MARCH 2026 VOLUME 24 ISSUE 3

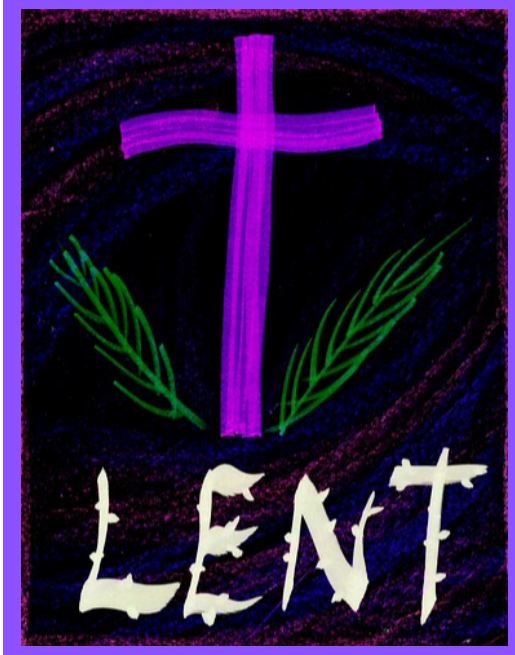
THE NUGGET

Open Door United Church of Christ

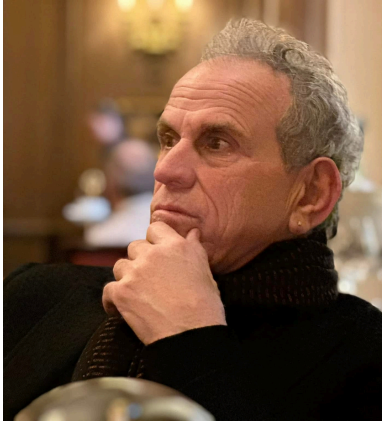


We will be having our annual Irish Day Pancake Breakfast on Saturday, March 21 from 8am - 12pm. Volunteers are needed for this event, so please see the sign-up sheet in the social hall.

Whoever you are,
Wherever you are on
life's journey,
You are welcome here.



We are in the season of Lent and the color is violet.



Interim Thoughts

How Should We Understand Lent?

Ash Wednesday came early this year: February 18. Joe Jackson and I walked the streets of downtown Murphys, offering ashes to our neighbors. Afterwards we gathered with other pilgrims at Faith Lutheran Church, where Rev. Karen Johnson offered a thoughtful homily. When it was time, the people came forward from their seats in the pews for the "imposition of ashes." If you missed it this year because of the weather, give some serious thought to attending next year.

Taken in isolation, Ash Wednesday will always sound terrifying. "You are dust, and to dust you shall return" feels like annihilation when it is pulled out of the context of the larger story. But the Christian year refuses to let us isolate anything. It is not a set of boxes; it is a rhythm, a living cycle that draws us through the same mystery until, by repetition, we begin to see more than we saw before. This is the beauty of the Church Calendar, once we learn to live by it. It gives life.

In the Church Calander, just before Lent, Christ's Church stood with Peter, James, and John on the mountain of Transfiguration. There they saw Jesus conversing with Moses and Elijah—one who had died and one who, as far as the biblical narrative tells us, did not. Yet both stand together with Christ, fully alive, engaged in ordinary, almost casual conversation. Before the Church dares tell us that our bodies are dust and will likely return to it, it first shows us this: whether you leave your body in the ground like Moses or are "caught up in a whirlwind" like Elijah, your final reality is communion with your God.

This is the context in which we hear, "Remember you are dust" --we must hear it through the echo of that mountain: dust is not the end of you. God —holds our entire existence in an unwavering gaze of love.

One of the ancient prayers for the start of Lent goes like this, "Almighty and everlasting Father, you hate nothing you have made, healing all that wounds your creation, casting sin away as far as the east is from the west." That little phrase, "healing all that wounds," sits very close to the original Latin (and subsequent 'Old English') behind this prayer. For several centuries, the Western Church prayed this language of healing and wholeness in Lent, only later shifting into more heavily penitential language that sounded less like restoration and more like self harm as a supposed way to make God love us more. Beloved, God could never love us more than God already loves us in this moment! We cannot do anything to earn God's favor. Lent reminds of the meaning of grace: unmerited favor. We are "accepted in the Beloved," that is, in Jesus Christ.

