

March 2023 Newsletter
First Congregational United Church of Christ
1000 Willson Avenue - Webster City, Iowa 50595
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<http://www.firstcongregationalwc.org/>

“Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me.”—John 15:4

My relationship with my father changed on May 18, 2011, which was the day he died. That was a hard day, for I loved my father and I still love him...and so I try to keep the memory of his presence alive as best I can-- even after all these years. I still can hear some of his memorable words to me, words of wisdom and affection (he always called me “lefty”); I remember doing home repairs with him and wrenching on the family cars (he showed me how to time an engine back when engines needed to be timed); I have photos of him at family events that remind me of bygone moments of our lives together; I have old stories of family vacations, holidays, and other events that I still hold dear. I can talk to him, even now...and I can imagine what he might say back to me. But he is no longer with me the way he once was—fully present—and since he died, our relationship is not the same.

I also have relationships with people whom I have never met, yet they are people whom I respect and admire, people whom I have listened to and taken inspiration from. MLK, Osho, Buddha, Lao Tzu, Meister Eckhart, an entity named Seth...these are a few of my personal heroes, and I have their words, their books, and a few videos and pictures of some of them which capture their time on earth. I owe a great debt to them in many ways, for they have helped shape my life...but my relationship with them is not the same as it would be if I had been in the same room with them, ate supper with them, or traveled on the road with them. When you are really present with someone you are more compelled to interact with them; being really present both challenges and reassures in a way that a memory cannot. Being really present with someone changes your present moment experientially, existentially...in the way that a memory or a story or even a photo or video does not.

And so when I hear people speak of Jesus being their “personal savior” I try to suspend my liberal protestant disdain for such talk and listen to what they are saying. Yes, I’m sure some who use this phrase are programmed to use it, even as we in our UCC tradition have certain theological buzzwords that we use almost as insider shorthand. But I know of people who claim to have vivid, unshakable experiences of the very presence of Jesus Christ, and those kinds of experiences seem to have been profoundly life changing for them. I can understand why, for as I noted, there is no substitute for the power and the impact of a real presence versus a memory or legacy of that presence. And yet that is where many of us find ourselves in our faith life: immersed in theology and memories and mores and history, surrounded by articles of faith and symbols of presence...yet hungering at some level for a real presence of the holy; the *Mysterium Tremendum*; a living presence that is capable and responsive, guiding and impressing in a way that only a real presence can be.

That is one of the reasons why the resurrection of our Shalom Circle has been so needed by my spirit and my faith walk. Yes, the relaxation techniques help “cool down” our overstimulated, overheated brains—and if there were no other benefit to the circle, that would be reason enough to come. But for me there is more... for I feel that I am being drawn into an immersive experience that words would fail to contain, even though we have words a-plenty to describe the experience. It is an immersion into a felt presence; an oceanic presence of such love and vitality and goodwill that the anxious, scurrying small “me” can let go of my anxious scurrying and *just abide...without fear, without the past or future, without the feeling of deadness or dread or vacuous meaningless emptiness that so often is our subconscious baseline that we stuff down deep*. During the meditations I enter into this presence with varying degrees of immersion, and even as I find my peace in the experience, I know that there is so much more...so much deeper I could go...so much infinity beyond what my small self is capable of experiencing and knowing. In this deep meeting, this deeply personal meeting, I feel

more changed and more en-lightened than I do when I am away from this experience --and this presence.

Now you who are mystically inclined know that the goal of such immersive moments is to eventually attune ourselves to carry this felt meeting-presence with us always, and I'm sure you can appreciate that this takes practice, discipline, a willingness to let go of so much of our lives' detritus...and faith. Yet the journey of 1000 miles begins with a single step, and in these weekly encounters with a living presence that we might call God, or Jesus, or the Holy Spirit, we set the intention that we can and should abide in this presence for the sake of our sanity and our souls...so that both might know the grace of peace and illumination which is the free gift of seeking and experiencing this form of a "personal savior."

