

UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST CONGREGATIONAL
Wallace, Idaho

Alice M.C. Ling, Pastor

January 16, 2022

Second Sunday after Epiphany

PRELUDE “Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing”

WELCOME AND ANNOUNCEMENTS

Annual Meeting: January 30; mailing is coming with notice, report, proposed by-law changes

CALL TO WORSHIP (Psalm 36:6, 7b, 8, 9)

Your love, O God, reaches for the heavens, your faithfulness to the skies.

Your righteousness is like the mighty mountains, your justice like the great deep.

Earth’s children, high and low, take refuge in the shadow of your wings.

We feast on the abundance of your house; you give us drink from your river of delights.

ALL: **For with you is the fountain of life; in your light we see light. Glory be to you, O God, our**

life and our light!

(Ruth C. Duck, *Touch Holiness*)

HYMN No. 61 “Lavish Love, Abundant Beauty”

Lavish love, abundant beauty, Gracious gifts for heart and hand,

Life that fills the soul and senses All burst forth at Your command.

Lord, our Lord, Eternal Father, Great Creator, God and Friend,

Boundless power gave full expression To Your love which knows no end.

Who am I that You should love me, Meet my every need from birth?

Why invest Yourself so fully In a creature made of earth?

In Your loving heart You planned me, Fashioned me with greatest care,

Through my soul You breathed Your Spirit, Planted Your own image there.

I am Yours, Eternal Father, All my body, mind and heart.

Take and use me to Your glory, Form Yourself in every part.

Lord, Your love brings joy and gladness Flowering forth within my soul.

May my very breath and being Rise to You, their source and goal.

PRAYER OF CONFESSION (in unison)

God, you have given each of us many gifts, but sometimes we cannot recognize what gift we have to share, so we hide it under a bushel. God, you remind us that all gifts are needed, but sometimes we let ourselves be convinced that some gifts are more special than others. God, you call us to work, to live, to love together as parts of one body, but sometimes we decide that membership in the body is limited by our understandings. God, for the times we have ignored or mislabeled your gifts, for those times we have cut another off from the body, we offer words of repentance, we ask for forgiveness and grace.time of silent prayer...

ASSURANCE OF FORGIVENESS

God is the giver of MANY gifts. God is the Creator of the ONE body. God is slow to anger and quick to forgive. God helps us to share and honor the gifts of all, God helps us to heal the wounds and reunite the body. We are forgiven, loved, and accepted.

Thanks be to God! Alleluia! Amen

(Rev Gord, <http://worshipofferings.blogspot.ca/>)

SCRIPTURE READING 1 Corinthians 12:1-11

Now concerning spiritual gifts, brothers and sisters, I do not want you to be uninformed. You know that when you were pagans, you were enticed and led astray to idols that could not speak. Therefore I want

you to understand that no one speaking by the Spirit of God ever says "Let Jesus be cursed!" and no one can say "Jesus is Lord" except by the Holy Spirit.

Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the discernment of spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. All these are activated by one and the same Spirit, who allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses.

SERMON

I want to share a story with you. My source says, "Northwest Native Americans" tell it, but now that I live in the northwest, that sounds way too generalized and vague for my taste. And I've learned enough about Northwest Native Americans to know that there are a heap of them, and they'd much rather be identified as specific tribes than dumped in a heap together. I don't know who tells this story, and I regret that, but I still think it's worth telling.

"In the beginning the Great Spirit gave a box to each of the animals. The box was painted with many sacred signs and symbols. Inside the box was a gift.

As the animals opened their boxes, all of creation tumbled out. Plants tumbled out, trees tumbled out, rivers tumbled out, streams tumbled out - everything appeared, and after some considerable confusion, everything took its rightful place. It did not happen in a day. It took some time. But soon all the animals had opened their gifts.

All, that is, except the seagull.

