

## **An Encouraging Word from Pastor Mike for December 11, 2021**

Hello Everyone – As always my prayer for you is that you remain safe and continue to do whatever you believe to be necessary to keep you and your family safe and healthy in this time when the Coronavirus remains present and active in our community. Having lived with it for nearly 21 months it has become the unwelcome neighbor that we've gotten used to. Yet we should not underestimate or forget its potential for wreaking havoc in our community and introducing serious illness to our homes. Please be careful and remain vigilant.

**Giving envelopes for 2021 are now available in the church narthex (sanctuary entry area). They are in alphabetical order. If you were expecting to get one but can't find yours please contact Jennifer in the Church office. Please also consider giving through our e-giving program, Jennifer can help set you up with that.**

### **ANNOUNCEMENTS THAT NEED REPEATING**

**Our Celebrations on Christmas Eve this year** begin with a brief service tailored to children and families with children. That celebration will begin at 6:30 p.m. Then, at 7 p.m. we will transition into our traditional Christmas Eve Communion Service and will provide overflow space in the Church Hall for those who are uncomfortable sitting with the larger group in the sanctuary. Communion will be provided in both areas.

Following the worship service, a presentation of sacred music will take place in the sanctuary and refreshments will be available in the church hall.

**From the Outreach Committee:** Our last project for Christmas is the Sock and Mitten collection for children in the local homeless camps. We have also been asked to add adult socks to our list this year. Please think about this project when you are shopping. We only have a few weeks for this project. We need to have all items collected by December 12th so they can be handed out by Christmas.

**An important reminder** to members and friends who enter the building – through either entrance – **while the Child Development Center is open and operating: Please be sure you are masked** – even if you are just going to the office or sanctuary. This is critically important for keeping our unvaccinated children safe and for setting a tone of caution for those using our facility.

**If you have prayer requests**, even if you plan to share them at Sunday worship, you may forward them ahead of time to Jen at the church office and she will compile a list to be used on Sunday morning. This will be a great help to this hearing-impaired pastor who can't always hear the prayer request correctly when shared during worship.

**THE AMAZING PUBLICATION – LOAVES & FISHES & UNITED METHODIST DISHES** – Is once again on sale in our church office for the AMAZING PRICE OF \$20.00.

**Signing On For Zoom Worship Services.** As most of you who Zoom our worship services know, I greet Zoom attendees as they sign on, take Zoom attendance, and assign names to phone numbers as phone callers sign on. I open the Zoom meeting at 9 a.m. in order to give people time to sign on. If you are Zooming, **I encourage you to sign on early to avoid the crush of people signing on at the last minute.** At 9:30 I have to make a mad dash from the office to the sanctuary to lead the service. The earlier you sign on the easier it is for me to attend to the greeting responsibilities. It also gives us a chance to chat, and share prayer requests

**The Announcements and Bulletin for Sunday's service are included as attachments to this encouraging word.** Please feel free to print them out and either bring them with you to the service or to use them as your guide as you Zoom the service. For those attending in person the worship order is provided on the monitors.

**In person worship is open to everyone.** We are not requiring the wearing of masks in the sanctuary but asking that you space yourselves appropriately. If you are not vaccinated, are otherwise at risk, or simply uncomfortable going maskless, we strongly suggest that you wear your mask. It goes without saying that if you are sick stay home! You can always enjoy our worship service via Zoom. We do have a fellowship time in the breezeway following our worship service.

Thank you to everyone who has been diligently supporting our ministry with your tithes and offerings. Your contributions have kept us open and in ministry through a very difficult period. Your faithfulness in supporting our church with your prayers, presence, gifts, and service has made all the difference!

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### **An Encouraging Word**

“For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope.” Jeremiah 29: 11

Often, in my prayers to open church meetings, I will thank God for all the opportunities we have been offered to engage in ministry throughout the day. That's because I see each day as a series of opportunities and choices to accept or refuse God's invitation to align our lives with God's purpose and live that out in ministry. Of course, the choice to accept or refuse God's invitation always rests with us. God will not violate free will.

Each day we will face moments of decision during which God is inviting us to become more than we already are. With each decision we face we are invited to become more compassionate, more caring, and more merciful in our dealings with others. We are also invited in each moment to draw closer to God, to align ourselves with God's intention for our lives, and become more connected with God and each other. But it's only an invitation, it's just a suggestion. We don't have to accept it. That's on us.

It's kind of like the battles I have with the GPS on my phone. I will enter my desired destination and the GPS program (Google Maps) will suggest the optimal route to get to my destination along with the estimated distance and travel time. But it's just a suggestion that I can accept or reject. Of course, I have my own favorite routes and sometimes I won't agree with the route suggested by the GPS program. So, a battle ensues. I go the way I want to go, and she (my GPS has a female voice) continues to offer me alternatives; sometimes managing to sound rather exasperated in the process. (That may just be my imagination.) She will tell me to bear left, but I decide to go right. Then she will say make a U-turn, I go straight. She will tell me she is recalculating, makes another suggestion, and I ignore it. Sometimes I end up at my desired destination. But sometimes I get horribly lost, must swallow my pride, admit I was wrong, and beg Google Maps for forgiveness.

This is how it is between us and God. God has a plan for our lives, that is to become ever closer to God and congruent with God's purpose. As God is gracious and forgiving, we are invited to become more gracious and forgiving in the living of our lives. As God is compassionate, we are invited to be compassionate in our dealings with others. As God is merciful, we are invited to grow in mercy and be

merciful to others. Each day we are faced with opportunities to accept, ignore, or refuse God's invitation to become more than we already are as we live out those values that are important to God.

As we face those opportunities God is present in our lives in many ways including through the promptings of God's Spirit, the guidance of Holy Scripture, and by observing the lives of others who are also living toward God. In many of those opportunities we know what we should do, and sometimes it is at odds with what we want to do. We have to decide to accept God's direction or go our own way. As I said above, that decision is on us.

The encouraging word here is that God never withdraws those invitations to grow beyond where we already are. God never withdraws the invitations to grow in acts of love, compassion, and charity. God never withdraws those invitations to draw close to one-another and God's self. The encouraging word is that no matter where we end up God always "recalculates" and finds a way to direct our lives to grow toward the achievement of that which God desires for us all. No matter how messed up a person's life can become by ignoring God's invitations, the invitations will continue and the possibility of growing closer to God will remain.

I encourage you to look for those opportunities to grow towards God that arise each day. Consider the decision you make when those opportunities arise. In any given situation what is God inviting you to do? How is God inviting you to respond? Understand that our decisions hold the potential of drawing our lives into a closer harmony with God's purpose, or further away from it. Ask for God's guidance – it will always be available. Look for God's invitations – they will always be extended. Seek the path that aligns you with God.

That's all for today. I'll see you on Sunday either in person or on Zoom. Until then be well, stay safe, make good decisions in this Coronavirus environment, and in please stay connected to each other and to God. Blessings & Peace, Mike