September 4, 2022

**Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost**

Philemon 1:1-21

A New Identity

As the letter to Philemon begins, the apostle Paul and his friend Timothy are writing a letter to their friends - two men, Philemon and Archippus, and a woman Apphia. Paul invites them to read the letter to the church community that they have gathered in their home. The letter they write is being carried by a freed slave named Onesimus. That’s a lot of characters for such a short book!

In fact, this letter is the shortest book in the Bible. If you have never read the whole thing, why not try it now? As you do, try to put yourselves into the shoes of the characters. Imagine what they are thinking, feeling, seeing and hearing as they write, carry, or read this letter. As you imagine, consider if feeling empathy for these or other characters in the Bible can help you feel close to them, or understand them better.

You don’t have to limit your imagination to characters on the page. What about people in your family, your region, your congregation, or your nation? How might your life, or your congregation’s life, be changed for the better by using this practice of holy empathy?

*Imagine yourself as Paul or Timothy, in prison. As you look around the cell, what can you see, touch, hear, feel? How do you feel about being imprisoned? What are your emotions as you say goodbye to Onesimus? How do you experience God’s presence in this place? What is God calling you to do next?*

*Imagine yourself as Onesimus, traveling toward Philemon and his family. As you travel, what can you see, touch, hear, feel? How do you feel about being on the road? What are your emotions as you prepare to deliver this letter? How do you experience God’s presence now? What is God calling you to do next?*

*Imagine yourself as Philemon, Archippus, Apphia or a member of the church community gathered in their home. As Onesimus delivers his letter, what can you see, touch, hear, feel? How do you feel about those you are gathered with right now? What are your emotions as you hear the words of your friends Paul and Timothy? How do you experience God’s presence in this gathered community? What is God calling your community to do next?*

September 11, 2022

**Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost**

1 Timothy 1:12-17

Growing in God's Love

*Faith Formation Sunday*

The COVID pandemic brought unavoidable change to everything, including our churches. Change can be difficult and one area of change that is especially challenging for many churches is in the area of faith formation. Recalling the “good old days” of over-full Sunday School rooms and thriving Vacation Bible School programs may seem preferable to facing today’s reality.

If your community is mourning the changes that have been thrust upon it, remember that most congregations also have the opportunity to choose how to change in the future. Even as we look back at what was, we can ground ourselves in the hope and joy of what is now. Now, more than ever, our world needs the United Church of Christ and our unique voice. How might that unique voice be expressed in all areas of your life, including in your children’s faith formation program?

If you are still using a pre-pandemic curriculum, it might be time to take stock and choose a change in your Sunday School or other children’s programming. As you do, take your time and make sure that this change is thoughtful.

Ask yourselves: What age children are part of your community now? How might you include families with children who are not able to attend worship services regularly in your curriculum plans? What is most important to emphasize with your congregation and children: Faith practices? Knowledge of scripture? Discipleship? Current affairs and issues? What is the best modality for your children and teachers: Art? Storytelling? Detailed lesson plans? Asking these questions and more will guide you towards the plan or program that will serve your children and your congregation in the present moment and into the future.

There are several excellent guides to a wide variety of Christian education curriculum online. The most comprehensive is compiled yearly by Episcopal priest Sharon Ely Pearson on her blog “Rows of Sharon”. Look around! The change you can choose is just around the corner!

September 18, 2022

**Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost**

1 Timothy 2:1-7

Prayerful Living

*Just Peace Sunday*

Michael Neuroth has served for more than a dozen years as the International Policy Advocate at the national United Church of Christ office in Washington, DC. Michael, and his colleagues on this small but mighty staff, are the UCC ear and voice in the nation’s capital.

Their work is multiplied by relationships fostered in the Washington Interreligious Staff Community (WISC), an ecumenical group from across a variety of faith traditions. WISC is made up of at least twelve working groups, which find ways to collaborate and let leadership emerge where there is expertise. They follow public policy and give voice in DC to various issues. Michael’s leadership on the Peace and Security Working Group and the International Affairs Working Group have been especially valuable.

As we acknowledge the 30th anniversary of the Just Peace resolution this year, everyone in the United Church of Christ can celebrate that identity whether or not they declare the local church a Just Peace church. Just Peace is part of our connection and identity as UCC, since the United Church of Christ was the first denomination to so designate.

