

**Worship Service – February 28, 2021**  
**First Congregational UCC, Eagle River**  
**L. Gail Irwin, Interim Pastor**

**Announcements:** Hello and welcome to worship at First Congregational UCC in Eagle River. This is the service for Sunday, February 28<sup>th</sup>, the second Sunday of Lent. If you haven't gotten a Lent kit and would like one, I still have a few; call Nan and come by to pick one up, or I can deliver one to you if needed.

Join us for Tuesday night adult studies by Zoom at 7 PM. We're studying Five Purposes of the Church and thinking critically about whether we are doing what Christ wants us to. The group has decided to meet informally at 6:30 PM, so there is a new Zoom link for the class now and you can come early if you want, but the class will formally start at 7. Let me know if you have questions.

Helena has moved to Phelps Care for continued rehab; please keep her in prayer. Let me or Tobi and the prayer group know of any other prayers you want lifted up.

Let's begin worship with a prayer of Confession:

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**Prayer of Confession:** (adapted from a prayer by John van de Laar)

It is too easy, God, for faith to become an escape

—a way to avoid the pain of being human and alive;

or a path to success —a way to persuade the universe to give us the things we want; or a system of control—a way to bend others to our will.

But the faith you offer is different, Jesus, more dangerous and compelling; It's the faith that carries the cross, that embraces death,

and lays itself down for the sake of others;

It's the only faith that can lead us to resurrection, to life renewed and overflowing. Forgive us for choosing the easy way when you call us to sacrifice. We praise you, O God, for your mercy, Give us open hearts to receive your grace. Hear our confessions in silence...Amen.

**Words of Assurance:** Christ calls us to follow, and is ready to accept us and lead us forward, any time we repent. Accept the gift of grace and keep following. Let the people at home say AMEN.

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**A Sermon for All Ages:**

- We are now in the season of Lent; a time when Christians pray a little more, and say they're sorry for things they've done wrong. It's also a good time to do kind things for others.
- To inspire you to do something kind for others during Lent this year, I want to introduce you to Quincy! He is a Golden Retriever who lives in Eagle River. Here he is with his "brother" Gibbs.
- Quincy is well known for the tricks he's learned; has gotten many awards during his life for competing with other dogs to do the best tricks!

- But Quincy is special in other ways besides just fun tricks
- He has been trained as a therapy dog and has visited over 100 kids who were sick, plus over 500 grandmas and grandpas in nursing homes. He makes people laugh, comforts them and give them someone soft to pet
- He’s been trained as a Disaster Dog: if there’s a disaster like a fire or tornado, he can go where people are scared and comfort them calmly; never barks or growls or bites or jumps on people;
- Quincy was once even blessed by a pastor in Conover at an animal blessing!
- How did Quincy learn to be such a special dog?
- He was born special and loving; but he was also trained by a special person named Nancy Diepenbrock;
- Nancy is also a special person:
  - She is a nurse who helps people when they’re sick
  - She once went to India to teach nursing students
  - And she went to Honduras to build houses for people who didn’t have them
  - Right now she’s vaccinating people with the Covid 19 vaccine!
- Quincy and Nancy are Jesus’ disciples who look for ways to help others
- If a dog can help others so much, I bet you can too!
  - You could reach out in friendship to someone who has to learn from home and can’t be at school
  - You could cook for a neighbor who doesn’t get to leave their house and take the food to their door with your mask on;
  - You could collect food for the Vilas Co. Food Pantry or even get your family to cook a meal and take it to the homeless shelter in Rhinelander!
- I think Jesus must be really proud of Quincy, and I know he’s proud of all the kind things you do. I wonder what kind thing Jesus will ask you to do during Lent this year.

**Prayer: Dear God, thank you for dogs and people who help others. We want to be like that. Show us what we can do to help others around Eagle River, or farther away. Amen.**

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**Gospel Reading: Mark 8:27-38** (The Message)

Joy Turpin, Scripture Reader

*Jesus and his disciples headed out for the villages around Caesarea Philippi. As they walked, he asked, “Who do the people say I am?”*

*“Some say ‘John the Baptizer,’ ” they said. “Others say ‘Elijah.’ Still others say ‘one of the prophets.’ ”*

*He then asked, “And you—what are you saying about me? Who am I?”*

*Peter gave the answer: “You are the Christ, the Messiah.”*

*Jesus warned them to keep it quiet, not to breathe a word of it to anyone. He then began explaining things to them: “It is necessary that the Son of Man proceed to an ordeal of suffering, be tried and found guilty by the elders, high priests, and religion scholars, be killed, and after three days rise up alive.” He said this simply and clearly so they couldn’t miss it.*

*But Peter grabbed him in protest. Turning and seeing his disciples wavering, wondering what to believe, Jesus confronted Peter. “Peter, get out of my way! Satan, get lost! You have no idea how God works.”*

*Calling the crowd to join his disciples, he said, “Anyone who intends to come with me has to let me lead. You’re not in the driver’s seat; I am. Don’t run from suffering; embrace it. Follow me and I’ll show you how. Self-help is no help at all. Self-sacrifice is the way, my way, to saving yourself, your true self. What good would it do to get everything you want and lose you, the real you? What could you ever trade your soul for?”*

