



**FIRST CONGREGATIONAL
UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST**
235 South Kenilworth Avenue, Elmhurst, IL
Partners in Christ's Service since 1890

SEVENTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

At Home or Small Group Worship for October 25

OPENING SONG – *audio available on the church website*

Here I Am to Worship Tim Hughes
Michelle Maiers, Meg McGarry, Kevin Loeper

CALL TO WORSHIP

Praise waits for you, O God!
You hear our prayers, forgive our sins, and call us to dwell with you!
God of our hope, you are the life of the entire world.
Your faithfulness calls forth songs of joy from the ends of the earth.
You care for the land, bless it with water, and fill it with grain to feed the people.
Let all creation shout and sing for joy!

OPENING PRAYER

We give you thanks for all the ways that you bless our lives: the beauty and abundance of nature, the love of family and friends, the joy of knowing you and hearing your word. Send Your Spirit during this time of worship so that we might dream your dreams and see visions of the world as you created it to be. Guide our thoughts and actions. Bring us closer to you so that we might do your will and dwell in your house forever. Amen.

GLORIA PATRI

Glory be to the Father, and to the Son
And to the Holy Ghost: as it was in the beginning
Is now and ever shall be, world without end. Amen, amen.

PRAYERS OF THE CHURCH

Prayer Hymn #263
Surely the presence of the Lord is in this place,
I can feel his mighty power and his grace;

I can hear the brush of angels' wings,
I see glory on each face;
Surely the presence of the Lord is in this place.

Silent Prayer

PASTORAL PRAYER – *audio available on the church website*

Rev. Mike Daly

Praise to you Creator God, for whether we sing together or sing silently, whether we shake-hands, or wave our hands as a sign of Christ's peace – you are ever-present. We thank you for calling us into this ministry of love and inviting us to give our time, talents, and treasure to further your kingdom.

God of Love, times like these have thrown us off balance. We can no longer worship or praise you by rote or routine or even habit. This disruption invites us to something new. It invites us to experimentation and change that we would have never imagined in ordinary circumstances. But no matter what, you are with us, and you lead us to where the gospel needs to be proclaimed.

Thank you for unbalancing us and reminding us that we cannot live life alone. We need your love and forgiveness. Infect us with gratitude. Plant seeds of joy. Let compassion be our rule. Bring a vision for a common humanity to bind us to one another despite our differences. And confront the destructive forces that would exploit us.

Lead us to forgotten places, that we may bring care to the suffering and strength to the hurting. Call us out of our comfort to serve one another and to treat all with grace and mercy. Embrace those who grieve, those who are ill and hurting, and those who cry out from a broken spirit. Encourage those who long for something better. Remind us of the contagious joy we receive when we give generously. Send more love as the cure this world desperately needs.

We pray in the blessed name of Jesus.
Amen.

OUR LORD'S PRAYER – *audio available on the website*

Michelle Maiers, vocals

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us. And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever.
Amen.

CHILDREN’S MESSAGE – *audio available on the church website* Martha Mendoza

SCRIPTURE – *audio available on the church website* Rev. Suzy Daly

Matthew 23:1-12 NRSV

Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples, “The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses’ seat; therefore, do whatever they teach you and follow it; but do not do as they do, for they do not practice what they teach. They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others; but they themselves are unwilling to lift a finger to move them. They do all their deeds to be seen by others; for they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long. They love to have the place of honor at banquets and the best seats in the synagogues, and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, and to have people call them rabbi. But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all students. And call no one your father on earth, for you have one Father—the one in heaven. Nor are you to be called instructors, for you have one instructor, the Messiah. The greatest among you will be your servant. All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted.

SERMON – *audio available on the church website* Rev. Mike Daly

Seeing Past the Mask

It’s almost time for Halloween! And perhaps, more than ever, we need a good spooky Halloween night because of COVID-19. Although I have to admit, the older I get, the more I find myself agreeing with an old Newsweek article (written by Mary Schmich), that basically said - Halloween has grown too big and too expensive. If you need evidence, look at the millions of dollars we spend buying costumes for our pets! *Although that is fun too and the Daly family.... “guilty.”*

As traumatizing as it is for the family dog, who gets pinned down by the 8 and 10 year old girls, so that they can Velcro on a spider costume, Halloween is still fun for those of us with two legs. The streets are full of people, young and old, wearing masks and pretending to be someone (or something) they are not. The creativity of trick-or-treaters is stunning, and the energy in the neighborhood is electric.

It's a different matter, however, when we masquerade as someone we are not. When pretending becomes a way of living rather than a fun excursion - when we disguise

our true intentions - when we mask our egos to grab power for personal gain. When this happens, Jesus throws a red flag onto the field. (*football reference*)

The scribes and Pharisees that Jesus encounters are that kind of pretender. In our lesson today, Jesus paints a sharp picture of a sterile religious life. The so-called religious leaders “perform” outward faithfulness with no sincere inward regard for what they say or do. The religious leaders looked good, and they were sharp. They were always ready to proclaim the rules and regulations of God. But - the reality of God's love – the Good News - was absent. They didn't practice what they preached.

The actions of the Pharisees and scribes, not their words, tell the real truth. “If you want to know what a person believes, watch their feet, not their mouth,” writes Richard Swanson, in the book, “Provoking the Gospel.” The Pharisees and scribes are frauds, according to Jesus. They are like those a writer from Texas (Molly Ivins) once described as “people who want to be Texans but aren't – they are *all hat and no cattle*.”

The Pharisees and scribes, Jesus says, are “all hat and no cattle,” or all robes and titles, anyway. They have forgotten the heart of God. The Greek word “hypocrites” is translated literally as “actors.” Of course, in ancient Greece, actors wore masks. So this is a fitting text for today, as we get closer to Halloween night.

