June 4, 2023

**Trinity Sunday**

Genesis 1:1-2:4a

This Is Good

Today’s scripture reading begins with the words, “In the beginning when God created...” Following each act of creation, God blesses and calls “good” what God has made. One amazing and joyful aspect of our faith is that our story begins with the creativity of God. With creativity comes change. The creativity of the Holy One did not end with the first act of creation, the creativity continued and continues today.

Once a year, we pull the word *triune* out of the cupboard, dust it off and remember that our God is both three and one. On Holy Trinity Sunday we remember that God is both one and three. God is One and also in relationship with God’s very self.

According to the United Church of Christ website, in the UCC, **We believe in the triune God: Creator, resurrected Christ, the sole Head of the church, and the Holy Spirit, who guides and brings about the creative and redemptive work of God in the world.** On this day, we remember how those three parts work together in harmony, unity, and joy to be continually creating, redeeming, and guiding the world.

This week, as you go about your daily life, notice the triune (that dusty old and still shiny new word) Divine One, and give thanks. You might try this prayer at the beginning or end of each day.

Holy One, Blessed Three - I’m grateful for all that you have created in my life, in my church community and in the world. Today, I’m especially grateful for the creation of \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_. I’m grateful for the salvation that comes in your name, for your willingness to save us all from that which burdens us. Today, I’m especially grateful to be saved from \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_. I’m grateful, too, for all the ways you nurture and guide me. Today, I’m especially grateful to be guided in the direction of \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_.

After you speak, listen. Do you hear the blessing? Do you hear how God has called all that is created “good?” Ask yourself how the three parts of the trinity speak to you and each other.

June 11, 2023

**Second Sunday after Pentecost**

Genesis 12:1-9

The Call of Abram

In today’s story, God calls Abram and his family away from the place they are living, and into a new home that is being prepared for them. In this story, God promises to be with Abram and his family for always, not just in this generation but the next and the next and the next. There are many reasons that a family might be called to leave the home somewhere on the globe, for the promise of a new one - war, famine, climate change, economic opportunity, religious freedom, or to freely love, express their gender and thrive in any number of ways. When a family is called in this way, God’s promise of accompaniment might meet them in the form of a United Church of Christ congregation or other entity.

In the UCC, “We have a long history of providing and creating robust structures of welcome for the resettlement of refugees and the protection of asylees within the United States, while advocating for and responding to the needs of those displaced globally.”\*

Are you or your congregation feeling called to be the face and hands of God for a resettling family or individual? If so, there are a number of grants available that can help you help God fulfill the promise of presence made to Abram long ago and to many others in this time.

Search the web to find more information about UCC Global H.O.P.E. Refugee & Migration Ministries Grants. Some of them include:

* Migrant Empowerment Match Grant: Career development funding for individual migrants across a range of visa statuses.
* Migrant Community Program Seed Grant: For churches creating community enrichment programs for migrants.
* Refugee Resettlement Booster Grant: Funding for churches to resettle a single or multiple families through a local refugee resettlement office, the U.S. Sponsor Circle Program or the Church World Service Remote Resettlement Program.
* Refugee and Migration Solidarity Grant: For UCC churches and conferences to meet emergency mass care needs.
* Asylum Accompaniment Booster Grant: Funding for churches hosting or resourcing asylum seekers.
* Ukrainian Sponsorship Seed Grant: Awards for churches to sponsor Ukrainian nationals.

\*https://www.ucc.org/what-we-do/wider-church-ministries/global-hope/refugee-and-migration-ministries/#anchor1

June 18, 2023

**Third Sunday after Pentecost**

Genesis 18:1-15, (21:1-7)

Sarah Laughed

*Father’s Day*

It is not an official church holiday, but many churches today will celebrate Father’s Day. In today’s scripture story, Sarah is surprised into laughter to find out that she will be a parent. On this Father’s Day, recognizing that family is sometimes a source of pain and rejection as well as a haven of joy and acceptance, we give thanks for the many kinds of families that God has blessed. As you say each line of this prayer, silently or aloud, give yourself plenty of time for reflection.

How are these thanksgivings true for you?

How have they or have they not been realized?

What kind of family has God called you into? Consider this question as broadly as possible.

Dear God,

We thank you for our birth family, the family we are linked to by blood. Some of us are very close to our birth family. Perhaps this family is always on our hearts, or even sitting together this very day in this very place. Some of us are far, far away from our birth family, separated by distance or misunderstanding or time or even violence. Whatever our proximity, today we remember that it is our blood family that brought us forth, and we give thanks that we are here.