On this Just Peace Sunday, local congregations are invited and encouraged to publicly witness and articulate locally what Just Peace means to them as they pray about and act on issues they feel called to in church communities and the world. By celebrating and upholding Just Peace Sunday, you can raise your local profile and also lift up the hard work of our national UCC staff. Just Peace Sunday creates synergy between what we say we are at the national level and who we are at the local level.

According to Michael Neuroth, the work of Just Peace is the work of avoiding conflict and war in the first place. As we look for ways to eliminate weapons of mass destruction, the ecumenism and cooperation that is lived out daily by our staff in the DC office and their colleagues in WISC is one beautiful model for a path forward.

September 25, 2022

**Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost**

Jeremiah 32:1-3a, 6-15

Surprising Investment

*American Indian Ministry Sunday*

*United Samoan Ministries Stewardship Sunday*

*Matou te faatalofa atu ai i le Suafa Pele o Iesu Keriso le Alii ma le Faaola!*

We greet you in the Beloved name of Jesus, our Lord and Savior!

“In 1999 General Synod declared a “Partnership in Mission and Ministry” with the Congregational Christian Church in American Samoa (CCCAS) as a way of acknowledging the deepening relationship between the two churches and the rapid growth of Samoan congregations in the United States.

Today, there are more than 60 congregations of the CCCAS in Hawaii, Alaska, California, Washington and Oregon. Many of them related to the UCC through our regional Conferences and local Associations. The partnership seeks to strengthen the ministry of these congregations and the mission of both churches.

In many places, Samoan congregations are actively involved in the life and leadership of UCC Associations. Many UCC clergy and lay leaders have immersed themselves in the life of Samoan communities and have traveled to American Samoa to learn more about its unique and ancient culture.” \*1

“The United Samoan Ministries of the UCC is established to provide a setting for members of Samoan congregations to gather for fellowship, spiritual nurturing, mutual support, and communications and strengthen our faith in Jesus Christ. Providing Resources for all faith communities and promote/teaching and maintaining Samoan Culture and Language; promote Ecumenical partnerships, and proclaiming the proclamation of Open and Affirming, and leading in Justice and Peace for ALL.

Samoan Communities residing within the Mainland, Alaska and Hawaii and those who are in Diaspora throughout the world.” \*2

If you are a member of a Samoan congregation, today is a day to celebrate your connection with the wider United Church of Christ. If you are a member of a church that has limited contact with your Samoan brothers and sisters, today is a good day to learn more about how you can be in intentional conversation and relationship with a Samoan Congregation.

\*1 - https://www.ucc.org/ecumenical\_america-samoa/

\*2 - https://unitedsamoanminist.wixsite.com/

October 2, 2022

**Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost**

Psalm 137

Free to Grieve

*Neighbors in Need Offering*

*World Communion Sunday*

The psalm today begins with weeping, as God’s people wonder how to sing God’s song

And so we hung up our harps,

there upon the willows.

For there our captors asked us for songs,

and our tormentors asked for mirth,

saying, "Sing us one of the songs of Zion!"

How could we sing God's song in a foreign land?

In 1933, in a pause between the last century’s world wars, the first World Communion Sunday was celebrated as a way to celebrate the interconnectedness of all Christians in all times and in all places. Today, 99 years later, the need for unity in our diversity is as great, or maybe greater, than it was in those fragile interwar years.

This mid-and-post-pandemic world in which we find ourselves is indeed a strange land, and we might be asking ourselves how we can sing God’s songs of justice, love and unity? Hope can be found in *Gifts in Open Hands: More Worship Ideas for the Global Community* by Maren Tirabassi and Kathy Wonson Eddy. This book shares multicultural liturgies, prayers, affirmations, blessings, and poetry by people from the global community. Images for reproduction in church bulletins are included, and a new feature is the arrangement of translations so that liturgies in other languages are available to English-speaking as well as bilingual worship planners. You can find that resource, and many more at The Pilgrim Press website, *thepilgrimpress.com*.

