



First Congregational Church

Highlights Newsletter

May 2020

If I say, "Surely the darkness shall cover me, and light around me become night," even the darkness is not dark to You. The night is as bright as the day, for darkness is as light to you.

Psalm 139 11-12

Dear Beloved Community of Faith,

Wherever you are as you read this, however it may be with your soul, I invite you to take a moment and settle ... breath ... call your mind and your heart to attention The Holy One is near, nearer to us even than we are to ourselves. Grace abounds and abounds always. Our Easter faith is a faith in God's restoring and reuniting power present to us in and for all times, times of glory and joy and times of weakness and brokenness.

You will find at the end of this newsletter the sermons, scriptures, and prayers from our April worship services after Easter. This is especially for those of you who are not able to watch on our YouTube channel. Let us know if you would like CDs of audio. And let us know if you would like coaching on how to connect with your computer.

In these times of safe social distancing, I am so grateful for all those who have been tending to the spirit of connection and care in our community.

Many of you I won't name because you are calling and praying and helping each other and doing your acts of mercy without fanfare, like you do.

But allow me to lift up a few folks and groups in particular:

Thank you to those who have kept our Community Lunch going in a safe way. Special thanks to Judy Chacon and Linda Schopp for your leadership. We are now providing lunch for the Christian Aid Center guests as well as our usual client base.

Thank you to all those on our calling tree keeping folks connected. Deepest thanks to Becky Kirtley and Jan Eyestone for your leadership with this. To date, we have 13 callers and 30 people on the calling list.

Thank you to those running errands for folks who need to be minimizing their risk.

Thank you to our Youth Ministry Leader, Margaret Thomas, for keeping our young folks connected and enthusiastic and spirit-fed.

Thank you to our wonderful online worship team – Julie Jones, Jackie Wood, Izzy Sherwood and Eric Weissner. Deepest thanks to the many folks who have contributed your music, your voices, your spirit. And to our Deacons for your guidance.

Thank you to our Trustees, with Dana Taggart's leadership, and to our bookkeeper Kim Croft, and to our Moderator JR Van Slyke, for all the smarts and compassion you've been bringing to help the church navigate these waters.

Thank you to our Office Administrator Gayle Kubrock for being our communication hub and for your help in adapting to our changed circumstances.

Thank you to Art Davila for keeping the plants water. Thank you to Gail Neilson for caring for our lawn. Thank you to Jon Rickard, Erik Gryler, and Patricio Morales, for plugging away at our green energy upgrades.

For the love of God, let me know if I've missed anyone!

Onward!

Peace,

Pastor Nathaniel





Moderator's Missive

Dear Church Family,

I hope you are hanging in there as we near the 6-week mark of sheltering-in-place.. This social distancing can be tough. My hope is that each of you is finding clever ways to cope, and perhaps unexpected benefits of this unprecedented moment in our lives. In recent days I have had the opportunity to connect both directly, and indirectly, with various members of our church family. I feel the joy and longing of each one of us in those interactions, and I trust that we will continue to use this time apart as a way to help strengthen the bonds we feel with our Creator, our Creation, and the wonderful community that exists between us.

I would like to share a couple blessings that I have observed in recent days. First, I have had a delightful time making music with my children over the course of this sheltering and social distancing regimen. Both of my boys have graciously indulged their father's desire to make music out of the boredom that looms about. Perhaps music has been part of your coping strategy as well? Second, when I am out and about -on a run, walk, or running the occasional errand- I am delighted to find how open people are to one another. There are no baseball practices to get children to, no work deadlines that absolutely can't wait, a and no dinners to fix before that just-remembered evening meeting. It's quite refreshing. I see folks living in the moment far more than usual. My final observation...As I shelter in place with my family, it's a great opportunity to see how my wife and children are interacting in their own social worlds. I'm sure I'm living vicariously through their conversations and check-ins, but I am grateful to see their healthy, caring, connection on regular display. I can't help but think that they have gained at least *some* of this "connection capital" through the wonderful community we all learn and practice at First Congregational Church.

A big *Highlights* hug to each of you this month. We will be together again, and I can't wait to see the big smiles we will all have for one another.

Peace to you all,

J. R.

The world is now too small for anything but brotherhood
~Arthur Powell Davies

Christian Education



I am missing all our church children from the little ones to the youth, who are in our youth group. One day soon we will burst from our COVID-19 isolation and again smile, share, and laugh together and in person.

For now, JR has been sending out ministry messages to the Intermediate Sunday School children every Sunday. Margaret has been doing virtual gatherings with the Youth group.

Other gatherings, as Church Council, have been meeting every month via ZOOM.

The Pacific Northwest Conference "Leaders of Children and Youth Ministry" organized by Margaret Swanson, youth minister at University Congregational UCC, had a ZOOM meeting on April 28th. Many members of our Christian Education committee attended virtually.

We have been notified that the Conference has accepted our grant application to infuse dollars into our Our Whole Lives education programs. These funds will expand our offerings.

We do what we can to carry on with "church", even if we watch the Sunday Services on You Tube in front of our computers. Our donations to maintain our church are mailed in instead of dropped in a collection plate. We all hope to be together soon, but not too soon for our safety.

