

**UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST CONGREGATIONAL
Wallace, Idaho**

Alice M.C. Ling, Pastor

Seventh Sunday of Easter

May 24, 2020

WELCOME AND ANNOUNCEMENTS

Good morning! And welcome again to our online worship as the United Church of Christ Congregational in Wallace. I often wonder what this mode of worship is like for you, and I know my imagination can't begin to get inside your head and experience, so I appreciate the glimpses I hear from you. What I can tell you about is my experience this past week as I participated in the Festival of Homiletics, which is an annual international gathering of preachers and teachers of preaching, and together for a week, we hear dozens of sermons and lectures, sing songs and pray prayers, and I have always come away filled to the brim with the gifts of the week. I am certain I wouldn't have even considered going this year, but when the pandemic moved it on line AND they said it was free, they had my attention. But still I wondered whether or not to sign up. I just wasn't sure I wanted to sit in front of my computer for that much time in one week. And part of what I like most about the Festival is sitting in a sanctuary with hundreds of others, letting the music wash over me and call to my depths, joining in prayer with others and feeling the immensity of the Church of Jesus Christ. Sure, online would deliver good words and helpful tools, but so much wouldn't be there; was it worth it? On the other side of the event, I can tell you without a doubt that it was absolutely worth it. Yes, there were things I missed, mostly especially singing with that cloud of witnesses, but I still feel filled and nourished, encouraged and inspired. As much as COVID-19 restricted and constrained our ability to be together, that event also provided me with rich new resources to help us make our way through COVID-19, and for that, I am grateful.

My friends, I miss you, and I miss greeting you at the door, seeing your smile and sharing a hug, gathering with you in our sanctuary and having some sense of you singing with me and us praying together, being in the same place at the same time. And yet, I deeply affirm the choices we've made so far to stay apart in order to stay safe and do our part in not spreading the virus. I give thanks for the ways in which technology allows us to come together, to listen and pray, grow and serve, and deepen our understanding of what it really means be the Church. I give thanks for your responsiveness and graciousness, honesty and encouragement. And I celebrate that no matter where we are or when and how we participate in our times of worship, our God connects us through the powerful, gracious work of the Holy Spirit. By the grace and promise of God, I believe deeply that whether we are gathered or scattered, we are still the Body of Christ, and for that great gift, I am eternally grateful.

As with other Sundays, I am sending along the words of this worship, and invite you to join with me in the singing as well as the responsive and unison pieces. Let us worship God.

CALL TO WORSHIP (based on Psalm 68)

We shout for joy, to God who rides upon the clouds!

We sing praises to our awe-inspiring God, before whom the earth quakes, and whose abundant blessings provide for all in need!

God is Sovereign over the earth, Defender of the defenseless, and Parent to orphans; God creates families for those who are alone.

God leads captives to freedom and breaks the yoke of oppression.

God goes forth before the people, marching through the wilderness of their lives, bringing forth restoration and justice.

Sing praise to God, Rider of the ancient skies, who dwells in holiness.

Proclaim the power of God!

O God, how awesome you are in your sanctuary! You give power and strength to your people.

Let us worship God!

(Rev. Renee C. Jackson, United Church of Christ Worship Ways)

SONG *“God Reigns o’er All the Earth”*

God reigns o’er all the earth! Green hills and valleys low,
the farms and towns in golds and browns God’s grace and beauty show.
God reigns o’er all the earth! Stone banks and spreading plains,
in rainbow hues – reds, yellows, blues – of streams and country lanes.

God reigns o’er human life! Through youth and aging years,
in death, in birth, in grief, in mirth, in all our hopes and fears.
God reigns o’er human life! Our inspiration still.
Through all our schemes, in all our dreams, we see God’s reigning will.

God reigns! Emmanuel! God with us every day.
In all our past and to the last, our comfort and our stay.
God reigns! Emmanuel! Let praise to Christ be sung!
God’s presence here makes all things dear. Let joyful bells be rung!

