

UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST CONGREGATIONAL

Wallace, Idaho

WORSHIP

March 22, 2020

Greeting

Welcome to worship as the United Church of Christ Congregational in Wallace. Today we're doing a new thing – a very new thing. And while I long for the days when we can be together in one place at one time, for now this gives us a way to hold on to each other and to God's movement in our midst. I suspect this is not a natural or comfortable form of worship for any of us (I know it isn't for me), I also believe that it's more important today than ever to gather in prayer and praise, and to be reminded that whether we are gathered or scattered, we are still the Body of Christ.

Along with this video, we're sending a PDF that contains the words for this service. If you have that accessible to you, it will provide an opportunity for you to join me in the responsive call to worship, the unison prayer of invocation, and even singing the songs. Please share in this time with me as fully as possible.

I'd also invite you to be in touch with me afterward, and offer some feedback. Did this format work for you? Could you hear me? What can we do to make it more effective next time? Ben and I are very clear this is a work in progress, so help us figure out how to improve on this start.

Song Gathered Here

Gathered here in the mystery of this hour  
Gathered here in one strong body  
Gathered here in the struggle and the power  
Spirit, draw near

Call to Worship

In silent sanctuaries, in our homes or apartments,  
wherever we are in these moments of worship,  
early each morning, God waits to greet us with joy and wonder.

**We awake to find ourselves enveloped in grace.**

During these days of isolation and worry,  
in this time of uncertainty and fear,  
Jesus challenges us with the possibility of faith.

**Even in these times of safe distancing  
and caring for others, as well as ourselves,  
we can offer healing and hope to others.**

In the shadowed evenings when fear lurks outside,  
and we long to hear the lullabies of grace,  
the Spirit is with us.

**The Light of life is shining on us  
from early morning until we say our prayers,  
comforting us in the shadows of sleep.**

(Thom M. Schuman)

### Prayer of Invocation

**Jesus, gentle savior, we come seeking your blessing.**

**Jesus, brave warrior, we come to borrow your courage.**

**Jesus, lamb of God, we stand in awe before you.**

**Draw us near to you, near to the cross,**

**And near to one another, in hope and love. Amen.**

(Martha B. Peck)

### Scripture Reading 2 Timothy 1:3-7

I am grateful to God—whom I worship with a clear conscience, as my ancestors did—when I remember you constantly in my prayers night and day. Recalling your tears, I long to see you so that I may be filled with joy. I am reminded of your sincere faith, a faith that lived first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice and now, I am sure, lives in you. For this reason I remind you to rekindle the gift of God that is within you through the laying on of my hands; for God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline.

### Sermon

I remember that years ago, a dear friend and colleague of mine had the dubious distinction of officiating over the funeral of a police officer who had been killed in the line of duty. As I recall, his family were members of her congregation, but because of the ways police turn out for one of their own, his service was held in the high school gymnasium and spilled over into the parking lot and down the streets. Police and other first responders from all over the country came, dignitaries and officials spoke, protocols and traditions were honored to the best of her ability, the media was kept in its place, and the family was sheltered as much as humanly possible so they could have a facade of privacy in which to grieve. When the service was over and the masses had gone home, she said to me – wearily – now that I know how to do that, I don't ever want to do it again.

That's sort of how I feel this morning, and I expect something of how you feel, except that none of us really know how to do this this morning. I've been videotaped and recorded before, but I've never crafted worship for a camera and the dim hope that maybe someone would see it on the other side. Sure, I can always count on Ben to be present, and the cats would be happy to be an audience, and climb all over my lap while they're at it, but that's not going to happen. How many of you thought you would someday go to church in your jammies and watch a talking head try to conjure up a sense of community? How many of us ever thought we would be sent to our rooms and told not to come out until sometime in an undefined future when someone (we're not quite sure who) will tell us the coast is clear? None of us have ever been where we are today. Few, if any of us, have an imagination that could have dreamed up the images and concepts that are creating this scenario. And once we're on the other side, I expect it's fairly likely that none of us will say, oh, that was fun, let's do that again.