I believe years ago I spoke in church of my experience encountering the living Jesus during a Shalom Circle meditation that was held in Troy, Missouri. We were meditating in a cry room of the church, and while in the meditation I saw the face of the Shroud of Turin—my personal symbol for the presence of Christ--and into the room came a presence that was palpable. There were no words offered, no reminders of Jesus' teachings or words of wisdom given to me by him...instead there was a shift in my consciousness as the entire room became alive with feeling and pulsing with vitality. It felt that even the molecules of the air were alive and singing praise for the gift of life; the very walls came alive with an awareness that defied the dead matter of masonry and mortar. What filled the room that evening was so deeply felt that in that moment I knew just how sacred and alive and creative and joyous this entire existence truly is. The experience testified to literal worlds without end filled with God and God-energy; every atom and brick and cell and heart filled with the good news that all of Life is one and filled with God's endless outpouring of "God." The experience lasted perhaps 5 minutes, but those minutes convinced me that God is utterly good and loving with "no shadow of turning," so generously creative that all of THIS is an outpouring of God's infinitely expanding self—all joined into a cosmic unity that erases all loneliness and fear and desolation from our sorrowed human hearts. If you read this and your heart leaps to hear this testimony---that is good! Only don't let painted cakes satisfy your hunger, for God is meant to be experienced and shared by each of us—directly. This is our birthright as children of God: the Good News that God is an intensely personal savior whom we can experience, and in whom we can abide!

Friends, you are all invited to give the Shalom Circle a try (Fridays at 6: 30 p.m. in the East Chapel), and see if it "clicks" for you. Regardless of whether it feels right to you or not, I invite you all to use this holy time of Lent to deepen your experience of God through prayer, devotional reading, and by sharing your "real" presence-- and your love-- with other people. To do this is to honor God, to follow Jesus, and by sharing what is best in your human life through your presence, you can *and will* make all the difference in a world starving for authentic human presence of a kind that opens and extends the love and the joyous compassion of the ultimate presence: God. --Pastor Craig

CHURCH OFFICE HOURS

M 8 am - 1 pm
T 9 am - 1 pm
W 8 am - 4:30 pm
Th 8 am - 4:30 pm
F 9 am - 1 pm

HAPPY BIRTHDAY TO:

4 - Vicki Blaufuss
6 - Jennie Williams
8 - Vada Williams
13 - Shirley Yungclas
14 - Talon Stockdale
16 - Craig Blaufuss
19 - Kaleb Butz

20 - Verna Bierle
20 - Jacob Meinders
22 - Macklin Elkin
22 - Jayden Burgos
23 - Todd Sonsalla
23 - Jose Burgos
24 - Garrett Shelton
25 - Jackson Elkin
28 - Jackson Leman

HAPPY ANNIVERSARY TO:

7 - Robert & Mary Van Diest
15 - Curt & Lorraine McCoskey
21 - Alaina & Steve Imhoff

Church Staff

Rev. Craig Blaufuss, Pastor

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Dale Olson: Stephen Ministry Ldr **839-5619**

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Tracy Wehrhan: Church Treasurer **297-0370**

Dale Olson: Financial Secretary **839-5619**

Parish Nurse News

Special days in March

Colorectal Cancer Awareness Month -

Recommends screening from age 45

Developmental Disabilities Awareness Month

National Kidney Month

National Poison Prevention Week March 14-20

People of all ages are at risk of poisoning.

The Shalom Circle Continues During Lent

The Shalom Circle, our prayer and meditation group, will continue to meet during Lent. If you have not yet chosen a Lenten discipline, the circle is a wonderful opportunity to explore spiritual practices and deepen your prayer life. We have a place for you in the East Chapel; if you are interested or want to know more, please speak with Pastor Craig.

Adult Education Multiweek Study Continues: LGBTQ Basics

By now almost everyone is familiar with the initialism LGBTQ, standing for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer. But how much do you really know about matters of sexual orientation and gender identity and expression? The Adult Education class has started on a multiweek study of "LGBTQ Basics" in order to increase our understanding of this diverse community of people. We will examine some basic definitions used in society today to denote various sexual orientations and gender identities, look at statistics and demographics, explore the influences of biology and sociology in the lives of LGBTQ folk, educate ourselves on the history of the "movement" and listen to firsthand accounts of their lives, struggles, hopes and dreams. Join us for an open and inquiring discussion about LGBTQ basics!

Tri-Conference looking for Deacons

The Tri-Conference of the United Church of Christ (UCC) is looking for individuals who have the gifts to serve as one of ten Conference Deacons. The primary focus of the Conference Deacon is to connect with and support the local churches and authorized ministers in their assigned area. These positions are open to authorized ministers or lay members of the UCC. This part-time, contract position is five hours per week and will be supervised by the Executive Conference Minister or his/her designee. To learn more about this opportunity please speak with Pastor Craig.

