

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

Alice M.C. Ling, Pastor

Ninth Sunday after Pentecost

August 2, 2020

SONG *“Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing”*

WELCOME AND ANNOUNCEMENTS

Good morning! And welcome to the gift of God’s new day. Welcome together as the people of God and into the presence of God. And welcome once again to the online worship of the United Church of Christ Congregational in Wallace. It’s good to be here – and with you – as we seek God’s presence and prepare ourselves for worship.

I would remind you that near the end of this time, we will share the sacrament of communion. If you haven’t brought something with you, now would be a good time to pause the recording and find something to represent the bread and the cup, so that you can participate with me and others in the sharing of this joyous meal.

Come, my friends. Let us worship God.

CALL TO WORSHIP (based on Isaiah 55:1-3)

Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy? Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food. Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live. I will make with you an everlasting covenant, my steadfast, sure love for (the faithful).

SONG *“Come to the Table of Grace”*

Come to the table of grace. Come to the table of grace.
This is Christ’s table, not just yours or mine. Come to the table of grace.

Come to the table of peace...

Come to the table of love...

Come to the table of joy...

GATHERING PRAYER

God, you see us. You see our struggles, You see our difficulties.

You see our possibilities, You see our promise.

Connect the dots for us, O God. Soften the hard spots with your blessing.

Call us in our wandering to hear you say our names. Satisfy our longings as with loaves and fishes and manna from heaven.

For you are a good God, a God present in the scramble, And in the end, you always, always have a blessing.

For this and so much more, we give you thanks, through Jesus Christ. Amen.

(Kaji Doua, UCC Worship Ways)

SCRIPTURE READING Matthew 14:13-21

Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself. But when the crowds heard it, they followed him on foot from the towns. When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them and cured their sick. When it was evening, the disciples came to him and said, "This is a deserted place, and the hour is now late; send the crowds away so that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves." Jesus said to them, "They need not go away; you give them something to eat." They replied, "We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish." And he said, "Bring them here to me." Then he ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. And all ate and were filled; and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full. And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children.

SERMON

It's really subtle, and if I was nice, I'd let it lie. Usually I just skip right over it, but this year writers have brought it to my attention, so I'm going to share the favor. Those opening words of our text? The ones that say, "now when Jesus heard this"? They're pointing to the deeply disturbing news that has just reached Jesus: that his friend and mentor John was beheaded by Herod as a party favor to his daughter. There's no great mystery in why Jesus felt a need to get away by himself; it's not a story he could hope to wrap his head around but he likely felt a need to pray as well as to grieve. And it's also not surprising that when the crowds heard the gruesome story, they turned in Jesus' direction and followed his footprints to the lake's edge. I don't know how much time Jesus claimed for his own raw nerves and broken heart, but probably not enough for either him or the crowd to let go of the tragedy or get over the trauma before they were together again on shore.

Clearly, these were far from light-hearted, carefree days for Jesus. Anything but. He'd just been home and even though Robert Frost said that home is "where, when you go there, they have to take you in", that wasn't Jesus' experience. Just the opposite: they drove him out. And there was nothing like John's death to highlight his clarity that his time was short and his days were numbered. With his own heart in a swirl of emotion, it's no surprise to read that when he came ashore and saw the crowd he felt compassion for them. Their grief was written all over their faces. Their fear had drawn their shoulders into tight, twitching balls of nerves. And they didn't have to speak a word for him to hear their longing for a word of encouragement, some reason to hope. All of their emotions echoed and ricocheted in his own heart and soul.

