

THE MESSENGER



"For all to know and share the Love of Christ"

January 2021

The Newsletter of First United Methodist Church Surgoinsville, TN
Elaine Ruth, Pastor Church: 345-2279

If This Is Not a Place?

By Rev. Martin Thielen

Psalm 42

Today I want to tell you about one of the most moving worship services I ever attended. Although it occurred years ago, I still vividly remember the service. The worship service was held in Dallas, Texas. Instead of a sermon, the message that day was given by a blind musician named Ken Medema. Ken walked to the piano, sat down, and began to play. He began by singing a phrase over and over, in a sort of eerie way, "Does anybody know my name? Does anybody know my name?" At first, he did not reveal his name. Instead, he told us about going to church one Sunday. He said everybody at church looked so nice with their Sunday clothes on. Everybody smiled at one another and said, "Good morning, how are you?" "I'm fine, thank you." The music was warm and bubbly. The preacher rattled off religious platitudes and offered easy answers to complex questions. Everybody seemed to be happy and have it all together. But as this man left the church, he realized that nobody knew his name.

Once again he sang, "Does anybody know my name?" Finally, he revealed his name. He disclosed his secret. His name was . . . Struggler. He was struggling with life, and he was struggling with faith. And because that was true, his visit to that church was less than satisfying. The easy answers, sweet Jesus songs, and smiling faces were not adequate for Struggler. He didn't need a place where everybody pretended to have it together or a place that offered slick and easy answers to hard questions.

He needed a place where it was OK to bring his questions and struggles and doubts. He needed a place where he could be vulnerable and real. At that point Ken Medema began to sing a deeply moving song called "*If This Is Not a Place*." During the chorus of the song, Ken asked three important questions that I want to hang today's sermon on. He asked:

- "*If this is not a place where my spirit can take wing, where can I go to fly?*"
- "*If this is not a place where tears are understood, where can I go to cry?*"
- "*If this is not a place where my questions can be asked, where shall I go to seek?*"

At its best, the Christian faith and Christian church offer such a place. We see that truth throughout Scripture, especially the Psalms, of which Psalm 42 is but one of many examples. So, using Ken's questions and passages from Psalm 42, let's talk about the kind of place God wants the church to be.

"If this is not a place where my spirit can take wing, where can I go to fly?"

Ken begins by asking, "If this is not a place where my spirit can take wing, where can I go to fly?" God's church, of all places, needs to be a place where our spirits can take wing. A place where we can fly and soar and celebrate. The author of Psalm 42 knew that. In verse

4 he says, "*I went with the throng, and led them in procession to the house of God, with glad shouts and songs of thanksgiving, a multitude keeping festival.*" (Ps. 42:4 NRSV)

In this verse the psalmist speaks of people joyfully celebrating at worship. The church of Jesus Christ should be a place where people can take wing and fly. It's always troubled me that on Friday night church folks scream at football games, and on Saturday night they laugh and cry at the movies, but on Sunday morning at church they sleep! The only time Methodists say "hallelujah" is if it's printed in the bulletin, and even then, we don't say it with much gusto.

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Not long ago a member of the congregation asked me it was OK to say “amen” during church. I said it would be just fine. But I also asked them to bring their cell phone so they could call 911 if somebody had a heart attack! I came across a poem the other day about Methodist worship that said, “We sit in the pew where we always sit, and we do not shout ‘Amen!’ And if anyone yells or waves their hands, they’re not invited back again.” We need to remember that we gather in this place every week to celebrate the risen Christ in our midst.

Therefore, it’s appropriate to fly and soar and celebrate. We don’t have to be Pentecostals to do that, of course. But it’s important to have a place where we can laugh and sing and soar and celebrate, and church is that kind of place.

“If this is not a place where tears are understood, where can I go to cry?”

In his song Ken also asks the question, “If this is not a place where tears are understood, where can I go to cry?” God’s church, of all places, should be a place where we can cry.