Blessings to all,

Dot Willis

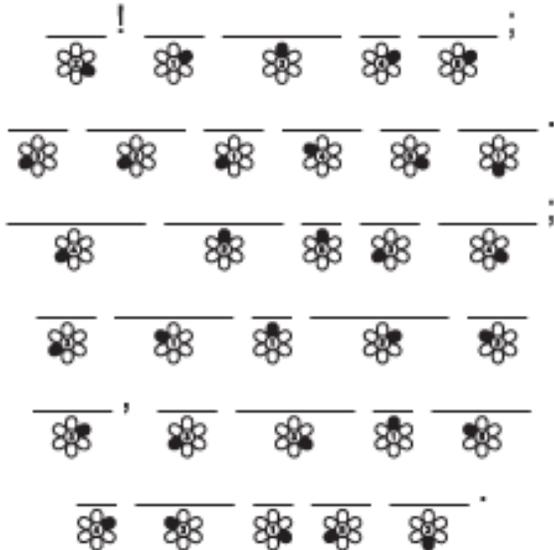
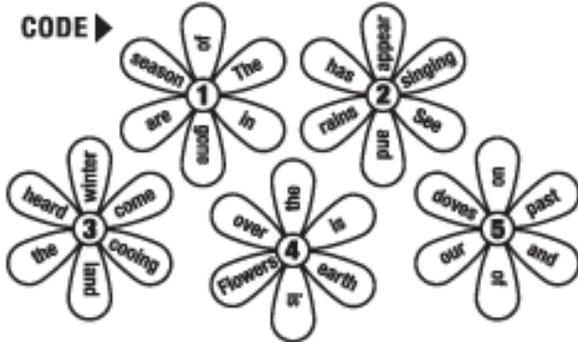
*Sun is not cancelled
Spring is not cancelled
Relationships are not cancelled
Love is not cancelled
Reading is not cancelled
Devotion is not cancelled
Music is not cancelled
Imagination is not cancelled
Kindness is not cancelled
Conversations are not cancelled
Hope is not cancelled*



Puzzle!

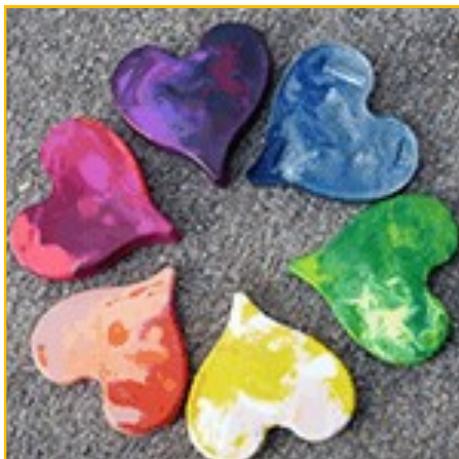
Using the flower code, fill in the blanks to complete the springtime words from Song of Solomon 2:11-12, NIV.

CODE ▶



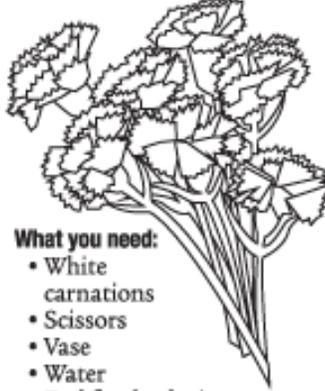
SONG OF SOLOMON 2:11-12, NIV

Answer: See! The winter is past; the rains are over and gone. Flowers appear on the earth; the season of singing has come, the cooing of doves is heard in our land. Song of Solomon 2:11-12, NIV



Scripture AND NATURE

Conduct a simple experiment to illustrate Easter's meaning.



What you need:

- White carnations
- Scissors
- Vase
- Water
- Red food coloring
- Bible

What you do:

1. Cut the carnation stems (at an angle) to about 8 inches long.
2. Fill the vase halfway with water. Add 10 drops of food coloring. (More may be needed to darken the water.)
3. Add the cut flowers and observe what happens to the petals over time.
4. Discuss how this is like Jesus' work on the cross. Read 1 Peter 2:22-24 (NIV) and reflect on what his death means for us.
5. To learn more about this experiment, research capillary action.

We Miss You!



"A couple of times a day Mom likes us to have silent prayer and meditation ... not to mention peace and quiet."

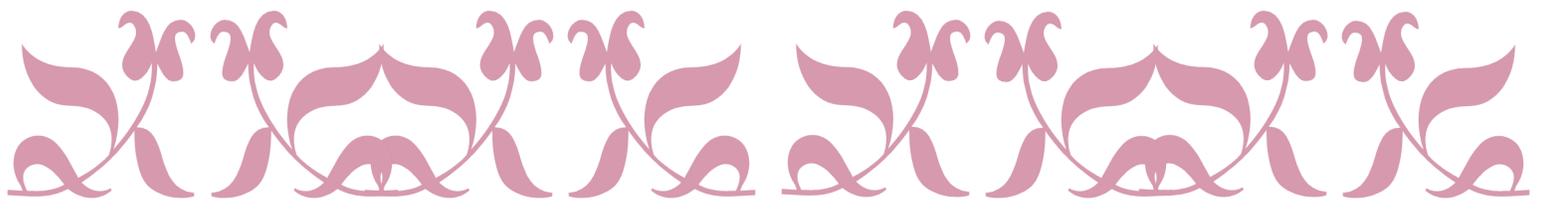
All-Church Camp Retreat at N-SID-SEN

Friday, September 25th through Sunday, September 27th

Keep these images in mind for an opportunity to come together again. Our prayers are that the worst will be over and we may come together to celebrate our life together as a community of faith!

