

Worship – Sunday, March 7, 2021
First Congregational UCC, Eagle River
L. Gail Irwin, Interim Pastor; Sandy Kaitchuck, Scripture Reader

“If you had a temple in the secret spaces of your heart, what would you worship there?”
Tom Barrett

Prelude: “Hear Our Prayer” (Word and Music by George Whelpton) CCLI#60609
Hear our prayer, O Lord.
Hear our prayer, O Lord.
Incline Thine ear to us,
And grant us Thy peace. Amen

Announcements: Hello and welcome to worship at First Congregational UCC in Eagle River. This is the service for **Sunday, March 7th, the Third Sunday of Lent.** Later in the service we’ll be sharing Communion, so gather some elements for that.

This Sunday at 10 AM we will host a Zoom coffee hour to check in with church friends. Look for the link in your Friday email. Remember to watch your SPAM or Promotions email box for Friday emails!

You can still join us for Tuesday night Lenten studies by Zoom at 7 PM. We’re studying Five Purposes of the Church. If you don’t know how to Zoom and want to learn, I can help you participate from the church building this Tuesday night if you call me in advance. The group meets informally at 6:30 PM, and class starts at 7.

Also, the adult class is organizing some meals for NATH, the shelter in Rhinelander. If you want to help them, see the Wish List in your March newsletter, drop off items from the list at the church during office hours, and someone in the class will deliver them to NATH.

If you haven’t gotten a Lent kit and would like one, I still have a couple; call me or Nan and we’ll get one to you. This can be used for your own devotional time or with the class.

Please keep Helena and Molly in your prayers. Let me or Tobi and the prayer group know of any other prayers you want lifted up.

Now, let’s begin worship with a prayer of Confession:

Prayer of Confession: (by Ann Siddall)

Jesus, cleanser of temples and souls, at this mid-point in the Lenten journey,
look deep within our hearts and our lives, and clear away all that holds us back.
May our minds, spirits and bodies be Temples open to Your presence:
and may our words and our actions be transparent to Your love and truth.
We pray that this church community will be purified in its life and mission,
so that all that we do in and from here may reveal Your Gospel to others.
In a moment of silence we sit before You, and name those things for which
we seek Your cleansing and healing, so that we may be more faithful disciples.
Silence

Words of Assurance:

Brothers and sisters, we are cleansed by the mercy of Christ; There is room in your life for that mercy to dwell. Accept forgiveness and be freed to follow as Christ’s disciples. **Let the people say AMEN.**

A Sermon for All Ages:

- Do you think you could put an entire Church in this wooden box?
- No, but maybe you could fit in everything you need for a simple service;
- I wonder what would you need in your box to worship God...?
- This is Bob’s Box: it was given to me by my friend, mentor and pastor Bob Simpson before he died;
- He had it built specially so he could take Church into nursing homes for small groups to worship together.

What’s inside? A bible, altar cloth, juice and cups, bread/wafers, a plate for the elements
o AND the box unfolds into a table!

- Most churches have pretty buildings where we gather for worship;
- We hear beautiful music and see art that reminds us of God; chairs; microphones
- But even you we don’t have all those things, you can still worship God;
- You could worship God with just the few things in this box
- Or even if we didn’t have the box, everything we need to worship God is right here in our hearts; our love for God and Jesus and each other!
- You can stop any time, anywhere in the day and worship God by saying: “***Hello God, I love you!***”
- Later in the service, we will have Communion together and we’ll try using the objects in Bob’s box, so watch for that!

Now let’s pray: repeat after me: ***Hello God! We love you! Amen.***

Hebrew Scripture: Exodus 20:2- 5a (NRSV)

I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me.

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. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the LORD your God am a jealous God...

Gospel Reading: John 2:13-25 (The Message)

When the Passover Feast, celebrated each spring by the Jews, was about to take place, Jesus traveled up to Jerusalem. He found the Temple teeming with people selling cattle and sheep and doves. The loan sharks were also there in full strength.

Jesus put together a whip out of strips of leather and chased them out of the Temple, stampeding the sheep and cattle, upending the tables of the loan sharks, spilling coins left and

right. He told the dove merchants, “Get your things out of here! Stop turning my Father’s house into a shopping mall!” That’s when his disciples remembered the Scripture, “Zeal for your house consumes me.”

But the Jews were upset. They asked, “What credentials can you present to justify this?” Jesus answered, “Tear down this Temple and in three days I’ll put it back together.”

They were indignant: “It took forty-six years to build this Temple, and you’re going to rebuild it in three days?” But Jesus was talking about his body as the Temple. Later, after he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered he had said this. They then put two and two together and believed both what was written in Scripture and what Jesus had said.

During the time he was in Jerusalem, those days of the Passover Feast, many people noticed the signs he was displaying and, seeing they pointed straight to God, entrusted their lives to him. But Jesus didn’t entrust his life to them. He knew them inside and out, knew how untrustworthy they were. He didn’t need any help in seeing right through them.

