Lewistown-Trinity United Methodist Church

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P.O. Box 134, 8088 CR 54

Lewistown, OH 43333

937-686-8355; www.LTUMC.com

Rev. Debra Ketcham – 614-580-2382 (Cell)

This is the day the Lord has made! Let us rejoice and be glad in it!

Our scriptures this week are from Psalm 121 & Matthew 18:15-17.

Contemporary Christian music singer and songwriter, Matthew West, recently released a new song called *Truth Be Told*. It begins, “*Lie number one you're supposed to have it all together - And when they ask how you're doing - Just smile and tell them, "Never better." Lie number 2 everybody's life is perfect except yours - So keep your messes and your wounds - and your secrets safe with you behind closed doors. Truth be told, The truth is rarely told: Now I say I'm fine, yeah I'm fine oh I'm fine, hey I'm fine but I'm not. I'm broken. And when it's out of control, I say it's under control, but it's not, and you know it. I don't know why it's so hard to admit it, when being honest is the only way to fix it. . . So let the truth be told.”*

In this ongoing season of social distancing, the grief, isolation, and yearning to get back to normal has gotten to all of us. In the midst of an upside down world, we more readily listen to the whispered lies in our ears that question our gifts, talents, abilities and identities – personally and as a church. We watch another church’s online worship service and convince ourselves that they are better than our church. We see creative programming offered at another church then tell ourselves that they are more committed to their work than we are. The reality is you can do a lot with a 1-5 million dollar budget, multiple staff, and a team hired specifically for technology and production.

When we grieve, messages fill our minds that are not true. These are lies of the deceiver, speaking to our vulnerable, weary spirits because we are exhausted, and our lives are topsy-turvy, as we try to figure out new technologies and ways of connecting with others, while juggling the regular stressors in our lives. We keep trying to live into “*I'm fine, yeah I'm fine oh I'm fine, hey I'm fine*” which speaks to our stoic ways of pushing ahead at all costs.

Everything is not fine. You are not fine. I am not fine. Not to be fine is the new normal, and will be for months ahead, as new stressors cause our mind to dig up the failures of our past, dwell on another’s inadequacies, which all cause our minds to not process correctly. Our minds have been hazy, as if a loved one has just died or job loss.

None of us can claim to know how to maneuver through this new way of being, in this unprecedented time. We have been called upon to do things we have never done before, things we never imagined. And through it all, we still hold ourselves and others to unreasonably high standards, and then berate ourselves and the other for not being as savvy, as smart, or as competent as we all used to be.

At the Pastor Parish Relations meeting last Wed., we talked about how this pandemic, and the grief associated with it, has affected the life of our church, our spiritual life, and our worship life. So, the PPR suggested I acknowledge and name our losses, and remind us we still have more than what we have lost. That night I began writing down what I and the church have lost, and the list was extensive. Although naming the losses was therapeutic to a point, I had to stop because I felt myself falling down into a rabbit hole that many of us have felt over these past months. So we wouldn’t be here for another hour, I whittled it down. I’m sure you could add many more.

First, we have all been through a wringer, and it continues to take its toll. We have been numb, and found little joy as we started out in March and April in survival mode. Like many of you, I was unable to see my family at first. I isolated myself so I wouldn’t get sick, or pass it on to others, knowing there was not another staff member to cover if I got sick. Most of us cancelled trips to see family or to relax and rejuvenate. Our son’s wedding was postponed. We have not seen friends or family because they or their spouse has health concerns.

We have missed sports, concerts, and summer events. We missed sports so much we were excited to watch golf on TV. Conventions and conferences had to be re-worked or cancelled. The *Country Music Awards*, Thursday evening, was strange without an audience applauding after each performance or award, because the auditoriums were empty. Our church also sat empty as Girl Scout Sunday, Biker Sunday, and the Strawberry Festival passed by us. Neither did we have the Ice Cream Festival or in person VBS. We’ve missed our two services each Sunday, and some haven’t or aren’t able to join us in person.

