June 5, 2022

**Pentecost Sunday**

Acts 2:1-21

Gathered and Scattered

*Strengthen the Church Offering*

The church year begins with Advent - the four weeks before Christmas. Then there is a short season of Christmastide, followed by Epiphany. Lent is the next season of the church year, which culminates in Holy Week and Easter. Eastertide, the season that follows Easter ends with Pentecost, which is today. After this, the church is in the long season known as Ordinary Time that lasts until Advent begins again in midwinter.

In thinking of the church year, for many churches, Easter is the high point of the year. With its majestic music, resurrection message, shiny new dresses and egg hunts, it can feel like it’s all downhill from there. Pentecost can be easy to miss, just a stop on the way to the long stretch of ordinary time. But what if we framed it in a new way? What if Pentecost day - TODAY - was not a steppingstone but the culmination of all that we have been preparing for and the beginning of a new adventure?

On the first Pentecost Day, the disciples, mourning the perceived loss of Jesus and the life they had known with him, were ready to give up. Then the Spirit arrived! When they felt the Spirit’s presence, they were infused with new energy. New gifts flowed from them, giving them the power to speak to their neighbors of all languages. Even Peter, who had barely been able to put a sentence together until now, suddenly preached with flowing eloquence. The church received the Holy Spirit on Pentecost day, and everyone paid attention.

Like the disciples, we, in these post-pandemic days, are mourning what we have lost and are trying to adjust to the new normal of the lives we have now. Now, more than ever, let us receive the power of the Holy Spirit. Now, more than ever, let us perceive how that Spirit is already at work, empowering the gifts of our congregation. Now, more than ever, let us speak in the languages that those around us need to hear - a message of salvation and love that only we can tell.

*Today, many churches receive The Strengthen the Church (STC) Offering. STC reflects the shared commitment of people across the United Church of Christ to cooperatively build up the UCC. Conferences and the national setting equally share the gifts given by members and friends through their local congregations. The funds raised support leadership development, new churches, youth ministry, and innovation in existing congregations. By your generosity to this offering, you build up the Body of Christ.*

June 12, 2022

**Trinity Sunday**

Proverbs 8:1-4, 22-31

Wisdom Calls

Litany for Trinity Sunday

Voice One: The Voice of Wisdom speaks:

Voice Two: Of course, we are One!

Voice Three: But also, we are not One at all. We are three.

A relationship. A community. A dance.

All: Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer; we dance together!

Rejoicing in Our Divinity, delighting in your humanity.

Voice One: Of course, we are One!

Voice Two: Have you ever thought of the pronouns you use for us?

Voice Three: If you have called us “He” or “She,” try this today.

Try calling us by all our names, saying “They.” How does this word feel in your mouth?

All: Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer; we dance together!

Rejoicing in Our Divinity, delighting in your humanity.

Voice Three: Of course, we are One!

Voice One: But Oneness cannot contain all that we are.

Voice Two: Together, creating. Together, restoring. Together, abiding.

There is so much joy in this togetherness!

All: Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer; we dance together!

Rejoicing in Our Divinity, delighting in your humanity.

Voice Two: Of course, you are One, you, humanity!

Voice Three: But created in Our image, you are so much more than one.

Voice One: You are many, your diversity astonishingly beautiful.

We will always delight in you.

All: Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer; we dance together!

Rejoicing in Our Divinity, delighting in your humanity.

June 19, 2022

**Second Sunday after Pentecost**

1 Kings 19:1-4, (5-7), 8-15a

In God’s Presence

*Father’s Day*

Today’s scripture tells the story of Elijah, worn out by political maneuvering, isolated and afraid. At the very end of his rope, Elijah was ready to give up. God did not give up on him, though, and spoke to him, giving him clarity and a renewed sense of purpose. Strengthened, he was able to go back out to follow God’s way. How about you? Are you also feeling isolated and weary? If so, take heart. God is near! Listen for God’s guidance as you remember that your actions and your voice matter now more than ever.

You need look no further for clarity and purpose than the many *Our Faith, Our Vote* resources available online from the Justice and Local Church Ministries advocacy office in Washington DC. There, you will find nonpartisan resources that will help you study issues through the lens of your faith and conscience, as well as get information on how church communities may and may not legally be involved in this congressional election year.