Sermon

- I. The story of Jesus turning over the tables in the Temple is a shocking one! In John’s Gospel, it’s one of his first public acts in his ministry, which helps us understand why he would immediately be a controversial figure. IMAGES OR GIF
 - a. It looks like he’s losing his temper, and maybe he did!
 - b. But there’s method to his madness. It’s like he is clearing the decks; cleansing the Temple for a new time; *it looks like destruction, but in fact it is housecleaning*;
 - c. Why did Jesus see the Temple as being unclean? Why so angry?
 - i. Here’s some history that might help: for the Jewish people the Temple in Jerusalem was politically charged and full of contradictions, corruption and bloodshed;
 - ii. Over centuries, it had been built up, and torn down, desecrated by their enemies.
 - iii. Many revolts and massacres had occurred there.
 - iv. In Jesus’ day, King Herod had enlarged it and made it into this resplendent edifice with inlaid gold and marble floors and walls;
 - v. He even put a big eagle, a symbol of Roman supremacy, by the entrance.
 - vi. Scripture says it took 46 years to build.
 - vii. And that was all paid for by oppressive taxes levied on the Jewish people;
- II. So you can understand why Jesus might see a need for some **deep spiritual cleaning** there.
 - a. Observant Jews like Jesus would have the ten commandments written on their hearts, starting with the first two:
 - b. *You shall have no other gods before me*
 - c. *You shall not make or worship idols*

- d. They understood that their beloved Temple had been corrupted into something more like an idol to be worshiped for its aesthetic beauty, rather than a place to pay tribute to God and commit to lives of faithfulness.
- III. Interestingly, the Jews had already experienced having the Temple taken from them back in history.
- a. They adapted their worship after the exile, away from a focus primarily on the Temple and its ritual sacrifices, to more local worship in synagogues and more of a focus on prayer, even worship in homes like at Passover.
 - b. They realized that to maintain their faith, they had to be able to carry it with them like in a suitcase, no matter where they were in the world.
 - c. But the Temple was still a beloved symbol, a gathering place for their unity, a household for their God, Yahweh.
- IV. In the Lenten study, we're talking about five purposes of the Church, and how we are living those out in the contemporary church, and right now, during quarantine; and what the future might hold for us in the Church.
- a. One purpose we're studying is (the Greek term for liturgy) *leitourgia*: **maintenance of divine worship**;
 - b. Basically, this means gathering to hear God's word, express our unity, and share the sacraments. But how do we make sure our worship has real integrity?
 - c. A few things I'm reminded of as I work on this study:
 - i. Worship should be God-centered: focused on who God is; and what God has done for us; its not about US, it's about God.
 - ii. We should bring our true selves to worship – with all our warts and mistakes *and* our best spiritual gifts and offerings;
 - iii. Worship should be an opportunity to be personally transformed by God's word;
 - iv. And it should then inspire our work to transform the world into something more in the shape of Christ's kingdom
 - v. Worship is not a spectator sport; (liturgy) *leitourgia* is “the work of the people”; everyone brings something of themselves to the party;
 - vi. And when people worship together, they should see a glimpse of what God's kingdom is like; even if ever so faint, a moment of transcendence where we've entered God's realm just for a moment!
 - vii. If those things are not happening, at least some of them some of the time, we may need to do a deep inner cleansing of our Temple, as individual worshipers and congregations!
- V. Quarantine is one of many circumstances that have caused us over the last few decades to engage in some existential questioning about the way churches worship, and what needs to be cleaned up in our own time.
- a. Even before Covid-19, church attendance has been declining for decades;
 - b. Almost all churches – everywhere! Even mega churches!
 - i. We might try to beef up our worship presentations with new music or more attractive preaching styles;

- ii. But research shows that those who have left the church-- or who never came at all-- are not just turned off by our music or preaching style;
 - iii. Some are not coming because they are unfamiliar with what we have to offer (nobody ever took them to church),
 - iv. Some are not coming because they've experienced the church as hypocritical, citing things like clergy abuse of children, homophobia and the influence of politics on what churches do and say;
 - v. they sense that Christians are not genuine; not what we claim to be.
 - vi. Jesus also recognized the hypocrisy in his religious community; verse 25 popped out at me!
 - a. *He knew them {Jesus knew his disciples} inside and out, knew how untrustworthy they were. He didn't need any help in seeing right through them. (John 2:25)*
 - vii. God also knows us and sees right through us when we are insincere and hypocritical. But She continues to love us anyway.
- VI. How can we learn from this current exile about how to be more genuine, more God-focused, more transformational in the way we worship God together?
- a. We may want to re-consider what we want the outcome of our worship to be. Instead of the outcome being aesthetic beauty or drawing large crowds, maybe the outcome we should be going for is *forming genuine disciples*.
- VII. This year I learned a little about “micro-churches”, small groups that gather in various spaces like a dog park or a Mexican restaurant or a home.
- a. Each group is a little Church in itself as an alternative to the traditional institutional Church.
 - b. The micro-church is inspired by the early Church;
 - c. Small worship groups are able to build trust and intimacy in a way large gatherings don't.
 - d. Because it's small, people learn to trust each other and help each other with challenges; not just Sunday worship;
 - e. on occasion, they worship together with all the micro-churches at one time.
 - f. It's just one of many new ways the Church is learning to gather with greater integrity.
- VIII. I would like to believe that quarantine is a housecleaning opportunity for our churches; a time to turn over some tables; to soul search about what we are doing and whether our worship is really transforming us, or if it's become just “religious entertainment”.
- a. We're wondering: is on-line worship “REAL” worship if we aren't together physically? Does worship need to happen in a building? If we're all having Communion at different times with a pre-recorded service, like we will do today, are we still expressing our unity as the Church?
 - b. Those are good questions;
 - c. We are still learning there are so many ways to be God's Church, just like the Hebrews in the wilderness, the exiled Jews and the early Church!

