

Congregational Church of La Jolla UCC  
Rev. Tim Seery  
September 27, 2026

**Matthew 21:23-32**

*Would you join me in prayer? God Who Delights in our Questions and our Wonder: May the words of our mouths and the meditations of all our hearts together be acceptable in your sight our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.*

Welcome back! We are back in our own digs this week, here, breathing the air of familiarity. We spent the last week on a bit of an adventure where we worshiped with Pioneer Ocean View UCC and so what I liken that to is the experience of being on vacation. And everything is great, you enjoy it, it's wonderful—and indeed that was a wonderful, spirit-filled experience, but you've still got that nagging impulse to just be back in your own bed. You know what I'm talking about. To stand in your own kitchen. To be among the familiar. And of course there is great growth and learning to be had in venturing outside the familiar, especially for us and the journey we are on together—where we are leaning into all of those things that are unknown, uncertain, and maybe just a little bit uncomfortable. But I also learned in that experience that a lot of the comfort that one feels in a church is not the physical space, or the building itself but in the familiarity that we build together: the rhythms of our worship that work their way into our bones, the words that we hear every week in our own liturgy here, the hymns that we sing, the way that we mark time here. By venturing out, we also, I think, come away with a deeper appreciation for the beauty of what we have built here, together.

There is a saying in the United Church of Christ that if you've been to one UCC congregation, you have been to one UCC congregation. All of our churches are united by so many similarities, but unlike other denominations there is such immense diversity in the way that gets lived out on the ground. When I was growing up in Montana, I thought that our church there, was the way they all were. And that that was the only right way to do church. First Congregational United Church of Christ - Great Falls, Montana was the only model for how to do it. But then once I left and I encountered dozens upon dozens, and at this point I have probably experienced over a hundred UCC churches, I realized there is so much more to the story. That every church is an experience worth excavating, and experiencing. There is a story there, in each of them. In the United Church of Christ we are unique in that each congregation gets to determine the way in which it goes about its life together and even gets to shape its own set of shared beliefs—and this is shaped by so many layers: the local culture, the people in the pews, the unique style of the minister—all of that has a part to play. And I am always intrigued by how if a pastor has been with a church long enough you can just through the worship of the church get glimpses of the way their story and their history has rubbed off on the church. My colleague the Rev. Mary Sue Brookshire who pastors Pioneer Ocean View is from the south and was originally ordained as a Baptist minister, and so I love how you can see glimmers of her story and her style in the accessibility and casualness and more praise-like nature of their worship. And so that experience had me reflecting on the ways that there might be little glimmers of my story, glimmers of our collective stories, here in our worship.

That experience of being at Pioneer Ocean View this past Sunday got me thinking about that. It got me wondering—thinking about what someone from the outside might see if they came here to be guests in our space just as we were guests in theirs.

I've been meaning for a long while to do a series of sermons that explains the the history of our worship and our theology. The “why,” for the things we do and believe. To unpack all of that. If you think of each part of our worship service, and each part of our history, and theology as a tool that we carry in a knapsack on our backs as we go out and traverse this world—wouldn't it be interesting to take that knapsack off our backs and take inventory of it. To unpack each tool that we have, to lay them all out and look at them, and marvel at it all and ask questions of it. To not be afraid to question. To wonder, together. Asking ourselves why do we carry this around with us, or what is this tool used for. Why do we do it this

way? What is the symbolism of facing the cross during the Glory to God? Is that a church history thing or is that just something Tim does? Maybe you've wondered that. Or, what is the reason we have two readings in church, and why is one almost always a psalm. Or why is sometimes, on an occasion, that psalm replaced by a Mary Oliver poem, or the preamble to the Constitution of Bolivia as it was last month—which this question then forces us to ask the question, what even is sacred scripture? Who are our prophets that we listen closely to? We have inherited the biblical prophets of Isaiah, and Ezekiel, and Hosea, but who might be the contemporary prophets that we might lift up in our worship? These are all interesting questions. Or what is the origin and meaning of my benediction that I say to you every week. Or, thinking about the ways that the things we do every week creep into the rest of life. How many of you have stood in line at the grocery store and silently hummed our benediction response in your head, "God is our only King of this beloved Land, and anyone who takes that name against them we will stand." This invites us to think of each aspect of our church life together like hiking supplies that we have in our backpacks that we take with us as we go out into this complicated, beautiful, confusing, and blessed world. But to do this, of course, I would need to ween myself off my almost perfect track record this year of following the lectionary text that has been assigned for each Sunday. But as luck or the grace of God or whatever way you want to understand it would have it, the lectionary spoke perfectly this week to what I was thinking about as I reflected on our time together at Pioneer Ocean View. And also as I thought about what is it that I am working alongside you on budding here, the kind of worship that we do, the beliefs that we hold together and nurture here.

