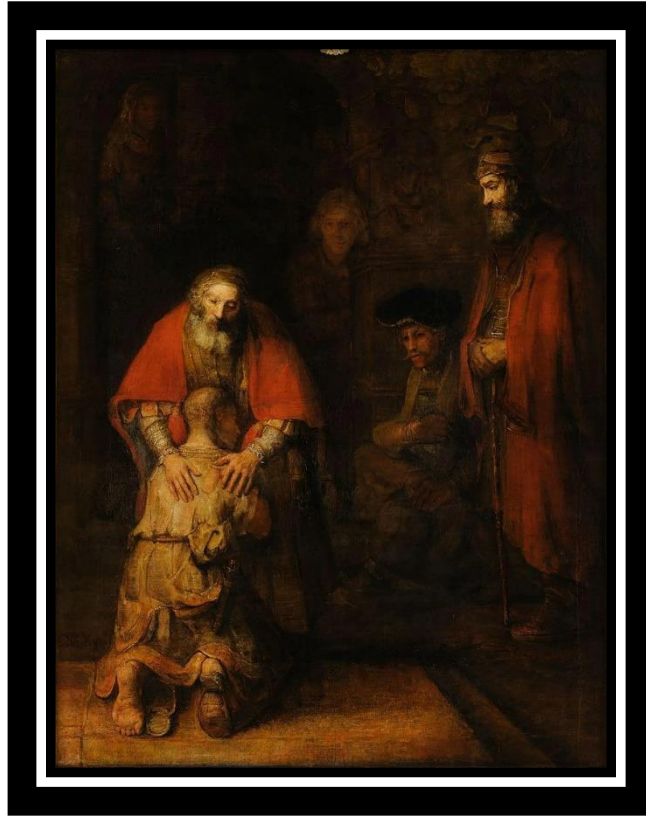




The Return of the Prodigal Son (1669) is an oil painting by Rembrandt, part of the collection of the Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg, Russia.

“Belonging is not something that is given to us by others, it is the truth of our existence. The work of justice, the work of love, is simply to remove the barriers that make us forget. God’s grace is not an invitation to be someone else; it is a call to be fully, radically, wholly who you are.”

– Rev. Angel Kyodo Williams

“To be welcomed is not a privilege; it is a right of our shared humanity. No one is illegal in the eyes of God. No one is disposable. Grace demands that we see each other fully, not as categories, but as beloved, worthy, and whole.”

– Jose Antonio Vargas

Founded in 1916, we are an Open & Affirming (LGBTQ+), anti-racist, and justice seeking church that is part of the greater United Church of Christ.

HOLY COVENANT UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST
FOURTH SUNDAY IN LENT

March 30, 2025, 10:55 am

** Your whole self is welcome here. Please feel free to take care of your body during worship in ways that work for you.*

Prelude "What Wondrous Love Is This" arr. M. Dorian

Welcome and Announcements Rev. Christopher Czarnecki

One: May the peace of Christ be with you.

Many: And also with you.

Chiming of the Hour

Introit "Jesus Walked This Lonesome Valley" LONESOME VALLEY

Jesus walked this lonesome valley. He had to walk it by himself.

Oh, nobody else could walk it for him. He had to walk it by himself.

* Call to the Heart Jim Dwiggins

Please take a comfortable posture that supports your reading and worshipping...

One: Come, all who have ever been told you don't belong.

Many: God's love makes room for us all!

One: Come, children, full of wonder and seniors, full of wisdom.

Many: God welcomes us with open arms!

One: Come, those who struggle to make ends meet and those the world overlooks.

Many: God's table has more than enough!

One: Come, strangers and migrants, seekers and wanderers.

Many: God calls us beloved, no matter where we come from!

One: Come, neurodivergent and disabled, those whose minds and bodies move differently.

Many: God delights in our whole selves!

One: Come, trans and LGBTQ, every person embracing their truest identity.

Many: God rejoices in who we are!

One: Come, people of color and minorities, bearers of beauty and resilience.

Many: God's image shines in every shade!

One: Come, bookworms and geeks, introverts and dreamers, the good-hearted and the overly optimistic.

Many: God cherishes every passion, every quiet soul, every hopeful heart!

One: Come home, all who long for love, for justice, for a place to be fully known.

Many: In God, we have found our home! Thanks be to God!

* Hymn 417 "This Is a Day of New Beginnings"

BEGINNINGS

This is a day of new beginnings,
time to remember and move on,
Time to believe what love is bringing
laying to rest the pain that's gone.

For by the life and death of Jesus,
God's mighty Spirit, now as then,
Can make for us a world of difference,
as faith and hope are born again.

Then let us, with the Spirit's daring,
step from the past and leave behind
Our disappointment, guilt, and grieving,
seeking new paths, and sure to find.