We thank you for our faith family, for the generations that stretch back further than we can see, even when we stand on tiptoe, peering into the past. We thank you especially for our parents Abraham and Sarah. We thank you that their curiosity, their faith in You, their willingness to follow Your call and their capacity for joy in moments of surprise.

We thank you for the families we have chosen. Those families we have made through law and covenant, families of lovers and friends, families of children and companions. And at the same time, we thank you for the families who have chosen us, drawn us into circles of sweet understanding and easy companionship, taught us to love and to live.

We give thanks for all the families that bring us to laughter, and all the families that we have called home.

In Your holy name we pray, Amen.

June 25, 2023

**Fourth Sunday after Pentecost**

Matthew 10:24-39

Daring Discipleship

*Open and Affirming Sunday*

*[Jesus said:] What I say to you in the dark, tell in the light; and what you hear whispered, proclaim from the housetops.*

On this Open and Affirming Sunday, you are invited to take a moment to give thanks in your prayers for the life and ministry of the Rev. Anne Holmes. In April 1982, the Rev. Anne Holmes was ordained at her home church, Emmaus UCC in Vienna, Virginia. Rev. Holmes was the first open lesbian to be ordained in the United Church of Christ.

At the time, forty-one years ago, her ordination made national news. *The Washington Post* wrote a long story\* about Rev. Holmes, who was ordained into a chaplaincy role. The paper reported,

“In the statement of the spiritual journey that brought her to seek ordination -- a personal and theological biography required of all candidates -- Holmes dealt forthrightly with the homosexuality issue: How she had become aware of her sexual orientation as a college student in Tennessee, her struggles with self-hatred, how she rebelled against the advice to keep her lesbian orientation a secret because that would contradict ‘the openness with which we are called to live our lives’, she said.”

The article ends with Rev. Holmes musing that although she would like to serve a church, she did not think it would be possible for her as an out lesbian. The United Church of Christ has come a long way in the past four decades. It no longer makes the news when a gay or lesbian person is ordained. That is why today, on this Open and Affirming Sunday, we give thanks for Rev. Holmes and her pioneering courage and faith. As Jesus said in today’s scripture, what was once whispered in secret will in these days be made public and proud. Thanks be to God!

To learn more about the pioneers of the Open and Affirming movement, visit: https://openandaffirming.org/about/history/.

\*Hyer, Marjorie. “United Church of Christ Will Ordain a Lesbian to Ministry on Sunday.” *The Washington Post*, WP Company, 24 Apr. 1982, https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/local/1982/04/24/united-church-of-christ-will-ordain-a-lesbian-to-ministry-on-sunday/df39bcc0-4032-4026-89ee-19042bc27280/.

July 2, 2023
**Fifth Sunday after Pentecost**
Matthew 10:40-42
Holy Welcome

*[Jesus said:] "Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me.”*

These are the very last words in the stirring and challenging set of instructions that Jesus gives to the disciples before he sends them forth to heal and to drive out evil. Their task is daunting, to go from town to town, carrying nothing with them. As they go, they are to speak to anyone who will listen, of Christ’s healing and saving power. Jesus warns them this task will be difficult and at times even feel divisive. If anyone does not listen to the disciples, they are to shake the dust of that place from their feet and move on, preaching and teaching to new people. Jesus ends his instructions by reminding his followers that those who welcome them welcome Christ among them, and those who welcome Christ among them will find their way to God.

These words continue to ring out for our denomination as delegates gather in person this weekend for the 34th United Church of Christ General Synod in Indianapolis, Indiana, under the theme, **Making All Things New**. During this time, attendees and delegates have the opportunity to fully live Jesus’ welcoming vision. Like the disciples, they are encouraged to speak the truth of Christ’s healing and life-giving presence. Like those who encountered the first disciples, sometimes that truth can feel challenging or even divisive. But Christ calls General Synod attendees to both speak and listen anyway.

This speaking and listening happens at General Synod this week over committees with clear agendas, in less formal conversations in hallways and parking lots, in worship and workshops, over vendor tables and, of course, in the main assembly, where all delegates gather to pray, deliberate, listen and speak. We do all this because Christ continues to assure us that where our words are welcomed, God is present. And when we can discern God’s presence, we can better sense what God is calling us towards.

As the 34th General Synod draws to a close, we thank God for the opportunity to follow these old instructions as we Create A New Thing!

