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“The Grace Period”

LIGHTING THE ALTAR CANDLES

MUSIC TO PREPARE US FOR WORSHIP Sue Koeppe, Musician

ANNOUNCEMENTS

*Due to the rise in Covid cases, please be diligent about wearing your mask properly and at all times in the church. Please practice social distancing. And, thank you for your ongoing cooperation. Our Health Team talks regularly and monitors the cases in LaSalle County.

*Jon and I thank you for all the Christmas cards, gifts and treats. We feel your love and you bless us so.

WELCOME

New Year blessings! Our next trip around the sun, the year 2022 and these next 364 days hold all God’s promises, unimaginable opportunities lie before us, us that is “us” as individuals and “us” as a church. This New Year’s going to bring a significant change in the church, too. As was announced December 19th, I am retiring. Come July 1st pastoral leadership will change here. So, in this New Year, with all the new and unimaginable opportunities that lie before us, let’s recommit to be in worship either in person or online. Let’s recommit to supporting the church with our prayers, presence, gifts, service and witness. And, let’s give our hearts to worship, allowing God to speak into the newness...Would you stand as you are able and Barb will lead us in sharing our gathering words, a unison opening prayer...

†**SHARING OUR GATHERING WORDS An Opening Prayer**

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Gracious God, we know love because you make it eternally visible in the person Jesus Christ, your Son, our Lord. He revealed the depth of that love by laying down his life for us. We pray our gratitude is visible in our loving actions, gracefully caring for each and our neighbors. Jesus show us love is never confined to words alone, nor is love ever just an abstract concept. Love is always heart and hope in action. Stir such a love in our hearts. May all we say and do please you, Lord. May we be the very best evidence of your grace. This we pray in Jesus' name. AMEN

OPENING SONG "Grace, Greater than All Our Sin" #365

PRAYER INTRO

Mystics in the Eastern Orthodox tradition, describe prayer as "bringing our thinking down into our heart." What a beautiful thought! That praying brings our thinking down into our heart...to the heartbeat of our soul, where God's living, loving Spirit stirs our soul with God's amazing grace... Let's pray...

PASTORAL PRAYER & LORD'S PRAYER

Dear Lord Jesus, in this New Year and in this time of pastoral transition, just keep bringing us word of your unfailing love. That's all we really need; the calm assurance of your unwavering, unconditional, boundless, inclusive love. By the power of your Most Holy Spirit, incessantly gossip the gospel into our innermost ear. Wrap the good news of your irrepressible, endless affections around our hearts, tighter and tighter still. Permeate our every cell with your new every morning mercies. Transform us with your grace. In this and every uncertain time, help us put our trust in you. Lord Jesus, it's the assurance of your unfailing love that enables us to trust you with life's transitions and our future's uncertainties. Change is never easy. Change makes us so feel vulnerable, fearful, and insecure. That's when we get tempted to be our own savior. Spare us that misery, Jesus. Instead, may your Word dwell in us richly. May your peace rule in us powerfully; and may your glory be our greatest passion. God, be our New Year guide, show us the way through our transitions—transitions of age and stage, career and calling, health and finances, relationships and ministries. Help us write a future that's beyond our wildest hopes and dreams. It's all about you, Lord Jesus—not us. Why do we so arrogantly expect all the details, up front. Lord, just take us by the hand and lead the way. Open doors we can't and shut doors we shouldn't open. Remind us always that you love us and that you're always with us prompting us to join

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our voices in prayer to you praying...Our Father who art in heaven. Hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us and lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil for thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. AMEN

PRAYING IN SONG “Through it All” (sung twice) #507

INVITATION TO GIVE Grace is the free and freeing gift of God’s love. Knowing, receiving such gifts of love motivates our hearts to give love. Our offerings to the church are gifts of love given to make God’s grace known in tangible, visible ways in the Ottawa community. Let’s generously give our gifts of love...If you’re in person...you’re invited to place your gift in one of the receptacles located at each exist. If you’re online, you’re invited to send a gift to the church or use our secure online paypal giving option. Now, let’s pray to dedicate our gifts and thank God for this and every gift giving opportunity. Let’s pray...