This week's lectionary text presents us with a very unusual parable. It's a parable that appears only in Matthew's Gospel. So this is the only place in scripture where you will find it. Matthew wedges it in as his response to Jesus' authority being questioned. And it is known as the "Parable of the Two Sons." Jesus is among the elite religious leaders of the time. He is teaching in the temple and they interrupt him to question by what authority he has to do this. So they lob this question at him and he responds in such a way to turn it around on them. He asks them if John the Baptist's authority was from heaven or human origin. Now, the religious authorities functioned almost as politicians so they knew what he was doing. And they knew that whatever answer they gave, if they chose one of the two, either would get them in trouble. If they said it came from heaven then they will seem to be hypocrites but if they say it was of human origin that will be politically problematic too because the crowd there in the temple regarded John the Baptist as a prophet. So they did the very political thing of giving no answer. They just said, "we don't know." Jesus then sets up his parable, taking us back to the vineyard, which has been the setting of each parable we've covered in the last three weeks. A man has two sons and sends them out to work in the vineyard. The first refuses, but then later changes his mind and goes. The second son when asked to labor in the vineyard agrees to it, but never shows up. And so the question is who did right here, the son who said no at first, but then changed his mind, or the son who said yes, but then failed to ever show up in the vineyard? Again just like last week and the week before, Jesus is turning the conversation on it's head.

One thing that is important to keep in mind is the context in which this was written. Especially since Matthew is the only place this parable appears. The Gospel of Matthew was written 80-90 years after Jesus' death. Matthew's audience lived in the aftermath of the Jewish War which took place between year 66 and year 73. The Jewish War was a major rebellion against the Roman Empire that took place in Judaea. The most complete account of this war was written down by a guy named Flavius Josephus and he aptly and very creatively named his book, "The Jewish War" which you can still buy from Penguin Random House to this today. But the real tragedy of this was that there was a complete absence of leadership. Not only were these people living in the thick of a sadistic empire that persecuted them, there was such deep infighting and factions among the resistance that at one point a rebel faction who was supposed to be fighting for the people burned all of the stored food supplies and grain reserves which led to a mass starvation of their own people. This was what was in the news, when these words were written down. And so, Jesus' words to the chief priests and elders would have poignantly reminded Matthew's audience of how their leaders had recently failed them. The leaders of the day were the second son in the parable. They could have become the first son, but they never chose that path. The leaders of the time agreed to serve, but they never showed up. They said yes to the cause, but ultimately they failed their own people.

And so the long story short of this parable, in my opinion, is that Jesus is interested in who actually shows up. Not when they show up or how they show up or what their initial response to the invitation is. But who is going to actually show up, and not just interested in hanging out on the sidelines in the comfort of the elite pillared and ornate religious venues of the day. So there you go, that is the parable. Now the question, is where do we go with this? Or, better yet, how did I read this in light of my wonderings this week after our visit to Pioneer Ocean View about the unique way we do things here, and how maybe my story, and your stories shine through in our identity and in all of those tools we carry with us in our spiritual knapsacks.

