September 3, 2023

**Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost**

Romans 12:9-21

Spirit-Led Living

*A Labor Day litany in the wake of pandemic, based on Romans 12:9-21*

Holy God,

On this Labor Day, we give you thanks. We thank You, for those whose work brings them to the front lines of caring and curing. We thank you for doctors and hospital janitors, nurses and nursing assistants, office workers who keep hospitals running smoothly, scientists who continually quest for vaccines and cures that will keep us safe.

On this Labor Day, we recall Paul’s urging in the letter to Romans, to “Love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor.” May we do so now.

On this Labor Day, we mourn. We weep with those who have lost loved ones who served on the pandemic’s front lines. We recall other areas where safety is compromised and lives are lost, and we vow to continue to make work a place where no one needs fear for their health or safety.

On this Labor Day, we recall Paul’s urging in the letter to Romans, to “Love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor.” May we do so now.

On this Labor Day, we remember. We remember those who have labored long and given much so that all workers may be safe and fairly compensated. We ask to be reminded that our faith’s call to simplicity does not mean that working families should have to sacrifice basic needs like food, housing, and medical care. We pray for the wisdom and the courage needed to create your reign on earth, where all experience plenty, ease, and abundance.

On this Labor Day, we recall Paul’s urging in the letter to Romans, to “Love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor.” May we do so now.

On this Labor Day, we pray that the love, affection, and honor that Paul impressed upon his friends may also fill our hearts and overflow into all places we live and work. In your holy name we pray, Amen.

September 10, 2023

**Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost**

Exodus 12:1-14

Remember, Restore, Renew

*Faith Formation Sunday*

God’s people have been through so much. After generations of slavery, they too have undergone the plagues that tormented all of Egypt. Now, God’s people are given an opportunity to mark themselves as God’s own ones by placing a sign, a mark on the door. The mark they place means not only that they belong to God. It also means that they are prepared to move on, out of the place they and their ancestors have lived for so long. By placing the mark on the door, they indicate that they are ready to move forward into freedom, and a new relationship with God.

Doorways are not a place to linger. On the threshold, the invitation is to pass from one space to another. On this Faith Formation Sunday, what mark are you placing on the doorways of your heart and mind? What sign are you giving to God that you are ready to move forward into a new life?

Faith Formation, the willingness to be educated and grow into our faith, is often focused on children. Many adults seem to believe that they already know everything they need to know in order to live out their faith. But the invitation of Faith Formation Sunday is for everyone who is willing to make a step forward and out, and a step into the freedom and new life which comes from knowing and following God.

No matter who you are, or where you are on life’s journey, Faith Formation is a door available for you to walk through. Are you a person who never learned the stories of the Bible and your ancestors of faith, or never wrestled with how you might bring the practices of our faith into your daily lives? Or, are you someone who has many years of Sunday School under your belt?

If you are either of those, or somewhere in between, listen to God’s call and invitation. Today, put a mark on the door of your heart, a sign to God that you are ready. And then, open the door and step through. Whether teaching a class or taking one, whether studying with a couple of companions or a couple dozen, take the opportunity of this day to step out, into the adventure of learning, growth, and freedom in God that awaits.

September 17, 2023

**Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost**

Exodus 14:19-31

Road to Freedom

*Just Peace Sunday*

Even if you have not spent much time in church or in Bible study, the story of the crossing of the Red Sea is probably a little familiar. Take a look at the story with new eyes today, reading it through a lens that is new to you. What new message or insight do you get from this story by reading it in this new way?

A **literary** reading considers the story from the point of view of literature. How does the plot arc and flow keep you, as the reader or listener, engaged? What are some of the literary devices, such as use of language? Who are the characters and how are they developed? What is your point of view as a reader or listener? How does the story change if you consider it from another point of view?

A **historical** reading considers the story from the point of view of its place in history. Take into account the place and time that the story takes place. What is the culture of God’s people and of Pharaoh's people at the time? What are other forces at work in these societies?

Another way to read a Bible story is as a story of **God’s work in the world**. In reading this way, pay attention to where God is and what God is doing. What is God like in this story and how does this compare to God’s presence in other stories? How does God look and sound? In what ways does God circumvent expected or natural law in order to accomplish Divine goals?

