

UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST CONGREGATIONAL
Wallace, Idaho

Alice M.C. Ling, Pastor

Sixth Sunday after Pentecost

July 12, 2020

WELCOME AND ANNOUNCEMENTS

Good morning! And welcome to the gift of this new day, a day created and blessed by God, for us to cherish and enjoy; a day in which we are encouraged to celebrate the abundance of gifts and graces in our lives and bring our thanks and praise to God. Welcome to the online worship of the United Church of Christ Congregational in Wallace, in which we open ourselves to the presence and power, healing and hope, wonder and Word of God. Welcome together as members of the Body of Christ, gathered now in order that we might worship God.

CALL TO WORSHIP (based on Psalm 65:9-13)

God visits the earth and waters it

Greatly enriching the earth.

God waters the earth, softening it with showers,

And blessing the earth.

Along with the hills, the meadows, and the valleys,

Let us shout and sing together for joy!

(Rev. Ruth Garwood, UCC Worship Ways)

SONG *“For the Beauty of the Earth”*

For the beauty of the earth, For the glory of the skies,

For the love which from our birth Over and around us lies:

Lord of all, to Thee we raise This our hymn of grateful praise.

For the wonder of each hour Of the day and of the night,

Hill and vale and tree and flower, Sun and moon and stars of light:

Lord of all, to Thee we raise This our hymn of grateful praise.

For the joy of human love, Brother, sister, parent, child;

Friends on earth and friends above, For all gentle thoughts and mild:

Lord of all, to Thee we raise This our hymn of grateful praise.

PRAYER OF INVOCATION (in unison)

O God, We gather together in your presence with expectation, hungry for an encounter with you, eager to hear your Word. Open our eyes and ears to the presence of your Holy Spirit. May the seeds of your Word scattered among us this morning fall on fertile soil. May they take root in our hearts and lives, and produce an abundant harvest of good words and deeds. We pray this in the name of Jesus Christ, our teacher and our Lord. Amen. (Christine Longhurst, re:Worship)

SCRIPTURE READING Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea. Such great crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat there, while the whole crowd stood on the beach. And he told them many things in parables, saying: “Listen! A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path, and the birds came and ate them up. Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and they sprang up quickly, since they had no depth of soil. But when the sun rose,

they were scorched; and since they had no root, they withered away. Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. Let anyone with ears listen!”

“Hear then the parable of the sower. When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what is sown in the heart; this is what was sown on the path. As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; yet such a person has no root, but endures only for a while, and when trouble or persecution arises on account of the word, that person immediately falls away. As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the lure of wealth choke the word, and it yields nothing. But as for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it, who indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty.”

SERMON

My initial reading told me to fight the urge, and to tell you to fight the urge. Yes, it's true: who among us hasn't heard about the seeds sown on hard packed earth, left to be gobbled up by birds; or on rocky soil where, while the seeds started to sprout, it was next to impossible for them to squeeze roots through to an underground source of water so they could live to see another day; or among thorns where, despite their best efforts and good intentions, in next to no time, they had the very life choked out of them. Who among us can hear that and withstand the temptation to say, guilty as charged? I know I said I'd be a better person, check in on my neighbor more often, lose weight, think kinder thoughts, be more patient, stop smoking, drink less. More prayer, less television. More Bible Study, less Facebook. More church, less cynicism. My early reading said don't go there; this isn't the parable of the bad soil; it's the parable of the sower, so focus on that: the extravagant sower who has so much seed to scatter that it's thrown everywhere. Throw caution to the wind, toss it out there and wait and watch, and trust me: there's going to be an abundant harvest. So I worked with that, thought and prayed about that, figured I could go somewhere with that – and then, at the last minute, I pulled up one more source and did a little more reading. Bad idea. This one said, No, no, no, all those folks that talk about this as the parable of the sower have got it all wrong. This is the parable of the soil. Think about that and talk about that, about how we need to work the soil and open it up so it can breathe, pick rocks and get them out of the way, go after those infuriating thistle roots and invading ivy runners; add some compost and manure; turn it over and let it set. Do everything you can to improve the quality of the soil you have to work with until it's black and rich, fruitful and productive, and growing the best and biggest crop of corn and tomatoes this valley ever saw.