For information email Judy Gibbs at: judysue2018@gmail.com



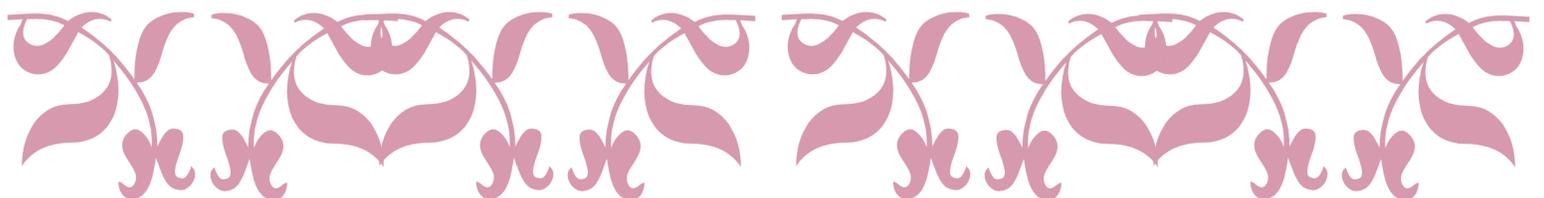


Reflections on “What Self-Isolation Means to Me”

- 1) I have stopped having “stress” dreams. Not sure what that means!
- 2) My hair has become much more “frosted” and curly. Almost look like my baby pictures, just with more sagging skin and wrinkles!
- 3) I will have to learn to put my makeup on every day. I’m really out of practice on that one!
- 4) I may have to have my ears re-pierced. I don’t usually wear earrings when I’m in my pajamas!
- 5) I have been so “creative” in the kitchen utilizing everything that I have on hand. Now if I can remember all of the great meals that I made!
- 6) I will have to get my eyes checked. Our neighborhood has one of those “little” libraries” placed by the pickle ball courts. So many types of books, what must our neighbors be into!
- 7) My husband and I help each other remember things we know or have forgotten we know!
- 8) Our neighbors have been decorating rocks and leaving them around the neighborhood. On our walks, we look for rocks and our dog looks for squirrels!
- 9) Thankfully, we shopped at Costco before the lockdown and purchased our share of paper products. But, we are 6 rolls away from another thing to think about in the bathroom!
- 10) But mostly, I am missing my friends at church. I have been practicing “elbow bumping”, so watch out!

Many apologies to Erma Bombeck and Dave Barry for their inspiration to tackle this subject!

Judy Gibbs



OUTSIDE IN THESE DAYS OF SOCIAL DISTANCING

If I had to pick a state to call my home these days, It would be Washington. We, in this state, for the continued health of the country and of our friends and neighbors, are asked to stay at home whenever possible, with the exceptions of going out for exercise, food or medicine. It's a sacrifice that we can make for our country and its people. And we in Washington, and here in Walla Walla, continue to explore ways to do as we are asked. We are successfully finding new ways to educate our young people, to feed our hungry, to help support our small business friends, and to come together virtually in worship. And, so far, we have held that virus at bay. I respect our state and local leadership and am proud to live in Washington.

Spring in Walla Walla arrived just as we were asked to shelter in place and to maintain social distance when outside. My dog, Chip, and I continue our daily early morning three mile runs. There are not many people outside at 6 AM, so we are free to run the roads without a care. Later in the day we go for a town walk, a hike in the Bennington Lake area, a trek down the Planet Walk (from Blue Ridge School along the VA Center), or a ramble down the newly wood-chipped trails within the Audubon Art Temple Natural Area across from the Fort Walla Walla Museum. We go out every day in search of some new adventure, sighting new birds, breathing in the amazing scents of blooming trees and plants, and looking and listening for rabbits, frogs, snakes, and other surprise travelers. The few folks we meet wave greetings

Dogs have not been asked to social distance. ... and they would not be compliant even if it were the law. When dog meets dog, both have to sniff and circle and greet. It is the unwritten rule of dogdom. The people stand apart, smile, ask about name, age and breed, and then walk on in hope that the right dog will follow the right person.

Occasionally I meet a friend while walking. A few weeks ago, a bicycler peddled toward us. It was a chilly day and this biker had on a jacket, gloves, a helmet, and a beard. I could see only the eyes. I waved. He stopped. No recognition on my part, but he spoke a friendly hello. Underneath the cover, cleverly hidden, was ... Sam Kirtley. One daily dog walker at Bennington Lake is Carolyn Dietzman. Whenever we pass, her little pup Gus and Chip greet each other and run with abandon .Chip loves Gus.

If you have the time and need some exercise, I urge you to step outside and find places to walk in this lovely town. The spring air will restore both your body and your spirit. You can wave or bow greetings to people, but by all means, let your dogs say hello.

Lee Coleman....and Chip

Phone Tree

Stay Connected With Each Other

Want to call others in our church community? Want to receive calls?

Becky Kirtley and Jan Eyestone have worked with Pastor Nathaniel and our Church Council to set up people to call each other. If you want to call or receive calls, give us a call!

