

UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST CONGREGATIONAL  
Wallace, Idaho

Alice M.C. Ling, Pastor

September 19, 2021

Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost

PRELUDE “*Jesus Loves Me*”

WELCOME AND ANNOUNCEMENTS

Vacation next two weeks: Gary Truitt leading worship, no video or PDF

CALL TO WORSHIP

Our world offers many wide avenues and beautiful boulevards to walk;

**Our God invites us to walk the road of service and sacrifice.**

Our society suggests we put down our roots in the shallow soil of pleasure and greed.

**Our God seeks to plant us on the banks of hope, watered by the rivers of joy and grace.**

Our culture promotes achievement, success, climbing to the top, ringing the bell.

**Our God tells us if we want to be first we need to go to the end of the line.**

(Thom M. Shuman, *Where the Broken Gather*)

HYMN No. 451 “*O Master, Let Me Walk with Thee*”

O Master, let me walk with Thee In lowly paths of service free;

Tell me Thy secret; help me bear The strain of toil, the fret of care.

Help me the slow of heart to move By some clear, winning word of love;

Teach me the wayward feet to stay, And guide them in the homeward way.

Teach me Thy patience! Still with Thee In closer, dearer company,

In work that keeps faith sweet and strong, In trust that triumphs over wrong.

In hope that sends a shining ray Far down the future’s broadening way,

In peace that only Thou canst give, With Thee, O Master, let me live.

PRAYER OF INVOCATION (in unison)

**We shall fill this space, O God, with words as we worship. Let them not substitute for honest acts of faith lived out in daily living. Make us doers of the Word and not speakers only. Take what we say and turn them into deeds of love and mercy. Transform our words into a living testimony to your Word, which became flesh in service to humanity. Amen.**

(*Chalice Worship*)

SCRIPTURE READINGS

James 3:13 – 4:3, 7-8a

Who is wise and understanding among you? Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom. But if you have bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not be boastful and false to the truth. Such wisdom does not come down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, devilish. For where there is envy and selfish ambition, there will also be disorder and wickedness of every kind. But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy. And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace.

Those conflicts and disputes among you, where do they come from? Do they not come from your cravings that are at war within you? You want something and do not have it; so you commit murder. And you covet something and cannot obtain it; so you engage in disputes and conflicts. You do not have, because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, in order to spend

what you get on your pleasures... Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you.

### Mark 9:30-37

They went on from there and passed through Galilee. He did not want anyone to know it; for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, "The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again." But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him.

Then they came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house he asked them, "What were you arguing about on the way?" But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest. He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me."

### SERMON

The Gospel of Mark tells us that Jesus took a little child and placed it in the middle of the circle of disciples, and then he took the child in his arms and said, welcome this child in my name and you welcome me; welcome me and you also welcome the God who sent me. Which child do you think it was that he wrapped his arms around and placed front and center? The fair haired apple of your eye? The quick study, soft spoken one who loves to cuddle? The one who brings you breakfast in bed without creating a disaster in the kitchen? The one in the cart in front of you at the grocery store, that you play peekaboo with while you wait to check out? The one who never stops with the questions, especially the ones you can't – or won't – answer? Did he pick the child on the playground who is nicely pushing a friend on a swing, or the leader who's overseeing the process of picking teams for soccer? What are the chances he chose the bully, the one who taunts and torments, steals lunch and spreads lies? The one with auspergers who sits in church and speaks without filters or volume control, swinging feet to kick the pew in front of them, talking back to the pastor when she doesn't make sense or goes on too long? The one with an anger disorder whose desk has been permanently installed in the principal's office, because this child threatens the safety of any other child within reach? Which one exactly do you think Jesus wants us to welcome? And can you tell me just where God is hanging out, waiting for us to open the door and welcome the child in?

The backdrop for Jesus' little show and tell lesson is an argument that broke out between the disciples while they are walking toward Capernaum. Jesus has just explained to them – for the second time – that he is going to suffer, die, and rise again after three days. They don't have a clue what he's talking about, but are afraid to ask him any questions; so instead they argue among themselves about who's the greatest, the brightest, Jesus' favorite. When they get to the house, he asks them what they've been quarreling about. Fortunately for him, he already knew the answer to his question, because it's clear they were all too embarrassed to answer it. He let them hang on the hook for what felt like an eternity, and then, Jesus finally sat down, gathered the twelve around him, and began to teach: so you want first place? Go to the end of the line. You want to be best and first, smartest and most important? Become a servant: clean up the spill on the floor, take out the trash, clean the kitty litter, scrub out the shower. And then, to drive the point home, he took a little child, wrapped the kid in his arms, and said, whoever welcomes one such child in my name, welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me, welcomes not just me but the one who sent me.