The seagull tucked his gift box under his right wing, smiled smugly, and said, "The Great Spirit gave me this gift. It's mine. I'm not going to open it." There was no more explanation.

However, it did not take the other animals long to learn what was in the box of the seagull. For although all of creation had tumbled out, they could see none of it. For in the box of the seagull was the gift of light.

The fox approached the seagull and pleaded, "I have a burr caught in my tail, and I cannot see well enough to get it out. Please open your box." But the seagull only repeated his position. "The Great Spirit gave me this gift. It's mine. I'm not going to open it."

The bear came to the seagull and complained, "My hibernation schedule is off. I do not know when to sleep and when to wake. Please open your gift." But the seagull just gripped his box more tightly and shook his head.

The deer approached and asked, "May I speak personally? I have just been embarrassed. I was bounding through the forest with my children and I crashed into a tree and chipped an antler. I heard my children laugh. It should not be this way. We need light. You must..." "I must nothing," said the seagull. "It is my gift, is it not? The Great Spirit gave it to me, did he not? I won't open it."

The animals did not know what to do. So they went to the cousin of the seagull, the raven. The raven is a notoriously tricky bird, and they thought perhaps he might have an idea. He listened to their complaint, told them to go home, and said he would "look" into it. Then he laughed at his own joke.

The raven flew around until he sensed the presence of the seagull. He landed next to him, settling silently on his right side. "My cousin, the seagull," said the raven, "It is good to see you," and he laughed gently.

When the seagull heard it was the raven and knowing the raven was a tricky bird, he shifted the gift-box from his right wing to his left. He wanted to keep it as far away from the raven as possible. As he did, he lifted his right foot ever so slightly from the ground. The raven bent down quickly and

slipped a thorn under the seagull's right foot. When the seagull shifted his weight back, the thorn pieced his foot. The seagull let out a great cry.

"What is it, my cousin?" asked the raven.

"I have stepped on a thorn," said the seagull.

"That must be very painful," said the raven. "I know how tender are the soles of the feet of the seagull. Why do you not pull it out?"

"I would," sighed the seagull, "but if I try, I will drop the box which the Great Spirit gave me."

"Oh, I see the problem," the raven sympathized. "I would love to help you. But I cannot see well enough to pull the thorn from your foot. If I could see, I would certainly help you."

The seagull thought about this, but could think of no way out. Carefully, he took the box which the Great Spirit had given him and opened the lid, just a crack. Instantly a string of light escaped and shot up into the blackness of the sky and strung themselves across it like a necklace. Creation was lit in starlight. When the raven saw the earth shimmer under the stars, he let out an exclamation of wonder, "OOOOOOOOOOH !"

"The thorn," interrupted the seagull, "You said you would take out the thorn."

"So I did," said the raven. The raven bent down, but instead of pulling the thorn out, he pushed it in. The seagull cried out a second time.

"I'm sorry," apologized the raven. "I'm sorry. But I could not see well enough. I could see enough to touch the thorn, but I could not see well enough to know whether I was pushing or pulling it. If I could see better, I am sure I could pull it out."

The seagull thought about this, but could think of no way out. Carefully, he took the gift that the Great Spirit had given him and opened it a little wider. There emerged a small, brilliant ball, which slowly climbed into the sky. As it climbed, it grew bigger and bigger. Finally, it took its place among the stars. Creation was lit by moonlight. When the raven saw the earth caressed by the light of the moon, he let out an exclamation of wonder, "OOOOOOOOOOOOH !"

"The thorn," interrupted the seagull, "you said you would take out the thorn."

"So I did," said the raven. The raven bent down, but instead of pulling the thorn out, he pushed it in even further. The seagull cried out a third time, and his wings flapped up in the air. The box that the Great Spirit gave him fell from his grip and banged against the ground. The lid flew open, and there fled from the box a golden, luminous ball, which streaked into the sky. The stars and the moon retreated before it. Finally, high in the sky, it stopped and blazed gently. Creation was lit in sunlight. When the raven saw the earth bathed in sun, he let out an exclamation, "OOOOOOOOOOH !"