Sandy Sorensen, director of the Justice and Local Church Ministry Washington DC office, advises that churches can legally “hold voter registration drives, take action for democracy protections, and generate voter mobilization as we near midterms — including rides to polls, getting folks registered, etc. It will also be critical in these divisive times to establish relationships with state and local elections officials to support fair elections…Urge legislators to pass democracy protections. Engage in media advocacy around voting rights in your community through op-eds, letters to the editor, social media and other outlets. Learn what your state legislature is doing to change election laws in your state.”\*

The UCC is a longtime supporter of the Poor People’s Campaign, and its actions to ensure equal access to elections, including marches near the date of Juneteenth, which have taken place both on the ground in local cities and online in the past few years. Find out what the Poor People’s Campaign has planned in your area, if you would like to connect with others interested in these issues.

*\*Holznagel, Hans. “National Ministries Eager to Work with Local Churches on Full 2022 Agenda.”* United Church of Christ *accessed 4 Jan. 2022, https://www.ucc.org/national-ministries-eager-to-work-with-local-churches-on-full-2022-agenda/.*

June 26, 2022

**Third Sunday after Pentecost**

2 Kings 2:1-2, 6-14

Pick Up the Mantle

*Open and Affirming Sunday*

An elder and a younger man go on a journey. Finally, the elder says to the youngster, “You have come far enough. The rest of the journey, I will make myself.” The younger person persists, saying that he will continue to accompany the elder even if it is difficult. At last, the youngster has the honor of walking with the elder all the way to the end of his days. In so doing, the youngster receives a mantle that he can carry to the next generation.

On this Open and Affirming Sunday, we read the story of the elder prophet Elijah and his student Elisha. As we hear the story of this passing of the mantle, we pause to honor members of the LGBTQ community 65 years and older. If we are in that group of elders, how might we pass the mantle to the younger generation? And, if we are in a younger generation, how might we accompany our elders on the great journey that for all of us ends in being received into the arms of the Holy One?

There are at least two million lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people 65 and older in the U.S., and this population will double by the year 2030. Many LGBTQ seniors are isolated and lonely. Often subject to mistreatment in retirement communities and nursing homes, they need the resources churches can provide. The majority of these seniors have been alienated from organized religion for most of their lives: an Open and Affirming congregation can be a lifeline to community, understanding and respect.

An effective ministry for LGBTQ seniors is an opportunity for partnership with your LGBTQ community center and other welcoming churches and synagogues. If your church is the only LGBTQ-welcoming congregation in your community, and there is no LGBTQ community center, there are still likely to be LGBTQ seniors—most of them closeted—who can be reached if you publicly affirm your welcome.\*

You can find resources and more ideas at openandaffirming.org

\*“Seniors.” *UCC Open and Affirming Coalition*, 27 Dec. 2020, https://openandaffirming.org/resources/seniors/.

July 3, 2022

**Fourth Sunday after Pentecost**

2 Kings 5:1-14

Surprising Prophets

*This is my song, O God of all the nations*

*A song of peace for lands afar and mine*

*This is my home, the country where my heart is*

*Here are my hopes, my dreams, my holy shrine*

*But other hearts in other lands are beating*

*With hopes and dreams as true and high as mine.\**

Of all the interesting characters we find in the busy book of Kings, Naaman is perhaps the most relatable to modern people. Mostly, his life is pretty good. He is successful at his career. He’s well-regarded by his peers. He has enough money to be more or less comfortable. He just has this one irritating problem - a skin ailment that will not leave him be.

When he finds out that a healer in a neighboring country might be able to help him, he’s able to wield his influence and power to find a way there. When he reaches the healer’s house, he is not welcomed in, as he would have expected after a long journey. Instead, he’s instructed by a servant to go bathe in the nearby Jordan River.

Insulted, he stomps off. Again, relatable. You can just imagine him fuming that he had paid the guy, and he didn’t even get a meeting. And what kind of river was the Jordan anyway? The rivers in Naaman’s own country were much more impressive.

When Naaman decides to fill the healer’s frustrating prescription, he is cured of more than his physical ailment. Perhaps even more importantly, he is relieved of his prideful nationalism, the belief that they do things best back where he’s from.

Today is the day before American Independence Day, and many of us will raise our voices in songs of praise for our own nation’s majesty and beauty. Today might also be a day to turn to page 591 in *The New Century Hymnal*, to give voice to the humility, curiosity, and generosity that is the path to knowing, like Naaman, that unthinking nationalism is never going to be what heals. What heals is curiosity and respect for all people.

