**WEST CENTER CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH, UCC**

***September 10, 2017 Where Two or Three Are Gathered***

**A Sermon by The Rev. John M. Barrett**

Hello Friends,
My summer vacation has ended, and so I found myself back in the pulpit. Here is what I had to say as Harvey had flooded Texas and Irma was bearing down on Florida.
If you care to donate to hurricane sufferers through the United Church of Christ, you can go to the website [www.cc.org](http://www.cc.org/) for directions. One hundred percent of the money you donate goes
to those in need. The denomination covers all the administrative costs involved in the fund raising.

Blessings to all,

Pastor John Barrett

**SHARING CONCERNS AND PRAYER REQUESTS**

With Hurricanes Harvey and Irene ravaging our country, following the Prelude and before the Opening Hymn, I asked people in the congregation to share their concerns and prayer requests for those in harm’s way. About two-thirds of the people gathered mentioned names and places in need of prayer. After praying, we sang six verses to *Amazing Grace* that had beenwritten in response to the hurricanes. I found these new verses on the United Church of Christ website (www.ucc.org). The verses are printed below:

***O God, We’ve Prayed in Wind and Rain***

O God, we’ve prayed in wind and rain and now we pray once more

For those who felt the hurricane and heard the waters roar.

We pray for those who watched the storm destroy the life they knew,

Who wait in shelters, tired and worn, and wonder what to do.

We thank you, God, for acts of love not bound by race or creed,

For hands that reach across the flood to all who are in need.

We pray for others far away who’ve seen destruction, too;

We look beyond ourselves, for they are also loved by you.

We pray that leaders of our land will heed creation’s cry,

And bravely care and take a stand for earth and sea and sky.

Where rains flood cities, homes and towns may we go out to be

A witness that your love abounds in each community.

Tune: Virginia Harmony, 1831 Arr. Edwin O. Excell, 1900.

Alternative Tune: ST. ANNE CM Attr. William Croft, 1708 ("Our God, Our Help in Ages Past").

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Email: bcgillette@comcast.net Website: www.carolynshymns.com

Permission is given for free use in local churches to support the relief efforts.

**OPENING HYMN** *O God of Earth and Space*

**THE OLD TESTAMENT WITNESS** Exodus 12:1-14

This is the story of the Jewish Passover, when the angel of death passes over the houses of the Jews who are enslaved in Egypt. Passover is celebrated as a story of God's love and liberation.

**THE WITNESS OF ST PAUL** Romans 13:8-14

Here St Paul echoes Jesus, writing in Romans 13:8-14, “The commandments… are summed up in this word, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’”

**THE GOSPEL WITNESS** Matthew 18:15-20

**SERMON**

Jesus often speaks to large groups of people. Think of Jesus’ Feeding the 5000, Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, Jesus noticing the tax collector Zacchaeus, who climbs a tree to see Jesus better in the crowd, and the times when Jesus has to get into a boat to put a little distance between himself and the clamoring throng.

I’m sure Jesus is pleased by the large turnout of people interested in his proclamation of the great good news that “The Kingdom of God is at hand.” Jesus wants to reach and teach as many people as possible, and so he is almost always traveling from one place to another, speaking to everyone who will listen.

But although our Lord likes big numbers and meeting new people, Jesus also delights in the smaller, personal exchanges that he has with friends in intimate settings. Jesus enjoys staying at the home of Mary, Martha, and their brother Lazarus. Jesus tells Zacchaeus to hurry down from the tree so Jesus can visit Zaccahaeus at his home. Jesus has a Last Supper with his 12 disciples and then speaks privately with his disciple Peter, while the other disciples sleep.

Jesus speaks with Mary Magdalene on Easter morning at the empty tomb. And later that Easter Day, Jesus converses with two of his followers on the road to Emmaus and then at their home, when they recognize their Lord in the breaking of the bread.

Jesus enjoys these small groups so much that he promises us that he will be with us even when he cannot be physically present: “For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.”