We’ve missed Sunday brunch with our church friends. We’ve slacked off caring for ourselves. Some of us have created new health concerns by gaining what’s been called the ‘COVID 15,’ from cooking and baking so much at home and not exercising. Some of us haven’t felt like cleaning or cooking, as clutter has piled up, from being out of sorts, having lowered energy.

We’ve missed our children’s and extended family’s milestones: graduation, prom, awards, and family reunions. Some have had to work long hours and continue to do so. Parents and grandparents assisted as the children and youth had to finish their classes at home last spring, and some continue this mode of education this fall.

Six months ago we were thrown 5 to 8 years into the future, with one week notice, with no guidebook or technology person. Those assisting with worship have sacrificed a lot over the shelter-in time. During that time we did not feel like we were worshiping, because we were creating worship for others to enjoy. Our wells have run dry. For those here, you may not feel filled as we sing softly, are masked, having limited interaction, with no organ or band, making it difficult, for all of us to feel worshipful.

The reality is – we’ve all been in deep grief, and things have added to that grief, deepened by the death of a friend or loved one. Some are still waiting for funerals to be scheduled. Some of us have developed new health issues, had delayed surgeries and procedures, doctor or chiropractor visits. We still feel isolated, and get in the ‘dumps’. We’re not ourselves, nor are we functioning well because our lives are still topsy-turvy and will be for months.

When our world is upside down, it’s hard to maintain spiritual disciplines and feel worship filled. When we grieve what was, God can feel distant. Even when we are numb many still respond, *I'm fine, yeah I'm fine oh I'm fine, hey I'm fine, but we’re not, - - we’re broken.*” - -

**The good news is, God has been and is still working in our midst!** We have an opportunity to celebrate what God has done, is doing, and will do. That is why we have added our mission and ministry moments, for you to remember. We also have an unprecedented opportunity to step out and into new ways of being the church, and not putting new wine into old wineskins,” as Jesus put it.

Our church has changed and will continue to change because of the opportunities we have been given through technology. Because of this opportunity for change, we have new people joining us for worship. Terri & Rick Beck, Diane Sutton, a teacher from Indian Lake Schools, my sister-in-law Deb, and a few others still join us via Zoom. Rosemary, Herb, Julia, the Cramers, Lynn Moon (that’s who Douglas is), and Pat MacDonald until she started back a few weeks ago, along with Martha Jane til she came back, Arno, Nancy Reuber, and others continue to watch most weeks from home. Some love joining through Zoom with their pajamas on.

I praise God that nearly every person here was able to watch or listen to our worship for months, singing the songs, reading the liturgy, and saying the prayers. When we first started, I suggested each person light a candle and create their own worship space before church began. I hope you did that. We shared Communion together and still modify how we participate in person, while many churches have not had Communion for 6 months.

While most churches had only a prayer and a sermon in those first months or so, we had a full worship service. Our ‘Coming Back Together” team and Church Board voted on when and how to return to church. Together, we have been singing, although muffled, and 2/3 of us can attend in person with safe distancing, while other churches can only accommodate up to 15 - 20% of their members with no singing. Those in our congregation have chosen a small church setting because of the **value** it adds to our lives, that larger churches can only dream of.

The children and grandchildren of our church have enjoyed activity sheets emailed each week for 4 ½ months, then a ‘VBS at Home’ kit for 4 weeks, followed by VBS type materials and crafts for another 6, and activities continue to be passed out and mailed. Richie completed a land swap with the Indian Lake School Board so they could have the land for school purposes we owned, and we now have the land we have mowed for 30+ years. The men have resumed their Wed. breakfast, the women have met for 2 months, one Emmaus Share group met the entire 6 months, social distancing in the parking lot on lawn chairs, and now our adult Sunday school has resumed!

I can’t praise our Congregational Care Team enough. They sent cards, made phone calls, sometimes numerous times, when I did not have the capacity to do so. The Food Pantry, the Homeless Shelter, and even Daily Bread for a month or so, was operational because our members were involved.