Christ is alive and goes before us
To show and share what love can do.
This is a day of new beginnings
Our God is making all things new

Daily Affirmation

Rev. Christopher Czarnecki

Ourselves: I welcome others into the kin-dom, as God has welcomed me.

Neighbors: You welcome others into the kin-dom, as God has welcomed you.

World: We welcome others into the kin-dom, as God has welcomed us.

Song of Preparation "Forgive Our Sins as We Forgive"

DETROIT

"Forgive our sins as we forgive," you taught us, Lord, to pray,
But you alone can grant us grace to live the words we say.

Prayer of Transformation (*unison*)

Jim Dwiggins

Merciful God, too often we have drawn lines of belonging that You never drew. We have turned away from our siblings in need, ignored voices crying for justice, and doubted that Your grace could truly be for everyone, including ourselves. Forgive us when we fail to love as You love. Call us home again, so that we may live and extend Your radical welcome to all. Amen.

Song of Transformation “God, Be Merciful to Me”

REDHEAD 76

God be merciful to me; on your grace I rest my plea.
My transgressions I confess; grief and guilt my soul oppress.
Wash me, make me pure within; cleanse, O cleanse me from my sin.

Gracious God, my heart renew, make my spirit right and true.
Do not cast me from your sight nor remove your Spirit’s light.
Your salvation’s joy restore, make me steadfast evermore.

Words of Grace

Rev. Christopher Czarnecki

The same God who ran to embrace the prodigal child is running toward us with arms wide open. Jesus dined with outcasts, welcomed the stranger, and assured the lost that they were always found in God’s love. May we remember, there is nothing that can separate us from this grace. In Christ, we are forgiven, freed, and called to live as God’s beloved. Amen.

Song of Response

“Return to God”

M. Haugen

Return to God with all your heart, the source of grace and mercy.
Come seek the tender faithfulness of God.

Stories for All People

Rev. Christopher Czarnecki

Song of Preparation “I Want Jesus to Walk with Me”

SOJOURNER

I want Jesus to walk with me. (2x)
All along my pilgrim journey,
Oh I want Jesus to walk with me.

Pastor Prayer

Rev. Christopher Czarnecki

Song of Prayer

“God Weeps”

DELGADO

Meg Houlihan, soloist

Lord’s Prayer (*unison*)

Rev. Christopher Czarnecki

Our Creator, who art in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your Kin-dom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil. For yours is the Kin-dom, the power, and the glory forever. Amen.

Prayer for Illumination “Take, O Take Me as I Am”
Take, O take me as I am; summon out what I shall be;
Set your seal upon my heart and live in me.

J. L. Bell

Modern Lesson

Terrence Hayes

Our Modern Lesson for today comes from Barbara Brown Taylor, who is a prolific progressive Christian writer and theologian. Among her work she says...

“What if the whole idea of being lost is not about punishment, but about being found? What if God is less concerned with where we’ve been and more concerned with bringing us home? Grace is not given in exchange for righteousness; it is given because love will not let us go.”

One: May we hear what the Spirit is saying to the people.

Many: Open our ears, our hearts, our minds.

*Gospel Lesson

Luke 15:1-3, 11-32 (CEB)

Jim Dwiggin

Please take a comfortable posture that supports your reading and worshipping. Our Scripture Lesson for today comes the Gospel of Luke 15:1-3,11-32, where Jesus tells the parable of the prodigal son...

All the tax collectors and sinners were gathering around Jesus to listen to him. The Pharisees and legal experts were grumbling, saying, “This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.”

Jesus told them this parable:

Jesus said, “A certain man had two sons. The younger son said to his father, ‘Father, give me my share of the inheritance.’ Then the father divided his estate between them. Soon afterward, the younger son gathered everything together and took a trip to a land far away. There, he wasted his wealth through extravagant living.

“When he had used up his resources, a severe food shortage arose in that country and he began to be in need. He hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed pigs. He longed to eat his fill from what the pigs ate, but no one gave him anything. When he came to his senses, he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired hands have more than enough food, but I’m starving to death! I will get up and go to my father, and say to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I no longer deserve to be called your son. Take me on as one of your hired hands.” ’ So he got up and went to his father.

“While he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was moved with compassion. His father ran to him, hugged him, and kissed him. Then his son said, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I no longer deserve to be called your son.’ But the father said to his servants, ‘Quickly, bring out the best robe and put it on him! Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet! Fetch the fattened calf and slaughter it. We must celebrate with feasting because this son of mine was dead and has come back to life! He was lost and is found!’ And they began to celebrate.