The message of the season of Lent is **not** that God asks you to hurt yourself or "deny yourself" so God will be satisfied! It is the Father, Son, and Spirit moving toward every place in us that is already hurting, already wounded, already bent out of shape, and saying, "Let us heal this."

To forgive sin is to cast off anything that wounds and hurts us or others. In other words, sin is not a set of infractions on a heavenly scorecard. Sin is whatever damages you, your neighbor, or the creation God delights in. And the goal of this Lenten season is not to condemn you for being wounded, but to remove from you what is doing the wounding.

For many of us, our most powerful "gift" is not our competence but our scars. There is a world of difference between saying, "It'll be okay, you'll get over this," and saying, "I've walked through something like this, and I am still here," from the inside. Lent invites you to ask: how might the Spirit be calling me to steward *even my story of pain* as a channel of compassion for others?

At its heart, Lent is about *metanoia*—not groveling, but a Spiritled change of mind and perception that naturally reshapes our actions. Because you are already included in Christ, already embraced in God's Triune life, Lent does not ask you to become someone else so that God can accept you. It asks you to allow the Spirit to expose the lies that keep you from living like the person you already are.

Lent asks questions of us. Questions like these:

- What lies do I still believe about the Father's heart—do I secretly imagine a judge more than an Abba (Papa)?
- What lies do I hold about my neighbor, especially those who look, live, believe, or vote differently than I do?
- What lies do I cling to about myself—old names, old shames, old verdicts that the cross has already overturned?

This is not self improvement. This is awakening! Lent is not a march toward grace as if it were waiting for us on the far side of the cross; it is walking with Grace, because we journey every step with Christ as our indwelling companion.

The forty days of Lent (with Sundays as feast days of resurrection) do not exist to stretch out your suffering. In Scripture, forty is less about *testing* and more about *completion*—Moses on Sinai, Israel in the wilderness, Jesus in the desert, the forty days between resurrection and ascension. In scripture, the number forty marks a time and a season where something comes to maturity, where what needed to be dealt with is now settled. So, as we pass through these forty days, we do so with the hopeful expectation that the Spirit intends to bring some things in us to a holy conclusion. There are patterns we will not have to relive endlessly.

May this Lent be for you not a season of striving, but a season of awakening—a slow, Spiritled realization that in Christ, you are already more alive than you know.

A reminder that we offer Morning prayer via Zoom each Wednesday morning at 8:15 a.m., and Evening Prayer each Thursday night in Lent at 5:30 p.m., also on Zoom. The links to the events can be found on our church website https://fccmurph.org

See you in church!

Gary

We will have our next Taizé worship service Wednesday, March 18 at 5pm.





Tuning in With Our Music Director

Wow, March has a lot going on - it's a good thing there are thirty-one days so we can fit everything in!

March 21 will be J.S. Bach's 341st birthday, so you can plan on hearing Bach's music for preludes and postludes throughout the month. The Lenten season invites reflection, and the choir will be singing Taizé chants throughout March.

On March 15 the choir will sing "I Choose Love" by American composer poet and lyricist Lindy Thompson (https://lindythompson.net/) and compser. Mark A. Miller. This anthem was written in response to the tragic events that occurred at Emmanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina in 2015, and is a testament to the power of forgiveness and peace.

Verse one:
"In the midst of pain I choose love.
In the midst of pain, sorrow falling down like rain
I await the sun again, I choose love."

On March 29 we get to hear both vocal and handbell choirs make a joyful noise for Palm Sunday.

The topic for the March Musical Sanctuary is "Spiritual Warrior: What Do I Stand For?" Exploring being a spiritual warrior is not about fighting, resisting, or defending. It is about presence. Feeling the stirrings of spring, we will open to inner connection and awareness, asking our higher wisdom to reveal what our mission is this day, what quality or qualities we can hold to be an active part of the upliftment and enlightenment of all of life.