*“If any of you are embarrassed over me and the way I’m leading you when you get around your fickle and unfocused friends, know that you’ll be an even greater embarrassment to the Son of Man when he arrives in all the splendor of God, his Father, with an army of the holy angels.”*

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## **Sermon**

- I. It’s been about a year since we heard about Covid-19 and the world stopped.
  - a. I read your March newsletter from 2020: Soles for Souls shoe collection; yoga classes were going in the basement; a book group met; you were doing Wednesday Lenten services with soup suppers;
  - b. My last in person worship service as the funeral for a colleague, an interim minister who was a mentor to me. I sat in a beautiful UCC church, surrounded by my clergy colleagues, shoulder to shoulder.
  - c. Its strange to remember that last day of normalcy
  - d. We are all tired of Covid after a year; but it is not tired of us;
  - e. This week we marked the chilling milestone of 500,000 dead from Covid, just in our country.
  - f. But there is good news, too! Infections rates have dropped dramatically in the last month;
  - g. Those who are older have hopefully started getting the vaccine; but we’re still at only 14% of the population. More vaccine is coming; all of us will eventually be able to get vaccinated;
    - i. This is important not just for yourself; but for everyone around you;
    - ii. It’s like wearing a mask: the more who get the vaccine, the safer it will be to open up schools, businesses and churches;
    - iii. Meanwhile, we keep masking up, social distancing until 75-80% are vaccinated, which is when doctors say we can establish a new normal.
    - iv. If you’re waffling on getting the vaccine, talk to Nancy Deipenbrock or Shirley and Larry Thompson at the pharmacy—medical professionals you know and trust.
- II. I’m not a medical professional; I’m clergy, and for a year I’ve listened to and transmitted messages about hygiene and safety that I never thought I would have to talk about:
  - a. Stay home; don’t come to church; don’t visit with church friends; don’t go to other people’s homes; don’t share food at a potluck; don’t take communion together; for God’s sake, DON’T SING TOGETHER; stop going to your

volunteer job; don't travel; stay away from your grandchildren; JUST TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF; spend more time on your computer;

- b. Everything about these messages feels WRONG! They are the opposite of everything I've tried to teach my congregations my entire career;
- c. These messages are good for decreasing the spread of Covid; but they are not good for building up the body of Christ.
- d. I fear that, in the last year, while some of us have become safely insulated in our little bubbles, others are suffering from the effects of isolation and loneliness, unemployment and the resulting lack of health care, poverty and homelessness. Children's education is diminished in some cases by having to learn from home. Alcohol and drug abuse has risen in the last year, and more people have contemplated suicide.
- e. Besides the 500,000 Covid-19 deaths, there are all these secondary effects. Some of us have done a good job of staying safe in our homes and bubbles; but while we're safe, we are not witnessing the needs of others and responding to that need. That's a problem for Christians!

- III. In the history of the plagues, going back to the 2<sup>nd</sup> Century, when epidemics hit a region, it was often Christians who went out to care for the sick,
  - a. There was the Plague of Cyprian in the 3<sup>rd</sup> Century: a disease historians think was similar to Ebola.
  - b. When it hit, it actually triggered a growth spurt in Christianity. Bishop Cyprian preached to his congregation that they should not just grieve for the dead, who were safe in heaven with God, but they should focus their efforts on caring for the living.
  - c. His congregation responded faithfully. A fellow bishop, Dionysius, wrote how Christians, "*Heedless of danger ... took charge of the sick, attending to their every need.*" This included people who were not Christians.
  - d. In 1527, when the bubonic plague hit Wittenberg, Martin Luther refused to flee the city to protect himself. Instead, he stayed and ministered to the sick. Unfortunately, he also kept his family with him and his daughter Elizabeth died of the plague. Was that sacrifice worth it?

- IV. How much of your own safety, or your family's safety, are you supposed to compromise to help others? This is a question that health care workers live with every day.
  - a. For those of us who can stay home and quarantine, there is a temptation to think we're powerless to help in the community because it isn't safe to be with other people; but safety is not the only consideration for Christians.
  - b. The journalist Lyman Stone wrote early in the pandemic about the responsibility Christians have to care for others. He pointed out the ethical dilemma here.
  - c. *For Christians*, he writes, *it is better that we should die serving our neighbor than surrounded in a pile of masks we never got a chance to use.*
  - d. But he points out that Christian teaching also prohibits self-harm, and harming others. In an infectious atmosphere, visiting sick people or working at a

homeless shelter or food pantry without protective gear can endanger you AND the people around you;

- i. (I visited the Oconto Falls food pantry at the beginning of the pandemic and was shocked at how many people in their 70's and 80's were milling around, filling grocery bags, some of them unmasked).

V. The dilemma for us in the Church is: how do we take the right amount of risk to do ministries of caring and healing in a pandemic?

