

UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST CONGREGATIONAL
Wallace, Idaho

Alice M.C. Ling, Pastor

Third Sunday after Pentecost

June 21, 2020

WELCOME AND ANNOUNCEMENTS

Good morning! And welcome again to worship as the United Church of Christ Congregational in Wallace. Welcome to summer and all of the gifts and pleasures it holds; long hours of daylight we can use to watch birds play or deer graze, kayak or walk, slurp and savor the juices and taste of fresh fruits and garden produce, strike out on adventures or sit and enjoy the gift of a good book, time to savor early morning sunrises and quiet calm at day's end. Welcome to Father's Day: a day to give thanks to the man or men who nurtured and encouraged you, taught you how to throw a ball or operate a table saw, do equations or ride a bike, cry at the sight of beauty or be gentle in the face of hostility. A father, step-father, grandfather, uncle, teacher or coach who walked beside you and introduced you to life. Welcome together as the people of God, to a time when we can listen for the Word of God for our lives, hear God's call for the work and witness we can offer others in Christ's name, receive the empowering, equipping, encouraging, embracing gift of the Holy Spirit. Welcome together as the Body of Christ, and welcome to worship in the presence of God. And welcome especially to Kasey Haig, who is again joining us with a special offering of music.

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

The Holy Spirit has given us life and pours on us the power to become new people!

The winds of the Spirit have given us breath and the fire of the Spirit has enkindled in us a love for God and each other.

Come here in faithfulness, and be ready for the surprises that God's Spirit brings.

We open our lives to the presence of God and trust God's promise to us that we can live new lives of freedom and grace. May God help us to be true people of spirit, letting holy surprises fill our days!
(Sandra E. Graham, *Touch Holiness*)

OPENING PRAYER

Gracious God, you gather us together this summer morning as we welcome a new season. Your presence is made known to us in the beauty that surrounds us with flowers, birds, rain and sunshine. Summer activities speak of life and joy in our community. And yet, as we look around and listen to the news, we recognize that all is not well with our world. We confess we sometimes wonder what it is we are called to do. Forgive our faltering faith and bless us, O God, with a spirit of discernment in our decisions, with compassion in our conversation, with love in our listening, with perseverance in our praying, and above all with hope that holds us in all seasons.

Amen.

(Sue Henley, *Before the Amen*)

SCRIPTURE READING Matthew 10:16-20, 24-31

“See, I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves; so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves. Beware of them, for they will hand you over to councils and flog you in their synagogues; and you will be dragged before governors and kings because of me, as a testimony to them and the Gentiles. When they hand you over, do not worry about how you are to speak or what you are to say; for what you are to say will be given to you at that time; for it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you.

“A disciple is not above the teacher, nor a slave above the master; it is enough for the disciple to be like the teacher, and the slave like the master. If they have called the master of the house Beelzebul, how much more will they malign those of his household!

“So have no fear of them; for nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered, and nothing secret that will not become known. What I say to you in the dark, tell in the light; and what you hear whispered, proclaim from the housetops. Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell. Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. And even the hairs of your head are all counted. So do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows.

SERMON

One of the things I do most mornings while I'm drinking coffee and before breakfast is read an online devotional from the United Church of Christ. Friday's Daily Devotional was written by Jennifer Brownell, who is a UCC pastor in Vancouver, Washington. Her piece was based on the first half of that first verse I just read to you: (Jesus said) “See, I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves...” I've always heard that as a statement about the vulnerability and risk of being sent, probably in no small part because of my own clarity about how much I would not want to be a sheep surrounded by a pack of wolves. Then again, maybe I've come to that conclusion because I've read on in the text and hear Jesus warning how careful they need to be and what they have to look forward to. Or don't. But Jennifer went somewhere else with her words. She wrote this:

“When I was a child, I had a persistent daydream of being adopted by a pack of wolves. I loved the idea of romping all day in a forested meadow, and curling up all night in a warm puppy pack.