The deep relaxation and openness brought on by the Connect & Glow practice helps the release of patterns of tension, and supports personal growth. This self-healing technique is suitable for beginning as well as seasoned practitioners. Wednesday, March 25, 5:30 pm.

In a recent choir rehearsal we were talking about refraining from using scented personal products. Many people are not aware of artificial fragrances or allergic to them, so don't consider them a problem, But recent research shows that many of the ingredients that are used in fragranced products are harmful to everyone, not just those who have an allergic reaction. Potentially harmful chemical fragrances are not only in perfumes and colognes - they are also pervasive in soaps, shampoos, lotions, scented candles, household cleaning and laundry products - even trash bags. In our discussion at the rehearsal, we could see that eliminating fragrances could be part of being an inviting and welcoming congregation, and of being stewards of the earth.

Anne Steinemann, a University of Washington professor of civil and environmental engineering has found : "Emissions and exposures from fragranced consumer products, such as air fresheners and cleaning supplies, have been associated with health problems and societal impacts. This study of fragranced consumer products in four countries (U. S., Australia, United Kingdom, and Sweden) shows that 32.2% of adults report fragrance sensitivity as adverse health effects from fragranced consumer products. For instance, 17.4% report health problems from air fresheners or deodorizers, and 15.7% from being in a room cleaned with scented products. Commonly reported health problems include respiratory difficulties (16.7%), mucosal symptoms (13.2%), migraine headaches (12.6%), skin rashes (9.1%), and asthma attacks (7.0%). For 9.5% of the population, the severity of health effects can be considered disabling. Further, 9.0% of the population have lost workdays or lost a job in the past year due to illness from fragranced product exposure in the workplace. A majority of people in the study would prefer that workplaces, health care facilities and professionals, hotels, and airplanes were fragrance-free rather than fragranced. The study highlights a concern for public health and societal well-being, as well as an approach to reduce risks and costs: reduce exposure to fragranced products."

For your own and your family's protection, and to help protect the environment, stay away from any product with the word "fragrance" or "parfum" in its ingredients list. (And know that the word "natural" is not regulated and has zero meaning in food and personal care products!)

And here is a quick shopping list: Carolina Unscented Castile Soap bars, Everyone Lotion, Mimosu fermented rice water shampoo bar (added bonus: no plastic!), Crystal Deodorant, Ecover dish soap. Dropps has ecologically friendly packaging for all its products: laundry pods, liquid soap, dishwasher soap, and more. Moisturizers under $20: **https://bit.ly/4ohgzWi**

Some of these products offer options that contain essential oils. Essential oils are derived from plants and don't have negative effects for most people (as opposed to "fragrance oils," which are artificially derived. To be safe, choose the unscented option.

Wishing you Happy and Healthy Breathing!

Kate

RESOURCES

Environmental Working Group **https://www.ewg.org/** maintains regularly updated lists of products - the good, the bad, and the extremely bad.

An EWG article: What is Fragrance? **https://bit.ly/3OeoZk**.

University of Washington article on Dryer Vent Pollution: **https://bit.ly/4tpYMA4**

Mother Jones: Is Fragrance Making Us Sick? **https://bit.ly/4amr1qu**



choir rehearsal schedule:

Saturday Rehearsals

- all at 10:00 am

March 7 Vocal Choir

March 14 Handbells

March 28 Handbells

Sunday Morning Choir Rehearsals

March 1, 8, 15, 29 8:45 Vocal Warmups, 9:00 Rehearse

Treasurer's Report



I am looking forward to our Council Retreat so we can have some deep discussions about our finances. I know many people have good ideas, so please don't hesitate to call or email me your ideas. Email is probably better, so I dont forget things and can share with others. I have been working with the bank and the investment companies on changing our name. I will let you know when we can officially write checks to Open Door. Besides the name change, things have been pretty quiet. I have moved some money from investments, and continue to monitor the bank balance to see when we need to move more. We want to get as much interest as we can on those accounts. Thanks again for all your support. Patty