I had three experiences after we were at Pioneer Ocean View this week that made me do some reflection. The first was I was assembling the bulletin elements and the liturgy for today and as you all know I have a lot of different versions of the pastoral prayer, I rotate them out for different seasons, and I have elements that I plug in and adapt from different sources and then I usually have to doctor it up to put my own voice into it. Well I found this pastoral prayer written by, the Presbyterian Church, which by the way the Presbyterians are about the most middle of the road religious denomination that you could imagine, Mr. Rogers was a Presbyterian minister, we use the Presbyterian hymnal here in church, our purple hymnals are from the Presbyterians. But this pastoral prayer that they had, was just so over the top in language that I felt so uncomfortable with. It started out with something like, Holy, Holy, Holy are you God in your Holy Dwelling Place and later on it said something like, "We pray for those who are struggling with their faith, or who don't know what they believe anymore." Now, I don't know about you, but that hits me the wrong way. It feels a tiny bit passive aggressive. Language like that gives me a choking feeling. Or maybe I'm just such a skeptic, I can't handle it. But, I had to take a figurative red pen to it to make it into something I'm actually comfortable saying. Of course, there is nothing wrong with a prayer like that, if that means something to you, but for me prayer is turning up my favorite music really loud in the car and driving around and letting God do the rest.

The other experience I had was I had lunch with a dear friend of mine who is not connected to our community here at all, she is a beloved person we have great conversations about faith. But she was telling me about a new bible study she is in at a new church and they were talking about the story of Jesus casting a legion of demons out of a man and when Jesus did this the demons came out of the man in the form of pigs who then ran off of a cliff to their deaths in the water below. That's an actual biblical story, I've preached it before. But the idea that she said the pastor shared and that she thought was very profound was this idea that a lot of the problems of the world today have their root in the fact that those legions of pig demons didn't all go away, and so we've all inherited some of them and that's why the world is the way it is. Now, that might be one way to interpret that story but I will guarantee you there is no situation in this world in which I am going to go out of here and tell someone that their problem is that they have pig demons inside of them. That language, which totally fine for some, would be disingenuous to me and the way I was educated and the faith that I feel called to proclaim.

The third experience where I realized that we here at CCLJ are unlike any other is I took a look at that incredible list of programming we have coming up in the next three months. And I realized that we've managed to build a program here where what we do outside of church could have the appearance of being entirely secular: there is nothing explicitly religious about a Japanese Tea Ceremony, or the film screening we are doing, or El Niño preparedness, a museum exhibit tour about queer joy queer nightlife along the US Mexico border, or a walking tour of La Jolla murals. You could look at that list of programming and wonder if it was sponsored by PBS, or National Geographic, or a some university's alumni club. But the fact that that it's a community of faith doing that makes it, in my opinion so special, so profound, and so important. Because as I've always said to you, the entire world is holy, and God is in everything, and those experiences are entry points for anyone and everyone to have the spacious opportunity to encounter whatever that transcendent moment might be for them and to construct a faith that is life-giving, responsible, and uniquely their own.

This is how we have become a congregation here that is not based on creed, not based on gatekeeping beliefs, not based in believing this or that, but based in showing up. Which is exactly what Jesus asks of us. Jesus in our parable lifts up the son who changed his mind and showed up. Which to me means that faith is about constantly being willing to change our minds, to grow, to reach, to question, to doubt, to wonder, and all the while being willing to show up for each other. How you feel about God, who Jesus is to you, is less important to me than your willingness to say yes to the journey of showing up, and going with us on a journey where you might be transformed, where along the way you feel the inspiration to know that the divine is already inside you and has been inside you since the day you were born. That in this place when we say Jesus is Lord, it doesn't mean that we are checking our minds and intellects at the door, it means that if the love and compassion, the *things* that Jesus embodied with his life—occupies that position in our lives, than other things logically cannot be lord over us. If Jesus is Lord, then Trump cannot be, that ICE cannot be. In saying that, we are saying our past is not our Lord, our abusive ex, or our impulses, our anxieties or additions cannot possibly lord over us, If Jesus is Lord then that means our loss and our grief cannot be. Saying those words is not necessarily ascribing magical properties to Jesus, saying those words is a declaration of independence over the myriad of things that want to be our lord but can't be if the justice of Jesus Christ already is.