Becky at 509-301-0583

Or

Contact the Office at 525-8753 {leave a message} or office@fcchurch.net

Or

Pastor Nathaniel at 608-469-1406 or pastornathanielmahlberg@gmail.com

WORSHIP SERVICES

– **online videos and call-in video-conference meetings**

Contact Pastor Nathaniel with any questions! You don't need a computer to participate in some of our offerings.

EVERY SUNDAY

10:00 am - Video of the worship service will be available on our [YouTube channel](https://bit.ly/39M7pLa):
<https://bit.ly/39M7pLa>

11:00 am – Prayer and Fellowship meeting

With computer, smartphone, or tablet

Go to this link: <https://zoom.us/j/638358688>

You may be asked for this password: 589720

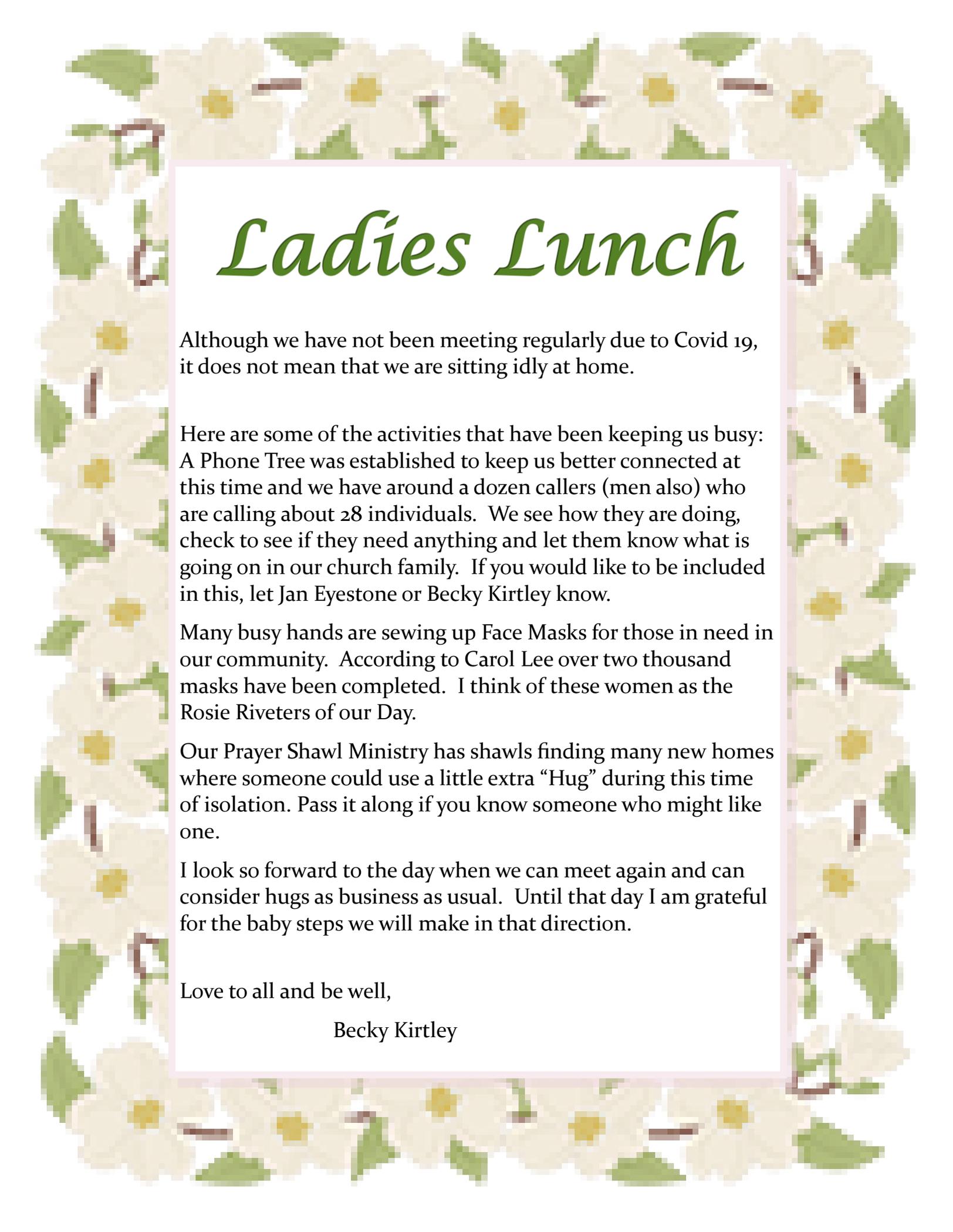
With landline or cell phone

Dial **(253) 215-8782**

You may be asked for the meeting ID: 638 358 688

& the password: 586720

The connecting info does not change Sunday to Sunday



Ladies Lunch

Although we have not been meeting regularly due to Covid 19, it does not mean that we are sitting idly at home.

Here are some of the activities that have been keeping us busy: A Phone Tree was established to keep us better connected at this time and we have around a dozen callers (men also) who are calling about 28 individuals. We see how they are doing, check to see if they need anything and let them know what is going on in our church family. If you would like to be included in this, let Jan Eyestone or Becky Kirtley know.

Many busy hands are sewing up Face Masks for those in need in our community. According to Carol Lee over two thousand masks have been completed. I think of these women as the Rosie Riveters of our Day.