Christian Education Recap

This article is my last Christian Education article that I will be writing. I have enjoyed leading the children and youth for the past four years. Thanks to all the parents for all their support over the years. Thanks to all the teachers and volunteers that make all the CE events happen. And, of course, thanks to Jenny for helping with everything!! I will continue to teach Sunday school one or two times a month, and it will be nice to be able to participate in Sunday worship service on the other Sundays. Thanks again, Patty



We will have our OGHS offering on Sunday, March 15. One Great Hour of Sharing (OGHS) is a Special Mission Offering of the United Church of Christ that supports partners worldwide with ministries that fund health, education, and agricultural development, emergency relief, refugee ministries, and both international and domestic disaster response.

Children of Gaza

by Gary Percesepe

***Like lost children we live our unfinished adventures.* —Guy Debord**

A child plots her life till the end
then spends the rest of her days
trying to remember it

Cities like rooms in abandoned
buildings, addresses carved in
notebooks lost on bombed staircases

A child fears he will be sucked
into the drain of a swimming pool or
dissolve in a bathtub like a cake of soap

A child is killed by one cold glance
No child waits for an explosion of larks
Children exist in the wrong hours of dawn

Childhood is an island with
nothing to do but extinguish
the brightness of the stars

Somewhere I read we
shuttle back & forth like the
ferryman's children

across four states of
nonbeing, across a
river of trauma stitching

shadow stories like
Wendy entertaining the
lost children of Neverland

Editor's Notes

The children of Gaza, in the words of the poet, are fearful in this place of no light and bombed staircases. Two terrifying images in the third stanza emphasize the children's deepest fears: that they are being sucked helplessly into a drain or completely dissolving to nothingness—that is, they know they could disappear. They are, as the epigraph tells us, lost; their future is obliterated; they have no memory, even their addresses are lost, and they exist as non-beings.

In a poem of eight stanzas, "child" or "children" are words repeated ten times, including title and epigraph. That children are suffering, being killed, lives violently cut off, the author does not let the reader forget. These are children. Children. Like the children of Neverland in Peter Pan, they will never grow up.

The "explosion of larks" in stanza four—the eruption of larks from a tree, perhaps—deserves exploration. As it stands, it is a powerful image. The usual collective term for a group of larks is "exaltation," but Percesepe uses "explosion." This is perhaps an echo of another poem, Philip Larkin's "The Explosion," which is about a mining disaster in England. In that poem Larkin describes a miner finding a nest of unbroken lark's eggs in spite of the death and destruction occasioned by the explosion. "Children of Gaza" contains little hope; the only vestige of it in a diminished form might be found in the last stanza where "Wendy … entertain[s] the / lost children of Neverland." Remember that in Neverland as J. M. Barrie wrote it, Wendy becomes the lost children's mother, telling them stories, and encouraging them to act as a family. This might recall the hope in Larkin's poem. The eggs remain unbroken.

by: Jill Peláez Baumgaertner, poetry editor

Guest Column

For Lent: Try Less Hard

God Does the Heavy Lifting

Tony Robinson/2.18.26

The season of Lent tends to morph from a focus on Jesus to a focus on us. The texts take us from Christ's temptation in the wilderness to his entry into Jerusalem and the cross, with stops along the way this year at some of Jesus' most vivid encounters from the Gospel of John. Jesus is in the spotlight, no two ways about it.

But Lent, in my experience, tends toward being largely about us and all the stuff we should be doing to be truly spiritual and really Christian.

Of the story of Jesus, Rowan Williams writes this in his recent brief introduction to the faith, Discovering Christianity: A Guide for the Curious,

"Gradually, as the story goes on, we see more and more deeply how and why human beings want to resist that double vision: the true vision of our own fear and the true vision of the love that overcomes it. And it seems that in the story fear wins. Jesus is condemned and executed. The human refusal to see finally means his death on the cross. But, says the gospel, that death is itself a moment of glory yet again. Because there we see what a complete letting go of self in love actually looks like. The symbol is lifted up before us, the symbol of love with no conditions and no defenses."

