

Lakewood Congregational Church

A Congregation of the United Church of Christ

Sunday, April 25, 2021



An Order of Worship to be followed in your home, along with our
worship video on your own
Preferably at 10:00am

Welcome and Announcements

If you are new among us, welcome. Please know we are glad you're here; you're welcome in our remote community and you're welcome in our physical community when the time is right.

At Lakewood Congregational Church, we strive to be people of extravagant welcome. Whether you are young or old, gay or straight, single or partnered, happy or sad, confused or inspired, street smart or college-educated, whether you can't pay your bills or you have more than enough to share—no matter who you are or where you are on life's journey, you are welcome here in this place, to worship a loving God who welcomes us all. As I stand in this sanctuary I join my heart with you and I pray that you might feel the refuge of this space.

May the Peace of Christ be with you. Let us worship God.

Pastoral Message Re: Covid Response

Before our worship service begins this morning, I want to take a few moments to talk about our current response to the Covid Pandemic and our conversations regarding returning to in-person indoor worship.

As many members of our congregation are getting vaccinated and the light at the end of the tunnel shines bright, I'm getting a lot of questions about whether that means we're ready to return to the sanctuary. Our metric since late summer or early fall of last year has been that we will return to our sanctuary when our county has declined to "Alert Level Yellow". We continue to follow that metric, and we are currently still in alert level red. There are times when I think we will start to see a very quick decline, as vaccine percentages rise and the most vulnerable among us have received the vaccine. There are times when I start to think, "You know, I think we can do this safely." There are

times when I want to just throw in the towel and swing the doors wide open and have a dance party with all of you from our infants to our oldest members.

We just are not there quite yet. I'm in communication with many other faith communities in Lakewood and across the country. I've seen churches that have opened without issue, and churches that have opened with profound regret. I've seen dozens of reopening plans and worked on iterations of our own.

From the beginning of this pandemic, we have been committed to an evidence-based approach to opening our church, guided by the CDC, the Cuyahoga Department of Health, the Living Water Association of the UCC, and many other resources. While we may feel peer pressure or a pull to open because we're tired of all of this, the guidelines we have followed for the past year show that today-- right now-- it simply is not time, and we will know when it is. There are times when I think we'll see those numbers drop very quickly, and there are times I think we'll have to hold on a while longer. Today-- I just cannot tell you a date. Truly, the more patient we can be in this last leg of the race, the more quickly we'll get to the end.

But for the sake of planning-- here's what we're doing: We're having an outdoor service the first Sunday of May-- next week. There's a signup genius link in the weekly email, or you can call the church office. We're doing more small group outdoor gatherings. We're planning an outdoor Confirmation service on Pentecost which will also be filmed and shared...and beginning the Sunday after Pentecost, we will have an outdoor service every week, with guitar-led music, and we will film our Virtch services "start to finish" more like a traditional service, rather than breaking up our video clips and pasting them together. That will allow a small group of us to film worship together. We might see that the Covid numbers allow more people to be present during

the filming of the services, but we don't know that yet. The two service options will be a little bit different, experimental, listening to how God is speaking to us and being open to the spirit. We might see that the Covid number sway us towards a hybrid in-person/livestream option, but we don't know that yet. There are so many logistics we're still working out, and so much we're learning along the way, which is why I usually don't go into too many details...because I know all you problem-solvers out there are going to email me in 5 minutes to tell me all the ways we can do this. Your suggestions are welcome, but please know that we're already considering many, many ideas.

I cannot tell you how deeply I yearn to be together in our sanctuary again. I have spent a lot of time bargaining with God and with science and with myself. Ultimately I just know that we will know when the time is right.