Our Prayer Shawl Ministry has shawls finding many new homes where someone could use a little extra “Hug” during this time of isolation. Pass it along if you know someone who might like one.

I look so forward to the day when we can meet again and can consider hugs as business as usual. Until that day I am grateful for the baby steps we will make in that direction.

Love to all and be well,

Becky Kirtley

May 2020

| Sun | Mon | Tue | Wed | Thu | Fri | Sat |
|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|
| | | | | | 1 | 2 |
| 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 |
| 10 | 11 | 12 | 13 | 14 | 15 | 16 |
| 17 | 18 | 19 | 20 | 21 | 22 | 23 |
| 24 | 25 | 26 | 27 | 28 | 29 | 30 |
| 31 | | | | | | |

VOUCHERS

Please have your vouchers turned in by the dates indicated above.
Thanks!

Trustees Meeting

Wednesday, March 13th, 6:00 pm

Council Meeting

Sunday, May 17th, 11:30 am

Deacons Meeting

Wednesday, May 13th, 6:30 pm

Newsletter Deadline

Tuesday, May 19th

Please have your
submissions in by
then.



Sunday, May 10th



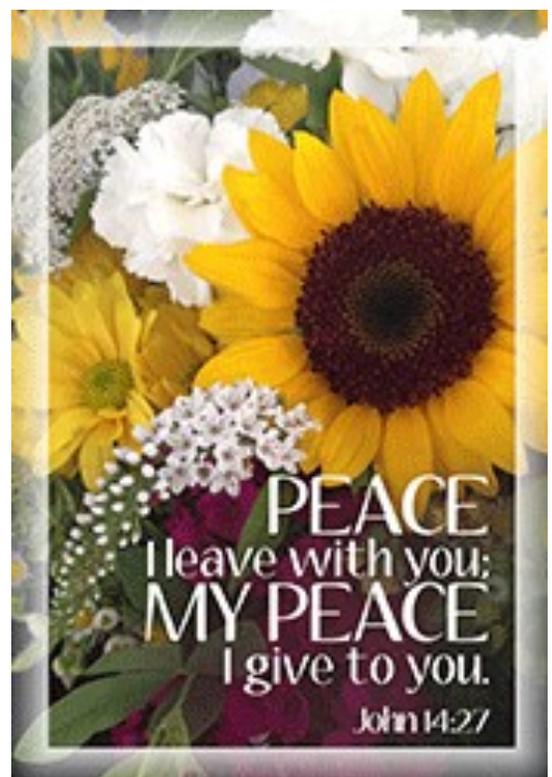
*Belated Birthday & Anniversary-
Wishes! Hoping your celebrations
will bring you happy memories.*



In order to protect the privacy of our members and friends, we do not display personal information in the web version



*It's a new season
a time of growth
a time of change
and though you
may feel rooted in
darkness
of winters past
of long days
of loves lost.
Just know that a
flower can still
grow with it's back
to the sun
And so can you.
~ Jillian Dez*





May
BIRTHDAYS

In order to protect the privacy of our members and friends, we do not display personal information in the web version



May
ANNIVERSARIES

First Congregational Church United Church of Christ

Ministerial Leadership

Minister Rev. Nathaniel Mahlberg

2020 Church Officers

| | |
|------------------------|------------------|
| Moderator | J. R. Van Slyke |
| Vice Moderator | Jennifer Rickard |
| Clerk | Larry Frank |
| Treasurer | Kim Croft |
| Financial Sec. | Bernie Newman |
| Asst. Fin. Sec. | Jonathan Webster |
| Head Usher | Galen Unruh |
| Diaconate | Judy Chacon |
| Christian Ed | Dot Willis |
| Trustees | Dana Taggart |
| Mission/Social Concern | Heidi McFarley |
| Music | Open |
| ... and Affirming | Open |

Staff

| | |
|----------------|-----------------|
| Admin. Asst. | Gayle Kubrock |
| Bookkeeper | Kim Croft |
| Youth Leader | Margaret Thomas |
| Custodian | Art Davila |
| Pianist | Jackie Wood |
| Choir Director | Julie Jones |
| Webmaster | Emily Asmus |

Church Office Hours

Monday- Friday
9 am - 2 pm

Pastoral Assistance

Church Office 525-8753
Rev. Nathaniel Mahlberg
(608) 469-1406

You can read Pastor Nathaniel' s sermons in his online blog at:
<https://thedandelionwayblog.wordpress.com>
Or hear them on our website at:
www.firstchurchuccww.org.

We celebrate our diversity as an expression of God's Creative love. We welcome persons of all age, race, gender, sexual orientation, marital status, and physical and mental ability.

Worship Services

April 19th and April 26th



April 19th, 2020

“Hallelujah, Broken & Holy”

WELCOME

We welcome you in peace.

May you enter this place knowing God has made you good and worthy of love.

May you feel safe to bring your light and your love and your messiness.

Use them to bless our sacred gathering.

May you in turn be blessed here in the presence of the Holy One our God.

STATEMENT OF IDENTITY

We are a congregation of diverse Christian believers empowered by love and guided by the Holy Spirit.

It is our mission to enable personal Spiritual growth, collective outreach to the community and stewardship of God's creation.

We are an open and affirming church.