God's one-way love in Jesus Christ. Grace. Which is shorthand for "God is the primary actor in the salvation story."

But instead of focusing there, on what God has done and is doing, Lent often, and under the guidance of clergy like me, becomes about us and all the stuff we need to do to get on God's good side.

In other words, Law.

In another context, Nadia Bolz-Weber commented, "My favorite thing I ever heard in a yoga class was, 'Try less hard.'"

As we resolve to pray more, give more, fast longer, and generally do more as our "Lenten discipline," we tend to turn Lent and the gospel into "Try Harder." If only we, this year, these forty days, try harder to do all the things that promise a "deepened spiritual life," "a closer walk with Jesus," and "knowing the true meaning of Easter." Avis is our patron saint. "We Try Harder."
But "try harder" is not the gospel. Nor is the gospel "straighten up and fly right." Or "get your act together."

Still, I love all that. My excuse is that I am a firstborn. We, God bless us, are forever trying to get it right, to bring God's strangeness under the orbit of our control. And we're trying really, really hard. As my dear mother used to say of and to me, "You go at everything like you're killing snakes." (She grew up in a part of the world where rattlesnakes were common.)

Not only firstborn but firstborn male, and then to add to it, becoming an ordained minister, "reverend." At which point, my sister said, "That's it, I give up. No competing with that. Ordained minister. Jeesh! Okay, you win. Take the blessing."

It took me a long time and several experiences of crash-and-burn to figure out it wasn't about me and trying harder. It was

about Jesus and his persistent grace even, and maybe especially, for elder brothers.



"Do you ever worry that we've strayed on to the self-righteous path?"

So for Lent this year consider this: Try less hard. Sure, keep at your prayers but doing so remembering that any prayer we pray is the second word, as Eugene Peterson reminded us. Our prayers are a second word, a word in response. The first word, as the last, is God's word.

The same goes for the other Lenten disciplines as well. Fast in whatever way makes sense for you. But it's not to lose weight in order to present yourself sleek as a seal on Easter Sunday. It's saying "no" to lean into the "yes" God speaks to us in Jesus, despite our blindness and fear (and roiling G-I tract).

Give to the needs of the poor, for sure, but as you do, maybe focus less on "the great and many blessings we have received," which requires our dutiful "remembrance of the less fortunate." Focus on your own, our own, terrible poverty of spirit and need for the blessed riches of a grace that finds us in our most desperately impoverished spiritual moments. For we try-hards, these often come as we await recognition and reward for our virtue, only to get royally pissed no one notices and no reward is conferred.

Lent isn't about you or me, not really. It's not about all the stuff we do, or must do, to get on God's good side or show others that this is where and who we are. It's about God taking our side and God's promise to never leave it, not even in death.

Rowan Williams once more,

"The cross is itself glory. The death of Jesus shows what is indestructible in the love of God, and the work goes on. God does not stop working, does not stop being this unselfish God because of our refusals. And so unbroken is that work, it goes through and beyond the death of Jesus on the cross; life breaks through once more. What is alive in Jesus cannot be suppressed by death, and returns actively loving and inviting us always."

God is doing the heavy lifting. Taking upon himself the burden of the sin and blindness of me, you, and the world. Rolling the stone away from the darkened tomb of our self-preoccupations and earnest efforts.

Try less hard, and may yours be a blessed Lent.

You can access the original published article by visiting
https://mbird.com/holidays/lent/for-lent-try-less-hard/

Cherishing our members, friends, and community...



HAPPY BIRTHDAY!

Joyce Hauck-Swanson 3
Diane Campana 8
Walt Markus 11
Daryl Hollinger 17

Pete Ryan 23
Pam Kimes 24
Mary Kelly 26
Chris Markus 27
Kelsey Markus-Sterrett 27

Diane Tussey 28
George Haskell 29
Phil Hosmer 31
Clinton Betts 31

Don't see your birthday listed? We promise it isn't on purpose! If you would like to have your special day listed in the newsletter, please call or email the church office.

