

VIRTUAL SERVICE OF PRAYER AND REFLECTION

UCC Westerly, Pawcatuck, CT

January 25, 2026

On the occasion of a massive storm set to begin in the area around 11am

WELCOME!

CALL TO WORSHIP – Psalm 5

Response: Lead me, O God, in your righteousness.

A GATHERING PRAYER *from The Iona Prayer Book & written by Martin Luther*

Behold, Lord, an empty vessel needing to be filled.

My Lord, fill it.

I am weak in faith; strengthen me.

I am cold in love; Warm me and make me fervent.

That my love may go out to my neighbor.

I do not have a strong and firm faith; at times I doubt and am unable to trust in you.

O Lord, help me. Strengthen my faith, and my trust in you.

Amen.

A MUSICAL INTERLUDE – *a chant from The Taize Community*

W&R#448

In the Lord I'll be ever thankful, in the Lord I will rejoice!

Look to God, do not be afraid.

Lift up your voices, the Lord is near.

Lift up your voices, the Lord is near.

A SCRIPTURE READING

Matthew 25:31-46

REFLECTIONS FOR THIS MORNING

My heart is breaking this morning as the news of another innocent person being killed in Minneapolis by ICE dominates the news and rocks our world. How did we come to this, we wonder. Dear ones, it has taken decades, even centuries for us to be here at this moment but we never saw it coming. We have all been so deeply nestled into our snug and safe bubbles that we truly never saw it coming, never thought it could happen here in the United States of America. But here we are. The question for all of us now has to be – what next? Where do we go from here?

Let me stop right here and acknowledge that some of you may already be put off by these reflections as being “too political.” You want to believe that “politics,” however one might define that, has no place in church. You think church should be a neutral place where we can come and retreat from all this horrible news and just be reassured that somehow, some way, God is in charge and, ultimately, everything will be okay. I get that. I really do. It’s a fine guideline for preachers to follow, especially when elections are looming. I would never,

for example, advocate that you vote for one candidate over another. That *would* be political, most definitely. I would and have stayed neutral in the pulpit on local elections, state elections and national elections. You must all vote your conscience. My job as your Pastor is to help you refine and shape the contours of your own conscience within the context of your faith and beliefs as a follower of Jesus. How that impacts your vote is always up to you. That's it. That's my role. Usually.

Dear ones, these are not usual times in our beloved country. You know that. I know that. These ICE operations coordinated out of an administration in Washington, DC that is internationally named as deeply corrupt, have one intention – to terrify everyone into submission to a white Christian nationalist takeover of our country. People are being murdered in the streets of Minneapolis for looking out for the welfare of their neighbors, along with their own welfare as untrained and seemingly unrestrained ICE officers and Border Patrol officers (please note there is NO border anywhere near Minneapolis/St. Paul) run roughshod in their streets. They hide behind the face of law enforcement but they don't care about the law. What they want is freedom to execute a form of vigilante justice where what's legal and what isn't is totally up to them. Dear ones, enough. Enough.

Perhaps you've already heard about all the clergy who headed to Minnesota to join the protests there. I had a lot of friends there, on the streets, at the protests at Target headquarters and at the airport. In fact, I saw on the television news a friend and colleague I have known for 30 years get arrested for praying at the airport that the airlines would stop supporting ICE's illegal deportations of people legally in the United States. He was on his knees praying and he was arrested. He didn't resist. He got up, was handcuffed and placed in a van for transport. All the clergy were later released, but without apology. I need you to understand that I wanted to be there with my colleagues. I wanted to be there with them and I would have been but my commitments here at the church – not the least of which was Bill Street's memorial service – made that impossible. So, I am doing what so many clergy who could not go to Minneapolis have been asked to do instead, right here in our own churches. Stand up and preach to this situation so here I am, even though I will undoubtedly be accused of being "political" for doing so.

