of the water, was made well of whatever disease they had.

One man was there who had been ill for thirty-eight years. When Jesus saw him lying there and knew that he had been there a long time, he said to him, “Do you want to be made well?”

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The sick man answered him, "Sir, I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up; and while I am making my way, someone else steps down ahead of me."

Jesus said to him, "Stand up, take your mat and walk."

At once the man was made well, and he took up his mat and began to walk.

## SERMON

### "The House of Grace: Healing for those Crowded Out, Healing for those Crowding Out"

The past few weeks, we've been exploring some of Jesus' healing stories and how they may speak to the needs for healing, real *soul* healing, we may have as individuals and as a society in our times.

For our healing for today I'm going to first invite us to really hear it in a prayerful way, and to even close your eyes and to see the story in your imagination and to even imagine yourselves within it. sit with it in a prayerful way

So what I'm going to do is read through the story again. And even, if you like you can pause this video and give yourself time to have a prayer experience with the story on your own terms, between you and God. If you like you can go back to the video of Allison reading the story. She does a beautiful job.

Then you can restart this video or you can just watch through, and I'll offer a few reflections of my own.

So I invite to be a prayerful way and use your sacred imagination to conjure up this story.

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his pool has five porticoes - porches with columns.

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Jesus said to him, "Stand up, take your mat and walk."

At once the man was made well, and he took up his mat and began to walk.

If you wish to pause this video and take this time in a prayerful way, I invite you to do so.

[pause]

Amen.

Welcome back, if you left in the first place.

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So, how many of you when you hear and sit with this story found yourselves identifying with the person in need of healing that Jesus comes to?

What would that need for healing be for you? In what way do you need to be washed in those healing waters in the House of Grace?

What does that need do in you? How are you seeking it?

And what is it like to then get crowded out from the House of Grace? Do you know what that's like, to get pushed out from accessing that healing, or that grace that you need?

How have you experienced that?

And how have people who are not you or not like you experienced that? Who would you expect to identify with this man?

Are there people in our world, in our community, in our church, who are trying to say that they have been getting crowded out from the House of Grace? The House of Mercy? Why is that?

And then:

How many of you could identify with what it's like to be one of the people who are seeking and needing healing who then manage to crowd this guy out?

This may take some more honesty: What is it like to be the one who manages to win that struggle or to just be lucky enough to get what it is you need to be well?

And then do we know what it's like to get what we need and to walk away from it, leaving the whole sordid mess of those other poor souls who are still struggling for their chance?

How are we doing that?

How much are we *even aware* of the ways we do that?

Are the ways we then feel ourselves to be somehow more deserving to be in the House of Grace?

Alright.

Next:

What is it like to be the person who this man needed or thought he needed – before Jesus came along – the person who could have been the one to help him get to those healing waters?

In what ways do we know what that's like, to help someone who has been crowded out from the House of Grace, to help them finally get in? Are there ways we're trying to do that?

And in what ways have we passed someone by and left them to fend for themselves?

Now, we know that Jesus does not pass this guy by.

But notice what also Jesus does not do. Jesus does *not* come, pick him up, and rush him to the front of the line. Right?

He bypasses the whole set-up altogether, the whole crowded situation around a House of Grace that only some people can get to some of the time.

Jesus just meets this guy where he is and asks, "Do you want to be made well?"

And then Jesus heals him, right then and there.

What does this say about the true nature of Grace?

What does this say about the true nature of the House of Grace and its healing waters?

What does this say about the nature of healing, the restoration we most deeply need?



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What is it like to say "Yes" to this kind of Grace?

What is it like to say "Yes" when you are the person always getting crowded out?

What is it like to say "Yes" when you are the person doing the crowding out?

What is like to say "Yes" when you are the person trying to help someone else get their fair chance?

What is it like to say "Yes" to the Grace and Mercy that Jesus has revealed?

Now, there are many avenues of interpretation for this story. And I'd love to hear what all these questions and reflections stir up in you.

But I will mention one

As a local church we are now twenty years into becoming Open & Affirming of the diversity of sexual orientations and gender identities our Creator has seen fit to endow creation.

All these questions I have raised with this healing story, are ongoing questions for us and challenges and learnings and un-learnings that we have as we venture further into our Open & Affirming Christian faith.

What is the healing we or others need from the ways they have been excluded from the House of Grace, because of their sexual orientation or gender identity?

What is the healing we or others need from the ways we have been doing the excluding?

And how to tend to a House of Grace knowing that the Grace we know through Christ is beyond the bounds of any roof or door or window we may want to put over it?

It is for this Grace and for its ongoing challenge, I give thanks to God.

## **OUR CHURCH'S COVENANT OF OPENNESS AND AFFIRMATION**

We at first congregational church are a diverse group of people who have known the joy of having been accepted and affirmed by God and one another.

We are a community enriched by persons of different Ages, Classes, Levels of Education, Races, Ability, and

Of different Sexual Orientations and Gender Identities.

As a church community we celebrate and find strength in that diversity and view it as a way to understand the inclusiveness of God's love

We welcome All persons to participate fully in every aspect of church life.

We, the members of First Congregational United Church of Christ of Walla Walla, Washington declare ourselves to be an

Open & Affirming Church!

## BENEDICTION

As you go from the sacred time, may you go knowing that in God's eyes  
You are worthy of love,  
You are deserving of forgiveness  
You are fearfully and wonderfully made  
You are empowered, useful, strong, and essential  
As able as you need to be for God's plan for you.  
And as you go out to the world may you have the grace to see that everyone you encounter in  
that same way, as God sees them.

Thanks be to God

Amen

(Adapted from a prayer by Rev. Julia Seymour)