And yet, that's really not the whole story. There is an irony deep in the heart of all of this that amazes and overwhelms me whenever I think about it. We are being asked, told, begged, directed, ordered to scatter to our separate corners, precisely because we are so deeply connected to each other. Just think about the ways those virus particles have traveled all around the world, and any pretense we used to have about being independent and disconnected goes out the window. And the cure for this thing, the hope for getting to the other side of this pandemic is that we help each other out; that we care, not just for ourselves but much more importantly, for the weakest and most vulnerable. We face into every day surrounded by living proof that where we go, what we touch, who we breathe on makes a difference. And we're in this position today, worshiping remotely, with the prayer and the intention that our

difference will be a constructive one. It's foreign to someone like me to be told that I can be most helpful by staying away, but that is precisely the message of these days.

You may have noticed that I don't often turn to the writings of Paul for our worship, but I was drawn to him today because of the parallels between his normal situation and our current one: he virtually always wrote while he was separated from his friends and the fledgling communities he was establishing. Sometimes he wrote from prison, sometimes just out on the road; usually he wasn't sure when or if he'd make it back for more time together. In his writing, he regularly acknowledged both the pain of separation and the joy of connection.

Today's passage opens with words that I think we especially really need to hear right about now: I am grateful to God... when I remember you constantly in my prayers night and day. That word "grateful" is an important one for us today. There's so much going on around us that could, and probably is, triggering a host of emotions other than gratitude: fear and anxiety, loneliness and isolation, frustration and impatience. We don't even want to think about how out of control we are or how little sense we have about how all of this is going to unfold – or when. In the midst of all of that and so much more, I think there's also more than a little room for gratitude. We may have to work at it at first; or be reminded when we start to ramp up for some serious whining that there's also beauty and kindness that deserve to be recognized and nurtured. I'd encourage all of us to pay attention to the gifts and graces of these days, to go looking for them if we have to when things begin to get to us, and to say thank you. I marvel every day at the wonder of spring weather that is accompanying us these days, and what a joy it is to get outside, see daffodil shoots and watch the birds return. And then there are the endless string of stories of caregivers and helpers, of medical personnel working tirelessly and often at their own peril to care for the sick, of donations of food being carried to Meals on Wheels or free lunches being delivered to children who aren't getting fed at school. I was really pleased to receive a news story from New Hampshire that told of a dear friend who reached out to a couple of his friends, and now they meet up at the end of his driveway every day before dark and begin to make music together. Neighbors are coming out and standing in the street – 6 feet apart, of course – and talking, sharing, moving to the music. Distilleries and breweries are using their ingredients to make hand sanitizer and then giving it away. The list goes on and on, and the more we look for it, the more we'll see. Gratitude is an essential part of these days.

Paul's letters are full of encouragement and joy, but he also doesn't sugar coat just how hard life can be at times: Recalling your tears, I long to see you so that I may be filled with joy. It's all real: the good, the bad and the ugly. He doesn't ask us to deny the hard parts, but he does encourage us not to wallow in them; instead he grounds them and us in the life of faith and the work of the Spirit. When social distancing reminds you of the people you love, reach out to them: write them a letter, call them on the phone, do a video chat. When staying at home gets boring, take a walk, rake some leaves, rake your neighbor's leaves. We can also make this time a fertile one for prayer and forging a stronger connection to God: read a few Bible verses each day, invite God to speak to you, in word, song or image. Seek the deep peace that passes understanding.

Paul wrote: Rekindle the gift of God that is within you... For God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and love and of self-discipline. Together we are strong, and we don't have to be in the same place at the same time for that togetherness to be real. We borrow power from one another and from God. We find new ways to show our love for one another. We practice self-discipline, to keep others safe and to stay positive. We focus on what we can do, not on what we lack.