PRAYER OF CONFESSION (in unison)

Blessed One, you created human beings for your glory and pleasure. Forgive us our anxiety in these troubled days, and empower in us your vision for a just and loving life in community. Forgive us for ignoring the prompting of your Spirit, your purpose for our lives, and for placing our will above yours. Grant us courage to share in Christ’s sufferings, to be his witnesses, and to carry your loving compassion to a hurting world. Amen.

WORDS OF ASSURANCE

As the Body of Christ, we are empowered by the Holy Spirit to be Christ’s witnesses. Each of us has our own story of what Jesus’ life means for us. Through our life-stories we can convey hope to the hopeless, joy to the downtrodden, and peace where there is turmoil. Therefore, let us “clothe ourselves in humility,” sharing the Good News of Christ, that we “may all be one.” In this God is well pleased.

(Rev. Renee C. Jackson, United Church of Christ Worship Ways)

SCRIPTURE READING: Acts 1:1-11

In the first book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus did and taught from the beginning until the day when he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. After his suffering he presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God. While staying with them, he ordered them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait there for the promise of the Father. “This,” he said, “is what you have heard from me; for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.”

So when they had come together, they asked him, “Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?” He replied, “It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” When he had said

this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. While he was going and they were gazing up toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. They said, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.”

SERMON

If ever there was one, this is a hinge moment: one of those pivotal moments in time when everything changes. We look back with clarity and fondness, and yes, perhaps rose colored glasses, longing to buy a return ticket or sign up for a do-over even though we know painfully well, there’s no going back, what’s done is done. We wish we’d paid better attention and listened more carefully, taken better notes, made better choices but it’s behind us now. So we turn and look forward with... with what? Into what? It looks so unfamiliar and undefined. What are we supposed to do now?

For the eleven disciples, it was all about Jesus. Behind them were three rich years of learning and believing and having someone believe in them, of seeing things they’d never dared believed were possible take shape before their very eyes. Three years of walking beside a man with a heart so big he made room for everyone, removed stains and warning labels, refused to take no for an answer, and insisted that regardless of how complicated and challenging others made the road to righteousness look, it could all be boiled down to one word: love. He healed the sick and raised the dead, fed the hungry and set the prisoners free, spoke truth to power and promised to change the world. And after they turned on him, arrested and tortured him, nailed him to a cross, mocked him while he died, and laid him in a grave, after three days he came back breathing peace and living love.

The book of Acts tells us they spent forty days together after the resurrection, while he talked with them about the kingdom of God and worked to prepare them for what was coming next. He also told them that what was coming was bigger than they could handle on their own, so they were to wait until the holy power arrived from on high. When it was time, he led them out of the city the way they’d come. It had felt so right a couple of months ago, when on Palm Sunday they walked the road they’d been told the Messiah would use to enter the city; but now, they were leaving by the same road, and that felt wrong, like they were undoing what they’d started. He led them up to the top of the Mount of Olives and gathered them close one last time. He didn’t exactly say it, but his message was clear: he was passing the baton. It’s as if he said, My work here is finished; it’s time for you to take up my mantle, and carry on. Take this baton, turn around and go back: beginning with Jerusalem, and then into Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth, you are witnesses to these things, so go, proclaim the good news with your words and with your lives. I commission you and bless you and send you into the world for the love of the world. And then he was gone: lifted up and carried away on a cloud, leaving them standing with heads back, staring to watch until there was nothing left to see, like a child watching their balloon get further and further away.

Eyes still glued to the cloud, after they’d begun to suspect they might not straighten their necks again, they heard two men speak: why do you stand looking up toward heaven? Your work is down here. He’s gone; you hold the mantle now. At which point, they were pulled from one side of the hinge to the other, away from their beloved friend and teacher, away from their years together as a band of brothers, away from what little security and confidence they had scrounged up, and positioned to look into the great undefined, unexplored and intimidating world of the unknown and told to carry on. How in the world were they supposed to do that? Surely others were more qualified. Now what?

