



WORSHIP AT HOME

*with UCC Westerly
during the Covid-19 outbreak*

August 16, 2020

Broadcast from our beautiful sanctuary!!!

- This abbreviated At Home Worship Resource is for your use at home this coming Sunday. Create a small worship space in your home anywhere. Add a candle, a bible and perhaps a small summer bouquet!

- Settle into your worship space around 9:30am on Sunday and begin. Make your list of prayer concerns. Then sit in silence and let your mind calm down. When you reach the Prayer Time in the service, aloud or just in your own mind, ask God to bless each of the persons and situations on your list. End with the Lord's Prayer in whatever words are most comfortable for you. *If you would like me to include your prayer requests in the service, kindly send them to me by email or text prior to 9:30am.*

- *Our service is broadcast on Facebook Live beginning at 845am. You can access the service through this church Facebook page, @UCC Westerly, or the church website www.uccwesterly.org where you can click on the Facebook symbol to be connected with the service. Please note that our Facebook Live broadcast is, unfortunately, subject to some tech issues that are beyond our control and, as a result, the broadcast sometimes ends prematurely. When this happens, we will do our best to begin again but we sometimes are unable to resolve the tech issues. Our deepest apologies for any time this happens. We're doing our best!*

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Light your candle as a reminder of God's presence with you

Gathering Music – *The Lord's My Shepherd*

[MUSIC: David Paxton, ©2000, Lorenz Publishing Co., All rights reserved. Reprinted under ONE LICENSE#A-734569]

CALL TO WORSHIP [adapted from *The Love of Eternal Wisdom*, Rabbi Rami Shapiro, ©2011; p. 12]

Wisdom gave you capacities to know that which only you can know. She gave you a body capable of building that which only you can build. She made you as expressions of Herself, bearers of Wisdom each in your own way, that you might guard the world and protect it.

OPENING SONG -- “God of Grace and God of Glory”

[WORDS: Harry E. Fosdick & MUSIC: John Hughes; Public Domain. Reprinted under ONE LICENSE#A-734569]

1. *God of grace and God of glory, on your people pour your power;
Crown your ancient church's story, bring its bud to glorious flower.
Grant us wisdom, grant us courage, for the facing of this hour,
For the facing of this hour.*

2. *Heal your children's warring madness, bend our pride to your control.
Shame our wanton, selfish gladness, rich in things and poor in soul.*

*Grant us wisdom, grant us courage, lest we miss your kingdom's goal,
Lest we miss your kingdom's goal.*

- 3. Save us from weak resignation to the evils we deplore;
Let the gift of your salvation be our glory evermore.
Grant us wisdom, grant us courage, serving you whom we adore,
Serving you whom we adore.*

UNISON PRAYER OF REFLECTION

[adapted from *The Iona Prayerbook*, Peter Millar, ©1998, p. 81-2]

Holy One, open my heart to the possibility that you have created me to do you some definite service. Enable me to believe you have committed some work to me which you have not committed to another. Help me to know my mission from you as a bond of connection between persons and that you have not created me for naught. I shall do good. I shall do your work. I shall be a conveyor of truth in my own life if I but keep your commandments. Embolden me to believe that whatever I am, I can never be thrown away because you do nothing in vain and I am precious to you. Amen.

SCRIPTURE READING

Morning Message

Backwards and Forwards

Luke 9:57-62

Rev. Ruth

A TIME OF PRAYER

Pastoral Prayers

Silent Prayers

The Lord's Prayer in whatever words are most comfortable for you

OUR RESPONSE TO GOD

Acknowledgement of Gifts & Offerings*

**Doxology "Praise God from who all blessings flow; Praise Christ all creatures here below; Praise Holy Spirit, Comforter; One God, Triune, whom we adore. Amen."*

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CLOSING SONG – "Lord, You Have Come to the Lakeshore"

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- 1. Lord, you have come to the lakeshore
Looking neither for wealthy nor wise ones;
You only asked me to follow humbly.
Refrain: O Lord, with your eyes you have searched for me,
And while smiling have spoken my name;
No my boat's left on the shoreline behind me;
By your side I will seek other seas.*
- 2. You know so well my possessions;
My boat carries no gold and no weapons;
You will find there my nets and labor.
Refrain*

3. *You need my hands, full of caring
Through my labors to give others rest,
And constant love that keeps on loving.*
Refrain

ANNOUNCEMENTS

A PRAYER OF BENEDICTION – [*The New Century Hymnal*, #875]

Jesus said, “you ought always to pray and not to faint.” Do not pray for easy lives; pray to be stronger women and men. Do not pray for tasks equal to your powers, but for power equal to your tasks; Then, the doing of your work will be no miracle for you will be the miracle. Every day you will wonder at yourself and the richness of life which has come to you by the grace of God.