PRAYER OF DEDICATION What good news for our New Year, God, that your grace abounds and is all sufficient. That your grace extends to everyone, no one is excluded. God, may our gifts be gifts of grace. Use us and use our gifts to spread your grace, so others experience your love in action. Bless us O God and bless these gifts. Renew and make new our lives; to be witnesses to your Gospel of grace, not just in our words and speech but in our truth and actions. In Jesus’ name we pray, AMEN

TODAY’S SCRIPTURE READING Barb Frey, Liturgist

Acts 20: 17-38 (The Message Bible) From Miletus he sent to Ephesus for the leaders of the congregation. When they arrived, he said, “You know that from day one of my arrival in Asia I was with you totally—laying my life on the line, serving the Master no matter what, putting up with no end of scheming by Jews who wanted to do me in. I didn’t skimp or trim in any way. Every truth and encouragement that could have made a difference to you, you got. I taught you out in public and I taught you in your homes, urging Jews and Greeks alike to a radical life-change before God and an equally radical trust in our Master Jesus. “But there is another urgency before me now. I feel compelled to go to Jerusalem. I’m completely in the dark about what will happen when I get there. I do know that it won’t be any picnic, for the Holy Spirit has let me know repeatedly and clearly that there are hard times and imprisonment ahead. But that matters little. What matters

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most to me is to finish what God started: the job the Master Jesus gave me of letting everyone I meet know all about this incredibly extravagant generosity of God. “And so this is good-bye. You’re not going to see me again, nor I you, you whom I have gone among for so long proclaiming the news of God’s inaugurated kingdom. I’ve done my best for you, given you my all, held back nothing of God’s will for you. “Now it’s up to you. Be on your toes—both for yourselves and your congregation of sheep. The Holy Spirit has put you in charge of these people—God’s people they are—to guard and protect them. God himself thought they were worth dying for. “I know that as soon as I’m gone, vicious wolves are going to show up and rip into this flock, men from your very own ranks twisting words so as to seduce disciples into following them instead of Jesus. So stay awake and keep up your guard. Remember those three years I kept at it with you, never letting up, pouring my heart out with you, one after another. “Now I’m turning you over to God, our marvelous God whose gracious Word can make you into what he wants you to be and give you everything you could possibly need in this community of holy friends. “I’ve never, as you so well know, had any taste for wealth or fashion. With these bare hands I took care of my own basic needs and those who worked with me. In everything I’ve done, I have demonstrated to you how necessary it is to work on behalf of the weak and not exploit them. You’ll not likely go wrong here if you keep remembering that our Master said, ‘You’re far happier giving than getting.’” Then Paul went down on his knees, all of them kneeling with him, and prayed. And then a river of tears. Much clinging to Paul, not wanting to let him go. They knew they would never see him again—he had told them quite plainly. The pain cut deep. Then, bravely, they walked him down to the ship.

MESSAGE

“The Grace Period!”

Pastor Cheri

Are you like me? Since my retirement’s been announced, you have a whole bunch of questions swirling around in your head? Who will our next Pastor be? When will we know? Will the next pastor identify as a man, woman, or non-binary? Young or old? Single or partnered? Inclusive or traditional? We don’t know! We won’t know for a while. It’s a long process! The Bishop and the Northern Illinois Conference cabinet begin work on appointments this month. It could be months before we know. But, what we do know is this: we have these next 6 months to prepare our hearts for this change. It’s why I use this time today to talk about our last six months together. Remember BC? Before Covid? Didn’t have to think about social distance so I preached down in front. I’d walk slowly back and forth and back and