“I never really thought that much about what it would be like to have a sheep family. I had it backwards, as it turns out.

“The flocking instinct of sheep is so strong that, if there are no other sheep on hand, a single sheep will attempt to form a flock with any other animals around – ducks, pigs, even dreamy little girls. But wolves, I recently learned, will almost never accept another animal into their pack.

“Childhood fantasies notwithstanding, Jesus calls us to be sheep instead of wolves. And having learned about their flocking instincts, I understand why. Samaritan women, fisherfolks, even tax collectors who collaborated with the oppressor – Jesus flocked with all kinds, not just with his own kind.

“Jesus sends us into a world that says we should form packs only with those who look, talk, think, act, and pray the same way. He calls us to be part of unlikely flocks – and if we don't have one, to form one, and to keep growing it. In other words, Jesus sends us out to be sheep in a world of wolves. (UCC Daily Devotional, 6/19/20)

I do think the predator and prey danger is part of what Jesus was warning his disciples about, but I'm really intrigued by the flocking inclination that Jennifer wrote about, and wouldn't be in the least bit surprised if Jesus was on to that as well. A single sheep will attempt to form a flock with any other

living, breathing creature that happens to be in the vicinity (ducks, pigs, even dreamy little girls), while wolves recognize their own kind, and are quick to draw a line, put up a fence and lock the gate to keep others out. Can't let infiltrators in or risk cross contamination, you know.

If you can argue Jennifer's assumption about which part of the dichotomy we're more like, I'd really like to hear it, because I can't. It seems to me that we do live in a world, or a culture, or a time in history that is much more wolf like than sheep: we're drawn toward and inclined to associate with people who look and think like us, talk and act like us, pray and believe like us; and all too often we vilify and work against those on the other side of the fence. Our trenches are deeper than they used to be, our tribes more homogeneous. Personally I admit I find it a whole lot easier to talk about bridging the divide and branching out than actually doing something to form a flock of variety and difference, of diversity and contrasts. And still, Jesus calls us to be more like sheep than wolves, and he sets the example, readily flocking with Samaritan women and fishermen, with eager learners as well as betrayers, even tax collectors who worked for Rome and zealots who worked against Rome. Any living, breathing creature that happened to be in the vicinity and showed some interest in coming along was more than welcome.

I want to share a couple of stories with you that I found this week of people who have recently been open to flocking with people that I wouldn't have assumed would have been an option. The first is a young woman named Madisen Hallberg, who was graduating from Portland State University and was invited to sing the national anthem for their virtual commencement exercises. She was warming up to have her performance recorded, when a man heard her singing and signalled to crew that he wanted to join her. At which point he stepped up and started harmonizing. I can only imagine what it felt like to have the stage and the limelight and then have a stranger assert himself into the moment. Her response was to offer a welcoming smile. Later she said that she was moved by the moment she was suddenly sharing. "It's symbolic:... what we need to do as a people, as a community, is to not try to out sing the person beside you, but blend with them and harmonize with them." The man was Emmanuel Onry, professionally trained opera singer who performs in Portland, and he said that he was grateful she was open to that duet. "It was a beautiful moment that we shared. It is essential for us to raise our voices in empowerment and in love with one another." In coming together in that moment, they opened the door to a flock of diversity and created a song of beauty - and what a gift that is for times like these. (ABC News)

And then there's this story from Minneapolis: On May 29, Terrell Bryant decided he was going to die, and take a cop with him. He'd gotten into a fight with his sister and left her home to go to a buddy's, where they got into an argument about the Bible. He didn't have a job or home, he was broke, separated and not able to see his daughters. And so when George Floyd died on the streets of Minneapolis, beneath the knee of a cop, Bryant hatched a plan. He was going to confront police, kill one — and end up dead. He said, "I was in a rage, I was ready to go. No matter how I had to go, it had to happen. That's the way I felt... Because the real violent part happened to us, and we've been watching it. We watched the execution of our brother on TV..."