PASSING OF THE PEACE

Music as the Service ends – “*Acclamation of Praise*”

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### ***Backwards & Forwards***

A Message for Sunday Morning Worship  
United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT  
*Facebook Live* service on August 16, 2020  
Text: Luke 9:57-62

I am in awe of the technology now available in cars and trucks. It’s really incredible, sometimes bordering on the creepy. For example, I am totally freaked out by the fact that some new cars can park themselves. I’ve never actually seen a car doing this but the mere fact it’s even a possibility is bizarre to me because I am someone who got her driver’s license in the ‘70’s. Back in the day, being able to parallel park the car was something you had to be able to do to get your driver’s license. And I took my driving test in my parents’ massive Buick station wagon. I literally lost sleep over that part of the driver’s test. But I passed. I passed even though I hit the curb while parking. I’m not sure why. Maybe the hot pats I was wearing had something to do with it?

Don’t get me wrong, there are some new car technology advances that I absolutely love. Chief among these is the back-up camera. My Matrix doesn’t have it, but Peter’s new Corolla sure does! Honestly, I didn’t even realize it was there but when I was doing all of the driving last year, Peter – who knows I hate backing up in parking lots especially – reminded me of the back-up camera. Who knew!! It is amazing! I can actually see whether or not someone is walking willy-nilly with a grocery cart behind me! And, even better, there’s that little red line on the back-up camera that tells you if you’re getting too close to something behind you – like the neighbor’s garbage cans placed in the street instead of at the curb.

Backwards and forwards. Surely this is a basic part of driving a motor vehicle no matter what kind it is, whether it has back-up cameras or only back-up lights, one of which may be

burned out at any given moment. And let's remember that backwards and forwards is always a part of life. Right now, in the midst of this Coronavirus craziness, that sense of one step forward and two steps backward is palpable. Government officials seem to get a handle on it and we feel like maybe, maybe, we are finally moving in a positive direction toward the end of all this. And then the weekend comes and a few too many people party with abandon and by Tuesday of the week after, we've taken several steps back as infection rates and hospitalization rates tick up. It surely does get discouraging, doesn't it? We so desperately want this to be over! This and all the other chaos and craziness that, on some days, feels like it is ripping the fabric of our society – our whole way of life – to shreds. Layered on to this are the usual worries of everyday life – home, family, finances – none of which have been left untouched by the chaos, and we simply feel overwhelmed and powerless. Some days the temptation to stay in bed, curled up under the covers with instructions left to wake us up in January when things will hopefully be better, is tempting indeed. But, dear ones, that is not a viable option, is it? So, what are we supposed to do? How are we supposed to cope with all this? How are we to find the strength, the will, to focus on the future?

Luckily, Jesus has an app for that. Jesus recognized the overwhelming nature of the demands that life, in its most chaotic moments, imposes upon us. He knew people needed help, reassurance in overwhelming situations as well as in the more mundane moments of life. Of course, Jesus' "app" was not an icon on a cell phone screen or a tablet that you can access by the touch of a finger and then move on. No, Jesus' "app" or "application" (which is what app is short for remember) was to teach people what it means to have God as the foundation of your life every moment of every day. Jesus' entire ministry was focused on teaching everyone he encountered how to apply God's expectations for us and of us to life in those moments when it feels impossible to do so. In fact, it is this very approach to ministry that ultimately led to his death on the cross because Jesus' "apps" for living life ran counter to every expectation the world insisted was important. Jesus' life and ministry reveals that he understood all too well how much average people suffer under the forces of empire. He understood it because he lived it right along with the people. Jesus was born into poverty, grew up in poverty and conducted his ministry in poverty. It was indeed the very environment he used as foundational for his teaching and healing of the people. The disciples whom he chose to join him in ministry knew this was his expectation of them – to give up life as they knew it to follow him. They each freely made this decision but something I'd like you to note is this. The Gospels record all the men (and women) who said yes, but not the ones who said no – usually. This very situation is the one we encounter in this morning's text.

Today's text comes when Jesus and the disciples had been on the road for a long time. In fact, the end of Jesus' ministry was approaching although the disciples didn't really understand this. In verse 51 of chapter 9 in Luke, we read that this is the time when "Jesus set his face to go to Jerusalem." Part of this is literary foreshadowing since Luke's readers would immediately know what awaited Jesus in Jerusalem. But, part of it is setting the stage for the readers of the exchanges Jesus soon has with a few of the folks who are trailing along with him and the disciples as they trudge along the dusty, hot road leading to his ultimate destiny. He is approached by three different men anxious to get close to this miraculous hero who was by now well known and recognized as someone with a unique and powerful relationship with God.