Matthew tells us that Jesus felt compassion for them. I don't know what the word means for you, but in the Greek language, it's a gut-wrenching, intestinal-twisting, visceral emotion of care. Sort of like how my innards feel most nights when I listen to the evening news. Especially on the nights when the death count is breaking records and ICU beds have gone missing and the economic numbers have the country quaking in our boots and violence is growing in city streets and national leaders tell the unemployed on the brink of losing their benefits and those threatened with eviction notices that they're working on a relief package but expect negotiations to take awhile; and oh did I mention that there's a hurricane with its sights set on COVID's current epicenter? I suspect most of us know gut-wrenching, intestinal-twisting, visceral emotions these days, and that's part of what we're told Jesus' felt when he saw those crowds, except for him it was an emotion that propelled him into action. His compassion insisted that he get busy healing the sick. He spent the day fully engrossed in conversation with them, listening to their stories and fears, nightmares and questions, healing their wounds while sharing with them his truth about the love of God and the way of faith.

Jesus and the crowd seem to have been totally engrossed in each other, but the disciples were watching their surroundings, so they went to Jesus and spelled out the situation: this is a deserted place and it's getting late; send the people away so they can go into the villages and buy some food for themselves. They knew things would turn sour fast once hunger set in, and growling stomachs drowned out Jesus' words. They knew they weren't equipped to deal with the situation and had every reason to want to avoid the unpleasantness that was bound to be headed their way. They were genuinely concerned for the people, but they don't appear to have much interest in getting overly involved.

Jesus doesn't see the situation the way his disciples do. They say, send the people away; and Jesus responds by saying, they don't need to go away – you give them something to eat. Interesting how the responsibility shifted between them. You send them away. No, you feed them. Us? You're the boss. You want them fed here, know how that can happen, you do it. Jesus is resolute in his clarity that part of the work of discipleship is to care for the needs of those around them, and so he insisted that the disciples accept the responsibility and do the work of feeding the 5,000 men besides women and children.

Their response was to protest: we have nothing but five loaves and two fish. While it is obviously true that they didn't have much, that their resources were more than a little limited, they responded to Jesus' instructions by saying they had nothing – which was not true. Jesus knew what they did have and he told them to go get it, to bring the five loaves and two fish to him. When they had done that, he took them, looked up to heaven, blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples who in turn gave them to the people. The food was passed from man to woman to child and on to man again until all had eaten and all were satisfied and each of the disciples moved among the crowd and gathered up a basket of the leftovers.

One teacher of ministry has written, “Jesus transforms our humble offerings into more than we could have dreamed, but it is also true that Jesus is calling us to dream bigger. Jesus did not say, ‘Give me those fish and that bread, and I will feed them.’ His first call was for his disciples to change their ideas about their own power in the world.

“For disciples who think they have ‘nothing,’ the possibilities are necessarily small. What might have happened if one of the disciples had ‘looked up to heaven, and blessed and broken the loaves’? Of course, we will not know. The more daunting question is, how many times have we heard our Lord say, ‘Give them something to eat,’ and because of our sense of powerlessness turned away? If we think our baskets contain ‘nothing,’ when we in fact have a few loaves and fish, then Jesus has ‘nothing’ with which to feed the hungry. (Dock Hollingsworth, *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Vol. 2*, page 313)

The issue is not how much we have at our disposal that can be put to work to meet the needs of the hungry – or the sick, the homeless, the unemployed, the refugees, the incarcerated – pick your concern. The issue is what we're willing to offer and to share, and how ready we are to look up to heaven and seek God's blessing for our gifts. If we're willing to make ourselves and our resources available to be transformed by the love of God, there's simply no telling how many we may be able to feed, heal, clothe, welcome and serve.