If we want to understand what Jesus is saying to his disciples, we need to consider the ways in which Jesus' culture was different than ours. In the Greco-Roman world of Jesus' day, children were the least valued members of society. The Greek word that used here for "child" was also translated as "slave". A

father could punish, sell, pawn off or even kill his own child. The Jewish community treated them with some more kindness and protection, but children still ranked at the bottom in terms of vulnerability. As late as the 1200's, Thomas Aquinas taught that in a raging fire, a husband was obliged to save his father first, his mother second, then his wife and last of all a young child.

That little person at the very bottom of the pecking order is the one Jesus points to as the definition of greatness. And not only that, but also the place to find and welcome God. Debie Thomas describes Jesus' teaching this way: "On the face of it, this tender gesture is so small and so simple, we easily miss its radicalism. But consider this: Jesus *doesn't* say, "Welcome the child because it's a kind or loving or generous thing to do." He says: Do you want to see what God looks like? Do you want to find God's stand-in, hidden here among you? Are you curious about the truest nature of divine greatness? Then welcome the child. Welcome the child, and *you welcome God.*" ("Who is the Greatest?", *Journey with Jesus*, 12 September 2021)

From there, Debie goes on to ponder what we can learn about God by welcoming children, how children can open us up to deeper communion with the Holy One, and what children might be able to teach us about greatness. The first possibility she names is one I've thought a lot about in recent months, and that's in relation to their imaginations. I spent a lot of the early months of the pandemic wondering what I could do to help or make a difference. Sure, staying home and out of reach of virus particles was crucial, but it didn't really feel very active or satisfying to me. I listened to news stories of people in Venice sitting in their windows, singing to the people in the streets and canals – and I thought, yeah, but how appreciative will the deer and turkeys be? I saw lines of cars and people filling trunks with food, and the email I sent volunteering to help was never answered. I talked myself out of most everything I thought of and continued to feel frustrated by not being able to do more. That longing has continued in recent months in relation to the devastation in Haiti and the nightmare in Afghanistan and the destruction in New Orleans. We watch the news; some nights I weep, some nights I yell at the television, and other nights I turn to Ben and beg for some wisdom. What can I do? There has to be something... One day he quietly said to me, it's interesting that children aren't having trouble answering that question. They're thinking up ideas and going to work. They haven't learned that they can't make a difference.

We routinely hear stories of busy children: a boy taking sandwiches to the homeless, a girl selling friendship bracelets on the streets of Minneapolis after George Floyd was killed, a girl collecting shoes to send to Kenya, a boy playing his violin outside a hospital as medical staff get off long shifts. The latest, just this past Thursday night, was an 8-year old girl from Texas named Paisley, who has a passion to help the most vulnerable and, because of that, is about to travel to Uganda to deliver school supplies. When she was 4, she heard about refugees in her Sunday School class and she's been working on a response to their needs ever since, while her mother figured out where it would be safest for them to go to meet up with some refugees. Paisley's taking sustainable wood materials that fit together to form portable desks, as well as cases of markers, pencils and learning kits made for hundred of kids in a refugee camp. When the reporter asked her why she sticks with this, she answered, "If we do not help them, because the adults aren't, then who will help them have a better life? I mean, they're just like you and me." When I heard that story, I knew I was seeing God at work in Paisley and her inspired imagination. (*CBS Evening News*, 16 September 2021)

One of the other arenas that Debie Thomas pointed to to help us see God in the lives of children is in their vulnerability. She writes, "A young child is the very picture of vulnerability. In some cultures, children are socially invisible. In others, they're legally unprotected... In all cultures, children are at the mercy of those who are older, bigger, and stronger than they are.

"And yet this — this shocking portrait of powerlessness— is the portrait Jesus offers of God. In the divine economy, power and prestige accrue as we consent to be little, to be vulnerable, to be invisible,

to be low. We gain greatness not by muscling others out of our way, but by serving them, empathizing with them, and sacrificing ourselves for their well-being. Whatever human hierarchies and rankings we cling to, Jesus upends them all as he holds a tiny child in his arms. Do we want to see God? Do we really want to see God? Then look to the child abandoned in the alleyway. Look to the child detained at our border. Look to the child who has been molested. Look to the child who is fleeing from war. Look to the least of these, and see the face of God.

“One of the most central and amazing truths about Christianity is that God became a helpless human infant. In this week’s Gospel story, Jesus underscores that stunning truth with another: *all* children represent God’s heart, God’s likeness, God’s power. To welcome a child is to welcome the divine. To cultivate childlikeness is to cultivate godliness. To choose vulnerability is to be great in the kingdom of God.”