Today many UCC congregations receive the Neighbors in Need (NIN) offering. This special mission offering of the United Church of Christ supports ministries of justice and compassion in the United States. One-third of NIN funds support the Council for American Indian Ministry (CAIM). Two-thirds of this offering is used by the UCC’s Justice and Witness Ministries (JWM) to provide funding grants to UCC churches and organizations leading justice initiatives, advocacy efforts, and direct service projects in their communities. Find more at the United Church of Christ website, *ucc.org*.

October 9, 2022

**Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost**

Jeremiah 29:1, 4-7

Planting Life

*Access Sunday and Disabilities Awareness Week*

Jacob Nault is a member of the UCC Disabilities Ministries. On this Disabilities Awareness Week, he checks in about how music connects us to God, and how the church can do better in welcoming people with disabilities.

“The church where I am a member is the Congregational UCC of Neenah-Menasha, in Neenah, WI. My pastor is Rev. David Frey.

I started playing piano at age 5. As my cerebral palsy affects primarily the left side of my body, learning to play the piano with both hands was a challenge. I taught myself a workable method which involves playing piano with six fingers—one in use in my left hand. My right hand takes care of melody and bass clef “fill” notes. In high school, I had the opportunity to take private piano lessons with an experienced professor who helped me refine that technique.

I feel very supported and affirmed as a musician. Music connects people to God in several important ways. Hymn lyrics, for example, can help us cement our theology. The experience of sharing music together can help worship become more communal and engaging. If implemented well, music can help us connect to the full range of the human experience—uncontainable joy or raging lament. Sharing the full range of human emotion deepens our relationship with God.

The wider church perspective on disability needs work. For example, many churches are unable to prioritize full inclusion of disabled people because building modifications are cost-prohibitive or accommodating neurodiverse needs in worship spaces seem too difficult. We miss an opportunity when we are inclusive of other marginalized populations but do not put the same energy into drawing the circle wider to the disability community.”

*You can connect with Jacob Nault - Six-Fingered Pianist - on Facebook and Soundcloud to hear more of his wonderful music, including a new verse to Amazing Grace he wrote just for the UCC Disabilities Ministries.*

October 16, 2022

**Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost**

Luke 18:1-8

Ask Boldly; Live Justly

*Children’s Sabbath/Laity Sunday*

Holy One,

Today we open our mouths and these words travel from our hearts all the way to Your ear. As we pledge to be a voice for all who are voiceless, we pray also that our words may impel us to action. *Like the widow, who knocked and pounded and BANGED on the doors of oppression until they were opened, make us tireless, as we seek and find You and Your way of justice.*

We pray today for those children who lack safe water to drink. We know that water is life, but for too many, water is poison. We know that water is abundant, but for too many, water must be carried or painfully rationed. *Like the widow, who knocked and pounded and BANGED on the doors of oppression until they were opened, make us tireless, as we seek and find You and Your way of justice.*

We pray today for those children in need of access to medical care. As you healed all whom you touched, make us healers in your name - not only of individuals but of sick health care systems. Use us to ensure that medicines and healthcare are available to all. *Like the widow, who knocked and pounded and BANGED on the doors of oppression until they were opened, make us tireless, as we seek and find You and Your way of justice.*

Today we pray for children in captivity. For those caught up in the swirling storm that is modern-day slavery, for those separated at the border from the parents who only sought a better life for them, for those incarcerated unjustly, we vow to break down walls and fling open doors. *Like the widow, who knocked and pounded and BANGED on the doors of oppression until they were opened, make us tireless, as we seek and find You and Your way of justice.*

We pray for those children who have no home, or whose home is a place of violence. We especially today remember your beloved LGBTQ children, made in Your beautiful image and yet too often cast out of their families and faith traditions in Your name. Open our arms wide, that we might embrace all of your children as we welcome all of them home. *Like the widow, who knocked and pounded and BANGED on the doors of oppression until they were opened, make us tireless, as we seek and find You and Your way of justice.*

October 23, 2022

**Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost**

Luke 18:9-14

Just Worship

In the summer of 2022, The Pension Boards of the United Church of Christ continued its innovative program of summer internships. This information, detailing the program, is taken from their website.\*

The Pension Board sought out the brightest students from some of the best colleges in New York to participate in the Pension Boards’ 10-week Summer Internship Program, which begins in June of each year.