He reached the site where Floyd died, but there were no police there – there rarely are anymore. Instead, Bryant found a young black woman confronting a group of white supremacists. Alone. So he stuck by her side all night, making sure she didn't get hurt. She lived just a couple blocks away, and he ended up mingling with people in her neighborhood that night as they watched over their block. About 4 a.m., some of the neighbors were turning in when someone asked Bryant where he was going to go. "Probably the casket, I don't know."

But one of the neighbors he'd met had another idea. She and her partner had a spare Airbnb room in their house, so they invited him to stay the night. "I was like 'Really?' I didn't know her from a can of paint," Bryant said. By then, the two women knew about Bryant's plan, they knew he had a criminal record, and they knew he had no place to go. After hearing the offer, Bryant handed them all his identification and a debit card as a sort of collateral. "You know why I did that?" he asked. She said, "Trust," and then she handed it all back.

Something happened for Bryant in that moment. He said, "They changed my life, That day changed my life. I no longer wanna just die. I have purpose now." Bryant said he "woke up in disbelief and awe the next morning." And then he made his hosts breakfast. Since then, he's become a fixture in the neighborhood. A natural connector, he helps the "white people" in the area understand what this protest is all about. The women who took him in said "It's been heart-opening and comfort-zone-expanding for me. He has a lot of charisma and brings a lot of energy to this space," Another neighbor calls him a one-man stimulus program. Bryant admits he's sold drugs, and has a record he's not proud of, but he has also found new joy in helping out in the neighborhood. He got his old job back at the food shelf less than a mile away. And though he still has strong feelings about the police and the National Guard, who were part of the response to the protests, he's changed his focus. Now he says: I just wanna give. I don't care about anything else. I love this job. I might not get paid as much as I would like, but I get paid in gratification. This is what I wanna do. ... I wanna bring people up, I wanna open people's eyes, I want everybody to be cool with each other."

In early June, Bryant brought home a carload of food from the food shelf. He pushed a wheelbarrow of frozen meat down to the stands that have popped up with free food and drinks, and thrust packages of frozen meat into grateful hands. "I'm the happiest I have ever, ever been," he said. "I'm putting things together for people, and it's just coming together. I love giving stuff away, for real."

The community is coming together, and people are getting to know their neighbors as they never have before, and Bryant has been part of that process as they've rallied around him. The women who took him in have started a go fund me page to help him get enough money together to rent his own apartment and support his daughters. They said, "While nobody is immune to systemic and individual racism, Terrell has given us deeper insight into what it means to be poor and black in America and we have taught him how to compost and be a good feminist," (Deena Winter, MinnPost, 6/616/20)

Jesus said, "See I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves..." Which means living with a flocking instinct that is so strong that we're open to forming a flock with any living, breathing creature in our neck of the woods; if we're not open to that, we can draw a line, erect a fence and keep others out. It's our choice: we can leave the barriers in place, close the gate, go it alone, or we can open the door, embrace the harmony of joining together, celebrate the healing and hope of expanding the flock. God will meet us when we come together with others, and live into the full potential of an expanding flock of all God's beloved people. Amen.

SONG "Jubilate"

Kasey Haig, Handbells

PRAYER REQUESTS

Since it's Juneteenth I have been thinking for a few days about freedom. Jesus made us free if we'd like to receive his love....for His love I am very grateful! I was thinking about what it would mean to an enslaved person to be granted freedom. There have been plenty of peoples in history who have been slaves including descriptions in the Bible, people past and present.... Today's context, I feel a tiny bit enslaved by fear of the COVID-19 and how it has changed many lives, and yet many people are fearless and careless.

A prayer of thankfulness to live in a FREE nation.

A prayer is for us all to learn to respect each other, that is really the root...

Prayers for our leaders!

For all those transitioning out of prisons, rehabilitation programs in such uncertain times....that as such a rich nation....we can make the support systems we need to help fill these huge holes in the system.