*\*Stone, Lloyd. “This is my song.” The Hymnal © 1933, The New Century Hymnal © 1993, p. 591*

July 10, 2022

**Fifth Sunday after Pentecost**

Luke 10:25-37

Caring Neighbors

Today’s scripture is the story of the Good Samaritan. Listen to the story in the words of those who experienced it:

*The Religious Official speaks*

I always believed there are two kinds of people in the world - good ones and, well, not-good ones. I, of course, have been blessed by birth and by training to be one of the good ones. I help when I can, but I tell myself that you can’t help them all. And so that day, I rushed right by that person lying beaten on the side of the road, as I had rushed so many times before. In my rush to get where I was going and do the “good” thing I had planned, I think I missed a chance. I can’t stop thinking of him and wondering if there was something more I could have done, wondering if “you can’t help them all” is just a justification to not help anyone. Since that day, I’ve been thinking that maybe the world is not so easy to divide into good people and bad ones.

*The Man Beaten by Robbers speaks*

I always knew that there are two kinds of people in this world - those who suffer and those who make others suffer. Until that day, I made sure that I was the one who made others suffer, so they couldn’t hurt me. Everyone feared my fists, and that’s why they hired me to walk that dangerous road. But that day, I let down my guard for a moment, and others found me, and beat me. I thought I would die there, but instead I felt a cool cloth on my head, a gentle hand to bandage my wounds. Since that day, I’ve wondered if maybe the world is not so easy to divide into assailants and victims. The person who picked me up and helped me that day had no reason to help, he just did. Maybe the world isn’t all about avoiding suffering or inflicting it. Maybe there is another way to live - healing and helping - that I hadn’t noticed before.

*The Samaritan speaks*

Look, there are two kinds of people in this world. The right ones, like me, who know that God dwells on the holy mountain and the wrong ones, like him, who think God lives in a box in the city. When I saw him lying by the side of the road that day, I knew that he was one of the wrong ones. But in that moment, I also saw his pain was just like mine would have been. I saw that his blood was red just as mine is. And for some reason, I couldn’t walk away. Since that day, I’ve wondered if maybe God could be both in my mountain and in their city. Maybe the world is not so easily divided into us and them.

July 17, 2022

**Sixth Sunday after Pentecost**

Luke 10:38-42

Word and Work

In today’s scripture, two sisters welcome Jesus into their home. Martha bustles about, working in the kitchen and at the table. Mary serves in another way, by deeply listening and learning, growing in her faith and understanding. Within each of us there is both a Mary and a Martha. At times we are ready to work and act, and at times we yearn to learn and grow.

To tend to your inner Mary, put a book or two from The Pilgrim Press on your summer reading list. The United Church of Christ’s Pilgrim Press is a bold voice with a rich heritage. The oldest English language publishing tradition in North America, The Pilgrim Press publishes books that nurture spiritual growth, cultivate religious leadership, and provoke the soul for the sake of a just world.

A Pilgrim Press classic, *Water Bugs and Dragonflies*, will be released in a 50th anniversary edition this summer. This gentle guide to talking to children about death, and the mystery of what happens afterwards, includes additional reflections by author Doris Stickney.

You may also want to check out *Intentional Leadership* by Sarah B. Drummond. Drummond serves as Founding Dean of Andover Newton Seminary at Yale Divinity School, and she writes and teaches extensively about leadership and ministry in formation.

Also, look for *Fat Church*, coming out this summer from The Pilgrim Press. We are all made in the image of God, or the *imago dei.* This book is a critique of how the church participates in fat shaming and diet culture in ways that contradict our foundational belief in *imago dei*.

We are all pilgrims, striving after insight in life and faith. There is within each of us a Mary, wanting only to learn and grow. The Pilgrim Press is a daring adventurer and trusted companion along the way, bearing testimony that there is “more truth and light yet to break forth.”

July 24, 2022

**Seventh Sunday after Pentecost**

Luke 11:1-13

Shaped By Prayer

The Lord’s Prayer

The disciples pleaded with Jesus to teach them how to pray. And in response, he gave them the prayer we find at the beginning of Luke 11. The disciples said the words aloud and to themselves, over and over, until they memorized them and could say them anywhere and anytime.

We usually think of the prayer we call The Lord’s Prayer or The Prayer of our Savior as words we say together, in worship. Many of us in the United Church of Christ have said this prayer so often and for so long, that it may be the only prayer we know by heart. The good news is that the prayer Jesus gave us does not have to stay within the walls of the church building. We can carry it in our hearts and minds out into the world, wherever we may go.

