Congregational Church of La Jolla UCC
Rev. Tim Seery
November 1, 2026

1 Thessalonians 2:9-13

Would you join me in prayer? God of all the Saints: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts together be found acceptable in your sight, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

96 years ago this month on October 5, 1930 the largest church in the United Church of Christ opened in the Morningside Heights neighborhood of Manhattan on Riverside Drive, adjacent to Riverside Park and so they appropriately they named it Riverside Church in the City of New York. It was really an interesting story, the idea to do this came from John D. Rockefeller who donated $5 million dollars to make it happen. Now, that already sounds like a lot, but adjusted for inflation that would be equivalent to $100 million dollars today. The purpose wasn't just to build any ordinary church—the idea Rockefeller had was that this church, with his vaulted ceilings and Neo-gothic design would be a landmark of liberalism, and a monument to Progressive Christianity. He was troubled by the direction the world was headed—the entire previous decade saw the rapid expansion of fascism in Europe, the country was still rebuilding from World War I and yet another World War was on the horizon. And in the United States at that time, the religious landscape was shifting. Prior to then academic, learned, social justice focused Christianity was predominant but there was during this time a concerning move toward fundamentalism. Tensions started to develop in seminaries and in churches where there was an impulse to respond to this great sense of social unrest and uncertainty by leaning into a ridged dogmas. John D. Rockefeller didn't like this. He detested fire and brimstone preaching, he was concerned by the rise of anti-intellectualism, and so he wanted to build a progressive religious skyscraper, showstopper of a church that would serve as an outpost of progressive faith near Columbia University and that could be a moral voice in a world that was living on the precipice.

So of course they had to find a minister for this new church. Who is going to lead a place like this. It's a big task. And so John D. Rockefeller who was a fan of good preaching, personally recruited Henry Emerson Fosdick for this role. Now let me give you an idea of who Henry Emerson Fosdick was—of course with a middle name like Emerson you can already figure out a little bit about what he was like. This guy led the charge to teach evolution in schools, he rejected biblical creationism, he wrote the prologue for the first edition of the Alcoholic Anonymous book, and took so much heat for his ardent defense of the Palestinian people and led Committee for Justice and Peace in the Middle East. But the best complement ever came from Martin Luther King Jr who when asked, "Who is the best preacher to ever live?" MLK said, Henry Emerson Fosdick. Rockefeller picks this guy because at the time Henry Emerson Fosdick was pastor of First Presbyterian Church in New York and he was on trial in the Presbyterian Church for being too liberal. They were about to charge him with apostasy and censure him. Because this guy was too radical. He was provocative. He thought of Christianity in this intellectual way that was in tune with science and with reason. And Rockefeller says, "that's our guy!" That's who we want. The thing is Henry Emerson Fosdick was also a hymn writer and so he writes a hymn to be sung at the opening worship service of Riverside Church in the City of New York and can you guess what hymn he wrote—you just sang it: God of Grace, God of Glory. One of my favorite hymns. And in that hymn is the most amazing lyric, "Grant us wisdom, grant us courage for the facing of this hour, grant us wisdom, grant us courage for the facing of these days."

When you hear the context that these words were written for they begin to have a lot more meaning. Grant us wisdom, grant us courage for the facing of this hour—Imagine where Henry Emerson Fosdick is coming from, this hymn is sung in the first hour long worship service at this church, on his first day there, in the midst of this new project proclaiming that yes, faith can be intellectual and progressive in this

cathedral of a church that was funded by a man whose wealth was equal to 2% of the entire American economy who just personally recruited him for this role when last week he was being charged as an apostate by the Presbyterians—I am sure he wanted wisdom and courage for the facing of that hour. But also wisdom and courage for the facing of these days—in 1930 when fascism is on the rise, when the world is on the precipice of war, when everything feels uncertain, the country is literally in a depression. Grant us wisdom, grant us courage for the facing of these days.

And face those days they did. Riverside Church is our largest congregation in the United Church of Christ. It is our flagship address in New York City. And it was then and it is today a holy site for progressive Christianity. Today Riverside has 3,500 members and it's magnificent. If you ever go to New York, I highly recommend going there and just standing outside this Gothic building and you will feel so small but you will also feel so cool to know that you virtue of your membership here you are part of this legacy. In fact I was in New York a couple years ago and I stopped for a drink at a bar across the street and the bartender asked where I was from, I said Southern California, and what I did and he was curious he asked what denomination and it felt so good to just point to Riverside Church and say, actually that one there. Let me tell you that feels so good.