Finally, I want to share a poem with you that has touched me deeply. It was written by Richard Hendrick in Ireland, and is entitled "Lockdown"

Yes there is fear.  
Yes there is isolation.  
Yes there is panic buying.  
Yes there is sickness.  
Yes there is even death.  
But,  
They say that in Wuhan after so many years of noise  
You can hear the birds again.  
They say that after just a few weeks of quiet  
The sky is no longer thick with fumes  
But blue and grey and clear.  
They say that in the streets of Assisi  
People are singing to each other  
across the empty squares,  
keeping their windows open  
so that those who are alone  
may hear the sounds of family around them.  
They say that a hotel in the West of Ireland  
Is offering free meals and delivery to the housebound.  
Today a young woman I know  
is busy spreading fliers with her number  
through the neighbourhood  
So that the elders may have someone to call on.  
Today Churches, Synagogues, Mosques and Temples  
are preparing to welcome  
and shelter the homeless, the sick, the weary  
All over the world people are slowing down and reflecting  
All over the world people are looking at their neighbours in a new way  
All over the world people are waking up to a new reality  
To how big we really are.  
To how little control we really have.  
To what really matters.  
To Love.  
So we pray and we remember that  
Yes there is fear.  
But there does not have to be hate.  
Yes there is isolation.  
But there does not have to be loneliness.  
Yes there is panic buying.  
But there does not have to be meanness.  
Yes there is sickness.  
But there does not have to be disease of the soul  
Yes there is even death.  
But there can always be a rebirth of love.  
Wake to the choices you make as to how to live now.  
Today, breathe.

Listen, behind the factory noises of your panic  
The birds are singing again  
The sky is clearing,  
Spring is coming,  
And we are always encompassed by Love.  
Open the windows of your soul  
And though you may not be able  
to touch across the empty square,  
Sing.

My friends, even in these difficult and frightening days, God is good to us. God is with us. God promises to see us safely through. Let us walk in gratitude, live in hope, grow in faith, and reach out to one another in love. Amen.

Song: “The Bond of Love”

We are one in the bond of love; We are one in the bond of love.  
We have joined our spirit with the Spirit of God; we are one in the bond of love.

Let us sing now, everyone; Let us feel God's love begun.  
Let us join our hands that the world will know We are one in the bond of love.

Prayer Requests

– Dena and Rick's grandson diagnosed with Crohn's

Prayers of the People

Holy and beloved God, there are so many ways in which we have never been in this place before, and honestly, if we're never here again, that would be just fine with us. We're unfamiliar worshipping through our computers and phones, and we miss the friends we usually sit beside, the handbells and smells of coffee coming from the other end of the room. This social distancing thing doesn't suit us well, and we chafe against other people telling us to stay away and stay apart. And yet, in the midst of all that we don't recognize and don't like, there are pieces that are delightfully and graciously familiar, that give us joy. First of all and most of all, we thank you for your presence with us through every aspect and angle of this pandemic. We give thanks that you hold and comfort us, encourage and sustain us. We thank you that in the midst of such suffering, illness and even death, we also are surrounded by countless signs of new life and the promise that long though this journey may be, it will not last forever. We will come through on the other side, and you will be with us to welcome us into the new day that awaits.

We pray this day for all those most intimately affected by the coronavirus: for the sick, those with mild symptoms recovering at home, in ICU beds and on ventilators fighting for their lives, those who are carrying and spreading the virus without even knowing it, as well as the most vulnerable and unprotected. We pray for those who are losing their jobs and are at risk of losing their homes, for families struggling with the closure of schools, access to food and the need for day care, and all of the disruptions in family life. And we give thanks for health care workers, for all those who are giving of what they have and who they are to reach out and help one another. Bind us together, especially in these days of separation. Bless, encourage and direct us to care for one another even as we protect ourselves. Help us to walk in your ways and live by your love.

We pray for all those who are sick, for the grieving, for caregivers who grow weary. We pray for the hungry, the unemployed, those who search for a people and a place to call home. We pray for those

whose lives have been shattered by acts of violence, the ravages of war, the destruction of storms, the far-reaching tentacles of COVID-19. Show us, O God, how you would have us respond: how to love, where to touch and when to keep a distance, when to speak and to stay silent, what it means to reflect your light and walk in your ways.

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

Prayer of our Savior (debts)

Song: “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 God we come and pour our ardent prayers;  
Our fears, our hopes, our aims are one, Our comforts and our cares.

When we are called to part, It gives us inward pain;  
But we shall still be joined in heart, And hope to meet again.

Benediction

Whatever wilderness the Spirit has brought you to:  
walk in boldness, as a beloved child of God  
walk in peace, under the shelter of the Most High  
walk in faith, knowing Christ walks with you. Amen.  
(Joanna Harader)