The Pension Boards looked for visionary young leaders with an ability to inspire others to innovation through strategic assignments designed to take the Pension Boards to its next level in service to its members. Selected students were empowered to lead with vision and creativity, challenging the organization’s “norm,” while also creating new direction for the organization. They were encouraged to inspire, create, and innovate.

Selected interns offered strategic insight and ideas to inform the Pension Boards' future strategic plans and programs in the core areas of analytics, finance, program analyst, health plan analyst, information technology, financial audit, investments, marketing/communications, customer engagement, customer experience, and philanthropy/fundraising.

At the conclusion of the 10-week internship program, students were able to present their visionary ideas and assessments to the Pension Boards' Executive Team.

"We believe this program will help foster creative and valuable input for the Pension Boards that will not only fuel and shape our strategic objectives, but further enhance our services for United Church of Christ members…" said Brian R. Bodager, President and CEO of the Pension Boards.

If you, or someone you know might be interested in next summer’s internship opportunity, check out the Pension Board website for more information.

\* https://www.pbucc.org/internship-program

October 30, 2022

**Twenty-First Sunday after Pentecost**

Luke 19:1-10

Transforming Love

*UCC Higher Education Sunday*

On this United Church of Christ Higher Education Sunday, we celebrate all the institutions of higher learning that claim historic or current affiliation with the UCC. Among those are several HBCUs (Historically Black Colleges and Universities). One of those HBCUs in New Orleans, Louisiana, is Dillard University.

Founded in 1935, Dillard is the result of the merger of two historically African American institutions. Immediately following Emancipation in the mid-1860’s, the Methodist Episcopal Church founded Thompson Biblical Institute to train African American ministers. A few years later, the American Missionary Association of the Congregational Church established Straight University in New Orleans. Today, Dillard University is the result of that merger and is affiliated with both the United Methodist Church and the United Church of Christ.

Dillard continues the training envisioned by its founding organizations so many years ago through Lawless Chapel Ministry’s (LCM) “VisionQuest, a program that aids students in pursuing ordained, music and lay ministry, and helps students find the work, and the life, to which God has called them.

LCM and VisionQuest accomplish their purposes by offering a lively worship service in Lawless Chapel every Sunday while the University is in session. The style of worship represents an eclectic mix of the University’s two affiliations (United Methodist and United Church of Christ) with a little bit of Baptist, and a measure of creative experimentation that reflects the cultural exuberance of the city of New Orleans. The VisionQuest Chorale and Liturgical Dancers and Mime Ministry provide the music and dance for worship--be it on campus, throughout New Orleans, or beyond the city.”\*

You can find out more about Dillard, or the other HBCUs affiliated with the UCC by visiting online or in person:

* Dillard University, New Orleans, LA; www.dillard.edu
* Fisk University, Nashville, TN; www.fisk.edu
* Huston-Tillotson University, Austin, TX; www.htu.edu
* LeMoyne-Owen College, Memphis, TN; www.loc.edu
* Talladega College, Talladega, AL; www.talladega.edu
* Tougaloo College, Tougaloo, MS; www.tougaloo.edu

\*www.dillard.edu/chaplain

November 6, 2022

**Twenty-Second Sunday after Pentecost**

2 Thessalonians 2:1-5, 13-17

Hold on to Faith

It’s been almost a week since we celebrated Halloween. You might know Halloween as a day for trick-or-treating, costumes and kids’ parties. But did you know that it started as a holy day? In fact, the root word of Halloween (hallow) means holy. The ending of the word, “een” is short for “evening.” Halloween is the eve of the Christian holiday of All Saints Day.

Traditionally, Halloween was the day to defy death, to shout to evil, “Our God is greater and we are not afraid of you!” Centuries ago, Celtic people gathered on this day around bonfires, wore costumes and enacted battles between forces of good and evil. Some of the rituals we still follow today, like scary costumes and jack-o-lanterns, continue that tradition.

All Saints Day, officially on November 1 but often celebrated in United Church of Christ congregations on the first Sunday in November, is a day to remember and honor saintly people in the past. On this day, we might recall those people in our congregation, family or wider church community who have had an impact on the world in God’s name. The following day, November 2, is officially All Souls Day. On this day, we honor everyone who has passed away, especially those who lived ordinary lives which did not garner recognition like the Saints. Many churches combine All Saints and All Souls celebrations as a reminder that God welcomes all into the tender arms of love and mercy in the life that is to come.

