

Announcements and Encouraging Word for May 17, 2023

All women and friends are invited to join the FAITH HOPE CIRCLE for our annual Spring Luncheon at the Green Turtle, Thursday, June 1st at 12:30. Hopefully the weather will cooperate and we can have lunch on their patio. Please RSVP by May 28 to Marilyn Williams or Pat Johnson if you can join us. Hope to see you there to enjoy good food and fellowship.

LAST CALL!! Is someone in your house graduating high school or college? If so, please let us know so that we can celebrate them. Please contact the office to let Jen know who it is and their future plans.

Are you following the church on social media? If not, you should! Our Facebook account is <https://www.facebook.com/mtcarmelumconnection/> And our Instagram account is <https://www.instagram.com/mcumc21122/>

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. The church email is mtcarmel21122@gmail.com and our phone number is 410-255-8887.

Prayer Cards are also available in the Narthex on Sunday morning. If you have a prayer or concern, we encourage you to fill out a card and it will be collected and read that morning.

We want to remind you that we are still using Zoom for our Sunday Services. Zoom allows you to join us from wherever you may be!! (Join us in your pj's with a morning cup of coffee) 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. to give people time to sign on. I encourage you to sign on early to avoid the crush of people signing on at the last minute. 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. **If you should have any problems logging in, please alert Jennifer in the office.**

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.

An Encouraging Word

"For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms." - Ephesians 6:12

The greatest danger we face in these perilous days is not economic, political, or even physical; it is spiritual. It is true that what is taking place in the economic arena is worrying. What is taking place politically and the resulting divisions are troubling. What worries me the most, however, is what these battles and struggles are doing to us spiritually. Jesus was once asked what the greatest commandment was. He replied, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength." The second is this: "Love your neighbor as yourself." No other commandment is greater than these." The most important thing that we need to do in this life

is love God and love our neighbors (no matter who those neighbors might be or how infuriated we become with them). Loving others is right at the top of the list next to loving God, it is in fact derived from loving God.

What I see happening in our nation and in our world is the insidious encouragement to not love our neighbors but to instead dehumanize them. The internet is rife with comments that not only disparage others but even suggest violence against them. Some issues, especially those concerning a woman's right to make decisions concerning her own health and how people identify themselves sexually have been heightened to the level of holy war and those of opposing sides demonized. The political discourse has been poisoned by divisive rhetoric that only enhances the movement toward dehumanizing another.

A spiritually healthy person is someone who loves God AND loves their neighbor. To dehumanize another, to hate them, even to classify their needs, views, or perspectives as irrelevant or unimportant not only disrespects them it disrespects God in whose image they are made and whose children they are. There is no doubt in my mind that this is a spiritual battle which not only threatens our relations with others, it threatens our relationship with God.

I bring this up because I am aware of my own susceptibility to a dehumanizing anger arising out of what I see as injustice, greed, or insensitivity toward others. I catch myself being sucked into the toxic discourse that is ongoing then realize just how close I am myself to thoughts that dehumanize or disrespect another. In those moments of realization, I understand how far removed from loving God or my neighbor I have become. I feel spiritually wounded and depleted. I recognize that I am on dangerous spiritual ground in these moments.

So how do we guard against this? How do we maintain our spiritual health and equilibrium in a toxic spiritual environment? We do so by first placing our trust in God. Much of the toxic anger that leads to dehumanizing others arises out of fear; the fear of losing something important to us like status, livelihood, or respect. If we have placed our trust in God knowing that God will supply any need such fear is greatly diminished. We can also battle the temptation to give into our fears by maintaining our connection to God through prayer and meditation. I've found that it's really hard to despise another when we're praying.

It may be as simple as using a physical reminder of who we are as Jesus' people. There is a picture that sits on the wall opposite my desk in my office. It depicts Jesus' discussion with the woman at the well. Here Jesus is caring for, ministering to, a foreign woman despised by his fellow countrymen. When I'm incensed by something I've seen on a news feed or social media post and find myself drawn toward dehumanizing anger I look up at that picture and am reminded of what my Lord asks of me; to love others and break down barriers. Some people use a cross in their pocket. Others use rosary beads (and yes there are rosary beads for Protestants). All serve as physical reminders of who we are and who we serve when tempted toward attitudes that draw us away from where our Lord asks us to be. They are symbols or objects that call us to connect to God through prayer.

It would be dangerous to discount or underestimate the level of spiritual damage that is possible in the secular and political/religious battles that are so evident in our everyday discourse. There is a spiritual danger in this that we need to guard against. As we encounter it, we need to ask God's help in rising above it to regard all others as beloved children of God, made in God's image and worthy of our respect and love.

That's all for today. I'll see you on Sunday either on Zoom or at in-person worship. Until then be well, stay safe, and please stay connected to each other and to God.

Blessings & Peace, Mike