Prayer List

The scriptures tell us:

"And my God will meet all your needs according to the riches of his glory in Jesus Christ."
Philippians 4:19

We continue to witness the stories of how God answers our prayers!
God hears our cries and answers them.
Let us pray daily for the following members and friends of our community:

Carol Dougherty
Carl Smith
Barbara Olivier
Lisa Shinn
Gene Davis (Ron & Darlene Davis)
Faye Morrison
Miriam Thorsen)
Shoshana (Laura Leonard)
Jodie Gibson
Lauren, Gordon, Emre, Willow (Jesse Hampton)
Angela Patterson
Tracey Ellifritz
Tabitha Kremesec
Shirley Soderer
Bonnie & Chuck (Mark McCormick)
Terry Dowell
Robin Chesnut
Tari Takara
Ben Richardson (LaMonts)
Bruce (Miriam Thorsen)
Dodi Horvath
Brian Whitehead (Nancy Burton)
Rev. John Randlett
Rev. Marty Williams



SUNDAY	MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY	SATURDAY
1 **9am** Vocal Choir rehearsal *Holy Communion*	2 **6:30pm** Al-Anon	3	4 **8:15am** Morning Prayer, Zoom **10am** Worship committee mtg. Zoom **12:30pm** AA **6:30pm** AA	5 **5:30pm** Lenten Evening Prayer, Zoom	6 **2pm** First Fridays **12pm** Women's AA	7 **10am** Vocal Choir rehearsal
8 **9am** Vocal Choir rehearsal	9 **1:30pm** F&F mtg., **5:30pm** South Grove Bunch **6:30pm** Al-Anon	10	11 **8:15am** Morning Prayer, Zoom **12:30pm** AA **6:30pm** AA	12 **5:30pm** Lenten Evening Prayer, Zoom	13 **12pm** Women's AA	14 **10am** Bell Choir rehearsal
15 **9am** Vocal Choir rehearsal **One Great Hour of Sharing offering**	16 **6:30pm** Al-Anon	17 **10:30am Family** Connections. EEC **5:30pm** The Seekers	18 **8:15am** Morning Prayer, Zoom **5pm** Taizé worship **12:30pm** AA **6:30pm** AA	19 **10am** Faith & Friends **5:30pm** Lenten Evening Prayer, Zoom	20 **10am** The Wanderers **12pm** Women's AA	21 **Irish Day Pancake Breakfast 8am - 12pm**
22	23 **6:30pm** Al-Anon	24 **12:30PM** M&C mtg., Fisk	25 **8:15am** Morning Prayer, Zoom **5:30pm** Musical Sanctuary **12:30pm** AA **6:30pm** AA	26 **5:30pm** Lenten Evening Prayer, Zoom	27 **12pm** Women's AA	28 **10am** Bell Choir rehearsal
29 **9am** Vocal Choir rehearsal	30 **6:30pm** Al-Anon	31				

THE NUGGET

First Congregational Church of Murphys
UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST
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MARCH 2026

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Webpage: www.fccmurph.org
God's love echoes through us to all creation.

Staff
Interim Pastor Rev. Dr. Gary Percesepe
Pastor Emeritus Rev. Dr. John Randlett
Music Director Kate Moody
Secretary Jenny Fuqua
Custodian Lucie Tardif
Christian Ed Director Evelyn Betts
Childcare Abby Fuqua

Officers
Moderator Carrie Shinn
Vice Moderator Barbara Olivier
Treasurer Patty Haskell
Assistant Treasurer Alan Horvath

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FIRST CONGREGATIONAL UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST, MURPHYS MISSION STATEMENT
We believe that all people are beloved by God and we strive to serve as a welcoming and nurturing church community to discern the Bible with insight for today and to live out Christ's teachings.

The Nugget Committee invites you to submit articles of interest and wishes to stress that the deadline is always the 20th of each month.
The Committee reserves the right to edit submissions for length and content.