I love the story we've heard on the TV news a couple of times of a man who delivers newspapers in New Jersey. His routine was to deliver early in the morning, throwing the papers onto yards and then moving on without ever seeing anyone. That all changed the day he received a request from an elderly customer who asked if he would pull into her driveway and leave the paper closer to the garage. As he thought about that, he began to wonder what a woman who couldn't get 20 feet to the sidewalk in front of her house was going to do to get what she needed in the midst of a pandemic. So the next day he inserted a note into the papers, introduced himself and offered to get groceries for those who needed help, free of charge. At which point, his phone started ringing off the hook. Now he takes orders, buys

groceries, delivers them to houses and sets them carefully by people's front doors. He started in April, and now has about 130 seniors that he serves, with the help of a dozen volunteers (mostly college students). And rather than looking for a way out, he's gearing up and ready to do more – because he can. (“On the Road”, CBS News)

We may not have much, but I don't think any of us have nothing. Jesus said to his disciples, and he says to us: bring what you have to me. However much or little you have, just bring it to me and believe that it is enough to get the ball rolling. Be the first in the crowd to turn your pockets inside out; be the first on your block to start a miracle, be the first to step up with what you have. They don't need to go away; bring what you have to me and together, we'll go to work. Amen.

PRAYER REQUESTS

For Christi's friend Sue who is a breast cancer survivor, but tests show that she may have a recurrence...she's on overloaded anxiety being the primary care giver to her 92 yr old mother who is fighting pancreatic cancer that has spread to her lungs.

Prayers for Dorothy Theilman's first cousin in Montana who has been diagnosed with cancer all over and is now in hospice. Hopefully his immediate family will see him through on his journey into Jesus arms.

Prayers for our firefighters out fighting fires in this heat...that God will surround them with safety and sustain their energy to do their job

Prayers for our world leaders: Please God, give them wisdom in all things. Please God, give them conscience and the heart to do what is right and in the best interest of the people they serve.

Prayers for the lonely people: give them light, and courage

PASTORAL PRAYER

Almighty and Eternal God, we marvel that you choose to be involved in our lives; that you are not far-removed at a high and holy distance from where you can look down on us and occasionally send messengers and prophets to carry your instructions our way. No, you have chosen over and over again to come among us, especially in the life and ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus, but also in the lives and hearts, compassion and courage, witness and service of countless others. You enter our lives and come close: close enough to see the pain etched in faces, to catch the tears cried alone in the dark, hear the rumbles of empty stomachs, feel the fear that keeps people locked behind closed doors, cradle the lonely and isolated, and hold the grief that accompanies thousands upon thousands of deaths. You know intimately the needs of the sick, the weariness of caregivers, the vulnerability of first responders, the anxiety of parents who don't know how to keep their children safe, the pain and anger of racism, the selfishness and greed, apathy and despair that run rampant in far too many places.

Holy One, you envision a better world for us, but rather than fixing this one on our behalf, you call us to bring what we have to you, to offer it for your blessing and transformation, and to join with you in the healing and restoring of hearts and bodies, states and nations, our small corner of the world and even all creation. You see wisdom and truth, justice and mercy, community and cooperation, peace and love in ways we can only glimpse. Show us the way ahead. Lead us, Holy God, that we too might catch your vision for our lives. Plant your compassion deep in our souls that we might take in the suffering of others in order to claim our role in building and planting, healing and holding, restoring and making new. By your grace, may we journey together toward your promised new day, a day of beauty and joy, wholeness and love.

Hear our prayers, spoken and unspoken. And hear us as we pray together the prayer that Jesus taught, saying: Our Father...

PRAYER OF OUR SAVIOR (debts)

OFFERING

God has shown us the meaning of generosity in the beautiful diversity of creation, in the overflowing love of Jesus Christ, and in the never ending gift of the Holy Spirit! God has abundantly blessed us and calls us to be a community that blesses others through the sharing of our love, our talents and our material possessions. Let us rejoice in what we have been given and in what is ours to give. Let us bring what we have, a little or a lot, and offer it to God for blessing, for transforming, for using in the world on behalf of God's people. Amen.

CELEBRATION OF HOLY COMMUNION

Words of Invitation

Christ's invitation is simple – sit down where you are. You don't need to run off somewhere else -- not a nearby village market or a familiar sanctuary, communion is where you are -- sit down.

The disciples complained – it is a deserted place and the hour is late. Jesus said, "They need not go away."

