

Call To Worship

Christ will hear our prayers, not from lofty distances and far-removed perfection, but as one who steps into the rivers of life ahead of us, who feels our every doubt and fear and laughs in joy in the midst of our survivals.

God who lives close to us, God whose life stretches onwards and outwards and beyond, God in Spirit and in truth, we worship you this day.

Prayer of Invitation

Spirit of God, invisible to our human eyes, we seek after you. God, we want to know you, feel close to you, and sense your presence. **We are drawn to your holiness, your might, and your mystery. In quiet and in our need we pray to you, trusting that you will listen and that we will know you hear us. Thank you for giving us this desire to know you, and have patience as we try to grasp the mystery of your being. We open our lives to you. Amen.**

The Word

John 14:12-14; Philippians 4:4-9 (Common English Bible)

Jesus said: "I assure you that whoever believes in me will do the works that I do. They will do even greater works than these because I am going to the Father. I will do whatever you ask for in my name, so that the Father can be glorified in the Son. When you ask me for anything in my name, I will do it."

Paul said: "Be glad in the Lord always! Again I say, be glad! Let your gentleness show in your treatment of all people. The Lord is near. Don't be anxious about anything; rather, bring up all of your requests to God in your prayers and petitions, along with giving thanks. Then the peace of God that exceeds all understanding will keep your hearts and minds safe in Christ Jesus.

From now on, brothers and sisters, if anything is excellent and if anything is admirable, focus your thoughts on these things: all that is true, all that is holy, all that is just, all that is pure, all that is lovely, and all that is worthy of praise. Practice these things: whatever you learned, received, heard, or saw in us. The God of peace will be with you."

Living the Word

Think Greater: Live, Give and Love Beyond all Expectations

October 30 is Reformation Sunday, important for the Lutherans, as it was begun with an event led by Martin Luther. Today they celebrate Luther's 95 complaints about the Roman Catholic Church which he nailed publicly to the church door. Luther was a German monk, priest in the Roman Catholic Church at the time.

The church would grant as an indulgence - a reduction of your earthly punishment due for sins which had already been forgiven by Christ. The indulgence was granted by the Catholic Church after the sinner had confessed and received forgiveness. The belief is that indulgences were granted for specific good works and prayers.

Indulgences replaced the severe punishments of the early Church. In the year 1516, Johann Tetzel, a Dominican friar and commissioner for indulgences, was sent to Germany by the Roman Catholic Church to raise money through an indulgence 'fee' to rebuild St Peter's Basilica in Rome. Roman Catholic theology stated that faith alone, without charity or good works, is necessarily not true and saving faith.

On October 31, 1517, Luther wrote to the Archbishop, protesting against the sale of indulgences. The list of thesis' included questions such as # 86, which asks: "Why does the pope, whose wealth today is greater than the wealth of the richest men in history, build the basilica of St. Peter with the money of poor believers rather than with his own money?"

Luther objected to a saying attributed to Tetzel that "As soon as the coin in the coffer rings, the soul from purgatory into heaven springs." He insisted that, since forgiveness was God's alone to grant, those who claimed that indulgences absolved buyers from all punishments and granted them salvation were in error. Christians, he said, must not slacken in following Christ on account of such false assurances.

Alleged abuses in selling and granting indulgence were a major point of contention when Martin Luther initiated the Protest/Reform – Protestant Reformation which we now call social justice issues. Like John Wesley, Luther had no intent on starting a new church, he just wanted to reform what he felt was corrupting the Church. We now understand faith and works to go hand in hand in our human lives, not to be bought or sold to buy our way to heaven.

To keep all of us from corruption in our thinking and doing, we need to continue to focus on God as we go through life. We have been sharing about 'Thinking Greater' for many weeks now. How many of you have taken time to explore your daily Christian walk by spending more time with God. Thinking Greater about anything should begin with a conversation between you and your Creator, God. Prayer should be where we begin anything in our lives.

