

“Desiderata” A sermon based on Jeremiah 15:15-21, Romans 12:9-21 and Matthew 16:21-28 delivered by the Rev. Alison Dutton Jacobs on the 14th Sunday After Pentecost August 30, 2026 at the First Congregational Church UCC of Onkama, Michigan.

Just like Peter, who rebukes Jesus in our Matthew passage this morning, we don’t really like to talk about the Cross. And yet, today we have to do that. For today the scripture is clear about these things. If we are not to be stumbling blocks to Jesus and his message to the world, then we must deny ourselves and take up our cross—whatever that means for us individually—and follow the Christian Way. And we should do this, because it is our deepest desire to repay the gift of life that Jesus’ death on the cross has given us.

In our Matthew passage, Jesus asks his disciples, and this includes us, “What will they give in return for their life?” What indeed! So, what IS our deepest desire to give in return for the free gift of life we have been given? What is our “desiderata,” so to speak? If we were Jeremiah, we would ask it this way: “what are the words of the Lord that, when digested by us, would become to us a joy and the delight of our hearts?” (Jeremiah 15:16)

“Desiderata” is a Latin word which means “desired things or things desired” It is also the title of a much loved, much quoted, and much displayed in poster form prose poem written by Maz Ehrmann in 1927. People as different as actor, Morgan Freeman, Canadian Prime Minister, Pierre Trudeau, and musician Les Crane, have cited this poem. Written almost exactly halfway between the end of World War I (1918) and the beginning of World War II (1939) this poem was dusted off by the anti-war movement of the 60’s as an antidote to the Vietnam War and widely distributed in poster form. In 1971, Les Crane recorded a spoken-word with gospel backup version of it, not realizing that it was a copyright violation.

Now, because it was written before 1928, it is officially in the public domain—so I can print it on our bulletin cover.

When you read the prose-poem “Desiderata,” it is almost impossible not to think of the words, cadence and rhythm of our Romans passage this morning. It is as if, when we read Romans 12, we are treated to a “Desiderata”—the “things desired,” of a person following a Christian way of life. Thus, the title of the passage, as designated by the NRSV editing committee, Marks of the True Christian rings so true, as well as the title given by the NIV committee “Love in Action.”

It is not inconceivable that Max Ehrmann, a practicing Christian member of the German Methodist church in his hometown of Terre Haute, Indiana, was inspired by the Apostle Paul’s words from Corinth to the church in Rome as a model of what is most desired to be the attributes of a faithful Christian.

Verse 18 of Romans 12 reads this way: “As far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.” Line three in Max Ehrmann’s work reads, “As far as possible without surrender be on good terms with all persons.” As you can see, these phrases are almost identical. And, although there are not other phrases so closely aligned in the two works, the concepts articulated in the two works are congruent.

For instance, Paul says about love, “Let love be genuine, . . . love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honour” and the “Desiderata” states, “Be yourself. Especially do not feign affection. Neither be cynical about love, for in the face of all aridity and disenchantment it is perennial as the grass.” While not the same, the import and feeling of the two sayings about love feel very closely aligned.

While not officially a Christian document the “Desiderata” has been used throughout its existence as a document of faith. Max Ehrmann, himself, used it as a Christmas card in 1933, and Rev. Frederick Kates of Old Saint Paul’s Church in Baltimore distributed 200 unattributed copies as devotional materials in 1959 and 1960 so people thought that he had written it. When former Illinois governor and US Ambassador to the United Nations, Adlai Stevenson died in 1965, the poem was found on his bedside table, marked to be used in his Christmas card for that year.

Open your Bibles now to page 1762 and look at the words of Romans 12:9-21 while you listen to the “Desiderata” as read by Dan Wilson:

Desiderata

GO PLACIDLY amid the noise and the haste,
and remember what peace there may be in silence.
As far as possible, without surrender,
be on good terms with all persons.

Speak your truth quietly and clearly;
and listen to others, even to the dull and the ignorant;
they too have their story.

Avoid loud and aggressive persons;
they are vexatious to the spirit.
If you compare yourself with others,
you may become vain or bitter,
for always there will be greater and lesser persons than yourself.

Enjoy your achievements as well as your plans.
Keep interested in your career, however humble;
it is a real possession in the changing fortunes of time.

Exercise caution in your business affairs,
for the world is full of trickery.
But let this not blind you to what virtue there is;

many persons strive for high ideals,
and everywhere life is full of heroism.

Be yourself. Especially do not feign affection.
Neither be cynical about love;
for in the face of all aridity and disenchantment,
it is as perennial as the grass.

Take kindly the counsel of the years,
gracefully surrendering the things of youth.
Nurture strength of spirit to shield you in sudden misfortune.
But do not distress yourself with dark imaginings.
Many fears are born of fatigue and loneliness.
Beyond a wholesome discipline, be gentle with yourself.

You are a child of the universe no less than the trees and the stars;
you have a right to be here.
And whether or not it is clear to you,
no doubt the universe is unfolding as it should.
Therefore be at peace with God,
whatever you conceive Him to be.

And whatever your labors and aspirations,
in the noisy confusion of life,
keep peace in your soul.
With all its sham, drudgery and broken dreams,
it is still a beautiful world.
Be cheerful. Strive to be happy.

By Max Ehrmann © 1927 Original text

Some word, some concept, some phrase in this poem speaks poignantly and
directly to each of our spirits. So, take the bulletin home and reread it throughout
the week to find that special nugget of wisdom for yourself and feel blessed by it.
Amen.

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