Author Tim Soerens, in his latest book *Everywhere You Look: Discovering the Church, Right Where You Are*, says, church communities too often make a profound mistake in asking questions about the church before asking questions about what God is doing." I find myself very regularly asking questions about how and when we will regather, before building my leadership on the firm foundational questions about what God is doing with us. I deeply understand the urge to be physically together in our sanctuary on this Holy Ground, and that will happen again. Please, when you find yourself caught in that feeling of longing, ask questions about what God is doing with us here and now. What possibilities are within reach? What work can we build up together right now? What spiritual growth is ready to burst forth within you if you nurture it? How do you want to participate? Okay? I'm going to turn off my camera and go to the sanctuary and welcome you in our normal way.

Prelude

God, I Stretch My Hands to You by Jay Althouse
Victoria Peacock, soprano; Ben Malkevitch, piano
(a remote collaboration)

Call to Worship

Leader: With grace flowing, the poet sings the opening lines of the famous prayer, “The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want.”

People: We hear the Psalmist’s contentment and wonder about our own.

Leader: Settled on the ground, with grass tickling their toes, the psalmist rests, “God makes me lie down in green pastures. She leads me beside still waters. She restores my soul.”

People: We hear their deep need for rest and wonder about our own.

Leader: With a deep sigh, the psalmist declares, “Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me. You prepare a table before me. You anoint me. My cup overflows.

People: We recognize their bold courage and wonder about our own.

Leader: Remembering God’s faithfulness, the psalmist finds words to carry with them, “Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord my whole life long.”

People: We hear their faithful trust and wonder about our own.

Leader: Holy Spirit of Rest and Renewal, in this time of worship inspire us with words both ancient and new so that we may find the words that connect us to You.

People: Amen and amen.

Hymn *Savior, Like a Shepherd Lead Us*

*Savior, like a shepherd lead us
Much we need Thy tender care
In Thy pleasant pastures feed us
For our use Thy folds prepare
Blessed Jesus, blessed Jesus
Thou hast bought us, Thine we are
Blessed Jesus, blessed Jesus
Thou hast bought us, Thine we are
We are Thine, who Thou befriend us
Be the guardian of our way
Keep Thy flock from sin defend us
Seek us when we go astray
Blessed Jesus, blessed Jesus
Hear Thy children when we pray
Blessed Jesus, oh blessed Jesus
Hear Thy children when we pray
Early let us seek Thy favor
Early let us do Thy will
Blessed Lord and only Savior
With Thy love our bosoms fill
Blessed Jesus, blessed Jesus
Thou hast loved us, love us still
Blessed Jesus, oh blessed Jesus
Thou hast loved us, love us still
Blessed Jesus, oh blessed Jesus
Thou hast loved us, love us still*

LCC Virtual Choir

Gwendolyn DeLaney and Victoria Peacock, sopranos;

Gwendolyn DeLaney, alto;

Peter Hampton, Steve Hotchkiss, and Michael Komperda, tenors;

Tim Hampton, Noah Hamrick, and Robert Wenz, basses

Ben Malkevitch, piano

Invitation to the Offering

Like a shepherd tending to those in their care, God has offered us rest and renewal, protection and mercy, love and nourishment. In response, we are invited to give a portion of our time, energy, gifts, and prayers so that others in this world may experience the same.

Dedication Prayer

Loving God, bless these gifts and all the ways in which we give. May each of our gifts be a part of co-creating and tending to the love, safety, belonging, and dignity You envision for the world. Amen.

Doxology

Praise God from whom all blessings flow.
Praise God all creatures here below.
Praise God above, ye heavenly hosts:
Creator, Christ and Holy Ghost. Amen.

Scripture Reading, read by Tom Leatherman

John 10:11-18

‘I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away—and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep. I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep. I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd. For this reason

the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father.’

Psalm 23

The Divine Shepherd

A Psalm of David.

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.

He makes me lie down in green pastures;
he leads me beside still waters;

he restores my soul.

He leads me in right paths

for his name’s sake.

Even though I walk through the darkest valley,

I fear no evil;

for you are with me;

your rod and your staff—
they comfort me.

You prepare a table before me

in the presence of my enemies;

you anoint my head with oil;

my cup overflows.