What you need to understand, dear ones, is that I have no choice to remain silent. And to preach about something that might help you "feel better" or "ease your fears and your nerves" is not what I am called to do. Not in this moment. Not when the ethnic cleansing now so blatantly visible in Minnesota and moving along with ICE into new areas like Portland, Maine; Philadelphia, PA and New York City are already in the works. History teaches us how wrong this is – for churches to pretend like everything is okay when it is clearly not. We can never forget that some churches were openly supportive of the Nazi Party and Fascism, persuaded by statements in the Nazi Party Platform of 1933 about what they called "positive Christianity." This was Christianity that was acceptable to the Reich because it endorsed the tenets of Nazism of a strong central government maintained by any means necessary as well as the entire notion of a master race of white so-called "Aryans." Dietrich Bonhoeffer dared to

declare openly that this was a perversion of Jesus' teachings and, in the end, he was assassinated in a German prison camp as the Allies were about to liberate it. A lot of Bonhoeffer's writings along with Rev. Dr. King's writings are finding their way into a lot of public spaces now, as they should. If you don't know much about either or both of them, google them. Both of them gave their lives as pastors and ministers in order to hold those accountable who believe, preach and teach that God does play favorites. God does prefer white people, some people believe. God does prefer simple theology that requires only that one profess Jesus Christ as their personal Lord and Savior and that, if they do this, everything else will be alright. They don't need to worry about anything "political" because Jesus will magically make everything okay again. Dear Ones, Jesus never said anything like that. In fact, Jesus said the opposite.

A little while ago I read from Matthew's Gospel, 25th chapter one of the most famous of Jesus' parables. He was precisely trying to answer the question of what is required of people who say they love God. His answer is quite clear:

"Then the king will say to those at his right hand, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world, ³⁵for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, ³⁶I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.' ³⁷Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food or thirsty and gave you something to drink? ³⁸And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you or naked and gave you clothing? ³⁹And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?' ⁴⁰And the king will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did it to me.'"

So, dear ones, let's note that Jesus' descriptions of those who are welcomed into the "kingdom" are not the ones who turn a blind eye or look the other way or who like church services to be politics free. Jesus says just the opposite:

⁴¹Then he will say to those at his left hand, 'You who are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels, ⁴²for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, ⁴³I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.' ⁴⁴Then they also will answer, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison and did not take care of you?' ⁴⁵Then he will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.'"

So why am I preaching about this today, of all days. After all, we're not even in the sanctuary because of this massive approaching snowstorm. Why couldn't I just "let it go with a few prayers and a Scripture reading or two. The answer is simple. I am preaching this today because I literally have no choice but to do so. It was in my ordination vows I took right here in our sanctuary almost 14 years ago:

I was asked by the ordaining authority:

Will you exercise wisdom and courage in carrying out public duties, witnessing and working for God's justice and mercy in each situation?

And I answered, as expected and required by the United Church of Christ:

I will, relying on God's grace.

When I made that vow all those years ago, did I ever imagine the courage I would be called upon to live up to and in to? NO! Dear ones, please be assured nothing would make me happier, more at peace, more joyful than being able to go back to the days when all I was asked to do, expected to do, was to preach and teach the Gospel, perform the rites and sacraments and to visit the sick and lonely. No one is more upset than I am that is no longer the world any of us live in. We might wish we did. But we don't. And it's part of my sacred responsibility to make sure we are prepared to face these times we find ourselves living through. This is difficult, painful and challenging, for you and for me. So, I thank you for your patience. Thank you for your support. If you are unhappy with what I have said here this morning, please tell me directly. Let's have a conversation about it. I need to hear your thoughts. Text me, email me, call me on my cell. Making our way through these times together will only happen if we trust each other, love each other enough to keep talking, to admit our own limitations and biases, including me. Amen.

A MOMENT OF TO REFLECT

A TIME OF PRAYER

Pastoral Prayer

Silent Prayer

The Lord's Prayer

OUR RESPONSE TO GOD

CLOSING SONG – "This Little Light of Mine"

ANNOUNCEMENTS

CLOSING PRAYER – *from THE IONA PRAYER BOOK – by Christians in Czechoslovakia*

When I am down and helpless, when lies are reigning, when fear and indifference are growing, may your Kingdom come. Into our churches, Into our praying. Into our singing. May your Kingdom come. Into our hearts. Into our hands. Into our eyes. May your Kingdom come. Soon. Amen.