As you go about your week, try this. Try making this a portable prayer. How does it change the prayer for you, to recite these words under a tree, at the sideline of a sporting event, before eating a meal at a restaurant, when you make a decision large or small, as you sit down to pay your monthly bills, while going to sleep, or while waking up?

The prayer of our Savior does not merely have to be a Sunday prayer, reserved for the one hour we sit together in pews and speak these words together almost without thinking. This prayer can be a hymn of gratitude, a shout of delight, a murmur for help, a plea for forgiveness, and a way to bring the Holy One close in any situation.

Make The Lord’s Prayer your companion, and you may find that you are able to recognize the kin-dom that is always arriving and is always already right here, wherever you may be.

July 31, 2022

**Eighth Sunday after Pentecost**

Luke 12:13-21

Soul Investment

*Then (Jesus) told them a parable: “The land of a rich man produced abundantly. And he thought to himself, ‘What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?’ Then he said, ‘I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.’ But God said to him, ‘You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?’ So, it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God.”.*

*Luke 12:16-21 NRSV*

This parable reminds us that it is human nature to plan and build newer and larger structures in abundant times. This parable ends with the advice to give to God rather than to the glory and false security for the self. How do we give to God? Many other places in scripture act as reminders that the surest way to give to God is to give to those who have need here and now.

For some congregations, their structures enhance and support their giving to others. For others, the building itself - its care and maintenance - has become their ministry. Prayerful discernment about the role of the building in congregational life can be energizing and lead to new vision and purpose.

During the first half of 2022, the national staff of the United Church of Christ moved from the space that had been home for more than thirty years into new office space. Over the years, the national staff has continued to be reduced. With COVID on the scene, many of the staff began to work from home. The combination of a smaller staff and a greater percentage of those working from home meant that that large space of the old offices was no longer needed. After a period of discernment, it was decided that that building was no longer serving its purpose - to serve the mission and ministry of the church. So, the staff moved their official offices a mile away. The new space at 1300 E. 9th Street in Cleveland, is smaller and more flexible, with an open floor plan that encourages collaboration and innovation.

It will not be the right decision for every church to sell its building and move to smaller quarters. However, every church with a physical plant can ask whether the congregation is serving the building and grounds more than the building and grounds are serving God and neighbor.

August 7, 2022

**Ninth Sunday after Pentecost**

Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16

Living into the Promise

Rev. Ann Kansfield, UCC pastor, FDNY chaplain and author of *Be the Brave One: Living Your Spiritual Values Out Loud and Other Life Lessons* shares the courage that led her to write a book about her experiences.

“My wife Jennifer and I serve part-time as co-pastors of the Greenpoint Reformed Church, (a joint UCC and Reformed congregation in Brooklyn, NY). We do our best to love God and neighbor, even though we aren't always sure how to do that.

My other ministry setting is as a chaplain for the fire department of the City of New York. I am one of seven chaplains who serve the department as a whole. I never know what might happen on any given day, but I pray that God can use me in a way to be of service to others. Also, the uniforms are pretty great.”

Although friends encouraged her to share her stories and reflections, Kansfield shied away from the idea of writing a book. “One of the things that really changed the trajectory of the book was connecting with Marty St. George, my co-author…He is really the one who helped take a bunch of stories and thoughts and turn them into a book. I think it's actually a really great story in itself because it shows that sometimes we can do big things when we have friends and fellow travelers who walk alongside us and help us. Sometimes we minister to others and other times they minister to us. Life is really best lived when it's done in mutual ministry with others around us.

For me, bravery is doing things which make us uncomfortable, things which we would rather not do or avoid. And being brave is what allows us to be authentic and vulnerable and have important conversations which we would otherwise want to avoid. Bravery is not just about apologizing for our mistakes but asking ‘how did my mistake impact you?’ and then being quiet and listening.

We can all use some extra bravery these days. It's not always easy to be our most authentic selves. It's certainly difficult to be vulnerable and to share our deepest hopes and fears and listen to the hopes and fears of others. That stuff can be terrifying! But that's the space where God often leads us - to authenticity, vulnerability and bravery.”

August 14, 2022

**Tenth Sunday After Pentecost**

Psalm 80:1-2, 8-19

Restore Us

In today’s psalm, God’s people are envisioned as a vine, planted and carefully tended by God. How might we participate with God in being planters and tenders of the church and its leaders?