You may also want to read a scripture story **devotionally**, as a way to intentionally deepen your walk with God. In reading this way, read the story slowly three times. The first time, pay attention to any words or phrases that jump out at you and make note of them. The second time, read while asking God to show you God’s purpose in the world. The third time, read asking God to reveal something that you need for your own particular faith walk.

Yet another way to read the Bible, and perhaps a particularly helpful one on this Just Peace Sunday (https://www.ucc.org/just-peace/*)*, is through a **liberation theology** lens. Liberation theology is based on the fundamental value that God’s preference is always for the marginalized and oppressed. As you read this way, look for clues that God is working for freedom for the enslaved, and disruption of systems of oppression.

September 24, 2023

**Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost**

Exodus 16:2-15

Tensions in the Wilderness

*American Indian Ministry Sunday*

*United Samoan Ministries Stewardship Sunday*

*Today, receive a letter of wisdom and compassion from The Alliance of Associate Conference Ministers of the United Church of Christ and The Council of Conference Ministers of the United Church of Christ. The letter, written earlier this year and excerpted here, is an invitation and a challenge to churches to care for their pastors in a radical way. How can your setting respond to these powerful words?*

“…We are aware that there is a particular burden, often unseen by many, that you who serve in authorized ministry carry because of the inherently relational nature of ministry. We see you, and we hear your weariness and often discouragement. We also love you and hold you in our prayers.

As such we are aware that there is a need to tend to the particular needs of you who serve as our authorized ministers so that your spirits may be renewed and so that the long-term health of God’s mission manifest in the many expressions of the church may be strengthened. The collective care of all our Conferences and indeed the church in every setting compels us to offer a word of encouragement regarding the need for care in ways that give space for rest and rejuvenation; clarity and the renewal of one’s calling.

While we recognize that resources vary widely throughout the settings of our shared life, there are several suggestions we would offer for consideration by local congregations and other settings of ministry.

* First, we urge you to intentionally pray for your leaders and the renewal they may need.
* Second, we encourage you to give permission and blessing for two consecutive weeks away for renewal leave, not counted as vacation time. This time alone will not be enough to process all that has happened or continues to happen in the life of the church, but it will offer space for a new ground to be cultivated to engage in ongoing practices of self-care, necessary for sustained and life-giving ministry.
* Third, we encourage you to trust that your setting of ministry will not be diminished by this time away but rather strengthened by it.

…Grief and loss are inherent in this season. Some of us even feel shame, which is a burden that we need not carry. We are hopeful that this time away helps you reconnect deeply with your call and with God, who loves you.”

October 1, 2023

**Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost**

Exodus 17:1-7

God’s Sustaining Presence

*Neighbors in Need Offering*

*World Communion Sunday*

*…I would like to beg you dear Sir, as well as I can, to have patience with everything unresolved in your heart and to try to love the questions themselves as if they were locked rooms or books written in a very foreign language. Don’t search for the answers, which could not be given to you now, because you would not be able to live them. And the point is to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps then, someday far in the future, you will gradually, without even noticing it, live your way into the answer.*

*Rainer Maria Rilke, 1903, in, “Letters to a Young Poet”.*

Today’s Bible story, as God’s people wander in the wilderness and begin to be disgruntled and fractious, is packed full of questions.

Moses first asks, “Why do you quarrel with me?” and immediately after, “Why do you test the Lord?”

The people chorus back with a question of their own, asking, “Why did you bring us out of Egypt to kill us and our livestock and our children with thirst?”

Finally, Moses, fearful he will be killed, pleads to God, “What shall I do with the people?”

In the end, the area where they are wandering brings up so many questions that they decide to name the place after the question they all keep asking, “Is the Lord among us or not?”

A century and a couple of decades ago, the poet Rilke urged his young correspondent to “live the questions.” Moses and his people certainly lived the questions in this story. But are they the kind of questions that deepen relationships or cause more alienation?

Are we willing to ask questions of God, of our leaders, and of each other that draw us into better conversations? And what would it mean to consider the questions on our minds, rather than just ask them? What would it mean to sit with the questions over time? How might the questions deepen and enrich our faith? What questions strengthen and empower our faith communities? Which questions encourage and support community leaders? Which questions are worth living? Can we begin asking those questions, here and now?