"The thorn," the seagull said in a dejected voice, "You said you would take out the thorn if you could see. Surely, now you can see."

"I surely can," said the raven. He bent down and pulled the thorn from the seagull's foot.

The seagull sighed in relief, "OOOOOOOOOOH !"

"There," said the raven, looking at the sparkling earth, "isn't that better?"

That is why, down to this day, to remind us how difficult it is to let the light that is within shine forth and illumine all creation, the seagull stands on one foot." (Starlight, Beholding the Christmas Miracle All Year Long, by John Shea, pp 97-99)

The story tells us that the Great Spirit gave each animal a gift; Paul, on the other hand, tells us that the Holy Spirit gives each person a gift. And then, just to prime the pump and get the conversation started, he names a few: wise counsel, clear understanding, simple trust, healing the sick, miraculous acts, proclamation, distinguishing between spirits, speaking in tongues, and the interpretation of tongues. In other places, he adds things like teaching, giving, leading, expressing compassion. It's a pretty endless list, full of variety and diversity; some are bright and splashy attention getters, others are indispensable but not always recognized or appreciated until they go missing. Gifts like quiet listeners or bed pan handlers, food growers and shuttle drivers. Some aren't much fun to have around, but are absolutely

essential, like truth tellers and time keepers. And then there's humor, courage, patience, stubbornness, music, art, a head for numbers, a heart for feelings, and so on and so forth. Hopefully by now, you get the gist. And hopefully by now something is beginning to resonate as yours. Paul said each one got one; and while I'm happy to argue with Paul on some matters, this isn't one of them. You carry and wear a gift of God's Holy Spirit. What is it?

Interestingly, Paul wrote this letter to a deeply divided church in which some people flaunted their gifts and told everybody else to get in line behind them. Speaking in tongues was the big one that caused some folks to fluff their feathers and strut their stuff; in this chapter, Paul steps into the tension and levels the playing field, saying that the Holy Spirit is an equal opportunity distributor; each follower has received a gift, each believer has a place and a job to do on behalf of the community. I may be reading us wrong, but for the most part, I don't think many (if any) of us are pointing to ourselves as the most gifted and most important. I tend to experience us as approaching the other end of the spectrum, pointing to others as the most gifted and blessed, as having the important gifts and playing an essential role in the body of Christ. Us? Well, if we've got gifts, there's nothing to make any fuss about; we'll keep them packed away and stuck up on a shelf. To which Paul says, don't even think it! So maybe you aren't holding back the light that would help a fox pluck a burr from its tail, send a bear to bed and keep a deer from running into a tree; you have received a gift from God's Holy Spirit. Own it and put it to work.

That's the other part of this passage: we can no more hide our gifts away under a basket than the sea gull can keep light boxed and tucked under its wing. They aren't our possessions to stockpile or dole out as we see fit or our personal freedoms to assert and protect. Our gifts have been given to us for the common good, for the life of the community, for the health and well-being of the Body of Christ and for the betterment of the people around us. If you have questions about what good they are or how you can offer them for service, the Holy Spirit who gave them will be more than happy to explain them and point you in a direction you can go. And if I can play any role in helping you identify and put your gifts to work, don't be shy. Nothing would please me more.

Paul tells us that there are varieties of gifts, varieties of services, varieties of activities but they all come from the same Spirit. There is one God who activates them all in everyone. To each is given a role to play, a gift to share, a service to provide, something that is necessary for the bringing together of the Body of Christ. It's time we lean hard into the fact that we belong to each other. There are many gifts, and one Spirit. May we bind ourselves to this beautiful and essential truth, and find new ways to seek the common good together. Amen.

HYMN No. 247 *"Spirit of the Living God"*

Spirit of the Living God, fall fresh on me. Spirit of the Living God, fall fresh on me.