July 9, 2023

**Sixth Sunday after Pentecost**

Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30

Chosen Journeys

*[Jesus said:] "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."*

Dear Jesus, our brother and friend,

Today we pray for all those who are weary, that they may feel the easiness of your yoke and the lightness of your load.

We pray for others who are ill, weary from battling the enemy within their own bodies. And we pray for the healing of our own illnesses of body, mind and spirit. Send your healing power like a balm over all who suffer in this way, and help us all to know that you are always near to comfort and to soothe.

We pray for others who are weary from the demands of overwork or from the worthlessness of worklessness. And we pray for ourselves, that we may remember that productivity is not a Kin-dom value. Send your grace, Holy Friend, upon all of us who suffer from the delusion that we are only as valuable as their work. Remind us that your ease is for all people, and draw them into the shelter of your mercy.

We pray for others who are trapped in cycles of addiction or violence. And we pray for ourselves, that the bonds of our violent and addictive tendencies be loosened bit by bit in the wake of your healing and hope. Shower us with the full confidence and faith to take the next step forward, and the next, then the next after that. Draw into our circles those who can counsel and guide us in new ways and patterns of being.

We pray for those who are pressed down into the cracks of the broken places in our society and culture. And we pray for ourselves when we find ourselves squeezed into the cracks, so heavily burdened by sexism, racism, or homophobia that it feels that we cannot stand. Raise us up, shattering that which keeps us fast and opening the eyes of all to the ease and joy of your justice.

We pray all these things in your name. Amen.

July 16, 2023

**Seventh Sunday after Pentecost**

Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

A House Divided

In their very conservative town of Colorado Springs, CO, Vista Grande UCC has long been visible as an LGBTQ+ ally, using their sign and flagpole “to proclaim that Black Lives Matter, immigrants deserve justice and queer people are uniquely made in the image of an expansively loving God.”\*

Rev. Mallory Everhart, Vista Grande’s pastor, believes that the church’s visible commitment to providing safe haven for all on the margins helped the wider community and city to trust the congregation in the wake of last November’s tragic shooting at Club Q on the eve of Trans Day of Remembrance. The shooter killed 5 people and injured 22, but Rev. Everhart adds that he “traumatized an entire community.”

Everhart reflects, “On Nov. 20 and beyond, we were true to our reputation and rose up to hold space and provide care to a stunned and terrified community. In their book, *Emergent Strategy*, activist adrienne maree brown writes that community organizing ‘moves at the speed of trust.’ If I have any advice about crisis response, it’s this: make connections and build trust now. No matter your good intentions, you will not be a community partner in times of crisis if you don’t.”\*

In today’s reading, Jesus tells the parable of the sower, warning that not all seed that is planted falls on fertile ground. He is speaking as loudly to the church of the 21st century America as he did to his little community in 1st century Palestine. In a world with growing visible division and terror, your church community has the opportunity to sow seeds now that will grow and flourish or will wither and fall away when a crisis arrives. Today is the right day to ask where the seeds you are planting are growing in your congregation, in your community, and in all the world.

\*Quotations from: Larkman, C. (2023, January 13). *UCC pastor: In the new year, resolve to listen, make connections, build trust.* United Church of Christ. https://www.ucc.org/ucc-pastor-in-the-new-year-resolve-to-listen-make-connections-build-trust/

July 23, 2023

**Eighth Sunday after Pentecost**

Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

Wheat and Weeds Together

When St. John's United Church of Christ, in the southern Illinois town of Belvidere, decided to plant a community garden that would be open to all, they did not go small. In a video on the church’s website, the large garden occupies a whole swath of the church’s side yard. The plot also has some raised boxes, for folks who don't feel like kneeling when they harvest, and other pots for plants that are important to the garden, but not good for spreading. A share table holds free produce from the church garden, as well as other local gardens throughout the community. And anyone who would like to is invited to come at any time and gather the food that’s ready for harvest, so that all might enjoy fresh produce during the harvest season.

Church pastor Rev. Muriel Morley Jahn explains in a video filmed in 2021 and available on the church’s Facebook page, “This year, we’re working to do a number of partner plantings, so we have the three sisters system with the corn stalk, and the beans growing up it and the gourds covering the root…Another way we’re doing partner planting is with our blueberry bushes…in between each blueberry bush we have some herbs growing. Here is some thyme growing between these bushes and down here we have some basil that’ll be growing up between the berries. We’re trying to get as much food out of our garden as possible and one of the ways we do that is through our partner planting. Thyme especially likes the soil that blueberries like, so we’re hoping they pair well together and appreciate each other’s company.”

