

Let There Be Peace

United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT

May 28, 2023 – PENTECOST!!

Text: Matthew 5:1-13a

Happy Memorial Day Weekend and a Happy Pentecost to you all! I am pleased to see some folks wearing red in celebration of Pentecost. We do this because the red of Pentecost is a colorful reminder of the tongues of flame which hovered over the heads of the disciples as the Holy Spirit came upon them. Pentecost then marks the beginning of the Jesus movement which the disciples undertook following Jesus' ascension into heaven. That Memorial Day weekend and Pentecost overlap this year offers us an opportunity to consider these occasions and the precise moments they capture in perhaps a slightly different way than we otherwise might.

Memorial Day holds many memories for me, as I am sure it does for all of you. When I was a child, Memorial Day memories focus on two very different experiences directly connected to how my family observed the holiday. First, my mother and I would go to the nursery to purchase plants and then make the short drive to a neighboring community to the cemetery where her parents, and many of her family, are buried. Once there, she would park near the graves of her parents as well as several aunts and uncles. We would take all those bedding plants out of the back of the station wagon over to the graves of her parents. Once there she would lovingly clear all the weeds away from the stone, gently clean it and then begin planting the plants we brought. Always marigolds and geraniums. To this day, the smell of marigolds reminds me of those cemetery trips.

To be honest, I really had no idea why we were at the cemetery. When I was really little, I would just walk around all the gravestones and look at the flowers other people had planted at the graves. When I was old enough, my job was to go to one of the spigots placed

throughout the cemetery and fill the watering can for mom to use on the freshly planted flowers when she was finished. I remember being upset when I was old enough to read and realized my grandmother's name was on the headstone mom was planting around. My grandmother was then very much alive and why her name would be on that stone was incredibly confusing to 6 year old me. My mom explained that the cemetery was a sort of special resting place for people when life as we lived it each day came to an end. The flowers she planted each year were her way of both loving her father already buried there and reassuring herself that it would be okay when her mother, my grandmother, joined him in this place. I was little, but I remember that moment vividly, especially when the pungent smell of marigolds comes my way.

The other Memorial Day memory of childhood still vivid for me is our annual trips to our lake house. We would make the two and a half hour drive (takes 45 minutes now with the interstate) very early Saturday morning arriving at the cottage before noon. My dad would have been up previously to air out the cottage and make arrangements for the water to be turned back on and the dock to go in. So by the time we would arrive on that Saturday of Memorial Day weekend, it would be ready for another summer season of fun. At least in my mind it would be. If it was warm enough, I could usually nag my parents into letting me go wading in the frigid lake waters while they cleaned the cottage, getting it ready for the rest of the summer. Part of that weekend was also about planting the little gardens dotting the landscaping around the cottage which was perched at the top of a hill overlooking the lake. I don't remember what Mom planted, but I do know that the place didn't seem ready for summer until her little gardens were in. I remember the lake would be busy that weekend, but not crazy busy like it would become later in the summer. It would

be mostly the cottage owners there that weekend, so we'd be greeting neighbors we only saw for a few months each summer, comparing stories of how the cottages fared during the harsh winter months of northwestern Pennsylvania.

Two powerful memories of childhood, both connected to this holiday weekend, join with adult memories and experiences of Memorial Day and Pentecost in my heart and soul. The most powerful of these adult memories is connected to our first Memorial Day visit to Arlington National Cemetery after Peter's father was buried there. This weekend, that space is truly holy ground, especially for all those with loved ones buried there. When we were living in DC, Peter actually worked very nearby to the cemetery and as Memorial Day was approaching that first year after we lost his dad, Peter stopped by to visit the grave on his way home from work. A television news crew was there creating a Memorial Day piece for the upcoming weekend and asked him what it was like to have someone buried there. When the piece aired that evening, we watched it but I honestly can't remember what he said exactly. I do remember we were both crying, the memory of Win's loss still so fresh. I'm not sure he remembers either. But I know how proud he is of his dad and I know how much he misses his dad every day, still. I also know that the sight of all those graves decorated with American flags on Memorial Day weekend is heart-stopping when you realize the only way you get into that cemetery these days is by having undertaken heroic action in a military conflict where that action saved the lives of others. I still remember that feeling like a gut punch as we stood at the side of Win's newly dug grave while taps was played. At that time he was in a "new" section, on the very edge where only a few graves were located. Now that "new" section is full and Win is surrounded by too many veterans who lost their lives in wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. It is almost too

much to bear to think of all those young lives lost. I would urge you if you ever make it to Washington, DC to be sure to go to Arlington National Cemetery. It is a reverent, sacred place. But if you go, don't go as a tourist seeing yet another famous DC "attraction." Go as a citizen of this country to honor with prayer and thanksgiving the men and women who made all the difference in this country's history. If you do, I promise you will never be quite the same again.