Melt me, mold me, fill me, use me. Spirit of the Living God, fall fresh on me.

Spirit of the Living God, fall fresh on us. Spirit of the Living God, fall fresh on us.

Melt us, mold us, fill us, use us. Spirit of the Living God, fall fresh on us.

PRAYER REQUESTS

Good Sam: 8 residents, 6 staff have tested positive for Covid. Symptoms are mild and spirits are good.

PASTORAL PRAYER

Holy and Wondrous God, we marvel at the generosity of your hand and the mercy that overflows your heart. You know us inside and out, frontward and back; you know our shortcomings and inadequacies, our self-absorption and apathy, our inclination to live for ourselves and those closest to us, often at the expense of other members of your family. You know all of that and so much more and yet you love us, you call to us, you lavish your gifts upon us, you ask us to care for each other and for your creation.

Thank you for believing in us, for giving us the gifts and tools we need to make a difference in someone's life, for inviting us to play a part in building up the common good and the community that is your people, for planting your love and your light within us that we might reflect them and share them, using them to help others know of your generosity and grace.

This weekend we are especially grateful for the life and witness of your servant Martin Luther King, Jr. For his voice calling this country to recognize the value and dignity in each person regardless of their race, for his commitment to justice and non-violence as the means to change, for his rejection of hatred and insistence that love is the way forward, for his vision of the beloved community and his dream of a day when all children, regardless their race or the place of their birth, can live and play, grow and thrive together. We celebrate the progress we've made in the years since his death, even as we confess the ground that we've lost and the racism that continues to tear us apart and to claim too many lives. Help us to keep his vision alive and move together along the paths that make for peace.

We pray, Holy One, for our community, our country and our world: for the Covid surge that continues to overfill hospitals and empty classrooms while exhausting the countless personnel who are working so hard; for those in the path of severe storms and those struggling to figure out what's next in the aftermath of fires and tornadoes; for the logjams and political bickering that make governing so difficult; for all those who struggle to feed their families, to keep a roof over their heads, to juggle child care and work, for whom winter is one more cost and one more burden. We pray for the tensions along the Ukraine/Russia border, for China as it prepares to host the Olympics, for the violent unrest in Kazakhstan, the military maneuvers in North Korea, the growing hunger and suffering in Afghanistan. We need your presence and your light, your wisdom and your strength, your peace and your love.

Show us, O God, how to live and move, walk and love together, how to lean into the truth that we belong to you and to each other. Lead us in light, guide us in peace, ground us in love. And hear us as we join our voices in the prayer that Jesus taught his friends, 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 called us to be a community that blesses others through the sharing of our love, our talents, and our material possessions. Let us rejoice now in what we have been given and in what is ours to give. Feel free to drop gifts off at the church anytime, dropping them into the mail slot; or mail them to 408 Cedar Street. May God bless each of us and all of us as we put the gifts that God has given us to work for the sake of the common good and to build up the Body of Christ. (Ann B. Day, *Touch Holiness*, revised)

PRAYER OF DEDICATION (in unison)

Holy One, whose heart abounds with gifts, receive our offering as sign of our intention to live surrounded by your mercy, inspired by your Spirit, open to the joy of your presence, hospitable to one another, and generous toward your world. Amen. (Edwin E. Beers, *Touch Holiness*)

HYMN No. 286 "Blest Be the Tie That Binds"

Blest be the tie that binds Our hearts in Christian love;
The fellowship of kindred minds Is like to that above.

Before our Maker's throne We pour our ardent prayers;
Our fears, our hopes, our aims are one, Our comforts and our cares.

BENEDICTION

Go in peace, open to the call and the grace of God. The blessing of God's unfailing love, Christ's unceasing presence, and the Spirit's unsurpassed gifts be with us all now and forever. Amen.

(Ruth C. Duck, *Touch Holiness*)