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forth like a duck in a carnival game. Remember? Well, if it walks like a duck...and it talks like a duck, and it moves like a duck, makes me a duck, a lame duck! But, is that really true? We have much to do in this New Year 2022, before your new Pastor arrives July 1st. I also believe God has a purpose for these next 6 months! Preparing, celebrating, ending and beginning. We'll be remembering 7 wonderful years together. We'll be saying our goodbyes. One thing I know for sure: this is NOT going to be easy for me. How about you? We've shared the many blessings of God in a pandemic. Would you agree? God's grown God's love in us? God's Holy Spirit's moved in us in beautiful ways! Makes this a significant change for us all! For me, I conclude 16 years of pastoral ministry, 7 of which I've served here among you. What a mixture of emotions I feel. I'm happy and sad, angry and frustrated all at the same time. Happy to be retiring and sad to be retiring. Angry and frustrated that Covid's changed EVERYTHING. I get all melancholy remembering back when we came to Ottawa 7 years ago. So much has changed. You not only allowed me, you welcomed me into your lives at some of life's most vulnerable times, and now we walk together through another vulnerable time. In all that vulnerability is anxiety and fear for the future! But, fear is NOT of God. God's already calling your next Pastor. God knows the plans God has for us. In Old Testament times, when God's people struggled, the Prophet Jeremiah spoke to remind them what Jeremiah speaks to us now. God's got prospering plans for us and for this church. Every act of God has us remember how God's acted in our past. We're to find God now, in the present and go with God into an unknown future, one step at a time...God is with us. God's never gonna leave or forsake us. God only wants what is good, right, truth and love for us and for God's church. So let's use this time of transition to do some God-centered reflecting.

Lately, in my reflecting, the only word that keeps coming to my mind is: GRACE. Today's Acts scripture is Paul's farewell address to the church. He says, "Now I'm turning you over to God, our marvelous God whose gracious Word can make you into what he wants you to be and give you everything you could possibly need in this community of holy friends." My dear community of Holy Friends, God's grace, God's gracious Word will focus us. God's gracious Word will center us in God's will for this church. God will give you everything you could possibly need. So, today, right now in fact, this lame duck Pastor's officially declaring the time from today, this Sunday, January 2 the first Sunday in the New Year to my last, Sunday, Sunday June 12th 2022, I'm declaring this a GRACE period. In the financial world, mortgage and insurance companies offer a 15 day grace period

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before your payment is due without a penalty. Students with loans have a little longer, usually a 6 month grace period after they graduate before their first student loan payment is due. It's a **grace period!** Our grace period's 161 days! Can our last 161 together be all about grace? We're going to move at the pace of God's grace. Grace, the undeserved, unmerited, loving action of God and God's most Holy Spirit. Grace. My Holy Friends, let's make this transition a graceful one! O, that we would experience the undeserved, unmerited loving action of God and God's most Holy Spirit in our last 6 months together! Grace will keep the vision of Ottawa First United Methodist Church ever before us; grace is what inspires our relationships in the faith so we come together serve to transform the world for Jesus Christ. Even though your Pastor will change, the church's mission and ministries do NOT stop. God's grace never ends. Great is God's faithfulness. God's mercies are new every morning. God's grace truly is amazing; but the honest reality we could let this transition keep us from growing in God's grace. Oftentimes, when there's a pastoral transition, participation in all aspects of the church declines. I'm asking you, I'm imploring you. Do NOT let that happen. Let's use this Grace Period to renew our lives in the faith. I want to see you and be with you and serve with you, every safe chance we can. I've noticed, since Covid, my office hours have been pretty quiet! I'd invite you to stop by, let's talk!

My Holy Friends, this time calls for a whole lotta GRACE. But, I recognize this might be hard time for you for many reasons. As your Pastoral Leader, I've always been open, honest, transparent, and vulnerable. We need to stay focused on what God wants us to do in Ottawa and respond with GRACE. Respond with LOVE even though it's hard, even though we might be sad, even though there's so much we don't know. But, let's consider what we do know. We do know God has begun a good work here at Ottawa First. In our last 7 years together, we've been privileged to be part of a 21st century resurrection; a new life, a re-birth of the church, a body of Christ working to be healthy again. Grace has been poured out on us. God's grace never ends. Grace is always and all sufficient and all because of God's living, loving Holy Spirit moving through us in ways we never could've dreamed or imagined. We know grace. We also know the United Methodist appointment system means a new pastor will be appointed to begin July 1st. We just don't know who and we won't know until the Bishop and the cabinet appoint the NEXT right person for this church. We also know that Ottawa First's past has had some pastors that were NOT good fits for this faith community, but now, can we look back and see that God was with us through that difficulty? That God redeems