So, why all this reminiscing about Memorial Day memories today, on this Pentecost Sunday? Isn't Pentecost supposed to be about the birthday of the church? Yes, that is how we think of Pentecost. Lots of churches have birthday cake celebrations on this Sunday for that very reason. The coming of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost does mark the moment when the disciples finally come to terms with the reality that Jesus was no longer with them in the flesh as he had been, and yet their work for him was not over. They accepted that they had received a call from God to continue the work Jesus had begun among them – the work of teaching and healing and encouraging people to live their entire lives differently as people beloved of God just as they were. This was a radical notion in first century Palestine in the era of brutal Roman domination. Their teachings got them arrested time and time again and yet they continued on, sometimes fighting among themselves about what exactly it meant to be doing what they were doing. These conflicts escalated when the Apostle Paul came on the scene because the disciples, especially Peter now the leader, distrusted Paul and could not understand why Paul felt he had this unique understanding of Jesus. So, even in the very earliest days of the church there was mistrust and disagreement among the followers. There were petty arguments amongst the people who made up the earliest groupings of followers, these groupings which eventually became known as house

churches. They disagreed about a lot of stuff – whether or not you had to be Jewish before you could become a Christian was a big one. They also disagreed about how to celebrate Communion, who should be baptized and when, what they should be doing in the rest of their lives as they waited for Jesus’ imminent return. In other words, then as now, they were church. They were people whose lives had been touched by other people of deep faith who had themselves been transformed by the experience of knowing Jesus. What we need to remember is that, like us, they brought all of themselves with them into the church, into what it means to love and follow Jesus in the midst of a group of fellow believers trying to do the same. What matters in all of this being church together, is one simple truth – we are all beloved of God, just as we are. Our challenge then, as church on this Pentecost Sunday when we celebrate how the church came to be, is to respond to God’s call to love and serve God through all the ways God needs us to love and serve others. It really is that basic.

This is why I chose the text I did for us this morning, the Beatitudes from the Gospel of Matthew. This, obviously, is not the story of Pentecost we know so well. What it is, though, is a summary of Jesus’ thoughts on how Jesus would have us live as God would want. It’s actually a list of all those moments we encounter in daily life, and how our faith invites us to respond to them:

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Jesus knows all those moments when you are feeling exhausted and overwhelmed, urging you to lay all those burdens down even if only for a moment, letting them rest in God’s hands.

Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. God knows your heart is breaking over the loved one lost last week or three decades ago. You are not alone in your grief, ever.

Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. God knows when you are being bullied and taken for granted, feeling like no one sees you or cares what is happening. God cares, and justice will be yours one day.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. God knows when you are suffering because others are choosing to do the wrong thing even when it hurts others. Again, God's justice will make itself known.

Blessed are the merciful for they will obtain mercy. No matter how badly you have been treated, how much you have been overlooked or forgotten, God still expects you to respond to others with kindness and compassion.

Blessed are the pure in heart for they will see God. You have to be looking for God to find God and you will not find God if you are seeking God for the wrong reasons – to punish someone else, to relieve you of a responsibility rightfully yours, to look the other way when you knowingly do the wrong thing.

Blessed are the peacemakers for they will be called children of God. God calls each and every one of us to work for peace in ourselves, peace in our lives, peace in our communities, peace in our nation and peace in our world every day. Yes, this is an impossible task but that call from God remains as the challenge for us every day. The question for us then is do we respond or ignore it because we think it just can't be done.

Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. This one, dear ones, we see and hear every day in our news broadcasts. Just yesterday, the Attorney General of Texas was impeached by his own Republicans in the State House because of gross offenses committed while in office and now some Republicans are literally reviling them,

threatening to persecute them and uttering evil against them. In other words, if this happens to you, you're already successfully living the rest of this list of "Be Attitudes" -- living life the way Jesus expects and needs us to do.

In closing I want to leave you with another thought we too often overlook on these two coinciding holidays – Pentecost and Memorial Day. Notice where I had today's Gospel reading end, with verse 13a. *You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored?* Dear friends, this is the crux of this entire discussion right there. Let me explain. If you spend your waking hours trying to live into the challenge Jesus puts before us in this list of the "Blessed be's" from Matthew, that is a wonderful thing. God will be smiling for sure, from ear to ear. But guess what. God will also be worrying about you because trying to do this hard work every day is exhausting! God knows this. Jesus knows this. Why? Because Jesus experienced this firsthand! It happened to him. Story after story in the Gospels ends with Jesus heading out into the wilderness alone to pray and to rest. Jesus knows rest is crucial to being able to do as God needs us to do each day.

Hence Memorial Day. Part and parcel of this holiday is the emphasis on taking a break from our usual routine lives. Part and parcel of this holiday is pausing to remember those who gave their lives for our country, for our wellbeing. Of course it is. But consider this. In using this holiday weekend as a time to pause yourself, to step aside for a bit to reconnect with family and friends, to do something fun or something that brings you joy or just doing nothing because you need the rest, that is an entirely appropriate use of this time. In fact, I would argue it is a necessary use of your time on this holiday weekend. I am absolutely certain all those war dead we honor this weekend would be the first to encourage you to step back from all the

ongoing craziness in your life and spend some time doing what they would do if they were still here with us. Resting, drinking a favorite cold beverage, eating a favorite food, just being you. If they were still here with us instead of lying in the midst of a field of little flags, I'm pretty sure they would be the first to join you in having that beer or sitting on the patio or the boat or whatever with a good book. Isn't that the whole point of why they did what they did – to preserve the living of life for us?

So, dear ones, on this holiday weekend in 2023 when two different realities merge – Pentecost and Memorial Day Weekend – please allow me to be the first to encourage you, to urge you, to look for God's Holy Spirit coming upon you in moments of rest and peacefulness more than in moments of business. We all need a break from the craziness! Here's is God's double invitation to take it!! Here is God's invitation to a whole new mindset as we sing "let there be peace on earth, and let it begin with me." Let it be so, God, because peace is precisely what we need in these crazy, too busy days. Peace in our minds and hearts, peace in our bodies, peace with ourselves. Only then can we engage with the task of bringing peace to the world. Amen.