However you celebrated this week, or continued in your worship today, this week is a powerful one that can in many ways mirror the entire Christian journey. Beginning with the ancient rituals of Halloween, you have had the chance to look death in the face and proclaim that you are not afraid, because you know that the eternal life God promises is stronger than death. Then, on all Saints Day, you recognize the power of those whose connection to God is especially visible. Finally, on All Souls Day, you celebrate a God whose love encompasses all, now and into eternity. Thanks be to God!

November 13, 2022

**Twenty-Third Sunday after Pentecost**

Isaiah 65:17-25

Infinite Possibilities

*Stewardship Sunday*

On this Stewardship Sunday, we look ahead with hope and make promises for how we as individuals will contribute to the health of the whole of the body of Christ in the year to come.

Our theme this year, *From Bread and Cup to Faith and Giving*, is a reminder that we give out of the goodness and abundance that we have received from a loving God. Of course, we don’t just need this message and reminder at Stewardship time. At all times of year, through scripture, study, prayer and connection with our community and the wider world, we can be recalled back to the God whose love for us overflows. If you would like more resources to encourage your generous response to a gracious God, check out the books and brochures available at uccresources.com.

Everyone in the church would appreciate a copy of the brochure, “What Scripture Says About Giving,” a quick and thoughtful guide to how and why to give to the work of the church.

*Inspiring Generosity: A Stewardship Resource for the Local Church* is a comprehensive guide to year-round stewardship. This 118-page manual is available in either book form or PDF download and features 4 fundraising methods for the local church, including "Consecrating Stewards," as well as chapters on the theological background on the motivation for giving and understanding mission.

*The Gifting God: Change the Way You Look at Giving* is a small group study that invites you and your small group into an exploration of what scripture has to say about giving, over the course of several weeks or sessions.

*For Such a Time As This: A Bible Study for Stewardship in Challenging Times* is a guide thathelps readers recall the story of Esther and to ponder anew how this story might inform generous giving here and now.

November 20, 2022

**Reign of Christ**

Colossians 1:11-20

Together in Christ

*Thanksgiving Sunday*

On Reign of Christ Sunday, we celebrate the many names of Jesus. Here are some of them. Which ones speak to you? Which ones are the most important? Which ones do you think we could do without?

ADVOCATE

(1 John 2:1)

PIONEER AND PERFECTER

(Hebrews 12:2)

BELOVED

(Matthew 12:18)

PRINCE OF PEACE

(Isaiah 9:6)

MESSIAH

(Luke 9:20)

CORNERSTONE

(Psalm 118:22)

DAYSPRING

(Luke 1:78)

JEHOVAH

(Isaiah 26:4)

DOOR

(John 10:7)

ALPHA AND OMEGA

(Revelation 1:8)

GOOD SHEPHERD

(John 10:11)

HEAD OF THE CHURCH

(Ephesians 1:22)

BRANCH

(Isaiah 4:2)

ONLY BEGOTTEN

(John 1:18)

HOLY CHILD

(Acts 4:27)

LIGHT OF THE WORLD

(John 8:12)

HOLY ONE OF GOD

(Mark 1:24)

I AM

(John 8:58)

IMMANUEL

(Isaiah 7:14)

ROOT OF DAVID

(Revelation 22:16)

KING

(Matthew 2:2)

WORD

(John 1:1)

LORD OF ALL

(Acts 10:36)

MAN OF SORROWS

(Isaiah 53:3)

BREAD OF LIFE

(John 6:32)

PROPHET

(Luke 24:19)

ROCK

(1 Corinthians 10:4)

DELIVERER

(Romans 11:26)

COUNSELLOR

(Isaiah 9:6)

SAVIOR

(Luke 2:11)

VINE

(John 15:1)

TRUTH

(John 1:14)

November 27, 2022

**First Sunday of Advent (Year A)**

Matthew 24:36-44

Called to Gift

*United Black Christians Anniversary*

Today is United Black Christians Anniversary. 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.\*

UBC 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 predominately 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.

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 world-wide 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

“Remembering Our Way Into the Future” ~ Zechariah 8:4-8

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