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me

all the days of my life,

and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord

my whole life long.

Message

On this Good Shepherd Sunday, I am feeling called to talk about some of the recent news of our world, to talk about Restorative Justice, and to talk about some of the harm that has been caused and that we’re experiencing in our news right now.

This past Tuesday, a jury in Minneapolis, Minnesota convicted Derek Chauvin on three charges in the killing of George Floyd. That same hour, we learned of the killing of 16-year-old Ma'Khia Bryant at the hands of the Columbus Police Department. We know of the recent deaths of Adam Toledo in Chicago, and Daunte Wright in Minneapolis. Our deepest condolences go out to the family, friends, and communities of these beloved children of God: George Floyd, Ma'Khia Bryant, Adam Toledo, Daunte Wright in this time of unthinkable grief.

I am a firm believer in the concepts of Restorative Justice. Restorative Justice says that where there is harm, we are all harmed: Victim, Offender, Community. Those who are present to witness the act are victimized by the trauma of the experience. Ripple effects go out through our community to harm for more than those physically present. Where there is violence, we are all harmed.

And so we grieve, too, for the witnesses of these and each act of violence: for Darnella Frazier and her young cousin; for Charles McMillan, Genevieve Hanson, Christopher Martin. Our hearts break for the other young girls involved in the incident that led to the fatal use of force on Ma'Khia Bryant, and the foster parents, and the neighborhood. We grieve for law enforcement who seek to protect but often both endure and perpetrate harm, and for their families. We grieve for Derek Chauvin, for he too has lost a fullness of life as a result of violence, of fractured community, of unresolved and pervasive violence in our nation. We grieve for us-- our nation, our children, who can't escape the stories of violence...who have to keep hearing about it...even at church.

Where there is violence, we are all harmed. The Prophet Jeremiah says, "They have treated the wound of my people carelessly, saying, "Peace, peace," when there is no peace." The work of Restorative Justice begins with identifying the source of pain.

Restorative Justice identifies the source and seeks to heal it. Restorative Justice prioritizes de-escalation, generational

healing, systemic change, diversion, and trauma-informed care. It recognizes that hurt people hurt people, but that they deserve healing, that healing balm doesn't come from a band-aid or careless treatment of a wound. We cannot treat the wounds of God's people carelessly, saying "Peace, Peace" when there is no peace. Healing comes from deep, ongoing, transformative and restorative work.

Jesus is an originator of Restorative Justice. It is the work he did in every act of healing, in every miracle, in every conversation. It is the work he taught in Discipleship and made manifest in the Resurrection. Briefly today, we will look at Jesus-- the Good Shepherd as an example of Restorative Justice.

You all know Psalm 23, which we read every fourth Sunday after Easter, thanks be to God. It's so beautiful. And you probably know this passage from John too-- the Good Shepherd in contrast to the hired hand.

Jesus says, "The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away--and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep."

Jesus says, "I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me." and just a half a phrase before this John passage begins, Jesus says, "I came that they might have life, and have it abundantly." Pastor and Theologian David Lose defines life in abundance as "life that is no longer dominated by fear, but rather lives in and through the promise of protection and presence." The Good Shepherd both in John and in Psalm 23, offers life to his sheep that is not dominated by fear. He teaches his sheep to live in and through the promise of protection and presence. He works to keep his fold together, he leads them in the right environments, he works to eliminate threats, to build an environment that will protect and enhance the lives of his sheep so that they do not live in fear. The Good Shepherd lays down his life, not to ignore and forget his own identity, but to build his own life alongside the care and keeping of his community--

because he knows that when his community is whole and healthy, he is too.