Do you remember the old Mack Davis song, Oh Lord, It’s Hard to Be Humble? “Oh Lord, it's hard to be humble when you're perfect in every way. I can't wait to look in the mirror 'cause I get better looking each day. To know me is to love me. Well, I must be a *heck* of a man. O Lord, it's hard to be humble, but I'm doing the best that I can.”

The early Christians could have easily surrendered to the same temptations of pride and prestige. They struggle with their growing popularity. They struggle with which rules to observe – the old traditional rules or the new way Jesus is teaching. Either way, they were sincere about wanting to set a good example and live a life of faith.

I think a real treasure of our church is something you already know. We make sincere efforts to practice what we preach. Here, you do not have to pretend to believe what you do not believe. You are not expected to adhere to a specific dogma. We celebrate diversity in all its forms, including diversity of thought. You don’t need to pretend to be something you are not. In short, you don’t have to wear a mask. (*Unless there is a global pandemic and it helps keep others and yourself safer*). Be yourself, be the way God made you.

This is evident in the way First Congregational conducts our stewardship campaign. We celebrate the gospel life. We do not claim that in order to be an upstanding Christian, you need to give a certain amount. How you give is between you and God. Together, we look to fulfill the dreams of God - to make the impossible possible. When we give, we give thanks too. We celebrate our call to mission and ministry to serve others as often as we can and *to be partners in Christ's service*. We cherish our church home. And we listen for God – who invites us to participate without resorting to a guilt trip.

We all like to be appreciated. And please know that you are! And so are your shared gifts of time, talent, and treasure. As we enter into this Stewardship season, I want to say thank you for your generous spirit – and generous support. Jesus reminds us that faithful giving is selfless giving. It is an act of love.

After Jesus criticizes the self-important, me-first attitudes, he lets the disciples know, that they will have no titles of honor, no pedestals, no competition for status. But, more importantly, he also lets them know that they are loved. As Deborah Fortel says, “In this community, there is no room for self-absorbed behavior, no place for win-at-all-costs, me-first attitudes.” *The greatest among you will be a servant. All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted.*

What does such humility look like? In a reflection on this passage in *The Christian Century*, Carter Hayward points out that we all share in our "need for love, justice, compassion, health, and dignity." But, Hayward says, "Genuine humility is a gift from God which has nothing to do with downcast eyes, a misty voice and noble stories of sacrifice. Humility is, rather, living courageously in a spirit of radical connectedness with others, which enables us to see ourselves as God sees us: sisters and brothers, each as deeply valued and worthy of respect as every other." Jesus was able to see each person as deeply valued and worthy of respect because he "had a strong sense of his place in the larger scheme of things in God's world."

As Jesus' followers, we look upon one another as spiritual kin. We look upon all humanity and see brother and sister. We are called by God - to trustworthy connectedness...genuine humility...deep compassion. This is the vision Jesus has shared. Jesus sees past our masks of false bravado and inflated egos. Jesus calls you back to being how God made you and then asks you to give that.

There is a story about a Special Olympics race. The teenaged participants excitedly placed themselves along the starting line. Each was proudly outfitted in running shoes and shorts with a number pinned to their shirt. The coaches encouraged them

from the sidelines, and then silence fell while the starter called out, "On your marks, get set...."

At the sound of the gun, the race to win began. Not many competitors were fast or graceful, but all of them were running their best until a young woman tripped and fell. As she did, a competitor saw what had happened and came to a full, sudden stop. Danny knelt down and asked in a loud voice, "Marlene, are you okay?"

One by one, the other competitors noticed that Danny and Marlene were halted in the middle of the track, and one by one, they went to where Marlene and Danny were helping each other up.

That was remarkable enough, but then the wonder really happened. All of the contestants linked arms and walked together to the finish line. They knew that it did not really matter which one went across the finish line first. They understood that what is most important are the relationships of friendships and the community of caring. (*story from Day 1, 2002*)

God grant that we have that same spirit. Happy Halloween, everyone, and enjoy your mask-wearing and costumes – but remember, only on special occasions. Amen.

OFFERTORY – *audio available on the church website*

In response to the promise of abundant life God calls us to share our resources with those in need. In that spirit of generosity, let us offer our gifts and tithes.

By Your Mercy Courtney/Boersma
Michelle Maiers, Meg McGarry, Kevin Loeper, Al Thurkow

OFFERTORY PRAYER

Gracious God, accept our gifts – of time, talent, and treasure - as evidence of our desire to participate with you in the care of your beloved creation. These gifts symbolize our thanksgiving for all that you provide. Through these gifts, we praise you. In Christ's name, we pray. Amen.

DOXOLOGY

Praise God from whom all blessings flow;
Praise him, all creatures here below;
Praise him above, ye heavenly host:
Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. Amen.

#349 My Jesus I Love Thee

My Jesus, I love thee, I know thou art mine,
for thee all the follies of sin I resign;
my gracious Redeemer, my Savior art thou;
if ever I loved thee, my Jesus, 'tis now.

I love thee because thou hast first loved me,
and purchased my pardon on Calvary's tree;
I love thee for wearing the thorns on thy brow;
if ever I loved thee, my Jesus, 'tis now.

In mansions of glory and endless delight,
I'll ever adore thee in heaven so bright;
I'll sing with the glittering crown on my brow:
if ever I loved thee, my Jesus, 'tis now.

BENEDICTION

Go forth and be of good courage. Hold fast to that which is good. Render no one evil for evil. Strengthen the faint-hearted, support the weak, help the afflicted. Honor all people. Love and serve God, rejoicing in the power of the Holy Spirit. Peace be with you, amen.