Invitation to the Table

We are Disciples of Christ, a movement for wholeness in a fragmented world. As part of the one Body of Christ we welcome all to the Lord's Table as God in Christ has welcomed us.

Perhaps one of the best applications of this statement of Disciples identity was written by Rosa Page Welch, an African-American Disciple singer:

The miracle of Communion means the rich bowing down with the poor, the learned with the unlearned, the clean with the filthy, the master with the slave, the privileged with the deprived the white with the black, and the black with the white.

Pastoral Prayer

God of love and grace, we come bearing the wounds of spiritual abuse and religious trauma. We ask for your healing touch to be upon those who suffer.

We know that, for good reason, they find it difficult to trust us in the church because we represent the source of their pain. Help us find ways to fulfill our missional purpose to be a beacon of inclusive welcome and compassionate caring. May the light of your grace, reflected through us, offer hope without conditions and healing without limits.

For those who are struggling with feelings of worthlessness or shame, may something we do or say open their hearts and minds to know your truth of their value and worth as your beloved children.

For those who are feeling alone and isolated, adrift with no spiritual anchor, we pray that they may be led to supportive and caring relationships to help them find their way. If it is we you call to be that supporting and caring community for them, guide us so we don't make things worse for them. Make us your instruments of healing and wholeness.

Help us to find hope and strength in you, and to trust in your loving plan for our lives, that we may be partners with you and with Jesus Christ in bringing about the day when your kingdom comes, your will is done, on earth as it is in heaven. We pray this in the name of Jesus, our Savior. Amen.

A Safe Place to Explore Your Faith

Isaiah 2:1-5 (NRSVUE) The word that Isaiah son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem.

2 *In days to come*
the mountain of the LORD's house
shall be established as the highest of the mountains
and shall be raised above the hills;
all the nations shall stream to it.
3 *Many peoples shall come and say,*
"Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD,
to the house of the God of Jacob,
that he may teach us his ways
and that we may walk in his paths."
For out of Zion shall go forth instruction
and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.
4 *He shall judge between the nations*
and shall arbitrate for many peoples;
they shall beat their swords into plowshares
and their spears into pruning hooks;
nation shall not lift up sword against nation;
neither shall they learn war any more.
5 *O house of Jacob,*
come, let us walk
in the light of the LORD!

The Word of God for the people of God!

In November 2023 our church had a booth at the Conway Pride Festival. Our message was, "We're here because we recognize most of the people here have been hurt by church, and we want to be a healing, accepting presence."

Now, for the record, I don't believe same sex relationships or LGBTQ+ identity issues are condemned in the Bible; moreover I believe those identity issues are genetic rather than chosen. I've been very open about that, and since I haven't been fired by the church, and since we are an open and affirming church, I'm guessing the church generally agrees.

Still, spiritual abuse and religious trauma are real. There are many who've been hurt by different expressions of church, and today my words are for them. And for you who are gathered here this morning, I hope these words will be a resource for you as you encounter people who've been hurt by the church.

I've been reading books and articles by some of those people. One thing I've learned is that there's no general avatar that represents the whole population; but the consensus is that they don't want to be patronized or instructed about returning to the church.

The logo on our website, and our deep hope is that, for all people, we will be "A Safe Place to Explore Your Faith." We find meaning in that because none of us has all the answers. We frequently end up with more questions as we explore our faith together without fear of being discounted or rejected. Faith is a journey of exploration and discovery, and we're always excited to welcome fellow travelers—for the next leg of the journey, or for the long haul.

So how did all this hurt come about? How did the church become so counterproductive to the gospel? Here's the Jim Robinson 6-minute version of church history.

In 312 CE, Roman Emperor Constantine converted to Christianity. Actually, it's more like he absorbed Christianity into the religious pluralism of the empire—let Jesus join the country club and schmooze with the other gods in the pantheon.

But Christianity didn't fit in with fertility cults and carved deities in the hierarchy of Roman mythology. Christian mythology was about a real person who was a living, visible reflection of the real God portrayed by Israel as the only God.

The religion of the empire was about bribing and appeasing human-like gods who were impulsive, unpredictable, temperamental, but unavailable. Christianity was about a God who is trustworthy, loving, nurturing and available—even accessible.

Paul had debated the intelligentsia of Rome and they laughed him out of town. But the common folk were eating it up; out in the "boonies"—places like Philippi and Thessalonica, even in some major cities like Corinth and Ephesus. But the Empire had kept it under a heavy thumb.

So, when Constantine let it out of the closet, it quickly got out of hand. Churches were growing and some of the big wigs were getting worried; so Constantine called a council at Nicaea. "Let's get some organization, set some rules, keep it under control."