The hired hand lives in scarcity. A life of scarcity is when we retreat, when we abandon the way when it gets too tough or inconvenient. A hired hand does the work under conditions and for profit. The hired hand is so protective of his own life that he will not lay it down, or share it, with anyone else. He treats the wounds of his sheep carelessly, and might be inclined to say “peace peace” when there is no peace. The harm caused by scarcity, and the harm caused by the careless tending of wounds, is that it is contagious. Those sheep, left scattered by the wolves, if they survived, will always be scared. They have lost all trust, they are far from the path to healing. A wound poorly cared for is one that worsens quickly and often spreads.

As a Disciples of Christ, we’re called to live as Good Shepherds, and to empower communities of Good Shepherds: to build environments of abundance, to value the life of each one of our neighbors, to lay down our individualism in pursuit of Restorative community. We are called to cultivate environments that address the root causes of harm and protect and enhance the lives of God’s people, and to not abandon our flocks when the going gets tough.

As we saw so clearly this week, especially in the killing of Ma’Khia Bryant, whenever these deaths come to our attention, people are inclined to ask, “well what did they do wrong?” Rev. Traci Blackmon, the Associate General Minister for Justice and Local Church Ministries of the UCC put it this way this week, “the deceased is immediately tried by public opinion.” She said, “Immediately. The person’s life, actions, context are examined to decide whether their death is a loss to society.” She asked, “Can’t we just begin with ‘this person deserved to live?’”

Similarly, my friend and seminary classmate, Aaron Rogers-- not the football player, but a Black pastor from St. Louis, posted on social media this week: “Let me be clear: we want all our kids alive, even the ones you find problematic.”

His words hit me hard. “We want all our kids alive, even the ones you find problematic.” I can imagine the Good Shepherd saying this to the Hired Hand. When the Hired Hand is inclined to just let some of the sheep wander off, or fend for themselves, the Good Shepherd says there is not a single sheep in this flock whose life doesn’t matter to me. Even the ones you find problematic.

You all know by now my favorite quote by Thomas Merton: “Our job is to love others without stopping to inquire whether or not they are worthy.” The Good Shepherd’s job is to care for, love, protect, and restore the lives of his sheep without stopping to inquire whether or not they are worthy.

Because you see ultimately the ripple effect of Restorative Justice goes both ways. There is a ripple effect of harm just as there is a ripple effect of love, of healing, of restoration, of wholeness. When we love others, lay down our lives for our neighbors, treat and tend to the deep wounds of God’s people, value each life... because those who are present to experience the act of healing are healed as well. Where there is healing, we are all restored to abundant life.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

Benediction

As you depart from this place, go with courage, and go with trust that the God who created you is also the One who will sustain you and the One who will show you the way. Until we meet again, may you be filled with curiosity, wonder, and openness to God’s tender leading. Amen.

Postlude

The King of Love My Shepherd Is (arr. Carol Parson)
Ben Malkevitch, piano

Offering and Contribution Collection

Please consider fulfilling your pledges during this time. Financial gifts are always welcome, and our church feels the call to respond to the needs around us as they arise. Financial stability allows us to do so more effectively. So, let us give generously of our time, talent, treasure to further the work of God in our community. You can do so in the following ways:

- Writing and mailing a check to Lakewood Congregational Church, 1375 W. Clifton Blvd., Lakewood, OH 44107
- Texting STEWARD to 44-321
- Sending a gift through your bank's online bill pay
- By using the donate button on the church's website www.lcc-church.org
- Call the church office at (216) 221-9555 to discuss other options

Our Mission Statement proclaims our common goal.

*We strive to be a welcoming,
worshipping community of faith,
helping people discover and deepen
their relationship with God, growing as
disciples of Christ, and reaching out in
faith and loving service.*

In keeping with the spirit of our Mission Statement,

*Lakewood Congregational Church,
United Church of Christ,*

is an Open and Affirming congregation.

*We welcome people of all sexual orientation,
ages, differing abilities, and ethnic, economic,
and racial backgrounds into
the full life and ministry of our church.*

*We declare this in the name of the Still Speaking God,
whose Son, Jesus Christ, welcomed
all people into God's circle of grace.*