October 8, 2023

**Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost**

Exodus 20:1-4, 7-9, 12-20

Wisdom for the Way

*Access Sunday and Disabilities Awareness Week*

On this Access Sunday and Disabilities Awareness Week, we pause for a moment to give thanks for the work of the United Church of Christ Disabilities Ministry (UCCDM). According to their website, “The UCCDM envisions a world in which all people are included in the fullness of life because they are created in the image of God. The mission of UCCDM is to support all settings of the United Church of Christ (UCC) including but not limited to Local Congregations, Associations, Conferences, camps, Historically Underrepresented Groups (HUGs), and national settings, as they seek to recognize and provide access to people with disabilities in all aspects of the church’s life and ministry.

This includes, but is not limited to, affirming and claiming as its own the commitments of the UCC to be a multiracial, multicultural, Open and Affirming, Just Peace, and Accessible to All ministry, recognizing that people with disabilities have a multitude of other identities, and that all justice movements are interconnected; encouraging all settings of the wider church to be physically, socially, and virtually accessible to and welcoming of people with disabilities; encouraging and providing guidance to UCC settings as they work to become Accessible to All (hereafter A2A), and supporting them as they sustain their commitment; participating in denominational and ecumenical conversations related to disabilities and working with the UCC national setting and community partners to promote disability justice through an intersectional framework”.

For many churches, one of the greatest barriers to full participation is their buildings. Many church buildings, erected before a time of greater understanding, are not built to be fully inclusive. With generations of time, attention, and money given to maintain church buildings, it can be hard to think of changing them, even if it means being more inclusive.

And yet, Exodus 20:4 says it clearly. You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. That includes the buildings in which we work and worship.

Look around you now. Has this building become an idol, and object to appease and be worshiped rather than a sanctuary of welcome? How can your community join the UCCDM movement of full inclusivity?

October 15, 2023

**Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost**

Philippians 4:1-9

Praiseworthy Living

*Children’s Sabbath*

*Laity Sunday*

Today is Laity Sunday, the day we celebrate the many astounding gifts of people who are not authorized or ordained ministers, and yet serve the church in manifold ways. On this day, we remember that the priesthood of all believers means that every person has a vital part to play in the life of local congregations.

Laity Sunday is a day of joy, a day to remember that when we focus on standing with one another, even as we maintain a variety of perspectives or behaviors, we are living God’s dream for us. Laity Sunday is a day to remember the gladness of giving into the spaciousness of God’s call and purpose for all people. Laity Sunday is a day to focus on, as the letter writer exhorts in the epistle to the Philippians, “whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise.”

Laity Sunday is a day to remember that this journey can be full of wonder and bursting with possibility. In short, Laity Sunday is a perfect day to play together. If you haven’t already, it’s a good day to check out *“Grow Your Church: A Board Game for Engaging the Marks of Faithful and Vital Local Congregations”.*

This game is designed to get people talking about church vitality through the Marks of Faithful and Vital Local Churches. It will help deepen relationships with each other and with the congregation’s covenantal partners while laughing, thinking creatively and having critical conversations.

This game is for the decision makers and strategic thinkers. It’s for the board room and the dining room table. It’s for the flower arranging committee and the deacons. This game is for people who love their church and want to experience it grow in vitality and faithfulness. Roll the dice and move about a garden path with your church friends!

You can learn more about the “*Grow Your Church: A Board Game for Engaging the Marks of Faithful and Vital Local Congregations”*, and order one for your own congregation at uccresources.org.

October 22, 2023

**Twenty-First Sunday after Pentecost**

1 Thessalonians 1:1-10

Living Messages

In the 1920’s when minister’s wife Lesbia Scott’s three children were young, she enjoyed writing simple hymns for them about everyday things. “Make us a hymn about a picnic,” they would ask. Or “write a hymn about a foggy day.” She collected the songs she wrote for her children in a long-out-of-print collection.

The only one that remains in regular circulation was not a favorite of hers, or her children’s, but it continues to capture the imagination of singers generations later. *I Sing A Song of the Saints of God* (\*#295 in *The New Century Hymnal*) canonizes the gospel writer Luke, queen Margaret of Scotland, Joan of Arc, John Donne and Ignatius of Antioch - not by name but by characteristics. Today will you sing this song in your church? Which image makes you smile? Which image makes you wonder? Which image makes you understand something about God’s people you didn't before?

I sing a song of the saints of God,
Faithful their whole lives through
Who bravely labored, lived, and died
for the God they loved and knew.
And one was a doctor, and one was a queen,
And another a shepherd in pastures green:
they were saints of God, if you know what I mean.
God, help me to be one too.