So, the Nicene Creed—the first Christian creed— formulated correct doctrines. It became a litmus test to determine who could get in and who got kicked out. A few generations later a church leader named Augustine came up with an idea that eventually got called "original sin." Said everybody was born in sin and was bound for hell. That's not in the Bible; but Augustine was pretty powerful in the church, so when another Christian leader, named Pelagius, challenged him, he was excommunicated. And power began to trump the gospel in establishing doctrine.

And the list of rules and authorized doctrines grew; and before long, you couldn't get to heaven unless you were in good standing in the church, and the church could kick you out if you didn't toe the line; and the line might be political or doctrinal, depending upon the guys with the funny hats. And the threat of hell became a weapon the church used to control the rabble—and the royalty.

The die was cast. The church was no longer a movement of love and grace, a faith reflected through ethics and loving your neighbor; it was about affirming right doctrine. And being wrong was the unpardonable sin.

In the Middle Ages names like Thomas Aquinas and Anselm of Canterbury tightened the doctrinal screws and the Inquisitions added the threat of prison and the death penalty to the fear of hell, and nobody—not even kings and emperors, dared question the power of the church.

In the 16th century Luther, Calvin, Zwingli and a few others started the Reformation, but it wasn't doctrine they were challenging; it was corruption in the

church hierarchy. The fear of hell and the authority of the church continued to hold sway. Nobody questioned the status quo…

…until… Something happened: the Enlightenment. Building on the work of Galileo and Isaac Newton, people like John Locke, Mary Wollstonecraft, and Immanuel Kant began questioning everything, not out of rebellion but out of curiosity. How does this work? Why does this happen? What makes the human body function or dysfunction? What are those shiny things in the night sky?

But the church took offense at the questioning. Lines were drawn in the sand and faith entered a binary phase: everything is black or white, right or wrong. Enemies were identified, people were excommunicated and that battle rages still today. The list of binary doctrines is virtually endless, and the ministry of reconciliation to which we are called is ignored, and people are hurt in the belligerent divisiveness between denominations, congregations, and individuals. The standard has morphed from "being wrong" to "disagreeing with us" as the unpardonable sin.

Early in the 19th century a door was opened—one of several doors opened by the Enlightenment. Two ministers of the Old Light, Anti-burgher, Seceder Presbyterian Church of Scotland—Thomas and Alexander Campbell, father and son—were also schoolmasters. They taught the thinking of John Locke. They believed the Christian faith was reasonable, that the Bible could be understood through reason, and they rejected the potentially abusive power of the clergy.

They came to America and separated from the church. They became itinerate preachers, traveling and establishing congregations in West Virginia, Ohio, and Kentuckey, emphasizing the ministry of the laity and rejecting creeds as divisive and exclusionary. They rejected denominationalism and attempted to create a foundation on which the whole church could be united by simply following the example of Jesus. They attracted a following and their movement became the fastest growing Christian body in America. One of the early mottos was "Unity is our polar star."

But the human need for control is powerful and unity is often sacrificed in favor of uniformity (everybody agreeing with us), so the movement that wanted to unite the denominations is now, itself, divided into three identifiable and too often belligerent denominations.

But the core of the Campbells' vision we believe survives as The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), and we identify as "A Movement for Wholeness in a Fragmented World."

Today's reading from Isaiah and literally dozens of other texts that reflect the same vision are the basis of our mission of wholeness.

Isaiah may have set up the writings of Amos and Hosea and Jeremiah: two centuries of prophetic writings that said essentially that God is not impressed; in

fact, Jeremiah actually says God never asked for or gave instructions about all the liturgical folderal and temple sacrifices. Those were the residue of the pagan religions the Hebrews had practiced before discerning the presence of YHWH.

Instead, Jeremiah says (speaking for God): ***"For if you truly amend your ways and your doings, if you truly act justly one with another, if you do not oppress the alien, the orphan, and the widow or shed innocent blood in this place, and if you do not go after other gods to your own hurt, then I will dwell with you in this place, in the land that I gave to your ancestors forever and ever."***

150 years earlier, Isaiah had prophesied:

In days to come
the mountain of the LORD's house
shall be established as the highest of the mountains
and shall be raised above the hills;
all the nations (sometimes translated 'peoples' or 'families') shall stream to it.
3 ***Many peoples shall come and say,***
"Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD,
to the house of the God of Jacob,
that he may teach us his ways
and that we may walk in his paths."

That was Isaiah's vision: that all people shall stream to the mountain of the Lord's house. And there are no qualifying adjectives related to that word, "all." No prerequisites. All means all.

It is the intention of First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Conway, Arkansas to live out that same vision as "A Safe Place to Explore Your Faith." May God strengthen us in that intention.

Pray with me.