“Now his older son was in the field. Coming in from the field, he approached the house and heard music and dancing. He called one of the servants and asked what was going on. The servant replied, ‘Your brother has arrived, and your father has slaughtered the fattened calf because he received his son back safe and sound.’ Then the older son was furious and didn’t want to enter in, but his father came out and begged him. He answered his father, ‘Look, I’ve served you all these years, and I never disobeyed your instruction. Yet you’ve never given me as much as a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours returned, after gobbling up your estate on prostitutes, you slaughtered the fattened calf for him.’ Then his father said, ‘Son, you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. But we had to celebrate and be glad because this brother of yours was dead and is alive. He was lost and is found.’

One: For the word of God in scripture, for the word of God among us. For the word of God within us.

Many: Thanks be to God.

The Good News

Rev. Christopher Czarnecki
“Beyond the Sons: Becoming Love”

Invitation to Generosity

Jim Dwiggins

Each year, the United Church of Christ receives five special mission offerings to support the wider church’s ministry efforts. The first of these in 2024, One Great Hour of Sharing, channels resources to international programs in health, education, and agricultural development, as well as emergency relief, refugee ministries, and disaster response both globally and within the U.S. A gift of any amount helps us maintain our recognition as a “5 for 5 Church” in the UCC, meaning we faithfully contribute to all five annual special offerings. If you feel called to give, please write “OGHS” on the memo line of your check or envelope. If giving online, select “One Great Hour of Sharing” from the available options.

Before our invitation to the offering, we'd like to share a video from the United Church of Christ of how your giving is making a difference:
[One Great Hour of Sharing 2025.](https://www.ucc.org/giving/ways-to-give/our-churchs-wider-mission/one-great-hour-of-sharing/)

<https://www.ucc.org/giving/ways-to-give/our-churchs-wider-mission/one-great-hour-of-sharing/>

In God's household, there is always more than enough. Enough love, enough grace, enough room at the table. When we give, we participate in God's abundance, making space for the weary, lifting up the marginalized, and sharing hope with those in need. Let us offer our gifts with joy, knowing that every act of generosity reflects God's radical welcome.

*** Doxology**

GIVE THANKS

**Give thanks with a grateful heart; give thanks to the Holy One;
Give thanks because God's given Jesus Christ, God's Son. (2x)**

**And now let the weak say, "I am strong,"
Let the poor say, "I am rich
Because of what the Lord has done for us." (2x) Give thanks.**

*** Prayer of Dedication (*unison*)**

Jim Dwiggins

Please join me in a prayer of dedication for the gifts we have received...

Generous God, bless these gifts we have offered, that they may be signs of Your love and justice in the world. Use them to welcome the stranger, uplift the weary, and build a diverse community where all are embraced. As we give, shape our hearts to reflect Your grace, so our lives may be offerings of love. Amen.

*** Hymn 449**

"Softly and Tenderly"

W.L. Thompson

**Softly and tenderly, Jesus is calling,
Calling for you and for me;
See at the portals Christ waiting and watching,
Watching for you and for me.**

**Refrain: Come home, come home,
All who are weary, come home;
Earnestly, tenderly Jesus is calling—
Calling, "O sinner, come home!"**

Why should we tarry when Jesus is pleading,
Pleading for you and for me?
Why should we linger and heed not God's mercies,
Mercies for you and for me? (R)

O for the wonderful love Jesus promised,
Promised for you and for me;
Though we have sinned Jesus offers us pardon,
Pardon for you and for me. (R)

* Benediction

Rev. Christopher Czarnecki

* Benediction Response 581

WORLD PEACE PRAYER

Lead us from death to life, from falsehood to truth,
From despair to hope, from fear to trust,
Lead us from hate to love, from war to peace;
Let peace fill our hearts, let peace fill our world,
Let peace fill our universe.

Postlude

"There Is a Fountain"

arr. L. Shackley

*Songs in this service are used by permission.
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*The liturgy for today's service was written
by Rev. Christopher Czarnecki.*

*Candid photographs and/or video recording share our work and witness
and invite others into the fellowship of our congregation. Some pictures/video
may be published in church print publications, on our website or on our
official social media sites. If you do not wish to have your image published,
please contact the church office by phone or email.*

WE PROVIDE OUR EXTRAVAGANT WELCOME WITH HELP FROM:

D Evans, Brian Hankins, Laura Hankins, Jo Ann Jellison

Ushers: Shakti Subramanian, Laurence Winston, Tom Magraw

Greeters:

Refreshments: Bill & Kim Tyler invite everyone to join them today in

celebrating their 44th Wedding Anniversary! Congratulations!