They loved their God and they lived that love,
It was loving that made them strong;
They did what was right for Jesus’ sake,
Lived justly their whole lives long.
And one was a prophet, and one was a priest,
and another was slain by a fierce wild beast:
and there’s no earthly reason, none in the least,

They lived not only in ages past;

there are hundreds of thousands still;

the world is filled with the living saints

Who choose to do God’s will.

You can meet them in school, on the road, or at sea,

in church, in a train, in a shop, or at tea;

for the saints are folk like you and me,

and I mean to be one too.

*\*The New Century Hymnal.* Cleveland, Ohio. The Pilgrim Press; United Church of Christ. © 1995 The Pilgrim Press. Hymn #295 Words, Lesbia Scott. Music, John H. Hopkins.

October 29, 2023

**Twenty-Second Sunday after Pentecost**

Matthew 22:34-46

The Compassionate Life

*UCC Higher Education Sunday*

People ask Jesus questions for a variety of reason. Sometimes they want to seek answers or ideas. They want to know more about themselves and their place in Christ’s kin-dom. They want to hear Jesus’ teachings and stories. And sometimes, they just want to trick Jesus, or trip him up. They want to ask him a question with no answer.

When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, and one of them, an expert in the law, asked him a question to test him. “Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?” He said to him, “ ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets.”

After this exchange, Jesus asks a question that those gathered cannot answer, about the nature of humanity and divinity. Question and answer exchanges are part of living and loving. On this Higher Education Sunday, we honor those institutions connected with the United Church of Christ where questions are welcome not as a barrier to faith, but as a sign of it.

There are 48 educational institutions related to the United Church of Christ, including academies, colleges, universities, and seminaries. They span the United States. Each is independent, self-governing, and fully accredited.

Each institution expresses partnership with the church. Closely related schools participate as full members of the UCC Council for Higher Education. Others are historically related, which means they recognize a past relationship with the church but are not full members of the Council.

These institutions provide opportunities to explore moral values, the importance of social responsibility, an ethic of service, and the ability to think critically. Many have campus ministries that are ecumenical and interfaith. Each embodies the UCC ethos where God is Still Speaking (https://www.ucc.org/about/higher-education/).

November 5, 2023

**Twenty-Third Sunday after Pentecost**

Matthew 23:1-12

Partners in Service

Long before he was Pope, a priest called Francis developed a prayer he called the five-finger prayer. On this All Saints Day, it’s a good way to call to mind those saints in our lives and in the world who have led the way in the faith.

Hold your hands palm down in front of you, and look at your fingers one by one, beginning with your thumb, which is the closest to your heart.

Thumb: Pray for those closest to you. Pray for those in your chosen family, or for your close friends.

Pointer finger: Pray for those saints who have pointed you in the right direction. Pray for older relatives, wise teachers, good employers, and thoughtful mentors.

Middle finger: This finger stands tall. Pray for the saints in leadership in your community and the world. Pray for those in business, government, and church leadership whose decisions affect so many.

Ring finger: This finger is the weakest of all the fingers. Pray for those on the margins, pray for the oppressed or the downtrodden. Pray for the ill and the dying. Pray for the addicted and the imprisoned.

Pinky finger: This finger is the smallest. This is where you put your prayers for yourself.

In today’s scripture story, Jesus teaches the crowds and disciples about servant leadership. He showed them that when we are followers of Christ, our words and actions need to be consistent. As we pray this prayer, we can get clearer about who are the ordinary, everyday saints in our lives and the world. We can better understand who those are who walk their walk and talk their talk, those saints who have something to teach us here and now.

November 12, 2023

**Twenty-Fourth Sunday after Pentecost**

Matthew 25:1-13

Tending God’s Light

*Stewardship Sunday*

Today’s story reminds us that we all carry the light of Christ within us, and it is our joy as well as our responsibility as followers of Christ to tend to that light so that it can shine brightly in service of God and the world.

As this year’s stewardship materials remind us, because of YOU and the light you shine in the world, our church changes lives. The materials claim, “It is a statement both bold and simple. It boldly expresses the truth about the ultimate nature and the purpose of the church: to engage in acts of transformation. It boldly asserts that we see our mission as one that gives assurance to every individual that their life matters, not because we say so, but because the gospel says so.