The point of all of our programing is not just to do things for the sake of doing them. Its to build a church where a work of art, a walk through the museum about queer nightlife, a mural tour, a cultural experience, a chocolate lecture even or time together at Hennessy's listening to music might just move you just as profoundly as a prayer. Where maybe, just maybe, you even begin to see those things as another form of prayer. My dream forever has been to build a community where you feel you have the permission to be who you are, and to know that that is holy. And here you let me live that dream. Where we ask hard questions and we know that Jesus is the guy who turns everything on it's head and doesn't care how many times we change our minds, that it's the showing up that counts. Where the church is your blank canvas and you get to construct your own faith brushstroke by brushstroke. Membership in this church, if I am doing anything right, means you get to be an artist, adding your own beloved saints and prophets to the tradition that has been handed down to us. Where you can be downright wild and creative and daring. And you get to do that in the embrace of a community that shows up for each other. This is a historic church that has its root in a liberal Christian denomination in the Reformed tradition, (if you don't know what that all means, don't worry, I will add that to the list for a future sermon) but now in 2026, knocking on the door of 2027 we have post-Covid, built community here were not everyone identifies at Christian, where not everyone has the same background, where everyone comes with a beautiful set of beliefs that span the entire spectrum. That it doesn't matter if you are Christian, Jewish, agnostic, atheist or you don't even know what you are. And that we hold all of that together, as one community. Let me tell you, that, that is what makes us so unique. That has become our brand here at this church. And that is, in my opinion, our biggest strength. And it is what I have always dreamed of.

I mentioned earlier that churches can sometimes have glimmers of their pastor's stories embedded into them and I wondered about what that might be here. And I think for me, the moment that stands out as the most profound was back in 2011. I was a freshman at Harvard, raised in a very Christian UCC church, feeling pulled toward ministry, and I took during my first semester of college a preaching class at the Divinity School. We met in Divinity Chapel and I will never forget my very first sermon there. I was terrified, because I was 19 years old and among graduate students. And right before I got up to give my first sermon, our professor said, "the spirit of Ralph Waldo Emerson is with you." At the time that so confused me.

Of course I knew who that was. But it wasn't until later that I realized that Ralph Waldo Emerson on a sweltering July day in 1838 from that exact pulpit, his hands on the same wood my sweaty palms were resting on, gave his most famous sermon ever, called the "The Divinity School Address." It was so very controversial at the time that some students walked out in protest. But in his sermon, unbeknownst to me at the time, he articulated his dream in 1838 for a Christian church like the one we are building here. One where creeds and belief were less important than showing up. In it he said, "Faith is a journey, not a destination.

Every man is a divinity in disguise. Jesus Christ belonged to the true race of prophets. He saw with open eye the mystery of the soul. Drawn by its severe harmony, ravished with its beauty, he lived in it, and had his being there.” He articulated a new kind of faith for that time based on individual experience, shedding the stale and irrelevant doctrines and language of religion and by inviting people to use their own inner spiritual experiences to understand the divine.

It would ultimately, and totally unintentionally, turn out that Ralph Waldo Emerson and I would share the exact same educational path, he started at Harvard College at 14 years old and ended up going to Harvard Divinity School and became a Unitarian minister. We were both raised Christian but received from start to finish an entirely Unitarian Universalist education, and I can’t help but wonder if at that moment trembling in his pulpit where he proclaimed every person a divinity in disguise, where he proposed a faith based not on boundaries of belief but on expansiveness, where he proclaimed that Jesus was the one who could see the mystery of the soul with open eyes, if that moment where my professor asked his spirit to rest his hands upon my trembling shoulders hasn’t been the thing that has followed me forever, to even this place. That you have wound up here with a pastor haunted by the Boston transcendentalists, who walks in Emerson’s footsteps, and bridges or Congregational/UCC heritage with our Unitarian ancestors.

So friends, as we go to Hennessy’s for Open Mic night together, as we go to the museum of contemporary art learning about the sacredness of queer joy, as we learn about and taste chocolate together at our upcoming chocolate lecture, as we play in tide pools together, as we study this blessed word and everything within it, we have become the church of Ralph Waldo Emerson’s dreams. The church that he proclaimed from my first pulpit. A church where you might come to find that the divine is already inside you. Where as he said, we are ravished with the beauty of the world, and we live and have our being right there in it. A church where we show up for each other. Unafraid. That friends, is bigger than even this building. That is what we carry with us. And that is why we will be successful wherever we end up. And as is emblazoned on banners across our building: it is Courageous. Bold. And Brave.

May it be so.

Amen.