The first man says to him, "I will follow you wherever you go." Jesus does not smile and say, "okay then!" Nope, instead Jesus replies, "Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head." Jesus is telling the man he is homeless and that if the man truly wants to follow him, he will need to give up everything to do so – his home, his family, any semblance of a normal life – everything. We can just imagine the man, who

obviously expected a different answer, slowly dropping away from Jesus and disappearing from sight in the dust.

The second man is someone Jesus speaks to first. “Follow me!” he says and this man replies, “Lord, first let me go and bury my father.” Sounds like a reasonable request to our 21<sup>st</sup> century ears. But how does Jesus respond? “Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God.” Again, the man, who might have been expecting a little sympathy, instead receives a rebuke. Some scholars believe this is because Jesus knew the man’s father was still alive so Jesus knew that the man’s response was just procrastination dressed up as family responsibility. Whether this was the case or not, we’ll never know. But we do know that Jesus clearly told the man that personal responsibilities cannot interfere with how one responds to God’s invitations when they come along. Again, we can just envision this man slipping back into the crowd until he was left far behind.

Then a third man approached Jesus and says, “I will follow you, Lord; but let me first say farewell to those at my home.” Again, this sounds like a perfectly reasonable response to us as we know so well what it would mean to our loved ones if we just took off for parts unknown with no explanation. And again, Jesus’ answer is not what we expect from this kind and gentle man. He says to the man, “No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.” Ouch! That was harsh! He just told this man he wasn’t fit for the kingdom of God if he felt it was more important to say goodbye to his family! ...Or did he?

The metaphor Jesus uses in his answer to the man here is one that most of us in our 21<sup>st</sup> century technology ridden lives do not understand at all. He’s talking about plowing for goodness’ sake! Now, maybe some of you have some plowing experience but I’m thinking most of you do not. And, Jesus wasn’t talking about tractor plowing. He was talking about plowing by hand with a plow you pushed through the hard, arid dirt by brute force! The most basic principle of plowing is to keep your eyes focused forward, on where you want to end with the plow. If you look backward, over your shoulder, the furrow you are plowing will immediately run crooked and this you do not want. So what Jesus is saying here is that anyone who wants to be a part of bringing God’s kingdom to life here and now can only be focused on moving forward. Your eyes and your energy must be completely future oriented, not backward looking. This, dear ones, is absolutely key to understanding how Jesus is asking us to orient our own relationship with God and the ministries of the kingdom that relationship makes possible. We must orient our lives and our work toward the future so that we do not become mired in the past which is exactly what happens so often. And, dear ones, this is something we’ve all done! We’ve all lamented about the ways things “used to be.” Especially in these Coronavirus days we lament the days of the church being filled with people we love singing and hugging their way through worship. We’ve thought about how simple things were then, how we long for those days when things seemed easier than they do now. But, let’s recognize all those remembrances as wishful thinking when our visions of the past, whether it’s the distant past of childhood or the remembrances of a few months ago, are viewed through rose colored glasses. The truth is, the “old days” were just as fraught with problems as today is. The problems are just different. But our memories tend to recall the good stuff much more easily than the bad and these memory sweet spots are the very things tempting us to become mired in those backward focused moments.

Backwards and forwards, a reality of life and faith for each of us. Where is God in all this and what does God imagine for us in the midst of this conundrum? In his commentary on the Gospel of Luke, William Barclay explains all this with a beautiful metaphor. He reminds us that Jesus invites us, needs us, wants us to focus not on the sunset but on the dawn. The empty tomb

and the new beginning, the hope, it embodies was revealed at dawn. Jesus is calling us always toward the dawn but it can be difficult to hear and respond when life is already so demanding and full. This is why sometimes it feels like we're not ready to accept Jesus' invitation to new life in him, just like the three men who talked with him about becoming his follower. Each of them had a moment with Jesus, a moment when all the possibilities of the new dawn were right in front of them. Each of them said no in that moment for what felt like very good reasons. Then the moment passed and Jesus moved on while the men slipped into the pathway behind him.

Dear ones, these moments of invitation from Jesus are not "one and done." They come to us all the time and each time we have the chance to make a decision which will bring us closer to Jesus and draw us forward into the future God envisions for us. The decision is always ours to make, in the midst of life as it is. There are always reasons to say no. But what might happen if you dared to answer Jesus with a smile and a resounding "Yes!"? Or, put another way, do you want to walk forward or backward on your journey with Jesus each day? Are you walking toward the dawn of new beginnings or the sunset of what might have been? Dawns and sunsets are each beautiful in their own right, in their own time – but only one leads to the future. The choice of direction is yours. Every day. Amen.