…We can be bold because we know it’s true. Our own life stories bear witness that being a part of the beloved community in some way has either made us different or causes us to fervently believe that it will. It gives us hope, reminds us of our value, calls us to discover and claim our purpose, clarifies the moral Right and Wrong, motivates us to be a part of something bigger than ourselves all for the sake of change! Change that can more closely align us and our world with the values of the Realm of God. Our church matters because of you.

Our theme, Because of YOU, our church changes lives, is also simple. It recognizes that each of us, by our gifts and the decisions we make to employ them, power this sacred work. Our resources make ministry happen. The arithmetic is not complex. Our choice to grow in our generosity to the church increases the impact of the difference it makes.

By choosing to give even a little bit more, we will expand our shared quest to change lives - even our own. Be bold! Take a step forward in your generosity. It’s simple! The choice is yours!”

God has given you a light to tend. How will you tend that light today and into the year to come? The choice to let your light shine is as simple as it is bold. Let it shine!

November 19, 2023

**Twenty-Fifth Sunday after Pentecost**

Matthew 25:14-30

Extravagant Opportunity

*Thanksgiving Sunday*

What if Jesus were telling this story now? Might it sound a little like this?

So, the reign of God is like a businesswoman, preparing to leave for the airport on a business trip, who called three of her employees into the conference office. The employees sat somewhat nervously around the conference table, not sure what to expect. The businesswoman arrived in a hurry and took her customary place at the head of the table. Only then did they notice the large box that sat in front of her on the table.

Then, one by one, she pulled three items out of the box. To the first employee, she gave a small but powerful video camera. That employee immediately left the conference room and began conducting interviews with her coworkers, asking them what had brought them to work at that company. She was amazed about what she learned about people she worked with every day. This employee uploaded the videos onto social media and a couple of them even went viral.

To the second employee, the boss gave a compact typewriter in a carrying case. The next day, during lunch, he offered to type a poem about any subject his coworkers might choose. One by one, his coworkers told him stories about the people they loved, the animals that made them laugh, the mountains that inspired them. And this second employee wrote poems for them all. They shared the poems with each other, delighted to get to know each other in this new way.

To the third employee, the businesswoman gave a pencil. But the third employee didn’t know what to do. She stayed in her office alone many nights, just looking at that pencil and wondering what the boss could have meant by giving her such a small and worthless gift.

When the boss came back, she praised the social media campaign of the first employee and thanked the second employee for the increase in morale and sense of comradeship in the office. But with the third employee, who, with a sheepish expression, tried to give her back the pencil, the boss was visibly disappointed. “There are so many ways you could have used this tool, but you chose to do nothing. This is a place for people to take risks and express their creativity, but you have twiddled your thumbs. Next time, the gift will go to someone else altogether.”

November 26, 2023

**Reign of Christ**

Matthew 25:31-46

Reigning Compassion

*United Black Christians Anniversary*

Today we celebrate the Anniversary of the United Black Christians (UBC) group of the United Church of Christ. From the ucc.org website: United Black Christians represents lay and clergy persons who faithfully minister in more than 278 predominately African American congregations of the United Church of Christ and those African American members in congregations that are not predominantly African American.

UBC seeks to preserve our tradition as a people of faith and hope. UBC recognizes that it is the Black Church that has meant survival for African Americans on these shores.

UBC affirms that it is the Black Church that will assure our continued growth, development, endurance and ultimate liberation.

UBC affirms that each of us has gifts to offer and is entitled to the full rights and privileges of the United Church of Christ.

United Black Christians (UBC) is an officially recognized special interest group of the United Church of Christ (UCC), providing voice and vision for more than 70,000 African Americans.

United Black Christians seeks to:

Provide voice for the African American members of the United Church of Christ
To strengthen Black churches in the UCC
To train and nurture leaders of our churches for Gospel inspired service to the Black community
To provide relevant ministry for our youth and young adults
To empower the laity for present day ministry
To create ecumenical and worldwide partnership for service and evangelism
To be active advocates for liberation and racial justice at home and abroad
To provide spiritual nurture for our members
To enhance clergy-lay ministry partnership
To provide support to African American Seminarians

You can learn more about United Black Christians at their website:

https://www.ucc.org/domestic-policy/ourfaithourvote\_about/about-us\_united-black-christians/