Prayers specifically for a young man, Deric Davin, who Christi has been corresponding with, who is walking in that transition period in Topeka, Kansas.

Prayers for the brides and grooms of 2020 fighting through the restrictions, dealing with cancelled plans, and loss of money and getting through a process which should be a joyous occasion, not a stressful one.

Christi could use some extra prayers for her body, that the changes of her physical conditions will be able to be met with some positive solutions that will relieve the issues at hand....and give her relief from pain and discomfort...and allow her to have better mobility.

A prayer for the black people in this country. For an end to police brutality against them and for the protests to stop. What good are they doing except making people mad?

PASTORAL PRAYER

Dearly Beloved God, we come before you in wonder and awe, in confession and concern, in humility and need. You hear the names and needs that we carry with us, the ones we speak aloud as well as the ones we whisper only to you. You also hear the sighs of our hearts, and know and tend the worries and weariness, anxieties and embarrassments, attachments and distractions we try to tune out and seal away. You receive it all, the good, the bad and the ugly and for that, we give you our deepest thanks. We ask you to nurture within us all that is loving and life-giving that it might grow and deepen, bear fruit and expand; set us free from all that hinders our faithfulness, the burdens we don't need to carry any longer, the griefs and grievances that trip us up and weigh us down. Help us to grow in trust, to move in faith, to live by love and to reflect your light in all that we do.

Holy God, we pray this day for our community, our country and our world. We pray for all who battle disease and whose lives are filled with pain, and for those who continue to suffer the ravages of COVID-19, the sick, medical personnel and first responders, those without work and without resources to meet their basic needs, those constrained by fear and anxiety and those who appear to be fear-less and care-less. Keep us attentive to the needs of others, and the ways our actions impact them. We give thanks for all who reach out and give of themselves in an effort to soften the suffering around them, and especially ask you to pour out your wisdom and courage, humility and compassion on leaders and decision makers, researchers and scientists. We pray for the protests and protesters that fill our nation's streets and parks. Help us to listen with hearts wide open, that we might grow in understanding of the wounds of racism, the fear that cripples too many, the brutality that fuels the rage. We pray for peace, and ask that it be more than a reduction of noise; help us to find a peace of justice and compassion, of understanding and equality. You know the wounds of our world better than we do, and so we ask your leading and your wisdom, your healing and your holding, your mercy and your love, that we might care for and support one another, that we might nurture the bonds that tie us together and encourage the community that holds us as one.

Our prayers are many, only a few of them spoken, others offered to you in the silence of our hearts. Receive our prayers. And hear us as we join together in the prayer that Jesus taught, saying: Our Father...

PRAYER OF OUR SAVIOR (debts)

OFFERING

What an abundance of gifts we have to offer: musical talent, the melody of laughter, the use of our hands in cooking and repairs, the use of our minds in problem solving, curiosity, compassion, patience, urgency, spiritual reservoirs, financial resources, obedience and courage to act. All these gifts and others which bear our personal marks are symbolized in our offering for the work of the church. Thank you for all that you do, for all that you give, for all of the ways that you serve God and the church through the use and giving of your gifts.

HYMN *“All Are Welcome”*

Let us build a house where love can dwell
And all can safely live,
A place where saints and children tell
How hearts learn to forgive.
Built of hopes and dreams and visions,
Rock of faith and vault of grace.
Here the love of Christ shall end divisions:
All are welcome, all are welcome, all are welcome in this place.

Let us build a house where hands will reach
Beyond the wood and stone
To heal and strengthen, serve and teach,
And live the Word they've known.
Here the outcast and the stranger
Bear the image of God's face;
Let us bring an end to fear and danger:
All are welcome, all are welcome, all are welcome in this place.

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 fainthearted, help the afflicted, honor all people. Love and serve the Lord, rejoicing in the power of the Holy Spirit. And may the blessing of God Almighty, the Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer rest and abide with you this day and forevermore. Amen.