

Dear Members and Friends of First Congregational UCC ~

May God's amazing and abundant grace hold you every day. I pray you are doing well, staying safe, and sensing God's love. I miss seeing you, singing with you, and sharing in the richness of our faith community. I am so grateful for your emails, phone calls, and the connections on Zoom we have been able to make. Please know, if there is anyway the church can offer support, care, and God's love to you, I ask that you call my cell phone number 608/449-9545. It is my deepest prayer that we stay connected during these days of being physically apart.

It is also important that we communicate with you. Even in the face of the Coronavirus, we have sought to live our core values of worship; service; and community/fellowship. A quick overview of the last seven weeks:

Worship ~ Beginning on March 15, we moved all our worship online using Facebook live. I am humbled by the fact that over 700 people were able to participate in Easter Service. It is my prayer that we will continue to live our Easter faith in these days. **We will continue to worship online in the coming weeks.** We do realize that all social media platforms have drawbacks, Facebook Live included. The moderators and Worship Team are committed to explore ways we can help bring worship to you. If you have thoughts or would like to talk, please call my cell phone. Beginning May 3, we will be offering an audio version of the service through a CD mailed to your home. If you have not been able to tune into the service and would like the CD please call me.

Service ~ We continue as a church to take God's love out into the community. A huge thank you to **Carol Hagglund and Sandy Smith** who organize the once a month community meal at St. Paul's Lutheran Church. What an important ministry in a time such this! We appreciate everyone who helps provide food to those who are hungry. Thank you to everyone who contributed to the Easter Love offering. As of today, we have received close to \$11,000. We are also beginning the individual investments in SURE (Sarasota United for Responsibility and Equity). Please remember **Wednesday, April 28 at noon to April 29 at noon is the Giving Challenge.** If you can contribute, please consider using this way to DOUBLE up to \$100 your gift to SURE. Finally, we are grateful to **Lynn Jones and Steve Combs** who will be co-chairing our participation in Family Promise. As of right now, we do not know when Family Promise we will re-open. We will keep you informed.

Community ~ In March, we started utilizing Zoom, an online tool for connecting while safe at home. Over the course of the last weeks, we have been able to gather for Bible Study, Wednesday Prayer time at 3 pm, COLLAGE, and committee meetings. I have been leading a Thursday Prayer Service on Facebook Live at 1 pm and posted daily prayers to Facebook. Rev. Sarah Melcher is leading a book conversation on *Inhabiting Eden*. **Beginning in May, I will lead a conversation on Richard Rohr's book, *Immortal Diamond*.** This book invites us to see this time as sacred and to reflect

on our connections with God. The book conversation will happen on **Mondays at 3 pm, on Zoom, beginning May 4th.**

Office ~ Over the last several weeks, our church has reduced the number of hours of operation and the number of staff hours on campus for safety reasons. However, we have continued to try to keep our staff whole so that they are not negatively impacted financially as they work less hours. Our Church Council and Staffing Team believes this is the caring and compassionate way to support our Staff who mean a great deal to us. If it financially possible, please keep your pledge current. We fully understand that we are living in uncertain times and that so many have lost their jobs and have reduced income. **We offer our heartfelt gratitude for any gift you are able to make.** You can mail your pledge to the church (mail is delivered on Tuesdays and Thursdays) or you can mail to Pastor Wes at 5753 Stone Pointe Dr., Sarasota, FL 34233. Most of all, we want everyone to stay safe and be well. If you have questions, please let us know.

Our Moderators, Church Council, and Teams continue to meet. **Our Green Team is working to help us become a Creation Justice Church.** Please watch the Midweek Message for more information on this. I pray that the above information has been helpful. At the same time, I realize there are so many questions left unanswered. When will we return to in-person worship? When might the church return to normal office hours? What impacts will this have on our church? These are wonderful questions that we are trying to live into always listening to our still-speaking God. While I may not have answers to all the questions, I am clear that we will prayerfully live the questions together. *I remain committed to serving as your pastor in these days, grateful for our relationship built over the last years together that tethers and ties us together even as we are physically apart.* I remain committed to staying open to finding ways of sharing God's love now and every day this year. I pray you will continue to participate in our church. I am grateful for each of you. You are a blessing.

Would you please pray with me:

O God, You are our help in ages past and our hope in the days to come. Continue to guide us through the wilderness of these days. We pray for those struggling physically with health issues, emotional exhaustion and loneliness, as well as spiritual frustration. We pray for every person in the health care field, those who work in grocery stores, and delivering items to our homes. We pray for those who feel alone and that our church would find ways to reach out with Your love. God who continues to form, fashion, and love us into being, we pray that we would be open to You every hour. In the name of the One who promises to be with us always, Jesus the Risen Christ. Amen.

I pray that in the coming days of May, I might be able to connect with each of you on the phone. But feel free to always reach out to me if you need to talk. May God's peace and presence be with you now more than ever. With great love ~~ Pastor Wes