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even life's hardest circumstances. Did God really let the church suffer or did we let the church suffer in our suffering? All this makes this next transition understandably concerning. All the more reason to offer each other grace. Can we offer the new pastor grace, too?

We also know that because I retire as a licensed local pastor, the Bishop and the cabinet will no longer license me to be a Pastor in the UMC. I am not an elder. Retired elders are allowed to perform pastoral duties, just not in the church from which they retired, unless invited by the new pastor. We also know this church's location and size affect the next appointment. We also know the new pastor will be completely differently gifted and graced. Pretty sure God glorifying altars, Macy's dresses and better than average donuts will not be their thing! Things will change, every pastor does things differently. We may not like the changes but I again I ask you to offer GRACE. You don't have to like the change, but grace will give everyone time to adjust and grow in grace. We also know: God calls us to love every neighbor, especially the new pastor. We also know that we (you and me) will miss each other. This all feels a little like a divorce or a death of our relationship but it isn't. These next 6 months are NOT going to be one long funeral. We can look forward to sharing MORE of God's blessings, MORE grace, MORE LOVE. Nothing can separate us from God's love. My holy friends, this time really isn't a funeral, BUT we might experience the stages of grief. There are very common feelings we experience when we someone we love dies. We might experience denial. Denial says THIS CAN'T BE HAPPENING! Then anger. Anger says, "WHY US? It's NOT fair!" Then, we might start to bargain with God, "I'll do anything for one more year." Then depression, "I'm so sad, why bother with anything, I'll just stop coming, stop giving, stop doing. Why, I might just change churches!" Please, try your best to acknowledge these feelings. It's our human nature to feel these feelings. Don't let yourself get stuck in any of those stages...because not seeing you, not spending these last 6 months together, your leaving is the LAST thing I want to see happen. If Covid's shown us anything it is that we need each other. In fact, I hope you'll stop by during Monday and Tuesday office hours to visit. Let's continue to make healthy choices. What's healthy is to set this church up to be strong and ready for the next pastor. It's also healthy to work through these feelings to get to the final stage of grief, which is acceptance, where we can say to ourselves, "I don't like this loss but I'll be OKAY."

Our relationship isn't ending it's just significantly changing. Come July 1st, I won't be your pastor anymore, but we will never forget ALL the beautiful blessings

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of God we've shared. What God joins together no one can tear asunder! So, stayed tuned. We'll do more talking about the rules of the United Methodist Church when a pastor retires. But, there's one more thing. My time with Alden's showed me. I am tired. I want you to know I will be FOREVER grateful for your understanding my need for grandma time. Thank you for allowing me to work from home. But, honestly, that plan was a crazy one. It really shouldn't have worked. Covid made it work. Once Covid is more under control, for the church to have a future, the church needs the pastor to be out in the community developing more faith inspired relationships. The church also needs more lay participation in EVERY aspect of leadership. Covid and then Alden showed me just how very pastor lead this church is. When I received calls about aspects of the church that are not really the pastor's responsibility, I was frustrated. Given my Alden schedule, all I had time to do was my pastor's job. Why wouldn't I talk to you about your opportunity to be part of the ministry here. We are all called to minister, each in our way, place and time. Your new pastor needs each and every one of you loving, helping, supporting, and doing! For the church to thrive, the pastor can't do it all! And, I hope you'll offer me more grace to have more of these hard conversations before I retire. I care about this church's future. I promise you this: I will do everything I can to help make this a smooth and informed transition. I also ask you to trust your leadership to lead us through the change. Staff Parish members are already thinking about the qualities and characteristics they believe our new pastor needs. So, my holy friends, yes, this will be a hard transition but so much of our current situation, makes this a healthier transition. We're in a much different place now than when I came and it's all because of God's amazing grace. GRACE really is our word for the next 161 days. Stay focused, step up! Let's always be asking ourselves: "What is God wanting to do here at Ottawa First and how can I be a part of it?" I ask for your prayers through this grace period. Pray for me and Jon. Pray for the church. Pray for the new pastor. PRAY! And, be confident of this, that the God who began a good work in us will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus! AMEN