I wanted to share that story with you because, that is one of my favorite hymns, that message was right on point for October 5, 1930 when it was first sung, and it's right on point for November 1, 2026. Grant us wisdom, grant us courage for the facing of these days. It's also All Saints Sunday. The day when we celebrate the saints of the past, present, and future. The day when we look back and pull wisdom and courage from those who have gone before us. When we get to marvel at our history. When we get to recognize who we stand with and who we stand for. And along with that it's a perfect day to receive new members into the life of this congregation, who are saying yes to joining with us on this 137 year old journey, where each of us have come on board at different points in that journey, through different decades and different eras but the prayer has always been the same: grant us wisdom, grant us courage for the facing of these days.

The epistle reading that the lectionary gives us today is one that, as always, is just perfect. It's a short excerpt of Paul's letter to the church in Thessaloniki, which is today the second largest city in Greece. It's beautiful, it sits right on the coast. And in this short excerpt he is reflecting on his ministry. And what he's actually doing is responding to a criticism. The criticism was financial greed. And so you might ask, "why was Paul being criticized for financial greed?" Well the reason was because Thessaloniki received a lot of traveling philosophers and religious teachers who would charge admission—they would assemble an audience, sell tickets, and they'd use their rhetorical skills so that people would open their wallets. And so people would see them as charlatans who were taking advantage of the people. So Paul comes along and of course they thought he was just like the rest of them. Why wouldn't they? Paul traveled, Paul taught, Paul gathered people together. And so in this excerpt he is saying, "hey, we work night and day for this mission, charlatans we are not, we are building tables of grace, that we are speaking the heart of God, that we are tentmakers who do manual labor, who trade, who labor in so many ways to fund our work, we are nothing like what they are thinking we are. He reminds the people, he addresses them as his siblings, "surely you remember, brothers and sisters, our toil and our hardship, we worked night and day," he says, "to not be a burden to anyone while we preached the Gospel."

One thing to know about me is I'm known for making some very unorthodox choices when picking scriptures for different occasions. And the reason is, is because I have a very distinct vision for what I'm going for. But I have to laugh because this past week I was telling my closest college and divinity school classmate that this week we were unveiling our 2027 stewardship campaign. Which by the way, many of you for whom we have addresses, should have received letters and pledge cards in the mail this week and if you didn't we have them there for you. This is just totally an aside but I decided this year to write personal notes to all of you. And aside from the carpel tunnel I might have brought on for myself, I have

to tell you, that was really an amazing experience to sit and call every single one of you to mind and to spend 10 minutes on every single person here writing out the specific ways I'm grateful for each of you. It was really an amazing experience. When I started here in 2017 I had the wild thought that my first week here I'd take the membership list, which was full of people I didn't know and hadn't really met yet, and I wrote notes to every single one of them just thanking them for being here. My mother taught me her beautiful cursive and then said, good, now you get to write thank you notes for absolutely everything that ever happens to you and honestly, that was maybe the best thing I ever learned. Gratitude. So much gratitude for all of you.

And so what I was saying was I told my friend I was using this text for the beginning of our stewardship season and and he said, why would you ever use the epistle where Paul is defending himself against financial misconduct to unveil a fundraising campaign. And I thought, well he's got a fair point. But here's the thing, Paul was also drawing an important distinction between what he was about, and what the Christ's church was about versus all of those people who came pouring into town selling admission to their healing ceremonies, and all their antics, and manipulations. He was saying, "the church that we are about is not that." He was saying, "look at how we work night and day not for our own enrichment but for a Gospel that is so much bigger than us, for a mission that is so much more grand, for something that is so eternal and true for a love and a justice that is beyond time." I think I might have convinced my friend by the end of it. Because set alongside the story of Henry Emerson Fosdick it makes sense. He had a vision for a faith that wasn't like the rest of them, that wasn't about narrowing and constricting, that wasn't about controlling, that wasn't about praying upon people's insecurities for financial gain or dictating what was right or acceptable, but that was expansive, that responded with a moral voice to the rise of fascism, that took seriously the social Gospel, that was intellectually rigorous and Fosdick's last church said that was apostasy but then John D. Rockefeller comes along and says you're the one to lead us as we pray for wisdom and courage not just for the facing of this hour but for the facing of all these days.