Because of who you and where you are on life's journey,

You are welcome here.

GATHERING PRAYER

Holy God Eternal Spirit

In which we all live and move and have our being

Stir us awake

To your presence here and now

Within us, and among us,

Between us, and through us,

And always ever beyond us.

O Holy God we come before You

In Your great mystery, Your great power

Your great love

In this Easter time, this time of death and resurrection.

We come to you as we are.

Please embrace us as we are

So that we may be changed.

We may be changed by your love and your power

Ever more deeply into who it is you have created us to be.

We pray all this in your many holy names Especially the precious name of Jesus

Amen

READING FROM HEBREW SCRIPTURES

Isaiah 65:17-25

"Pay close attention now:

*I'm creating new heavens and a new earth.
All the earlier troubles, chaos, and pain
are things of the past, to be forgotten.*

Look ahead with joy.

*Anticipate what I'm creating:
I'll create Jerusalem as sheer joy,
create my people as pure delight.*

*I'll take joy in Jerusalem,
take delight in my people:*

*No more sounds of weeping in the city,
no cries of anguish;*

*No more babies dying in the cradle,
or old people who don't enjoy a full lifetime;*

*One-hundredth birthdays will be considered normal—
anything less will seem like a cheat.*

*They'll build houses
and move in.*

*They'll plant fields
and eat what they grow.*

*No more building a house
that some outsider takes over,*

*No more planting fields
that some enemy confiscates,*

*For my people will be as long-lived as trees,
my chosen ones will have satisfaction in their work.*

*They won't work and have nothing come of it,
they won't have children snatched out from under them.*

*For they themselves are plantings blessed by God,
with their children and grandchildren likewise God-blessed.*

Before they call out, I'll answer.

Before they've finished speaking, I'll have heard.

*Wolf and lamb will graze the same meadow,
lion and ox eat straw from the same trough,
but snakes—they'll get a diet of dirt!*

*Neither animal nor human will hurt or kill
anywhere on my Holy Mountain," says God.*

READING FROM THE NEW TESTAMENT

John 20:19-31

Later on that day, the disciples had gathered together, but, fearful of the mobs, had locked all the doors in the house. Jesus entered, stood among them, and said, "Peace to you." Then he showed them his hands and side.

The disciples, seeing the Master with their own eyes, were exuberant. Jesus repeated his greeting: "Peace to you. Just as the Father sent me, I send you."

Then he took a deep breath and breathed into them. "Receive the Holy Spirit," he said. "If you forgive someone's sins, they're gone for good. If you don't forgive sins, what are you going to do with them?"

But Thomas, sometimes called the Twin, one of the Twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. The other disciples told him, "We saw the Master."

But he said, "Unless I see the nail holes in his hands, put my finger in the nail holes, and stick my hand in his side, I won't believe it."

Eight days later, his disciples were again in the room. This time Thomas was with them. Jesus came through the locked doors, stood among them, and said, "Peace to you."

Then he focused his attention on Thomas. "Take your finger and examine my hands. Take your hand and stick it in my side. Don't be unbelieving. Believe."

Thomas said, "My Master! My God!"

Jesus said, "So, you believe because you've seen with your own eyes. Even better blessings are in store for those who believe without seeing."

Jesus provided far more God-revealing signs than are written down in this book. These are written down so you will believe that Jesus is the Anointed One, the Son of God, and in the act of believing, have real and eternal life in the way he personally revealed it.

SERMON "Hallelujah, Broken & Holy"

By Rev. Nathaniel Mahlberg

If I sing "Hallelujah" I want that "Hallelujah" to sing out from our suffering,

I want that "Hallelujah" to sing out from our love.

If I sing "Hallelujah" I want that "Hallelujah" to sing out from our deepest reverence,

To sing out from our fullest praise,

To sing out from a gratitude we feel in the marrow of our bones.

If I sing "Hallelujah" I want that "Hallelujah" to sing out from our delight,

And to sing out from our sorrow,

To sing out from our yearning

To sing out from a peace we have come to know, if only for a moment in this life.

If I sing "Hallelujah" I want that "Hallelujah"

to be a 'cold and a broken "Hallelujah"

and to be a warm and a whole "Hallelujah"

To be truly sacred

To be truly the "Hallelujah" of a Sacred and a Broken People

Wounded and yet whole

A people singing fully as the embodied souls

Singing wholly as the ensouled bodies

Our God has created us to be

Our God who is not some distant engineer, our God who is not some merciless judge, Our God who is not some petty tyrant,

But our God, the Holy One Beyond Name

who truly is the creator, the sustainer, the redeemer of *all*,

Our God of the Eternal Spirit in which we all live and move and have our being

Our God who joins us in our condition, in the flesh

Who comes to us

As the risen Christ came to those disciples locked in their homes, afraid of the pandemic of hate raging outside

Who comes to us

As the risen Christ came to dear Thomas who refused to believe it until he'd seen it

As the risen Christ who came to them, and comes to us,

Fully as an embodied soul

Wholly as an ensouled body

Shining with the heart of all being, its power greater than death

Yet marked and scarred by the wounds of life

The bitter bites of the lengths to which human beings can go to keep heaven divided from earth,

The bitter bites of the violence to which human beings can resort

To deny the ensoulment of each other's bodies, to deny the embodiment of each other's souls

To crucify, whether by hate or fear or greed or pride or neglect

Our God of the risen Christ who in life cried: *Metanoiete!* Wake up to a new mind and a new heart:

The realm of heaven is here! Shake off your hypocrisy! Wake up to the Divinity nearer than you can conceive.

"Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven."

"Let heaven and earth become one."

"Truly I tell you, the Realm of God is among you, within you."

And: beyond us, way beyond us, beyond the limits of our life, beyond the boundaries we place on life and death, beyond the boundaries of what we think is possible, beyond the boundaries of our limited love, through and beyond the veil of tears and out into an all embracing peace.

As God has loved me so I have loved you. Abide in my love, and so love one another, serve one another, die for one another, and so rise with one another together as one with the new heaven and new earth.

It is for this that I sing "Hallelujah"

"Hallelujah" in the midst of our tremendous grief

"Hallelujah" in the midst of biting injustice

"Hallelujah" in the midst of hearts broken open by love

"Hallelujah" in the midst of songs and prayers interweaving the globe

"Hallelujah" in the midst of our fierce hope in the forces of life that overcome death.

The "Hallelujah" of a Sacred and a Broken People

Wounded, yet whole

A people singing fully as the embodied souls
Singing wholly as the ensouled bodies
Our Creator has made us to be.

For that Creator and for that Christ, I give thanks this day.

Amen

BENEDICTION

BLESSING THE BODY by Jan Richardson

This blessing takes one look at you and all it can say is holy.

Holy hands. Holy face. Holy feet.

Holy everything in between.

Holy even in pain.

Holy even when weary.

In brokenness, holy.

In shame, holy still.

Holy in delight. Holy in distress. Holy when being born.

Holy when we lay it down at the hour of our death.

So, friend, open your eyes (holy eyes).

For one moment see what this blessing sees, this blessing that knows how you have been formed and knit together in wonder and in love. Welcome this blessing that folds its hands in prayer when it meets you; receive this blessing that wants to kneel in reverence before you: you who are temple, sanctuary, home for God in this world. Amen

April 26th, 2020

“The Road Between the Now and the Not-Yet”

WELCOME

We welcome you in peace.

May you enter this place knowing God has made you good and worthy of love.

May you feel safe to bring your light and your love and your messiness.

Use them to bless our sacred gathering.

May you in turn be blessed here in the presence of the Holy One our God.

STATEMENT OF IDENTITY

We are a congregation of diverse Christian believers empowered by love and guided by the Holy Spirit.

It is our mission to enable personal Spiritual growth, collective outreach to the community and stewardship of God’s creation.

We are an open and affirming church.

Because of who you and where you are on life's journey,

You are welcome here.

SCRIPTURE

Luke 24:13-35

That same day two of Jesus’ followers were walking to the village of Emmaus, seven miles from Jerusalem. As they walked along they were talking about everything that had happened. As they talked and discussed these things, Jesus himself suddenly came and began walking with them. But God kept them from recognizing him. He asked them, “What are you discussing so intently as you walk along?” They stopped short, sadness written across their faces. Then one of them, Cleopas, replied, “You must be the only person in Jerusalem who hasn’t heard about all the things that have happened there the last few days.” “What things?” Jesus asked. “The things that happened to Jesus, the man from Nazareth,” they said. “He was a prophet who did powerful miracles, and he was a mighty teacher in the eyes of God and all the people. But our leading priests and other religious leaders handed him over to be condemned to death, and they crucified him. We had hoped he was the Messiah who had come to rescue Israel. This all happened three days ago. “Then some women from our group of his followers were at his tomb early this morning, and they came back with an amazing report. They said his body was missing, and they had seen angels who told them Jesus is alive! Some of our men ran out to see, and sure enough, his body was gone, just as the women had said.” Then Jesus said to them, “You foolish people! You find it so hard to believe all that the prophets wrote in the Scriptures. Wasn’t it clearly predicted that the Messiah would have to suffer all these things before entering his glory?” Then Jesus took them through the writings of Moses and all the prophets, explaining from all the Scriptures the things concerning himself. By this time they were nearing Emmaus and the end of their journey. Jesus acted as if he were going on, but they begged him, “Stay the night with us, since it is getting late.” So he went home with them. As they sat down to eat, he took the bread and blessed it. Then he broke it and gave it to them. Suddenly,

their eyes were opened, and they recognized him. And at that moment he disappeared! They said to each other, "Didn't our hearts burn within us as he talked with us on the road and explained the Scriptures to us?" And within the hour they were on their way back to Jerusalem. There they found the eleven disciples and the others who had gathered with them, who said, "The Lord has really risen! He appeared to Peter." Then the two from Emmaus told their story of how Jesus had appeared to them as they were walking along the road, and how they had recognized him as he was breaking the bread.

SERMON "The Road Between the Now and the Not-Yet" by Susan Greene

In the spirit of full disclosure, I take no credit for what I share with you today. Like all of us, I am looking to make sense of life these days. When Nathaniel asked us to share a message this Sunday, I felt dry and empty – not creative and inspired. So I turned to other sources and found a piece by Dr. Ruth Haley Barton, a leader in the area of Christian spirituality and the founder of the Transforming Center in Wheaton, Illinois. This is her reflection on the Emmaus story - very timely for our current reality - with a few brief thoughts of my own added at the end.