No one needs to go away. No one is deserted and no one is late – not you who are alone, because you are vulnerable to virus or you who would feel alone even in a crowd because that's how life feels to you.

Jesus has compassion on every crowd, healing them, even the hungers, one by one by one. Here is green grass, someone to help you sit down, someone to help you stand up again, someone to bless Communion, so it will be enough, and break it into pieces you can handle. Sit down where you are.

Prayer of Consecration

In the story about feeding a multitude, Jesus asked that people bring to him what they had. You have done that today. In your many kitchens and living rooms, rest your hands lightly upon these elements which we set aside today to be a sacrament. We ask God's blessing on them to make them enough and also to make them abundant for us and for all those who are in our prayers this morning.

God of compassion, you bless and break everything we are and everything we bring to you. Our deep scarcity becomes enough to sustain us, and then our "enough" becomes an abundance we could never imagine. We pray that your Spirit of life and love, of tenderness and power, rest upon every bread and every cup, that they may feed the inmost need of each child of God and pour forth a grace that can change the world. Risen Christ, live in us, that we may live in you. Amen.

Words of Remembering

We remember the Creator fed the aurora borealis and ocean depths, pterodactyls and diatoms, all we see now that grows and breathes, all that swims, swarms, slithers, all that runs, flies, leaps and loves.

We remember Jesus Christ played vintner at a wedding feast, rubbed elbows with Zacchaeus' friends, taught the disciples they should not substitute anything like stone or snake for really important menus like reduced lunch, soup kitchen, food pantry or meals on wheels, and, in the midst of profound grief for cousin John's death, expanded the disciples' understanding of the hope recipe in bread crust and fish scraps, and then, when they forgot ... did it again.

We always remember a Passover in Jerusalem when Jesus borrowed an upper room, soaked and scrubbed the tired feet of others, and explained that there is a God-shaped hole in everyone's belly and Jesus would fill it with love.

Remembering is beautiful, but there is not much taste in it. Let us stop running to nearby villages with our hunger and thirst, and sit down here and now, to eat and drink, be blessed and broken.

Sharing of the Elements

The bread on your table is blessed and broken like the picnic of grace.

Sharing love, we will never be hungry.

The cup on your table is blessed and shared like the overflowing of tears and joy

Drinking deeply, we will never thirst.

Prayer of Thanksgiving

In thanksgiving for the meal that heals yesterday and the unexpected grace that empowers tomorrow, we pray for the wisdom to give away as fast as possible some twelve baskets of leftovers ...

O Holy One, as we received this sacrament in the holy dispersion of virtual worship, we thought we “ordered” from a select gourmet menu, and never expected to become the curbside pickup of your love and justice, of your compassion and courage, of your hope and healing for all of your children who need a meal in a deserted place. Help us gather the leftovers from the miracles in our lives and give them away. Amen.

(Maren Tirabassi, Gifts in Open Hands)

SONG *“Let Us Talents and Tongues Employ”*

Let us talents and tongues employ, reaching out with a shout of joy;
bread is broken, the wine is poured, Christ is spoken and seen and heard.
Jesus lives again, earth can breathe again, pass the Word around: loaves abound.

Christ is able to make us one, at his table he set the tone,
teaching people to live to bless, love in word and in deed express...

Jesus calls us in, sends us out bearing fruit in a world of doubt,
gives us love to tell, bread to share: God (Immanuel) everywhere...

BENEDICTION

So now we leave this time of worship. And while so much of the road ahead is uncertain, the path constantly changing, we know some things that are as solid and sure as the ground beneath our feet, and the sky above our heads.

We know God is love.

We know Christ's light endures.

We know the Holy Spirit is here, found in the space between all things, closer to us than our next breath, binding us to each other, until we meet we again,

Go in peace. Amen.

(Rev. Nora Vedress, Calvary United Church in Prince Albert, Saskatchewan, Canada)