Like I said before, if ever there was one, this too is a hinge moment: one of those pivotal moments in time when everything changes. I don’t mean to equate what we’re living with as the same as Jesus’ departure after his resurrection, but I do think we are at a pivotal, defining moment that will mark time

for generations to come: the year 2020 when life flipped a switch and went from before COVID-19 to after. A time when we'll look back at what life used to be like, the growing economy and years of a bull market, all the plans we had made and the hopes we had stacked up waiting for us, the ease with which we came and went and lived our lives and loved our dear ones. We look back with clarity and longing, and resist turning into the new world that's waiting, because we simply don't have the stomach to look into that world. Like asking how we grieve a 100,000 dead? I know; we're not there yet, but it seems likely we will be before the weekend is over. And who among us wants to consider what number we'll eventually land on before we can declare victory and move on? How do we even begin to put the lives back together of people who have lost jobs, and God help us, who knows how much more they will lose before this is over and done? I can't even decide if I feel comfortable enough to make a phone call to make an appointment to get my hair cut; how do we begin to find our way through all of the unknowns and risks, vulnerabilities and cautions that stretch before us? We can cower in a corner in fear, we can boldly assert our rights and steam full blast ahead as if nothing has changed, or we can search and pray for an alternative path, a path of faith and love, of care and compassion, a way that holds a complicated combination of feelings and realities together and tries to move and act lovingly.

One of the words I hear in today's story is that Jesus sent his followers into the world for the love of the world. As much as I'd like to push that message aside and say, nope, not me; I'm not supposed to go into the world; let me just pull the shades, stay home and keep looking up into heaven, I don't really think that's the way it works. I'll admit to you that there have been weeks that I've pondered what benediction to use at the end of our worship, and I've rejected those that start by saying, and now go forth into the world... I can't send us into the world. But the more I think about it, the more I realize social distancing doesn't mean we can or should turn our backs on the world. Let's start with the people in our own lives and homes and families and friends, the people we live with and the people with whom we've been in touch from a distance. Are there ways that we can more fully live out Jesus' commission by notching up the love and forgiveness we extend them, by reaching out from a distance to those who need encouragement and companionship? And what about if we reframe the whole social distancing thing a bit. I read a suggestion this week that wondered if "social distancing" might be a misnomer, and how it might impact our outlook if we thought of it as increasing our physical distancing while at the same time, increasing our social connectedness. (SALT Commentary for Ascension) What that looks like can mean as many different things as there are people in the valley: everything from making and donating masks to delivering groceries to neighbors who are uneasy going out. A phone call, email or card to a person who's alone. I love the stories of school teachers and principals who have gone out of their way to see and help students, to locate and congratulate seniors. I've been thinking a lot about the people we've come to call essential workers, the ones who a few months ago were treated as expendable workers: underpaid, under appreciated, under protected. The cleaning people and truck drivers, workers who wipe the surface of gas pumps and clear away our trash. How can we communicate to them our care and appreciation? We have a nephew who's working in a grocery store and he sometimes tells us about how rude customers are. That's a starting place for me: whatever else I might say to them, I don't want to add my voice or my face to their list of people who have been rude.

Jesus commissioned his followers to go into the world, for the love of the world. One of the things that circle of friends reminds us is that Jesus chose and God still uses the simplest of folks – peasants and outcast, thick-skulled and fearful folk – to change the world. They didn't do by themselves, but together in a community of the faithful. They didn't do it all at once, but one act at a time, one healing, one word of truth, one offer of forgiveness, one swallow of wine and one piece of bread, and they kept at it until they'd spread the good news of God's love to the very ends of the earth. Jesus stayed with them long enough to be able to pass them off to the Spirit who would continue the work he had begun

in and among them; together they sent those first disciples into the world for the love of the world – which is precisely where they’re sending us as well. Amen.

PRAYER REQUESTS

Christi’s dad, John, will be undergoing a procedure to drain fluid from the cysts they found in his spinal cord; may it be successful, and rehabilitation to regain his mobility and be out of pain be taken with patience.

