

# Order of Worship

Ninth Sunday after Pentecost, August 2, 2020

WELCOME

PRELUDE

CALL TO WORSHIP                  Psalm 122                                  UMH p. 845

HYMN 131                          *We Gather Together*                                  KREMSEY

CHILDREN'S MESSAGE

PASTORAL PRAYER AND LORD'S PRAYER

**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 trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass 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.**

SCRIPTURE                          Hebrews 10: 16-25

HYMN 419                          *I Am Thine, O Lord*                                  I AM THINE

SCRIPTURE                          Matthew 14: 13-21

MESSAGE                          *Gathering Together*

GENEROSITY, INVITATIONS and CELEBRATIONS

HYMN 540                          *I Love Thy Kingdom, Lord*                                  ST. THOMAS

BENEDICTION

POSTLUDE

## Prayer Corner

- ♥ The Schmoldt family is grieving the loss of their son and brother, Robert, who quietly fought a battle with cancer. Please pray for Sandi, Sue, Tom, and Bert's widow, Tracy.
- ♥ Alberta C. is moving to Colorado to be closer to her daughter. She has lived and served God faithfully for a full century, and our gratefulness and prayers for her wellbeing go with her.

## Better Together: “*Gathering Together*” – Sunday, August 2

What was I thinking!?! It is a fair question about this new 5-week series about how it is better to be together when we shouldn't even be together. Many of us have had prolonged isolation in tumultuous times when we need each other more than ever. Even the most introverted among us miss the familiar faces and places. My mom always used to say, “Absence makes the heart grow fonder”. It holds true not only for romantic relationships but for all positive connections and friendships we have.

The point of this whole *Better Together* series is not to pour salt on the wound of loneliness. It is also not to insist that we have some sort of divine or constitutional right to begin gathering together in large groups before the scientists feel it is safe for society. Many have heard pastors or church leaders claim that, but their lack of both biblical and constitutional knowledge and ethics is appalling to me. The goal of this *Better Together* series is to explore deeper ways of relating and connecting as a church that we have perhaps been missing without even realizing it. Though we have our traditions and assumptions of what “church life” can and should look like, we unknowingly limit the possibilities of how God may be moving and working in our midst.

In today's gospel lesson from Matthew 14 where Jesus feeds 5,000 men and their families, we can all relate to the overwhelmed and exhausted disciples who don't see any possibilities for continuing to care for this spiritually and physically hungry crowd. It is natural to see our human limits and suppress any God-inspired imagination. Perhaps we are also struggling with this as a church. We tend to focus on “we can't do that anymore”, or “that isn't an option”. There is some truth to that. We can't gather – like we used to. We can't sing – like we used to. We can't do mission projects or trips – like we used to. We can't gather for Wednesday Night Live – like we used to. We can't come together and receive communion – like we used to. I'm as prone to pouting about the situation as anyone. I have echoed the emptiness of first disciples in a variety of ways: “This is a deserted place,” (v. 15) and “We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish.” (v. 17).

But Jesus – both then and now – says to us, “Bring them here to me.” In the story he's referring to the meager 5 loaves and 2 fish

that naturally can't feed 5,000 families. But Christ, the Word of God, is supernatural and eternal. We get to ask God, "What small, simple thing can we bring to you? Where or how can we gather together as an act of faith? How can our simplicity plus Christ's divinity fill a hungry world with God's supernatural grace?"

Matthew's version of this story leaves out an important part that Luke remembers to add. In Luke 9:14-15 we read, "*But he said to his disciples, 'Have them sit down in groups of about fifty each.' The disciples did so, and everyone sat down.*" Jesus confirms what teachers, EMTs, accountants, music conductors, and engineers all know. Even God takes big and complex crowds and challenges and breaks them into smaller groups and issues.

Let's apply this to how we are used to "doing church". We think of everyone gathering at a service in a church building, sitting in pews, and shaking hands. Did you know those are not the primary way churches have functioned over the past 2000 years? For instance, early Christians adapted the Greek tradition of exchanging kisses as the way to pass the peace. It wasn't a pandemic that changed things, but it was misdirected passions that eventually put a kabosh on kissing in church. Just as kissing gave way to hand shaking, there is a good chance that our culture and church may find itself needing to come up with a new gesture to show others our welcome and joy in their presence. And did you know that in early churches there were no pews or benches because the congregation stood the whole time and the preacher sat while speaking? And that churches rarely had their own buildings, but usually met in homes, patios, or river banks?

For many centuries, both in early church history and many times and places ever since then, smaller groups of people gathering together have been the primary expression of the local church. Throughout history Christians have found that small groups are more effective at spiritual growth and ministry than large crowds on Sunday mornings. The founders of United Methodism, John and Charles Wesley, knew that small groups were necessary to feed hungry souls and bring fresh life to the struggling and anemic Anglican church of their day.

The Methodist movement was centered on gathering together in groups of about 8-12 people one evening a week for an hour or so. John Wesley was likely inspired to organize churches this way by the writings of Martin Luther who proposed that widespread spiritual

renewal should take the form of *ecclesiolae in ecclesia*—little churches within the church. Each person shared how they were growing and/or struggling in their faith, and everyone supported and prayed for each other. It was more of a spiritual 12-step group where both encouragement and gentle accountability helped grow and develop the faith and leadership of people in the group. These “classes”, which today we might call Small Groups, Life Groups, or Cell Groups, were the life blood of the church. They would then gather with a few other classes to form a larger group, but still not a crowd, called a “society” of about 30 people. A pastor usually oversaw several societies and offered communion on a rotating basis. Back in England, Wesley told people to go to the Anglican churches on Sundays, but it was more for the people in the small groups to be able to take communion and be inspiring examples of what a transformed and energized spiritual life is like.

Here we are, about 250 years after John Wesley and over 500 years after Martin Luther, and health scientists are telling us the same thing. I believe that God has a plan up his sleeve to redeem the pain of this pandemic. I believe the Holy Spirit is whispering Hebrews 10:25 in our souls – *“And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching.”* I believe Christ is saying to us, “I’m not only interested in my Church’s survival, I’m using this to set you up for a revival”.

What does this mean for us? It starts with committing ourselves to gathering together with a small group of people in order to help each other grow in our faith and calling. We’ll dig into more of that in the coming weeks. There are already some small groups at our church that are or could become incubators of inspiration and spiritual growth. I’m working with some leaders at FUMC to both identify and strengthen existing groups, as well as to make sure there is a group for every person who is or wants to be connected to FUMC. Some of them will meet in homes or backyards and some of them will meet through Zoom. Please contact the church office if you’d like to participate in, host, or lead a group. Jesus turns small things into miracles, whether a little lunch that feeds 5000 families, or small groups that revitalize the faith of a community. I look forward to watching the Holy Spirit gather together with us in small groups!