- IX. When Jesus suggested he could tear down the Temple and rebuild it in 3 days, he wasn't talking about the physical structure; he was talking about his own his body.
- a. the Church is a **body** that lives and breathes, grows and changes, organically.
 - b. In Jesus, that body was broken; and then resurrected;
 - c. now the Temple lives in our bodies, and it goes with us everywhere, by the power of the Holy Spirit.
 - d. WE embody the Church and its worship wherever we go.
 - e. How can we, as Christ's body, broken and resurrected, stay healthy and connected to each other and God in new ways of worshiping and living together? What new insights and models can we learn from along the way of exile?
 - f. The Council is beginning to work on how we can get back to at least limited in person worship. There are many complicated logistic and ethical issues to work out to be sure worship has integrity, whether together or apart. Please be praying for your leaders!

Hymn: "Change My Heart, O God" (Eddie Espinosa) CCLI #1565
 (Norma Jaeger, Piano; Linda Brainard and Lori Hunter, Vocals)

*Change my heart, oh God; Make it ever true;
 Change my heart, oh God; May I be like You.*

*Change my heart oh God; Make it ever true
 Change my heart oh God; May I be like You*

*You are the potter; I am the clay
 Mold me and make me; This is what I pray*

*Change my heart oh God; Make it ever true
 Change my heart oh God; May I be like You*

Pastoral Prayer:

O Holy God, there are so many tables that need to be turned over in this world.
 We lift up our anger and sorrow for all that is corrupted and broken
 In places that you made to be holy:
 In this beautiful creation you gave us, the earth, that should be protected;
 In the Church, your house, that should be a place of healing and transformation;
 In our communities divided by wealth and poverty and politics and racism;
 Turn our world around, Lord, and bring us healing.
 We look up with hope, beyond the suffering, to see glimpses of resurrection.
 We feel your blessings pour over us like the sunshine we enjoyed this week,
 The little promises of spring, more vaccines administered.
 Thank you, O God, for all you have done and are doing to turn the tables.
 Hear our prayers of concern and gratitude, lifted up in silence...

As we gather at your table, transform us into living stones building Christ's Temple.
These things we pray in his name, saying

The Lord's Prayer

Service of Holy Communion

Invitation:

At this table, we gather with all who commit to be followers of Christ,
To share in the feast of the Kingdom.
We confess that Christ has offered his body,
broken and resurrected, as the new Temple,
Through which we meet God and find wholeness.
We believe that God created us, Christ called us,
and that the Holy Spirit sustain us on our journeys of faith.
Wherever you are on the path of salvation,
if you are a follower of Jesus Christ,
young or old, member, friend or visitor, on line or in person,
You are invited to this table, for Christ is our host.

Words of Institution

Prayer of Thanks:

We thank you, O Christ, that we are the guests at your table.
As we have been fed by your gift of life,
So we will share with the world all that you give to us in love. Amen.

Invitation to the Offering:

If you have a Lent kit, you may have already learned about Sandra, a Congolese refugee who is making the best of her situation by sewing masks for other refugees during the pandemic. Sandra and her husband were recently laid off from their manufacturing jobs due to COVID-19. But through a program called RefugeeOne, she says sewing face masks is a good way to keep busy until she can get back to work, and to help others. She is using a brand new sewing machine from RefugeeOne and donating the masks to local community organizations and a homeless shelter.

Hundred of refugees in the program have lost their income and aren't sure when they'll return to work. But they still want to help others.

RefugeeOne is one of many organizations supported by your generous donations to One Great Hour of Sharing. March 14th is the target date for OGHS giving. Use the envelope in your March newsletter, or you can give on line at ucc.org/oghs. Thank you!

Blessing/Benediction: And now, let God turn your hearts over and be cleansed by Christ's love.
Go in peace. Amen.

Closing: "Let There Be Peace on Earth" (By Sy Miller and Jill Jackson) CCLI #1562668
Let there be peace on earth, and let it begin with me.
Let there be peace on earth, the peace that was meant to be.
To take each moment and live each moment in peace eternally!
Let there be peace on earth, and let it begin with me!