Sower or soil? Seeds or weeds and rocks? Welcome to the world of parables where the answer to those either/or questions is yes. Not a straight forward, linear argument on good and bad, right and wrong. Not a list of commandments or moralistic lessons or warnings and threats. Not even an ordinary story that we can relate to and learn from. No, a parable is meant to provoke and rearrange our thinking, to disturb our common sense assumptions by introducing ideas and behaviors that jolt us awake and slow us down. One writer said that she was taught that just about the time you think you know what a parable means, precisely when you think you have it figured out, you discover you're wrong. (Kathryn M. Matthews, UCC Sermon Seeds) Maybe that's an exaggeration, but it's completely true that there's more than one answer to the meaning of a parable; and more than likely, we won't see it all on the first read.

The other thing that is true about Jesus' parables is that he used them to talk about the kingdom of God. Tom Long weaves the two together this way: “(Parables) are simply profound; that is, they are simple, but, for those with eyes to see and ears to hear, they are also profound, opening up deep insights about

the ways of God. For those who are ready learners of the gospel, parables unlock the secrets of the kingdom; for those whose minds are closed, parables remain bolted shut.” (*Matthew*, page 146)

Jesus came out of the house; once he comprehended the size of the crowd, he got into a boat and sat down, assuming the position of a teacher. The crowds gathered close on shore, and once he knew he had their attention, he began. Listen! (I don't think he just meant with the ear, but with the mind wide awake and heart at full attention). A sower went out to sow. A full bag flung over the shoulder, the farmer threw the seed everywhere: on hard-packed paths, on rocky ground, in fields choked with weeds, and yes, on some open fertile soil as well. Throwing the seed with wild, careless abandon, letting the wind carry it, the birds eat it, the sun bake it, the weeds choke it, and every now and then, the soil receive it. And he promised an abundant harvest. Bushels and bushels of abundance.

Now, I grew up with farmers, and have lived among a multitude of farmers, and I have to tell you that not one of them – ever – planted like that. Not if they had a prayer of coming back for another year. And if, by some miracle, they've managed to live to farm in this day, they're hanging on by a very frayed thread. They're counting every seed, measuring every morsel of fertilizer, working the soil, picking rocks and eradicating weeds, watching the temperature and moisture trends, and timing the planting with razor sharp precision. And still there's no guarantee of a crisis-free growing season or a harvest of any size.

But that's farming, and this is the kingdom of God. This is God's realm where seed is thrown wide and wild, where conditions are not prejudged as fertile or hostile, receptive or too far gone to be worth the bother; but mercy and compassion, patience and forgiveness, courage and love are thrown about with abandon, like they come from a bottomless source and an indiscriminate planter. Which they do. The parable tells us that God operates from and envisions for us a realm of bounty and possibility that we have trouble even imagining, much less encouraging. In God's realm, new life springs up in the deadest, most shriveled places, places we've given up on, places we assumed were beyond hope. Inhospitable environments are altered by love. God's seed is all around, just looking for places to settle and sit, crack open and grow, bear fruit and bring forth an abundant harvest.

This is the Parable of the Sower. Jesus offered it to all who would listen, but mostly expected his disciples to be the most ready to hear it's truth. It sits in front of us now, and the choice is ours. We can let it sit where it is and turn away, admitting we're more comfortable with the prudence and reserve of this world than the wild extravagance of the realm of God. We can count our pennies and ration out our resources, and focus our attention toward the most deserving and the most likely to bear fruit, walking away from rocks and weeds, desolate landscapes and hardened hearts. Or we can buy into the grace and promise of the Sower, roll up our sleeves and join the planting party. If we're willing to claim a place in God's realm, we make this the Parable of the Soils as well as that of the Sower. We can accept the task of working the ground, picking rocks, clearing weeds, opening up and turning over the soil. Feeding hungry hearts with compassion and care, providing shelter for those who have been walked on over and over again until they begin to soften up and become more receptive, encouraging those who currently don't have the staying power to deal with rocky ground and maddening obstacles, or those whose lives are so over crowded in their overplanted plot that they simply don't know how to be open to anything more.

I don't know how many of you have either read the book or seen the movie *Just Mercy*, but for me it captures much of the extravagant sowing and diligent soil clearing that this parable talks about. *Just Mercy* tells the story of Bryan Stevenson, a black man who attended Harvard Law School and then moved to Alabama to establish the Equal Justice Initiative. He has spent his career defending the poor, the incarcerated and the condemned, the people so beaten down by rocks and weeds and having been

walked on that they've lost all hope. The heart of the story in *Just Mercy* is his defense of a black man wrongly convicted of killing a white woman and then being sentenced to death. With Walter McMillan and countless others, Stevenson has worked tirelessly to listen deeply and carefully, to overturn rocks, to pull up weeds, to unearth the truth, to be a person who cares, to work for and trust in the abundant harvest that he deeply believes will one day come. And through him, it is – one person, one conviction, one sentence at a time.