Prayers for embracing change in all avenues of our lives and letting God's will and plan not be interrupted by our own selfishness and wants for control.

Indy’s friend who has had multiple back surgeries.

Please God, put a shield around all the workers and residents of our Valley as the careless tourists descend on us.

Give our leaders wisdom and strength to make tough decisions.

Prayers for Kasey and people that deal with drug relapses and for peoples health and mind set

Memorial Day

PASTORAL PRAYER

Memorial Day Prayer by Rev. Austin Fleming

In the quiet sanctuaries of our own hearts,
let each of us name and call on the One whose power over us
is great and gentle, firm and forgiving, holy and healing ...

You who created us,
who sustain us,
who call us to live in peace,
hear our prayer this day.

Hear our prayer for all who have died,
whose hearts and hopes are known to you alone ...

Hear our prayer for those who put the welfare of others
ahead of their own
and give us hearts as generous as theirs ...

Hear our prayer for those who gave their lives
in the service of others,
and accept the gift of their sacrifice ...

Help us to shape and make a world
where we will lay down the arms of war
and turn our swords into plowshares
for a harvest of justice and peace ...

Comfort those who grieve the loss of their loved ones
and let your healing be the hope in our hearts...

Hear our prayer this day
and in your mercy answer us
in the name of all that is holy as we pray the words that Jesus taught his disciples... Our Father,

PRAYER OF OUR SAVIOR (debts)

OFFERTORY

Last Sunday when I arrived at the Offertory section of our worship, I encouraged you to remember the church's ministry and to do what you can to support what we are doing together. When we went to the church on Friday, Ben found more donations than he had in several weeks, gifts that are gratefully received and will be put to use to help sustain our presence in the community and to continue our witness and worship in Jesus' name.

Similarly, I reached out to Art Fleming recently and asked how things were going at the Food Bank. He reported that they are receiving about double the requests for food that they had before our economy tanked and people began to lose jobs. He also reported that people have been giving in ways that allow them to meet the need. They have cash for vouchers which will buy milk and meat, and enough food is being donated that they are able to fill bags and share those with the people who come seeking assistance. If you've contributed to that ministry in any way, thank you. If you are able to contribute to their ongoing ministry, feel free to purchase one or several of the bags of food that are available at either Harvest Foods or Steins. All donations are gratefully received and put to work on behalf of others in our Valley.

And then there is the delightful story I heard the other day of the ways in which one of you was kind to strangers at a doughnut shop. When you drove up to the window to pay, you learned that those folks had paid your bill, so you in turn paid for the dozen doughnuts the people behind you were buying. Paying it forward, we can guess at the smile you brought to faces you hadn't even seen, and in doing so shared the love of God.

Thank you for all that you do as you share some of what you have as well as parts of who you are with others: through gifts of money and food, kindness and compassion, in the ways that we live and work, care and share, we honor God and serve God's people. Thank you.

SONG *"Sent Forth by God's Blessing"*

Sent forth by God's blessing, our true faith confessing, the people of God from this dwelling take leave.
The service is ended, O now be extended the fruits of our worship in all who believe.
The seed of the teaching, receptive hearts reaching, shall blossom in action for God and for all.
God's grace did invite us, and love shall unite us to work for God's realm and to answer the call.

With praise and thanksgiving to God ever living, the tasks of our every day life we will face.
Our faith ever sharing, in love ever caring, embracing God's children of each tribe and race.
With your grace you feed us, with your light now lead us, united us as one in this life that we share.
Then may all the living with praise and thanksgiving give honor to Christ and that name which we bear.

BENEDICTION

And now go forth into the world in joy.
Be of good courage.
Hold fast to that which is good.
Render to no one evil for evil.
Support the weak, strengthen the faint hearted, help the afflicted, honor all people.
Love and serve the Lord, rejoicing in the power of the Holy Spirit.
And the blessing of God Almighty, Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer, rest and abide with us all, this day and forever more. Amen