By their intentional growing methods, the church is not just feeding the community. It’s modeling a system of interdependence and mutual cooperation that helps not just thyme and blueberries but people to flourish.

You can see the whole video tour of the St. John’s UCC community garden here: https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=235969421622372 or at <https://stjohns401.org/>

July 30, 2023

**Ninth Sunday after Pentecost**

Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

Weaving the Future

Today’s reading contains many mini-parables, a couple sentences each. Parables, short and seemingly simple stories meant to instruct and guide, are used often by Jesus as a means of teaching. Although they are simple, the parables sometimes leave the listener scratching their head and asking, “what did that mean?” It’s a paradox of our faith, that it is the very mysteriousness of the parables which reveals so much. Because there are nearly infinite meanings to each one, parables are one of the strongest examples that, as we say in the United Church of Christ, “God is still speaking.”

Your reaction to the parable reveals a God who continually invites us into the surprise of an ongoing conversation, one in which the partners know and love one another but still can’t guess what the other is going to say next. As you dive into the mystery of the parable you are invited to get curious, ask questions, and express wonder, ultimately growing in your understanding of God’s work in your life, and your own faith journey.

But your reaction to the parables is not the only measure of your ability to ask questions as you grow in your faith. Take a look at the order of service (also called the liturgy) for your worship service today. Does it contain a prayer of confession? The prayer of confession works like a parable - it invites you into conversation with God and with yourself. As you say the words of the prayer of confession, you are invited to get curious, ask questions and express wonder about God’s work in your own life and the life of your faith community.

One of the parables today says that the kingdom of heaven is the net that is thrown into the sea, catching fish “of every kind.” One of the many ways of thinking of this parable is that in the Reign of God, all are drawn into, and pulled together into the divine. But then some fish are kept, and some are not. Perhaps we include the prayer of confession as a small parable in our worship services because we do not believe that fish are born worthy or unworthy. Instead, we believe that within each person is the power to grow, change and be transformed.

August 6, 2023

**Tenth Sunday after Pentecost**

Matthew 14:13-21

Face to Face

When Jesus fed miraculously produced loaves and fishes to the crowds who followed him, here’s what he did *not* do. He did *not* ask them to show evidence that they were gainfully employed. He did *not* make them prove that they followed a certain set of guidelines or adhered to a particular set of behaviors. He did *not* make them sign an oath of allegiance to him. He just…fed them. Every single person who was gathered there that day was fed.

Lost in the wonder of Jesus’ production of the loaves and fishes, we can lose sight of how this story can guide us in our own lives. In order for Jesus to feed everyone, he had to believe not only in the abundance providence of God but in the inherent worthiness of each person, without discussion or question. How often we forget these things!

It is perhaps no accident that we hear this story of abundance and worth on Hiroshima Day of Remembrance. As we recall the atomic bomb that was dropped on August 6, 1945, on the city of Hiroshima, we join the citizens of that city and people around the world in pausing for a moment to pray for peace, and for the will to see the abundant worthiness in all of creation as stronger than our weapons of mass destruction.

If you look on the timeline of Iao Congregational UCC in Maui, Hawaii, you will notice that in 1942, months after the bombing of Pearl Harbor by Japanese forces, the church changed its name from Wailuku Japanese Christian Church to Iao Congregational Church. This was no coincidence, but a move designed to protect the church members of Japanese descent. These American citizens, many with generations in the country, were interred in great numbers on suspicion of spying or treason, even though no evidence was ever found against a single Japanese-American Hawaiian during the second world war.

As we pray for peace this day, may we also pray for the willingness to be changed from within, to follow Christ’s example of abundance and compassion for all.

August 13, 2023

**Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost**

Genesis 37:1-4, 12-28

When All Seems Lost

In today’s story, Joseph, the youngest and favorite son of Jacob is gifted a beautiful coat by his father. Joseph's brothers are jealous of Jacob’s favor, and turn on him, plotting to kill him. One brother, Reuben, softens and suggests instead that they throw him in a pit. He tells his brothers that then they will be spared the blood guilt of killing their brother directly but thinks to himself that he will come back at a later time and rescue him. Then, seeing some slave traders passing by, the brothers decide to sell Joseph instead. Then, they take his coat, which they have torn and bloodied, to their father as proof that his favorite is no more.

