

**First Congregational United Church of Christ, Fifth Sunday after Pentecost
July 2, 2023**

Today's scripture is taken from the Gospel of **Matthew 10:40-42** New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) These words were spoken by Jesus: *Rewards*

⁴⁰“Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. ⁴¹Whoever welcomes a prophet in the name of a prophet will receive a prophet’s reward; and whoever welcomes a righteous person in the name of a righteous person will receive the reward of the righteous; ⁴²and whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple—truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward.”

The title of my message today is: *“After all these years...”*

Pray with me: Holy One, we give you thanks and praise for the beauty of these days of summer. The gardens are continuing to whisper to us your deep, deep love. The warm and clearer breezes on our faces remind us that you care about us. The flowing streams and lakes ripple peace. Thanks! We need that. We need you. We place our trust in you now and forevermore. Amen.

This week, as I was piecing together this message, I had no idea how fitting it would be today. I will admit that I changed a few things this morning at 5am... My friends in Christ, we have been witnesses of God working in our midst. Our plans are not always God’s plans. If you walk backwards through the days of your life, you will know that after all these years, this is true: when it seems as though our work has been in vain, we find a surprising, better way.

This is how the Holy Spirit works! I chose the following story over a week ago:

Once upon a time two brothers who lived on adjoining farms fell into conflict. It was the first serious rift in 40 years of farming side by side, sharing machinery, and trading labor and goods as needed without a hitch. Then the long collaboration fell apart. It began with a small misunderstanding, and it grew into a major difference, and finally it exploded into an exchange of bitter words followed by weeks of silence.

One morning there was a knock on the older brother's door. He opened it to find a man with a carpenter's toolbox. "I'm looking for a few days' work," he said. "Perhaps you would have a few small jobs here and there that I could help with? How could I help you?"

"Yes," said the older brother. "I do have a job for you. Look across the creek at that farm. That's my neighbor, in fact, it's my younger brother. Last week there was a meadow between us and he took his bulldozer to the river levee and now there is a creek between us. Well, he may have done this to spite me, but I'll go him one better. See that pile of lumber by the barn? I want you to build me a fence - - an 8-foot fence -- so I won't need to see his place or his face anymore."

The carpenter said, "I think I understand the situation. Show me the nails and the post-hole digger and I'll be able to do a job that pleases you."

The older brother had to go to town, so he helped the carpenter get the materials ready and then he was off for the day. The carpenter worked hard all that day measuring, sawing and nailing. About sunset, when the farmer returned, the carpenter had just finished his job.

The farmer's eyes opened wide, his jaw dropped. There was no fence there at all! It was a bridge -- a bridge stretching from one side of the creek to the other! A fine piece of work, handrails and all -- and the neighbor, his younger brother, was coming across, his hands outstretched.

"You are quite a fellow to build this bridge after all I've said and done." The two brothers stood at each end of the bridge, and then they met in the middle, taking each other's hands. They turned to see the carpenter hoist his toolbox on his shoulder. "No, wait! Stay a few days. I've a lot of other projects for you," said the older brother.

"I'd love to stay on," the carpenter said, "but, I have many more bridges to build."

Jesus said: “This is a **large work** I’ve called you into, but don’t be overwhelmed by it.” (MSG)

The older brother said, “Build me a fence.” The carpenter had something else in mind.

I would say that this is sort of a miracle story, wouldn’t you? Something that was unimaginable: a bridge was built and the two brothers and in just a few minutes solved their differences.

We are now in need of a “bridge” that will get us from what we thought was a perfect plan to our *next and better* plan. Let the one who is called to serve as the next Senior Pastor here at First Congregational United Church of Christ **not be known** as our third or fourth choice, but as the one that God is preparing to send our way this very moment...the one who will be leaving wherever they are located and may not even **know yet** that we will be welcoming them into our hearts and our church family.

Today’s scripture is a continuation of the instructions that Jesus was giving to his disciples. He knew that he would be leaving them on their own soon. The *older brother in the story*, also was leaving the carpenter on his own to do the work that he had contracted. Think of the far-reaching effect that the work of the disciples *has had*...compare that, if you will, to the work of the carpenter.(and the work of our Search Committee) Both are stories of changing peoples’ lives. Both are stories of building bridges between people...and are stories of welcoming.