How fitting... We begin our New Year Grace period with the sacrament of Holy Communion...

HOLY COMMUNION The Great Thanksgiving

Holy Communion's not just monthly ritual of the church; it's tangible evidence of God's grace, a sacrament of thanksgiving and remembering. A time of looking back and seeing what God has done but also a time of looking forward to what God will do. And, so, with gratitude and thanksgiving we remember how we live in darkness

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but, the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ shines goodness and truth that light our world with love. Without His light we were stoned, but He makes us the earth's salt. We were as lifeless as clay and God's grace unites us as a living, loving, kingdom building Body. We were sinful and by God's forgiving grace we are made holy. What a holy mystery you are Lord! You transform us and are transforming us still by your Holy Spirit who changes ordinary wafers and juice into a Holy Meal and we are fed and nourished in your grace for this journey called life. So, O, God; when the discouraged cry for hope, make us hope. When the hungry cry for bread, make us bread. When the thirsty cry for water, make us water. **When the suffering cry for help, make us help.** When the sick cry for healing, make us agents of your healing love. When the bound and addicted cry for freedom, set them free. When the outcasts cry for love and acceptance, make us lovingly open, inclusive and accepting. Lord, you are hope, you are bread and water, you are help and healing, freedom, and love unending, so send your Holy Spirit to this first Holy Meal of the New Year 2022! Transform us anew that in you and with you we may mysteriously transform the world. Let's pray before we receive this Holy Meal.

PRAYER OF PREPARATION

God, as we receive our first Holy Meal of 2022 we just ask you to bless us and bless this church in the year, 2022, sanctify us so we know the purposes for which we were created. Give us revelations of you and your amazing grace, so we desire only what you desire. Make it so by the power of Holy Spirit who reveals your love. So that by our receiving this Holy Meal you grant us, your church, the power not just to comprehend but to be the breadth, length, height and depth of your love who is Jesus Christ, so that by your power at work in us we may accomplish abundantly far more than we can ask or imagine. Feed us, fill us and bless us in Jesus' name.

AMEN

RECEIVING THE HOLY MEAL In this holy, sacred sacrament, grace has us remembering the night Jesus gathered his disciples around the table before he gave himself up for us— how he took bread, gave thanks to you, broke the bread, gave it to his disciples, and said: “Take, eat; this is my body which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.” (Eat the Bread)

When the supper was over, we remember how he took the cup, gave thanks to you, gave it to his disciples, and said: “Drink from this, all of you; this is my blood of the new covenant, poured out for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins. Do this,

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as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.” (Drink the Cup) Having experienced God’s grace and been fed grace and with grace for the journey ahead, let’s give our hearts to God in prayer...Let’s pray.

PRAYER FOLLOWING THE RECEIVING Lord, we’ve looked back and now we look forward to giving you this day and our every day. It’s yours. We’re yours. You’ve fed us and nourished for the journey ahead. Now, walk beside us, be with us; live in us, and use us to bring more unity in our divided world, to offer only grace to each other and every neighbor in these next 6 months. Make us your loving action in Ottawa. We pray it all in the holy name of Jesus Christ. Amen

†**CLOSING SONG** “Amazing Grace”

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†**BENEDICTION & SENDING FORTH**

God loves you. I love you. God’s grace really is amazing. Go in the amazing, sustaining love and grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.

MUSIC AFTER WORSHIP

Sue Koeppe, Musician