A place where our pain and tears are welcome and understood and allowed. The writer of Psalm 42 felt free to cry to God. In verse 3 he said, “*My tears have been my food day and night.*” (Ps. 42:3) The psalmist felt the freedom to take his tears to God, and so should we. Even Jesus cried. One of the most powerful verses in the Bible is “Jesus wept.” He wept because his dear friend Lazarus had died, and he was not ashamed of his tears. Neither should we. In fact, the Bible tells us that we should “weep with those who weep” (Rom. 12:15 NRSV).

I read recently about a Catholic church in Macon Georgia called St. Joseph’s Church. In the back of the sanctuary hangs an intriguing sign, which says, “CRY ROOM.” The “cry room” is actually a nursery at the back of the sanctuary. It’s for parents of small children. If their babies start crying during mass, they can go to the soundproof room and still see and hear the Mass without bothering other members.

I’ve thought a lot about that sign. I’ve decided that every sanctuary in the world should have a sign that says CRY ROOM. The cry room shouldn’t just be for babies, but for grownups too. The entire sanctuary should be a cry room. A place where people can bring their deepest pains and hurts and griefs and losses and failures and sins and brokenness and not be ashamed to cry before God and before one another. A place where tears are voiced not silenced, acknowledged not denied. A place where people can cry, where tears are understood, and where hope and grace and love can help dry them.

“If this is not a place where my questions can be asked, where shall I go to seek?”

I want us to consider one more question. In his song Ken also asks, “If this is not a place where my questions can be asked, where shall I go to seek?” God’s church, of all places, should be a place where hard questions can be asked. The psalmist knew that. Psalm 42:9 reads, “*I say to God, my rock, ‘Why have you forgotten me?’*” (Ps. 42:9 NRSV) The psalmist was not afraid to ask hard questions of God, and neither should we. It’s OK to have questions and doubts and struggles. God can take it. The church can take it. We may not have easy answers, but it’s OK to ask the questions and to seek the answers. Authentic faith is not afraid to ask hard questions. Jesus did. On the cross he cried out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matt. 27:46 NRSV). We must never be afraid to ask hard questions about life and God and faith. The church must always be a place where people can ask and seek and struggle.

In an editorial in *The Christian Century*, editor John Buchanan references Elaine Pagels’ book *Beyond Belief*. She begins her book by telling about standing in a church vestibule. She is not a churchgoer. But a few days earlier, she and her husband received the crushing news that their two-year-old son was terminally ill. She said: “Standing in the back of that church, I recognized, uncomfortably, that I needed to be there. . . . Here was a place to weep without imposing tears upon your child; and here was a heterogeneous community that had gathered to sing, to celebrate, to acknowledge common needs, and to deal with what we cannot control or imagine. . . . Here is a family that knows how to face death.” (“A Place to Mourn,” *The Christian Century* [June 15, 2010], 3.)

Elaine Pagels was expressing the need to belong to a community of faith that knows how to be real. Living out authentic, honest humanity is one of God’s great dreams for the church. As Ken Medema’s song so eloquently expresses, “If this is not a place where my spirit can take wing, where can I go to fly? And if this is not a place where my tears are understood, where can I go to cry? And if this is not a place where my questions can be asked, where shall I go to seek?” The Christian faith and the Christian church offer such a place. A place to fly, a place to cry, and a place to seek. Thanks be to God. Amen.



1/2
James Boehms
Thomas Skelton

1/4
Earline Bellamy

1/5
Elijah Long

1/6
Jim Harvey

1/8
Mark Skelton
Emily Seal

1/12
Brian Shaw

1/13
Kevin Garman

1/15
Glynn Kruger

1/16
Tammy Clark
Cindy Childress

1/17
Justin Creighton

1/21
Janice Tillett

1/29
Shirlee Bury



In Memory of Jessie Young

- *For Youth Ministry*
By Ron & Jean Keirsey
By Rudy & Patty Alvis
By Billy & Janice Reeves
By James & Susan Loy
By Thelma Cantimo
By the Worship Committee
By Joan Turnbull
By Gaynell Reed

In Memory of Rheanne Hanson

- *For Youth Ministry*
By Philip & Sue Pierce
By the Worship Committee
By Ron & Jean Keirsey
By Gaynell Reed
By Jeanne Hanson
By Allen Hanson
By Steve Hanson
By Carolyn Almennigen
By Rob, Mei & Jim Miller

How do you receive the newsletter?