All of you should have received a church commitment card by now. It is for everyone to consider, not just the members of this church. When you opened it did you stop to pray? Did you ask God to help you think Greater?

A few years ago there was a big to-do about the book 'The Prayer of Jabez.' It is based on just two verses of scripture from the Bible: I Chronicles chapter four. True to the title chronicles, chapter four is 23 verses long and all but two verses are a listing of family generations: fathers and children.

But let me read verses 9-10: *Jabez was more honored than his brothers. His mother had named him Jabez, saying, "I bore him in pain." Jabez called on Israel's God: "If only you would greatly bless me and increase my territory. May your power go with me to keep me from trouble, so as not to cause me pain." And God granted his request.*

Jabez knew how to 'think greater.' There is not another word about him, so we can't know what God did for him, but scriptures tell us that "God granted his request." And in the middle of his families genealogy his story is told. Have you taken time lately to think about where you are at? Can you think greater?

The commitment card is more than just about money. In fact it is not about more time or more money. It is about more God. Do you remember that verse a few weeks back about "*Everyone should give whatever they have decided in their heart. They shouldn't give with hesitation or because of pressure. God loves a cheerful giver.*" II Corinthians 9? The Apostle Paul is inviting you to 'think greater' by recognizing that you aren't paying for indulgences, but giving from your heart because you can.

He end caps that verse with some reality on one end and some faith on the other by saying in verse 6: "*What I mean is this: the one who sows a small number of seeds will also reap a small crop, and the one who sows a generous amount of seeds will also reap a generous crop*" and verse 8: "*God has the power to provide you with more than enough of every kind of grace. That way, you will have everything you need always and in everything to provide more than enough for every kind of good work.*"

Beyond Expectations: If you are living only at the level of expectations, you will miss out on a lot of life. Disciples are called to live beyond just what is expected. In confirmation class the first week we talked about places we see God in our lives. One student said in the trees. I see God in the unexpected things that happen.

God is in the expected, but we really believe in God when we encounter the unexpected and know there must be a Creator still working in our world. Think for a moment about those disciples. Some walked away from jobs and families to live beyond expectations with Jesus. Some stayed home as was expected of them. Some sacrificed and some suffered, but they kept following because living in the 'beyond expectations' was where they knew God deeper and where they felt fulfilled. To be a Christ follower asks for more, but gives more to the one willing to go.

I don't know about you, but I have always hoped to be great someday: To be a hero in history or author a book, with my name on the cover. When I was in my teen years I didn't like to study, and even when I did, I was still pretty much a 'C' student. I remember coming home and telling my mom that I just hated being average. She reminded me that I had won many first place blue ribbons in 4-H at the fair, so I wasn't so average. As I began to find my place in the order of things, I became excited to give more of myself.

During college I was easily distracted, but somehow graduated. Almost 20 years later I attended Seminary, where I knew 'C's wouldn't cut it. But at that point I had found my passion and it all came much easier for me. I then knew that I could make a difference if I would trust God to use me beyond what was expected. Some days this work is a whirlwind beyond belief, let alone expectations. But I now know this is who I am and what I can do beyond just the expectations.

The church can be a place to help you find your passions. I invite you to try something new – beyond what you expect of yourself. Listen for direction from God and offer yourself. I know there is a place for all and God will guide you.

If you are looking for examples of passionate people, take a look around here: Volunteers: Ruth Pechacek,, Bruce Konkler, Bethe Wiberg, Cliff Stoner, Shirley Anderson, and Roxana Jackson are just a few of the many. Carol Heinrich as one of the paid staff, puts in more of herself because she likes working beyond expectations. And then there are the Anonymous givers of money who surprise us (beyond expectations) with funds just when we need them.