As we enter this season of our stewardship pledge drive we do so at probably the most unique point in the entire 137 year history of this congregation. The uncertainty that we face both as a congregation and as a country and world is almost the same as it was in 1930 when this hymn was first sung. But what we do here is the same thing Riverside Church does but in our own way in our own little corner of the world. But the main idea is the same. It can be easy to think that because something is small it is less relevant. I've told you the story about people on planes when they ask how many members we have and I say 87 and they look at me a bit confused by that. But that doesn't tell the full story. You have to almost experience this place to understand. When I created the stewardship theme for this year I went with a theme of invitation, "Find Your People, at the Congregational Church of La Jolla. Because that is what happens here. Think about the first day you walked through those doors. It's a brave thing to walk into a church you've never been to. Think of who you remember, who welcomed you, who you sat with in coffee hour, who told you their story. And over time you begin to discover that there is something healing, there is something empowering about finding people who are interesting in engaging in the same work as you. Who care about the things you do. Whose heart beats in a similar rhythm to yours. And as we learn about this place that each of our journeys have intersected with in different ways we learn that there were saints who came before us who arrived to this place, who also found their people here, people we will never know or meet for ourselves, but they had those same experiences, they felt that same thing, there was something here that moved them in some way that that they said yes, these are my people and this is my place.

We are drawing on our history this year—if you've seen it, our pledge card features the graphic that you'll find on our bulletin cover that features four different people from different points in this church's history. All four of those people found their people here at the Congregational Church of La Jolla. Ellen Browning Scripps, one of our founding members was a woman of extraordinary wealth from the journalism sector who just like John D. Rockefeller thought that every community ought to have a place where intellectual freedom and truth could prevail. This is Ellen's Riverside. Both of them had the exact same vision.

Carleton Winslow was hired to be the architect of this building, he also designed the Los Angeles Public Library and most of the buildings still standing in Balboa Park. During the same year, that Carleton designed this church he won the contest to be the designer of the official seal of the City of San Diego. Turn your bulletins over for a second. That's the city seal he came up with. Look at the very top. Tell me that's not our exact bell tower configuration on the top of the City's seal. He included the bell tower as a nod to the Spanish missions that played a part in this city's history, but that is not the mission's bell tower there, he used ours. You'll also see Julia Dudley's picture there. Julia was a member of this church who was a Congregational missionary in Japan and who raised money from this community to establish a girls school there which today is known as Kobe College which is a part of the United Church of Christ in Japan. Here name is in this book. The same book that those of you joining this morning will be added to. You get to join the saints of the past, your name is in the book, and we look to you to grant us wisdom and courage for the facing of these days. And lastly, you'll see there Fred Spiess. Who a few of you met in person. Fred died in 2006, I've only met his two daughters. But Fred was a pioneering oceanographer at Scripps who revealed more knowledge to the world about the ocean floor than just about anybody else. He studied the deepest and darkest parts of this universe to uncover truth and when it came time to retrofit the bellower here to withstand Southern California earthquakes, he donated his time and his scientific skill to help us make that happen. Every single one of these people found their people here and give the gifts of the time and talent and treasure to make that a reality. Some of them gave money, some of them gave expertise, some of them gave the labor of their lives and that, that is what stewardship is about. Two of the people we are honoring this year, whose pictures you see there, didn't even start out in this building. Julia and Ellen would have known and loved and joined this church in the first building which burnt down. If you've ever wanted to know what that looked like there is a photo of it in historical exhibit I put together this week in the fellowship hall. That has receipts for the original furniture, for the painting, that even has our satisfaction of mortgage—was was given to us in 1915 at an 8% interest rate by the Congregational Church Building Society in New York City which today is a division of the United Church of Christ that still exists called Church Building and Loan. And guess what, that mortgage was paid of on October 19, 1926—100 years and two weeks ago. None of those people who are mentioned on this satisfaction of mortgage would have probably ever imagined the nature of the world 100 years later, or the church that we carry forward today, but it is because of them that we will have the chance to carry it forward to the next generations who will inhabit a world that we can only imagine.