Jesus looked at his disciples, and said, so you want to know who among you is greatest. If any of you would be great, stop where you are and what you are doing, sit or stoop or do what you need to do to be face to face with a child. Give her your full and undivided attention. Play a game with him, listen to her bad jokes and wild imagination, draw in the fingerpaints and bake cookies together. It is here that you can work on your own greatness by understanding that it is what you do when you think no one is looking, with someone who does not count, and for no reward, that ushers you into the presence of God. Amen.

HYMN “*Won’t You Let Me Be Your Servant?*”

Won’t you let me be your servant, let me be as Christ to you?  
Pray that I may have the grace to let you be my servant, too.

We are pilgrims on a journey, we are travelers on the road;  
We are here to help each other go the mile and bear the load.

I will hold the Christ-light for you in the shadow of your fear;  
I will hold my hand out to you, speak the peace you long to hear.

I will weep when you are weeping; when you laugh, I’ll laugh with you.  
I will share your joy and sorrow till we’ve seen this journey through.

When we sing to God in heaven we shall find such harmony,  
Born of all we’ve known together of Christ’s love and agony.

PRAYER REQUESTS

PASTORAL PRAYER

Holy and mighty God, thank you for the gift of children. We celebrate those who are part of our congregation, those who are part of our families, those who live in our community, country and world. We give thanks for the energy with which they embrace life, whether they are playing volleyball or learning to ride a bike, discovering the joy of reading or exploring the world of science. We pray for those who have all they need to grow and thrive, and for those who go to bed hungry and wonder where they will sleep tonight; for those for whom learning comes easily and unlocks hidden doors every day and those for whom learning is a struggle, infused with frustration and a sense of failure; for those who thrive in the confidence that they are loved and safe, and those whose lives are colored by violence and pain. Teach us, Great God, to love with your love: to encourage imaginations, protect vulnerabilities, heal brokenness, promote dreams, welcome the abandoned, nurture the forsaken, listen and love with your heart.

Holy God, the needs of our world are many, and we bring them to you for healing and holding, transforming and cradling. We pray for the sick, for those battling Covid and the medical staff who are

running on empty yet still caring; for those who near the end of their lives and those who are just beginning; for those who grieve, who wrestle with alcohol and drugs, who feel alone and cut off, on edge with anxiety, beaten down by depression. We pray for communities where wild fires still burn and firefighters continue to serve and protect; for all those struggling in the aftermath of Ida and Nicholas, earthquakes and drought, tornadoes and flooding. For the people of Afghanistan and Haiti, the United States and Canada, Mexico and Central America. Pour out your wisdom upon us that we might seek the paths that make for peace. Open our hearts to one another and help us to listen with openness and speak with honesty, to walk in gentleness and lead with courage, to serve with humility and live with love.

Our prayers are many, only a few of them spoken. Hear now the prayers of our hearts: (*silence*) And hear us as we join together in the prayer that Jesus taught, saying: Our Father...

PRAYER OF OUR SAVIOR (depts)

OFFERING

God never asks us to give what we don't have. Rather, God moves among us and within us, calling us to open our eyes and our hearts to what we do have, and the ways that we might share with others from our abundance. Gifts of time to listen to a story or help with an errand, gifts of kindness to share a plate of food or surprise a neighbor with a handful of flowers, gifts of laughter to soften the darkness or lighten a heart, gifts of welcome to usher a stranger in or offer shelter from the rain, gifts of money to support the church's ministry or provide food for the food pantry. There's no end to the ways in which we can share with others, and all of them honor God and build up the body of Christ.

PRAYER OF DEDICATION (in unison)

**God, receive our gifts – and give us open hands. Fill our lives – and give us open hearts. Touch us with your word – and give us open minds. Bless this church – and give us open doors. Amen.**

(Maren C. Tirabassi, *Touch Holiness*)

HYMN No. 450 “*Lord, Speak to Me*”

Lord, speak to me that I may speak  
In living echoes of Thy tone;  
As Thou hast sought, so let me seek  
Thy erring children lost and lone.

O teach me, Lord, that I may teach  
The precious things Thou dost impart;  
And wing my words, that they may reach  
The hidden depths of many a heart.

O fill me with Thy fullness, Lord,  
Until my very heart o'erflow  
In kindling thought and glowing word  
Thy love to tell, Thy praise to show.

O use me, Lord, use even me,  
Just as Thou wilt and when and where;  
Until Thy blessed face I see,  
Thy rest, Thy joy, Thy glory share.

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.