Last winter, UCC President John Dorhauer and Pension Board President and CEO Brian Bodager encouraged church members to be vine tenders, as they described one of the crises facing church leadership.

“Seminary and educational debt, the debilitating nature of limited income and the uncertainty of a secure financial future represent a deepening crisis for many pastors in the United Church of Christ,” they wrote in a joint letter. The Ministers’ Financial Vitality Initiative (MFVI) is a program to help ministers address this problem with practical tools. Participants in the program receive financial gifts of $9000 for debt reduction, $1000 to seed a retirement account and the support of a cohort of fellow pastors and financial experts.

The Ministers' Financial Vitality Initiative strengthens ministry in the UCC by:

* increasing and enhancing financial literacy among UCC authorized ministers, with a particular emphasis on ministers from historically underrepresented groups within the denomination;
* assisting UCC ministers and their Ministry settings, Associations, Conferences, and the National Setting of the Church in “breaking the conspiracy of silence” that exists around pastoral finances;
* providing financial assistance to UCC authorized ministers toward repayment of educational and personal debt as well as seeding of pension funds;
* engaging key lay leaders in UCC churches in collaborative efforts to identify and address the connection between pastoral financial challenges and ministry setting financial challenges; and;
* launching a major fundraising campaign to solicit major gifts that will enable the long-term sustainability, and continued expansion of the program

You can be a vine-tender along with God, planting and nurturing growth. One way is to support the MFVI with your gift at pbucc.org.

August 21, 2022

**Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost**

Luke 13:10-17

Healing Reign

For eighteen years the woman in today’s story suffered an ailment that kept her bent over and in pain. Jesus knew how to bring healing to the woman who suffered, but those around him wanted him to wait until after the sabbath. Jesus knew that suffering could not wait. If healing was available and ready at once, then it should be enacted.

Look around. What kind of suffering do you see in your region or neighborhood? Is there suffering that has been allowed to linger because it seems that it is never the right time to heal? What kind of healing can you and your congregation bring to those broken places?

Pray this prayer as you open your heart and mind to the suffering in your midst and the healing that might be available to alleviate that suffering.

Jesus, our friend and brother,

We breathe in and we breathe out.

With each breath in,

we receive the suffering of our neighbors.

With each breath out,

we exhale your healing power.

With each breath in,

we pray for courage and insight

With each breath out,

we become more like you.

With each breath in,

we feel your strength and clarity

With each breath out,

we step forward, reach toward.

Jesus, our friend and brother,

Guide us, we pray, as we breathe, pray, become, feel, step, reach, heal. Amen.

August 28, 2022

**Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost**

Luke 14:1, 7-14

Open Table

The Little Pantry Movement is based on the Little Library movement. Where the little libraries made books available to neighbors and passers-by, the little pantry makes available non-perishable food and hygiene items for anyone who might be in need. The motto of the loosely organized movement is “Take what you need, give what you can.” The mini pantry movement is a grassroots, crowdsourced solution to immediate and local need. Whether a need for food or a need to give, mini pantries help feed neighbors, nourishing neighborhoods.

Emmaus United Church in the Northern Virginia community of Vienna has a Little Free Food Pantry on their property. In September 2020 the Emmaus Youth Group received a $500 service grant from a local organization to build a Little Free Pantry, a project that was chosen by the Emmaus Youth Group members. Over the course of 3 weekends, the Youth Group members gathered to construct and install the Pantry. The Youth Group checks and stocks the Pantry weekly, but anyone can check it throughout the week and restock it from a bin of donations left in a public place.

Suggested personal care donations to the Emmaus Little Food Pantry are items like hand sanitizer, face masks, individually wrapped toothbrushes, small size toothpaste, socks, first aid supplies, soap/shampoo, brushes and combs.

Of course, food donations are the mainstay of the pantry and include nonperishable food items with pull tabs or other easy-to-open and single serve containers. Suggested items are jerky, canned/packets of meat, canned ready meals (pasta, chili), nut and seed butter (single serve or small size preferred), canned fruit/fruit cups, peanut butter & other snack crackers, dried fruit, trail mix, nuts, granola/protein/breakfast bars, single serve cereal, single serve shelf stable milk, juice boxes, canned vegetables, canned soup, and water bottles.

Jesus welcomed all to an open table. A Little Free Pantry is one example of an open table that you and your community can co-create with Christ in your area. If you are curious about how you could create a Little Free Food Pantry on your church property, check out https://emmausucc.org/ or https://www.littlefreepantry.org/.