Luke's account of Resurrection Sunday includes the story of two dazed and distraught disciples traveling along the road from Jerusalem to Emmaus. It was Sunday, the third day of the most traumatic weekend of their lives, and they were on a roller coaster of emotion.

On Friday these two disciples along with many others had witnessed the painful, humiliating and violent death of their beloved leader, teacher and friend. That night and through the day on Saturday they sat with each other in utter despair. And now, on this day, a glimmer of hope had been introduced into the situation.

Some of the women in their group had visited the tomb in which their leader had been buried and found it empty. There was talk of resurrection, but it was too soon to tell whether it was a miracle or just a hoax of some sort. They had hung around in waiting mode as long as they could, and now it was time to get back to real life.

These disciples had lost so much more than just a friend. Their dream of what the kingdom of God would look like as they had imagined it...the hopes and dreams around which they had oriented the last three years of their life...the vision that had caused them to give up fishing and tax collecting and the like in order to commit themselves to following Jesus...it was all gone.

Each one who had been a part of the community of Jesus now had to come to terms with life on the other side of the death of their wish dream. They had to figure out what to live for now that the vision that had brought order and purpose to their lives was no more.

Not knowing what else to do, Cleopas and an unnamed disciple were now wandering home, trying to make sense of it all. They were suspended somewhere between loss and possible gain, grief and possible joy, profound human suffering and perhaps some kind of redemption, dashed hopes and maybe daring to hope again. They were wrung out – emotionally, spiritually and physically. They had been powerless to prevent the events of the last days, and they were powerless now to do anything to change their situation.

The road from Jerusalem to Emmaus was the road between the now and the not-yet.

Although they were probably not aware of it, these disciples were in what Richard Rohr calls "liminal space" – a particular spiritual position where human beings hate to be, but where the biblical God is always leading them. It is when you have left the "tried and true" but have not yet been able to replace it with anything else. It is when you are in between your old comfort zone and any possible new answer. It is no fun.

The Latin root *limen* literally means "threshold", referring to that needed transition when we are moving from one place or one state of being to another. A liminal space is a period in which something has been dissolved and a new thing has not yet emerged to take its place. It's that period of uncertainty, ambiguity, restlessness, fear, discomfort, and anguish. It's the space between, when a trapeze artist let's go of one swing and doesn't yet know whether she'll be able to reach the other swing.

Liminal space usually induces some sort of inner crisis: you have left the tried and true (or it has left you), and you have not yet been able to replace it with anything else. Some native peoples call liminal space "crazy time".

Liminal space is Abraham leaving his home country and his father's house for a land he did not yet know.

It is Joseph in the pit.

It is the Israelites wandering in the wilderness between Egypt and the Promised Land.

It is Jonah in the belly of the fish.

It is Mary weeping at Jesus' tomb.

It is the disciples huddled in the upper room.

It is the disciples on the Emmaus Road betwixt and between the life they had known and whatever was supposed to come next.

This was a time for intimate emotions and dangerous questions. Maybe something new and wonderful was in the works, but who knew? And just when they had gotten about the business of trying to adjust to their new normal, they were unnerved by the unexpected, pushed off center by intimations of the unimaginable.

Thank God they had each other!

The disciples' choice to walk together and talk together about all the things that had happened to them was, in some ways, fairly radical. They could have decided that what they had been through was so personal, so traumatic and so confounding that they didn't want to talk about it until they had gotten a handle on it. Or they could have chosen to walk together but avoided talking about what was really going on, chatting away about anything else but that.

But no. While the experiences of the weekend were still fresh and raw, unvarnished and unresolved, they chose to walk together and talk with each other about all these things that had happened. And there was something about the willingness to walk together and speak honestly about the fundamental issues of their lives that caused Jesus himself to come near.

They weren't praying in any formal way. They weren't having a Bible study or worshiping in the synagogue. They were not having a formal quiet time.

April 26th "The Road Between the Now and the Not-Yet" cont'd.

No, they were discussing the stuff of their lives – the things that had happened that were impacting them so deeply – and something about the nature and quality of their conversation opened up space for Jesus to draw near.

The encounter that took place between Jesus and these two disciples was completely reorienting and life changing. Transforming, if you will! And that is the essence of a Christian community. Before Jesus draws near, a group of people journeying together is merely a human community. Once Jesus joins us on the road, it becomes a Christian community.

Clearly, we are in liminal times – the loss of experience that comes from the suspended animation of being isolated and sequestered across the globe is liminality in the large. Although we are experiencing the pain alone, we are also experiencing it together. When we hold liminal space, we are willing to be in both the darkest and lightest of places with each other...to be alongside anguish and terror in tandem with profound joy and a celebration of life...the central message and gift of the Easter season.

May we be courageous, walk with each other to places unknown, and discover ways to be open to Jesus' transforming presence on the road between the now and the not-yet.

BENEDICTION

By Galen Unruh, based on a prayer by Saint Thérèse of Lisieux

May today there be peace within you.

May you trust God and that you are exactly where you are meant to be.

May you not forget the infinite possibilities that are born of faith.

May you use those gifts that you have received,
and pass on the love that is given to you.

May you be content in knowing that you are a child of God.

Let this awareness settle into your bones,
and allow your soul the freedom to dance, sing,
praise, and love.

Amen