Some of you will find and share your passions outside these doors. You are the church, going beyond the expectation of Sunday morning worship. Many of you do mission work for this community by volunteering some time or other gifts? I'm coming out to be with you as you share some of the places you volunteer your gifts or time: Food Shelf, Salvation Army, Library, Birkie lost and found (nothing soothes the soul of someone than finding what they have lost)... Your passion is shared in the schools, the community and the hospital.

If you can slip it in, mention to people where you are serving that you go to the United Methodist Church – just slip it in somewhere...I know, my mind always goes to marketing, but when you help another, you bring Christ to them. Christianity wouldn't have found its way out of Jerusalem if the followers of Christ hadn't shared who they were as a part of the body of Christ.

When someone thanks you for your work – you can tell them why you do it. "It seems like the Christian thing to do." and then, add "the United Methodist Church founder, John Wesley said 'the world is our parish'." If that isn't your thing, just say "at my church, the United Methodist Church, we are trying to thing greater, to go beyond expectations."

Often when we work toward a financial goal, we find the rewards to be beyond our expectations. We began this journey of thinking greater on the first day of Fall programming for Adults and Confirmands and Children. Everything about Fall has been beyond my expectations. Our giving is up a little – we are now running in the black... We have a Confirmation Class. I have had a few people asking to join the church.

People are inspired to look beyond what is expected of them and they are becoming a part of something greater. Some people may not be inspired and may be missing the potential greatness of what God can do when we apply ourselves to a passion together.

If you feel that you are missing it, don't despair, this week you can apply your gifts and passion to help make the Oktoberfest Dinner a success. You may think that it is not where your passions lie, but if we all come with open hearts, open minds and an open door, who knows what might happen. (Did I mention that there are still some invitations left to be handed out to your neighbors and friends? Be sure to pick them up on the way out...

No matter what your passion is, the church is also here to give you a place to return to and thank your Creator for the life you experience beyond expectations. We call that worship: an opportunity to praise the Holy Spirit, who stirred a passion within you that is unique only to you. This is a place to come together and reconnect with other passionate people; and to remember when our passions might wane and even seem to die, that there is always something more to come.

We are fulfilled in the pursuit of passion and the use and sharing of our gifts and talents. We were not put here to just meet God's expectations, or to buy ourselves out of the messes of our life through indulgences or to resign ourselves to being just average or even less, missing the greatness God has for each of us. We were put here to seek what stimulates us to go beyond all expectations in our living, giving and loving... and in the midst of that we are blessed.

The Commitment Cards you have been asked to fill out are mostly for your benefit, so you can record what you and God have decided about who you are as a part of this church family, this community and this world. Even so, this information, when gathered and totaled by the financial secretary, gives the finance team and myself a sense of how far beyond expectations we can plan for the ministry of Hayward United Methodist Church, our church.

As a side note, I asked Staff Parish not to give me a raise as I want to help get this church financially on track. So my first look at my commitment card said – I can make the same commitment financially as last year. Then the words 'think greater' came to mind and I started to pray and consider what I really have to give. Then I realized that I will not be driving as many miles as I did last year, so I can commit more. If that changes, I will reconsider. The Holy Spirit has inspirations for us, if we will just slow down long enough to listen.

God, do I have a passion for one of the ministries of this church: Education, Worship, Missions, or Caring? Besides attending worship is there a place that I could serve the church? What excites me enough to want to talk about it with someone else? Pastor Graham West, who I served with at Lake Street UMC in Eau Claire says often: "Gossip the Good News!"

How you commit yourself is up to what you and God find in your heart. The church is here to help you go beyond just what is expected. With Holy Spirit power you can be the one with the surprise for others. Like Luther and Wesley, we aren't out to start a new church, but to re-form it in a way that all are included and have a place; serving the world through ourselves and all that we have to share.

What God can do with that has been proven throughout history as others have offered and made a commitment of themselves to the passion that God planted within them. Next week we will have a celebration during worship, with a preliminary total of the commitments received by then. I don't know what you will be expecting, but I am sure if we all do what God has set before us this week, it will be beyond all expectations...