I am drawing this parallel because many of our efforts begin with offering hospitality to strangers (or the estranged) and of the difference receiving a warm welcome can make in peoples’ lives. We do not know how long the two brothers’ relationship flourished, but we know for sure that the **work of the disciples has continued after all these years!**

Jesus speaks these words: “Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me.” **Matthew 10:40**

In Paul’s letter to the **Hebrews 13:2** he encourages his readers to be hospitable to “strangers for thereby, some have entertained angels unawares”

In **Matthew 25:31-40** these, too, are the words of Jesus: “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.’ ³⁷ Then 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? ³⁸ And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? ³⁹ And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?’ ...Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.”

Listen again to today’s scripture the words of Jesus as interpreted by Eugene Peterson in The Message: **Matthew 10:40-42**

⁴⁰⁻⁴² “We are intimately linked in this *harvest work*. Anyone who accepts what you do, accepts me, the One who sent you. Anyone who accepts what I do accepts my Father, who sent me. Accepting a messenger of God is as good as being God’s messenger. Accepting someone’s help is as good as giving someone help. **This is a large work I’ve called you into, but don’t be overwhelmed by it.** It’s best to start small. Give a cool cup of water to someone who is thirsty, for instance. The smallest act of giving or receiving makes you a true apprentice. You won’t lose out on a thing.” **The Message (MSG)** Copyright © 1993, 2002, 2018 by Eugene H. Peterson

Perhaps we do not think of any of these words when we are welcomed in as guests, or when we are getting ready to be the hosts but we have learned since we were young, that when company is coming, we get ready. *After all these years*, we know that welcoming needs to be learned and practiced and continual.

He was an expert at welcoming, wasn’t he? His life modeled what welcoming should look like: yes, welcoming one another IN, welcoming the stranger...but at the same time, being more aware of showing kindness to those who are sick, those who are hurting, those who are lost,

those treated unjustly, those who are grieving, those who have lost their homes, those who are hungry, and those with little hope.

We, in the United Church of Christ, say, “No matter who you are or here you are on your life’s journey, you are welcome here.” If you are on vacation or just visiting for the weekend, you are welcome here. If you have been here all your life, you are welcome here. If you are looking to renew your spiritual journey, you are welcome here. If you are searching for a church, you are welcome here. Want to join a Bible study? You are welcome here. All are welcome. Always.

We will soon have an opportunity to further extend our hospitality practices here at First Congregational United Church of Christ. A new Senior Pastor will be coming through these doors. We have been given an *extension of time* to decide how we will get ready. Will we send a move-in team to the new pastor’s house on moving day? Will we plan “meet and greet” opportunities? Will we throw a welcoming party? Will we be sure that the new pastor and family are introduced to the activities here at First Congregational UCC...in the community of Appleton...in the Fox Valley?

Now, think about what you do to get ready when company’s coming? Isn’t it funny how you begin to see things you never saw before...the piles of magazines that are there to read when you get around to it, suddenly need to be recycled. The weeds in the gardens are looking bigger now. You begin to notice the fingerprints on the windows and the dust on the piano. You clean out the refrigerator and sweep the garage...send the good dishes through a dishwasher cycle, polish the silverware and cut fresh flowers from the garden for the table.

Take into consideration the times you have been welcomed into someone’s home...or have been welcomed into another church. What did you feel? How were you treated? Is it likely that you would return there?

In the words of Jesus...“This is a large work I’ve called you into, but don’t be overwhelmed by it.” But, Jesus, you know it IS overwhelming.

We are the church of the Open Door...how welcoming ARE WE?
how do we welcome the stranger? Is our welcome consistent?

We, together as a family of faith in this building named, “First Congregational United Church of Christ” need to re commit ourselves to being the “church”...the hand-holding, hugging, smiling, welcoming and open church that we always say we are! It takes practice. It takes courage. IT takes intention.

We, like the disciples and the carpenter building the bridge, are “on our own” now for awhile in this “side trip transition” time...but, we still are the “church” wherever we may find ourselves these days.

My friends, we are called every day to welcome one another in the name of Jesus. Let that great joy sustain us and help us to find more ways to serve one another...even if our efforts have been exhausting...even if we are frustrated...even if we think we have failed...even if our fears keep us focused on the *circumstances this week*.

This is exactly when we lift up our heads and keep our eyes on God; when we lift our prayers in praise **and let it be known that after all these years, (yes, even now)** that we still believe that all things are possible with God.

The **carpenter** has something else in mind for us...it’s up to us to start building the bridge today! Thanks be to God! Amen.

Benediction: Ephesians 3:20-21 NRSV

²⁰ Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, ²¹ to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.

This hour's worship has ended. Let our service and our welcoming continue. Amen

Preaching today, Pastor Mary Jo Laabs, Interim Associative Pastor for Congregational Life and Outreach Ministries 715-351-0450 mjlaabs@firstcongoappleton.org