During this pandemic, our offerings came down a little, so a few members increased what they were giving to help out. Our over and beyond giving has not decreased these 6 months totaling: $1000.00 to Brody’s Bunch for Cystic Fibrosis, $2270 to the Food Pantry, $1250 to Gracehaven, almost $200 to the Love Fund, and currently we are giving to Pathways Pregnancy Center through the end of October. Yet there is more: additional donations have come in for the food pantry, Gracehaven, the Homeless Shelter and Daily Bread.

Thankfully we have an older congregation that had little financial disruption, plus we received a financial grant from the Conference. We praise God that we have great renters of our farm land and farm house. We had one Work Day and another scheduled is for this Saturday - so come and help! We’ve held two funerals for our church members in the Sanctuary. I’ve been able to give limited pastoral care with the hospital restrictions, and have been able to resume home visits, 4 thus far, and visiting others as I see them*. “Through it all, through it all, we’ve learned to depend upon God’s Word.”*

I praise God that most everyone was financially secure during this time. One family had a job loss, but soon another job was found. One had an electrical surge which caused lots of issues. A few others have struggled. Yet we praise God that those affected by the shut-downs still had their benefits and unemployment, and have been back to work for months. We praise God for the Happy Hookers, who didn’t skip a beat. They are amazing! They were featured with a short article in the West Ohio Conference’s NewsNet.

On Thursday, West Ohio had their Awards Ceremony on *Facebook Live*. We received the United Methodist Rural Advocates Revitalization Award for churches worshiping less than 100 for the work we did in 2019. We will receive a plaque and a financial gift from the Rural Advocates group in the near future. Through it all, we’ve found a way for the Girl Scouts to meet, outside, with access to the church bathrooms this fall. We have not been slothful. We have moved forward in spite of the pandemic, and will continue to do so, because of what God has been able to do in and through us.

Yet, as we look back over the past months, we have been out of sorts, bumped heads with others, totally misunderstood someone, or they’ve misunderstood us, because of the difficulty we’ve had in processing the world around us, we likely have some work to do to patch things up. Because we have not been ourselves these past 6 months, most every one of us has messed up on relationships, conversations, and intentions. So, before we go, we’ll look briefly at Jesus’s Rule in Matthew 18.

In our gospel lesson this morning, Jesus urged his followers to keep their relationships right-side up. He laid out a basic outline in how his followers have a duty to go and make things right when they misunderstand another, or worse yet, sin against another. Jesus said when a relationship is broken, “go to that person.” This is in stark contrast to how most of us deal with conflict.

It’s easier to pretend the problem will go away, but it doesn’t. Some fear if they do say anything, they’ll make the situation worse. Regretfully, some will choose the sinful ways and engage in grape-vining, that degrades the other person and our church. When we allow Satan to stir the pot the stories in our head, we get things twisted, backwards and upside down. When people choose not to resolve their broken relationships, it affects the church and the church’s reputation in the wider community. Jesus’ Rule retains our holiness.

As followers of Christ, we do not listen to someone’s angst against another. We stop them and direct them to talk to the person who has hurt them. If they say they can’t do that, we offer to go with them. It is up to each of us to make and keep this fellowship of believers a place of peace, understanding, forgiveness, reconciliation, love, and unity. In love, we are called by Christ to keep each other accountable, speaking in love and kindness.

In these difficult times none of us could or can be everything to everybody. It’s impossible. Instead of breaking a relationship, we mend our relationships by following Jesus’ Rule. In Romans 13, Paul wrote, “Lay aside the darkness and put on the armor of light; living honorably like during the light of the day.” Paul implores Christians to be rooted in love, ridding themselves of the darkness in their lives, by ‘dressing’ themselves with the Lord Jesus Christ – and behaving appropriately, like ‘Children of the Light.’ May we do so too. Amen.

**BENEDICTION** – Let us be a church that comes alongside each other, because we need each other, especially in these difficult times. Let us realize we deceive ourselves and others when we claim “*I'm fine, yeah I'm fine oh I'm fine, hey I'm fine*” because we are not. Be gentle with yourself and others. Take time to care for yourself. Love, forgive, reconcile, and live in in the peace that comes from Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Blessings! Pastor Debbie