WHAT'S HAPPENING AT HOLY COVENANT

Stay connected! There are many new events in our future! Check out all the current happenings in the weekly newsletter via Constant Contact. *Not seeing it in your inbox? Sign-up here:*

<https://holycovenantucc.org/newsletters/>

Season of Lent: March 5 through April 17

Lenten Devotionals

“YOUNG VOICES: STEPPING OUT OF THE WILDERNESS”

This 47-day devotion walks you through Lent and concludes with the good news of Easter Sunday. All entries were written by UCC youth and young adults between the ages of 12 and 35.

See these daily devotions on our Facebook Page:

<https://www.facebook.com/HCUCC.Church>

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/61370940062>

Sojourners Class

Book study of The Last Week:

What the Gospels Really Teach About Jesus's Final Days in Jerusalem
by Marcus Borg and John Crossan.

We gather In-person or via Zoom: Meeting ID: 895 6175 8099 Passcode:
986788

April 6

On the 5th Sunday in Lent, join us for “Mix-it-up” Sunday,
with a Spring Brunch Potluck following worship.

Pastries, Muffins, Casseroles and Salads

April 13

Palm & Passion Sunday:

Let's celebrate our Confirmands together!

April 17

Maundy Thursday Dinner & Tenebrae Service, 6pm

April 20

Easter Worship 10:55am

Bring fresh flowers for the cross

April 27

Celebrate Earth Sunday with the Creation Justice Team

CHECK OUT OUR ONLINE CALENDAR AT www.holycovenantucc.org/events/

CARES TEAM BRAINSTORMING SESSION, TODAY

Following worship in the conference room we will have a brainstorming session around the idea of forming a Cares Team Ministry. This is an idea in development. If you have a passion for being part of this ministry, please join us. All are welcome!

BAGGED LUNCH BUILD FOLLOWING WORSHIP TODAY

No experience needed! We are making 100 bagged lunches for the Giles Center on March 30, and again on April 27.

DAYTIMERS COVENANT GROUP, APRIL 2

Join us at noon in the Conference Room on April 2nd. There's always lots of good food. Drop in and visit a while! Zoom for those that have a tight schedule: Meeting ID: 881 0227 8992 Passcode: 338539

GAME NIGHT, APRIL 6

We start around 6:30pm. Join us for fun and fellowship!

COMING SOON! NEW PICTORIAL DIRECTORY!

It's been a popular request! Please save the dates May 1-4th as potential photography appointments are developed. We encourage everyone to participate. More details coming soon.

CHARLOTTE AIDS WALK, MAY 31

Join us for the Charlotte AIDS Walk on Saturday, May 31st, from 9:00 AM to 12:00 PM at Truist Field. You can walk with our team, sponsor a participant, or make a donation by visiting: [Holy Covenant UCC Team Page](https://p2p.onecause.com/aidswalkclt/team/holy-covenant-ucc-5), <https://p2p.onecause.com/aidswalkclt/team/holy-covenant-ucc-5>

TAKE ME OUT TO THE BALL GAME!

Charlotte Knights vs. Gwinnett game on Saturday, July 19, 6pm. Tickets \$20-27 each. Order by April 20. Payment info will be sent in an email then. Questions? Contact Martha Bomely, martha.bomely@gmail.com. <https://www.signupgenius.com/go/10C0C44ACAD23A2FE3-48668551-charlotte>

PLEASE REMEMBER IN PRAYER

If you wish to add someone to the list, please send a note to
prayers@holycovenantucc.org

Members

Mel & Christine Andersen, Liz Colton, Kevin Decker, Tina Ettesen, Laura Hankins, Jana Harrison, Jim & Faye Humphrey, Sharon Landis, Sue & Bill Pascucci, Isabelle Reedy Powell, Beth Sharp, Anita Taylor, Darline Warren, Sally Young & Alice Phelan

Friends & Family Members

Family and friends in the recent death of Carl Farrow (Jeff Edwards-Knight) Sandra (Carl & Phyllis Johnson), Beth, Michael & Julian Bliss (Robert Shepherd), Gary Bomely (Martha Bomely), Melissa Brown, Reva Dixon, Kim Dixon VanFleet (Diane Neese), Kent Hansen (Kristen Fuchs), Jeanne Hord (Diane Neese), Pam McGill & Pam Culp (Melissa Noll), Deby Gumper (Dawn Simmons), Cindy Hedrick (Barb Schneller), Henry Hildebrand (Bill & Connie Hildebrand), Charles Jernigan (Lee Parrish), Dave Johnson, Richard Lease (Barb Schneller), Earl & Susie Morgan (Ed Vickery), Larry & Karen Roark (Ed Vickery), Michelle Sharp (Beth Sharp), Janet Wakefield (Linda Burby), Brian Weddell (Jon Weddell), Kim Wiggs-Gamblin, Scott Whitley (Jay Whitley)

OUR MINISTRY TEAM

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