Do you receive the church newsletter electronically? Do you pick up a paper copy? Do you click on the link on our website? If you would like it emailed directly to you, please send Gina an email requesting to be added to the "Monthly Newsletter" email listing. Being a part of our email distribution saves paper and you will get your church news a few days earlier... 😊



1/3
Tim & Bronwyn Hogan

1/21
James & Vickie Hughes



Our Jimmy Luster Christmas for the Children was quite different than any other we have had. With the constraints of the pandemic, and regard for everyone's health, we had a drive-thru party for families to pick up their gifts. THANK YOU to everyone who made donations, shopped and spent time preparing for this ministry. We provided new clothing and Christmas gifts for 27 children and cleaning supplies for their families. THANK YOU again for making the Jimmy Luster Christmas for the Children a success.

PRAYER PAGE

As you pray this week please remember:

Gerri Pierce

Vicki Linderman

**Roger Sizemore
(Jean Keirsey's Brother)**

**The Family of Amber
Randolph**

**The Family of Mary Collins
(Margie Barrett's sister)**

**Sally Honeycutt
(Debbie Allen)**

**The Family of Rheanne
Hanson**

The Family of Jessie Young

Terry & Jalana Clingan

Dale Byington

Mary Risner's Sister

Erika Bellamy



**Update your
contact info!**

Gina is working on an updated version of the church directory as we have had members of our church family move out of the area. If you have had any changes to your address, phone number, cell phone number or email within 2020 please let her know. If you are unsure if the information in the church directory is correct, or you do not have a copy of the directory, kindly email secretaryumc@bellsouth.net with your name and information and Gina will update your information accordingly. Please have updates turned in by January 31.

This will not be a pictorial directory, ONLY contact information will be updated.



The church has a prayer chain system that notifies church members of a prayer request at any time during the week. There are two ways for your family to be made aware of a prayer request, either a telephone call by a member of the church or a text message.

If you'd like to be notified of prayer requests by text message, here's how to set it up on your cell phone:

Enter this number: 81010

Text this message: @surgumc

Or you can go to: www.remind.com/join/surgumc and sign up through the website.



Offering Report for 2020

This year has been an unusual one to say the least. We have gone through a pandemic shutdown; many have had to isolate or quarantine and our church has learned to adapt to different ways of worship. All of our staff gracefully accepted salaries being cut in half to save on expenses. Our utilities reflected the absence of the buildings not being utilized with the exception of a water issue which was corrected and the bill was negotiated to an acceptable amount. Our church had an approved budget of \$181,000 for this year which, as you can see from the chart below, we did not meet.

The church has completed several capital improvements in 2020 with funding for those projects coming from the Myrdell Kensing Memorial for Jay Patterson.

Many thanks to all who have continued to support the church monetarily by either mailing in your offering or dropping it off at the church.

2020 Monthly Offering

	<u>Offering</u>	<u>To Budget</u>	<u>Qtr. To Budget</u>
January	12,370.00	11,149.00	
February	13,787.00	12,454.00	
March	12,816.29	12,099.00	35,702.00
April	15,168.20	10,955.00	
May	8,902.00	8,777.00	
June	11,277.25	11,232.25	30,964.25
July	9,561.52	9,486.50	
August	10,344.00	10,294.00	
September	10,655.00	10,355.00	30,135.50
October	10,589.10	10,100.00	
November	10,720.00	10,085.00	
December	13,868.00	12,698.00	32,883.00
Yr. to Date	140,058.36	129,684.75	129,684.75