This story, and Joseph’s adventures in Egypt that follow this capture, was memorably made into a musical by Tim Rice and Andrew Lloyd Weber more than fifty years ago. The musical, which began as a 15-minute cantata, has grown into a full length and often-staged musical, *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat\**. If not the only, it is certainly the most popular staged musical interpretation of a Genesis story, beginning with the lines,

“Way, way back many centuries ago,

Not long after the Bible began.

Jacob lived in the land of Canaan,

A fine example of a family man…”\*

and ending with a rousing call to follow your dreams no matter the circumstances.

For many, the musical, like another Rice and Weber production, *Jesus Christ Superstar,* has been a gateway into learning a bible story that they would not have easily walked into another way.

What about you? How have you learned the bible? What songs or chants have helped you to take it to heart and know it by heart? How can we, in our churches, introduce both our members and those in our communities to the stories that form our faith?

\*You can find this and all the songs from the musical at this resource: Webber, L.A. (1992). *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat Songbook*. Hal Leonard.

August 20, 2023

**Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost**

Genesis 45:1-15

Bold Moves

In today’s story, Joseph, having achieved success and power in Egypt, is reunited with his brothers who assumed that he was dead or enslaved in terrible conditions. Consider the words of this meditation as an invitation to reconcile a difficulty in your own life.

Imagine yourself standing, beginning to walk. You move with ease, each step making you stronger, never tiring…Imagine that you come to a hill and you begin to climb, noticing the terrain around you. It is the most beautiful kind of hill you can imagine.

What does it look like? Is it dry desert and rock? Rain forest? Mountain meadow? Glaciers?

Now imagine that you get to the top of the hill, and the view of the valleys and plains around you opens up. You can see a long way. Imagine that the place spread before you is the country of your life…It is populated with all the people you have known and every place you have ever been and everything you have ever done. As you look over it, you can see it at a distance, yet you can see it all clearly – the country of your life…Take a few moments to locate someone precious, or something that brings you joy, or someplace that brings you peace from sometime in your life. Enjoy your memories and feelings as you look upon that beloved person, object or place….

Now turn your gaze. Somewhere in the vast country of your life, there is something that still feels out of place. It is time to look at the thing that it is time to forgive. From your safe place, high on the hill, you can look at it with fresh eyes. You can see that thing for what it is – one thing in the country of your life, not the whole of it.

You know what it is – this thing that needs forgiving….

Is it something in yourself? Or done by another?... Look at it from this distance and with this clarity. See again how the thing that needs forgiving is only one place in the country of your life – one part (whether large or small) of all the vastness that you have seen and known….

Allow yourself to imagine how it would change the geography of the country of your life if you were to forgive the thing that needs forgiving…Would the thing change in shape or color? Would it reflect or absorb the light in a different way? … Would it become smaller? Would it disappear altogether, leaving room for something new? ….

Allow yourself to imagine forgiving that thing. Allow yourself to imagine that it is already forgiven by a God whose love is more powerful than any human act. When you are ready, return to this place and this time.

August 27, 2023

**Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost**

Exodus 1:8-2:10

Be Transformed

A new king rose to power. This king did not understand the past or remember that it was Joseph’s wisdom and God-given insight that had saved his people in generations gone by. Instead, like many in power, he began to be afraid of Joseph’s many children and grandchildren, nieces, and nephews. What if they join my enemies, he wondered, in the event of war? So, he conscripted and enslaved the people, forcing them into hard labor. Our Book tells us that Pharaoh and his slave drivers were ruthless, imposing harder and harder tasks upon God’s people. He could force them to work, even to build great cities, but he could not steal their joy and love. And so, God’s people grew in numbers.

Then Pharaoh called the midwives, the women who attended the births and brought the babies, squalling and slimy and so preciously alive, into the world. The midwives must have wondered if they would be killed when they went cautiously before the terrible ruler, but Pharaoh instead commanded them to do something horrible. He commanded that the women, called by God to bring life into this world, would instead kill the boy babies they helped birth.

The midwives left Pharaoh’s presence breathing a sigh of relief. They knew just what to do. Instead of killing the babies, they lied to Pharaoh about the birth process, something he obviously knew nothing about.

God’s preference for those on the margins is shown strongly throughout the scriptures, but perhaps nowhere as strongly as this story. How can the midwives help you find your power against those who would abuse or oppress? What skills do you have that keep giving life, even times and place that ask you to deal in death?