- a. The answer is: *with more creativity*.
  - i. The same way we've figured out how to get groceries, get a haircut, go to church on line and honor other traditions.
  - ii. These are things we've decided are important to keep doing in quarantine because they matter to us, so we've found new ways to do them.
- b. In the same way, we need to get creative about how to make sacrifices on behalf of others; taking the right amount of risk;
  - i. In the newsletter this month I asked you to think of what your church would be doing in March, if there was no Covid,
    1. lap blankets, collecting shoes for Soles for Souls, raising money for Relay for Life;
  - ii. And then think of new ways you could do those things socially distanced
    1. The adult study is toying with random ways of making and sharing soup—with neighbors or the Pantry, because you used to have a soup supper during Lent
  - iii. **But also:** to keep us attentive to the needs of the world, we should always be thinking of new things we didn't realize God needs us to do—needs that Covid has uncovered:
    1. Increasing poverty means we might need to ramp up our support for the Food Pantry and shelter and low income housing;
    2. education and awareness about racism
    3. You could offer internet or smart phone education, Zoom training, or even lend out laptops
    4. As pastor: I need new ways to distribute Melody of Compassion funds because people aren't coming by the church anymore
    5. We need re-organization of a calling committees to connect with homebound;
  - iv. The challenge becomes personal when you decide to be the one to step out and take a risk:
    1. to teach yourself some computer skills so you can help others
    2. cook food for 10-20 people at Frederick's Place;
    3. Your church's new structure means no committee is going to spoon feed you a mission opportunity! It's up to you to be creative, find partners, and get to work.
    4. I think you have the capacity to do this.

- VI. Lent is a season to offer sacrifices, not just to make yourself feel holy, but to help build Christ's body and reign. It means putting your own safety and security aside for the sake of others;
- a. At the same time: God wants us to stay alive so we can keep following Christ. So don't lose the mask! And keep social distancing!
  - b. Thank you for staying safe and keeping others safe with your mask and by avoiding travel and crowds! THAT'S THE RIGHT THING TO DO.
  - c. BUT a year of staying safe is taking a toll on our souls! We need to shift our heads and hearts outward.
- VII. A story to close with: We've all seen the stories from Texas this week of ice and snow, power outages and burst pipes.
- a. I have several cousins in Texas who were all effected. But each one had incredible stories of being saved by neighbors with groceries and generators, OR being the ones who saved neighbors with room to sleep on the floor and hot cooked meals. All this generosity had to go on with masks and social distancing.
  - b. In a crisis, people do risk themselves for each other; and we can too.
  - c. This pandemic is a huge ethical challenge, and its tempting to stay in our turtle shells;
    - i. but God is giving us time to rise to the occasion, get creative while staying safe; and take the right kind of risk to save someone besides ourselves.

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**Hymn:** "The Summons" (John L. Bell & Graham Maule) CCLI #1040329

*Will you come and follow me if I but call your name?*

*Will you go where you don't know and never be the same?*

*Will you let my love be shown? Will you let my name be known,  
will you let my life be grown in you and you in me?*

*Will you leave yourself behind if I but call your name?*

*Will you care for cruel and kind and never be the same?*

*Will you risk the hostile stare should your life attract or scare?*

*Will you let me answer prayer in you and you in me?*

*Will you let the blinded see if I but call your name?*

*Will you set the prisoners free and never be the same?*

*Will you kiss the leper clean and do such as this unseen,  
and admit to what I mean in you and you in me?*

*Lord your summons echoes true when you but call my name.*

*Let me turn and follow you and never be the same.*

*In Your company I'll go where Your love and footsteps show.*

*Thus I'll move and live and grow in you and you in me.*

**Pastoral Prayer and The Lord's Prayer** *(from a prayer by Malcolm Boyd)*

Dear God, we need to communicate with each other across abysses of separation.  
How can we let you enter our lives, Lord,  
if we shut out our sisters and brothers who share the earth with us?  
From the bitterness and loneliness of keeping you and other people outside our lives,  
save us, God.  
Nurture in us your love of the whole of life that you have created.  
Let us be faithful followers of your way of responsibility,  
unselfish involvement in your people wherever they are found.  
Hear our prayers for the loved ones of those 500,000 who have died of Covid,  
And the many around the world who grieve like us.  
Hear our prayers for mercy, for those who suffer because of hunger or homelessness,  
Who are lonely, unemployed or deal with mental illness.  
We remember to you those on our hearts who we lift up to you in silence... But we cannot  
forget the abundant blessings and protection you've afforded us...hear our prayers of gratitude. ..  
Thank you, Lord.  
All our prayers, silent and spoken we offer up in the name of the one who taught us, saying  
**The Lord's Prayer**

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**Invitation to Offering:**

The United Church of Christ has issued an appeal to assist people affected by this year's winter storms across a wide swath of the US, with Texas particularly hard hit. A number of UCC congregations there are opening up warming centers and distributing emergency food and water. UCC Disaster Ministries is working with leaders in the impacted communities on needs like shelter and food, clean-up, and repair and spiritual care. Please pray for all the communities impacted by the storms. You can Make a secure online donation to help by going on line to [ucc.org/disaster-winter-storms](http://ucc.org/disaster-winter-storms)

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**Blessing/Benediction:** And now, go out remembering Jesus's message to his disciples: *Don't run from sacrifice. He will show you how to follow. Amen.*

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**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!*