Call it what you will. Focus your heart on the extravagance of a Sower who knows no limits and flings seeds around with reckless abandon, giving thanks for the bushels of an abundant harvest that even now are being gathered up. Or focus your energy and discipleship on the soil that cries out to be worked and prepared, opened up to breathe, fed with compassion and grace, made hospitable and welcoming. God works in all of it to create a realm of joy and promise, welcome and mercy, abundance and love. By God's grace, we're invited to participate in the extravagance of throwing grace around like there's no tomorrow, precisely because there is a tomorrow – and it belongs to God. Amen.

PRAYER REQUESTS

Gretchen's friend Gary had a small heart attack; they've now diagnosed that his heart isn't strong enough for a quadruple bypass, so they're moving toward a stent and putting him on the transplant list. Prayers for his heart, as well as the stress on both him and his wife Dena.

Dave Hanson sends his love to everyone, as does Evy May Burkett. Alice was able to visit them Friday (outside and with social distancing), which was a joy for all of them.

Prayers for the family of Regina Horning as they deal with the release of her from this world into Jesus's eternal hands.

Continued prayers for Christi's healing....getting there...a little more to go yet.

Prayers for adjustment and getting settled as Christi's friend Kelly moved into a new apartment...her sister Katie and niece Bella also will be living with her as Katie continues to go through her divorce....special prayers for Bella dealing with her anger towards her mother over divorce.

Prayer that the COVID cases won't spread any further than they have already

Please pray for WISDOM and GUIDANCE for world leaders and our government officials

Safe travel for Judy Hofmann's daughter Judell as she has just finished her nurse's training and will be headed for home on Tuesday

PASTORAL PRAYER

For all the blessings of this life, we give thanks to you, Creator God. For families, friends, colleagues, neighbors, and strangers, who nurture us, that the love of God may grow within. That your love, your Word, like a seed, may grow to produce in us good fruit.

May your love be like a seed, taking root and growing strong.

For the leaders of various nations and cities, that they may lead with strong hearts and gentle hands and generous spirits, with compassion and mercy, with wisdom and grace. May they reflect your will guiding all their actions and decisions.

May your love be like a seed, taking root and growing strong.

For those who serve in harms way, those who live in dangerous places, those who live in areas of war and strife, those who live in fear, those who worry about employment, bills, food, and struggle just to find dignity in life. May your grace bring peace and safety to all people, one to another.

May your love be like a seed, taking root and growing strong.

For those who suffer from any illness or dis-ease— of mind, body, or spirit. Restore these, and all those we carry in our hearts, to fullness of health— health as only you, O God, can bring. May your mercy

shower each of us with healing mercy and love.

May your love be like a seed, taking root and growing strong.

For those who are dying, and for those who have died. Send forth your comforting love. Give solace to those who mourn. Console those who grieve. May your grace surround us like a mantle upon our heads, a shawl upon our shoulders, a hand to hold our hand.

May your love be like a seed, taking root and growing strong. (Terri, RevGalBlogPals)

PRAYER OF OUR SAVIOR (debts)

Hear us now as we join our voices in the prayer that Jesus taught, saying: **Our Father...**

OFFERING

As we come to this morning's time of offering, I'm drawn back to the parable and it's image of a sower who went out to sow. God invites us to consider the seeds we have in our possession and how we might sow and plant, use and share what we have and who we are for the work of God's realm. Whether we're opening our hearts to the needs of those around us or our wallets to support the work of the church, speaking words of kindness or sharing our bread with the hungry, extending a hand of welcome or offering a sign of forgiveness, pouring a cup of cold water for a thirsty one or standing up to protect the needs of one who cowers in the shadows, the parable encourages us to throw caution to the wind as we scatter the seeds. By God's mercy and love, our gifts will be blessed and multiplied, nurtured and transformed into an abundant harvest and an offering of great joy. May it be so. Amen.

SONG *"You Are Salt for the Earth, O People"*

You are a seed of the Word, O people: bring forth the reign of God!

Seeds of mercy and seeds of justice, grow in the City of God!

Bring forth the reign of mercy, bring forth the reign of peace;

Bring forth the reign of justice, bring forth the City of God!

We are a blessed and a pilgrim people: bound for the reign of God!

Love our journey and love our homeland, love is the City of God!

Bring forth the reign of mercy, bring forth the reign of peace;

Bring forth the reign of justice, bring forth the City of God!

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, Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer, rest and abide with us all this day and forevermore. Amen.