“For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.” I think these words are among the most encouraging in the Bible, encouraging to all Christians who gather in small groups in churches and in homes to praise and pray, to be inspired and to go forth to love our neighbor as we love ourselves, laying aside the works of darkness and putting on the armor of light.

Knowing that we are not alone in our small churches encourages us and gives us hope in the future, hope that our numbers will increase as does our faith, as we think of new ways to invite people to join us in community and in membership.

Hayley Moreno has proposed a movie night for neighborhood children and their parents to help us attract new members This fall will be a good time to brainstorm other new ideas of what we can do to open our doors more widely. The Mitchells have an idea of a twice-monthly music night in Bodge Lounge, where we invite our neighbors to come, make music and/or listen to the music that is made. In this way we will be meeting people where they are, welcoming them to join us for fellowship and fun, and who knows, perhaps they will even join us on a Sunday morning.

I especially like the colorful cover of today’s worship bulletin, with the words, "*Where two or three* are gathered in my name, *I am there* among them" printed in bold letters. I like the dynamism, the growth and diversity that the bulletin cover represents, the growth and diversity that happens when we gather in Jesus’ name and realize that he is here among us.

The name of the watercolor painting on the cover by Kathleen Eppick is “God with Us.” And in the painting we see there are lots of us with God, when we visualize the two’s and three’s and twenty-five’s altogether. This coming together in Spirit is hopeful and encouraging too.

I think today's bulletin cover may well be worth taking home and contemplating as we look to the future of our church.

It’s interesting to me that today’s Old Testament Witness tells the story of Passover, one of the most important of the Jewish holidays, a holiday that may also be the origination of our own Maundy Thursday service during Holy Week.

Passover is centered on a family religious meal, the Seder, which is held in the home, not in the temple. The Seder is quite ritualized, with the same questions being asked and answered each year, as well as special prayers offered.

The food for the Seder is also prescribed: “Lamb (Pesach) represents the lamb’s blood put over the doorposts as a sign of God’s protecting love. Unleavened bread (Matzoh) recalls the bread made quickly without yeast for the flight from Egypt. Bitter herbs (Moror) are a reminder of the bitterness of slavery and suffering in Egypt. Green herbs dipped in salt water are a reminder of the tears shed in captivity. A mixture of chopped apples, nuts and wine (Horoseth) resembles the mortar used to build Pharaoh’s palaces in Egypt. Wine represents life and redemption.” (Seasons of the Spirit, *SeasonsFusion*, Pentecost 2 2017, pg. 53)

So in Judaism we see a small group, the family, recalling and symbolically re-living God’s liberating love as they begin forty years of wandering before entering the Promised Land. God is there among their family and among all families celebrating Passover.

Jesus experiences God’s presence at Passover, just as we experience God’s presence in Jesus whenever we gather in his name.

In St Paul’s Letter to the Romans 13:9-10, St Paul teaches that all the religious commandments of the Holy Scriptures can be reduced to one law, one word --- the law of love: “Love your neighbor as yourself. Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.”

So here we are again, two or three gathered together in love. We love God as we love our neighbor as we ourselves, God with us.

And in the Gospel for today, Jesus teaches that if we believe someone has wronged us, we should talk to that person privately first. Then if there is no resolution, we are to take one or two others with us to speak with that person; and only if that does not work, bring the matter before the whole group, the church.

Our Church, our Faith, our Lord, lives and moves and has its being where two or three of us gather in His name. And from our gathering here, let us go forth and multiply.

Amen.

**HYMN OF RESPONSE** *Draw Us in the Spirit’s Tether*

**CLOSING HYMN** *God of Our Life*

Our Closing Hymn is especially appropriate, for tomorrow we recognize the sixteenth anniversary of 9/11.

**BENEDICTION**

And now, unto the one who is able to keep us from falling, and lift us from the dark valley of despair to the bright mountain of hope, from the midnight of worry to the daybreak of joy: to God be the power and glory, forever and ever. Amen.

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