D/SAOC Auction

The Domestic & Sexual Assault Outreach Center is doing their annual auction again this year. Once again, they will be doing an auction of baskets to raise money for the center. This year, the mission board is collecting items to fill Easter baskets for pets. Items that could be donated include pet food, leashes, pet treats, pet toys, chewable bones, litter, and "I love my pet" items. The online cake auction will run from March 30th - April 4th. Please drop things off at the display in Fellowship Hall. If we get an abundance of donations, we will submit multiple baskets.

Care For Our Earth

An education/informational display has been set up in the Fellowship Hall by the mission board with books and information about environmental justice. Please feel free to peruse - or even check out a book! Also, if you have informational items that you'd like to share with the congregation, please add it to our resources.

One Great Hour of Sharing

"You are God's field; God's building."

Through the One Great Hour of Sharing (OGHS) offering, we are planting seeds of new life. Together, we are investing in communities worldwide: providing education to girls and boys, empowering communities through vocational training, supporting microcredit lending and seeing people through to self-sufficiency, empowering families with skills to support themselves and their neighbors, and participating in sustainable solutions that offer dignity to all. These are just a few ways the OGHS offering touches God's children, in

addition to disaster relief and refugee initiatives. Through your generosity, the world is a better place. But more is needed. We have an opportunity to plant seeds into the lives of others. Be a co-worker with God. Building, planting, watering...and trusting that God gives growth to all good gifts shared in faith. We will take an offering for One Great of Sharing on Sunday, March 19th. You can make your check out to the church and put OGHS in the memo line.

UCC GMP Search Committee makes historic choice, recommends Karen Georgia Thompson as next leader

After a year-long search, the United Church of Christ Board's Search Committee for General Minister and President has made a historic choice. The committee will be recommending Rev. Dr. Karen Georgia Thompson to the UCCB this week as nominee for General Minister and President. If elected, she would be the first woman, and the first woman of African descent, to lead the denomination. Here is the link to the letter sent from Search Committee Chair, the Rev. Emma Brewer-Wallin, to all UCC members and churches. [UCC GMP Search Committee makes historic choice, recommends Karen Georgia Thompson as next leader - United Church of Christ](#)

Ash Wednesday Service Canceled

Poor weather in February is no surprise, and so it is no surprise that we would eventually have to cancel an Ash Wednesday service due to the weather. It happened this year, but not being able to gather in person did not stop our observance of Ash Wednesday! Pastor Craig sent out by email an audio recording of the Ash Wednesday service that was planned, and on Thursday our KLAB kids received the mark of Ashes along with a discussion of its meaning and the meaning of Lent.

Shrove Tuesday Pancake Supper

Our Shrove Tuesday Pancake Supper was a wonderful was to observe the time immediately preceding Lent by gathering with other church members and enjoying the traditional Shrove Tuesday meal of Pancakes, Sausage links, Scrambled eggs and drinks. Over 40 hungry souls attended and enjoyed good food and fellowship. A big thank-you you to Pastor Craig,

Curt McCoskey, Gayle and Dale Olson for cooking and serving this meal.





Mario and Luna want to remind us that our quarters are needed to help fill the Heifer Project Peace Pipe!



Thank you for your support.

Thanks to all of you a check for \$501.00 was presented to Terry at the ACE food pantry this week. \$271.00 were funds donated at the Souper Bowl lunch back in January and the remainder, \$230.00, was left after paying expenses at the Shrove Tuesday pancake meal. A big thanks from Terry at the food pantry for your generosity.



Our Annual KLAB Valentine's Day party had lots of fun and sugary treats!





Treasurer's Report

<u>INCOME</u>	<u>January</u>	<u>YEAR TO DATE</u>
Pledges and Offerings	\$21,545.33	\$21,545.33
Other Income	0.00	.00
TOTAL INCOME	\$21,545.33	\$21,545.33
<u>EXPENSES</u>		
Outreach and Mission	1,815.63	\$1,815.63
Pastoral Services	8,287.81	8,287.81
Maintenance and Repairs	2,555.86	2,555.86
Church Office	3,216.01	3,216.01
Music Ministry	408.33	408.33
Christian Education	119.10	119.10
Local Ministry	0.00	0.00
Misc. Expenses	286.30	286.30
TOTAL EXPENSES	\$16,689.04	\$16,689.04

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Address Service Requested

God is still speaking
to everyone in the home of:

 **March** 