Why would I put together a historical exhibit for us, because this past week was Congregational Church of La Jolla day in the City of San Diego signed by Mayor Susan Golding in the early 1990s. This is our day to celebrate who we are and where we've been, the saints who have paved the way for us, the new members who are joining us, and the place that we have in the history of progressive Christianity with our origins in the same movement that John D. Rockefeller and Henery Emerson Fosdick were a part of in New York City. This is the day to be assured that this church has a past, it has a present, it has a future. And we rejoice in that. We celebrate it. There is more to be revealed. This might seem like a small community but we represent the legacy of giants, shoulder to shoulder with those who wrote the antiracist hymns we sing, the prayers of inclusion we pray, the liberation theology that we profess and the radical justice we preach. You are important. We are important. This, is worth fighting for. And that is the vision I am attempting to cast here.

I spent a lot of time in our historical archives this week and let me tell you there is a lot of La Jolla history in there, not to mention a lot of history relevant to the Congregational church movement and the history of the United Church of Christ. And one thing I found, and I'm not sure how it got there, was the journal of a woman from 1954 whose name was Josephine G. Seaman. Her name is embossed on the cover. And from what I gather she apparently was a part of a discussion group here that was working through the psalms. Somehow her journal made it into our archive. And when I opened it, I opened to this page. Where she reflects and says, "Perhaps one of the reasons why these poems of 3000 years ago appeal to us with particular poignancy is that they reveal a world in tumult much as our wold is today; that they voice much the same questionings that trouble our hearts and minds. Our questioning, like theirs, centers

around three question: “why does tumult fill the world, Whither it is leading us and when will it case. She says, “These are the questions which we ask today and the Hebrew people asked 3000 years ago.”

These are the questions we ask, today, just as she asked in 1954. And we know she was just like us because tucked away in the back of this book is a newspaper clipping she saved from April 19, 1955 that says, “World Now Seeks to Measure Contributions by Einstein.” The ancient psalms, and newspaper clippings about theoretical physics merged together into one journal.

Grant us wisdom, grant us courage for the facing of this hour. That’s been the prayer and it will be both now and forevermore. A courage and a wisdom to face these days that feel impossible, these days that feel unfair, that feel like they make no sense, these days where we feel so tangled up that there’s no way it will ever all get untangled, these days where it might feel like everything is coming apart. If our archive tells us anything it’s that the saints of our past know this feeling well. And yet here they found their people and here they fought for the vision, founding a college in Japan, a journalistic empire so that the truth might be known, exploring the depths of the deep sea, all of them building things that would long outlast any one of them. Ellen, and Julia, and Carleton, and Fred, and John Rockefeller, and Henry Emerson Fosdick. They’ve all been at one point or another where we are and now they are up in the bleachers rooting for us. Our world today is all too similar to where it was on October 5, 1930 on that day Riverside Church first opened—fascism on the rise, nationalism, Christian fundamentalism, anti-intellectualism, the prospect of war, all of these things weighing on those people who sat in those pews on that day but that didn’t stop them from stewarding a community of justice and truth that remains to this day as the preeminent monument to progressive faith. And that is no accident. Every one of those people found their people and they participated in that project so much so that today it is our denominations banner congregation. That is the power of stewardship. That is the power of vision keeping. That is why we each participate, in whatever way we can, the mission of this institution.

So, we rarely do this, but we are going to sing the same hymn twice today. You’re going to have the chance to sing Henry Emerson Fosdick’s hymn again and when you do I want you sing those lines with conviction, that this is our prayer, grant us wisdom, grant us courage for the facing of these days. And I also want you to call to mind every transformative moment you’ve had here, whatever that might be for you. When you sing I want you to remember the first time you walked through those doors and what it felt like, what was going on in your life, what were you feeling, what were you looking for. Remember what it felt like to find your people here. What it means to you to be here. And to sing that hymn now knowing its history, knowing that it is an ode to our progressive faith, and as you sing it I want you to imagine every saint of your own past, all of those people who have shaped you and formed you and somehow led you to be at this place at this moment in time, I want you to bring them with you, shoulder to shoulder with you, imagine that they are here among you, and that together with once voice we will ask for wisdom and for courage for the facing of these days. Because that’s what this place has been about for 137 years, and just like the founders of Riverside that is what we will cary into the generations that follow. That matters. That is so worth it.

Grant us wisdom, grant us courage for the facing of these days. Now and forevermore.

Amen.