

**UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST CONGREGATIONAL
Wallace, Idaho**

Alice M.C. Ling, Pastor

Seventh Sunday after Pentecost

July 19, 2020

SONG *“O Jesus, I Have Promised”*

WELCOME AND ANNOUNCEMENTS

Good morning! And welcome again to the online worship of the United Church of Christ Congregational in Wallace. It's good to be together for worship. Especially in this time of separation, it's a deep joy to live in the confidence that God joins us in our individual homes and times of viewing this video, is present in our shared listening and speaking, praying and singing, and knits us together into one body, the Body of Christ. There is no doubt in my mind but that whether we are gathered or scattered, we are still God's people, still called together as the Body of Christ, still equipped and empowered to do God's work in the world. For all of that and so much more, I am profoundly grateful. So welcome into the presence of God, and welcome together as the people of God.

CALL TO WORSHIP

We worship the God who inhabits our world and dwells in our lives.

We don't need to look up to find God, we only need to look around: within ourselves, beyond ourselves, into the eyes of another.

We don't need to listen for a distant thunder to find God, we only need to listen to the music of life, the words of children, the questions of the curious, the rhythm of a heartbeat.

We worship the God who inhabits our world and who dwells in our lives.

(Presbyterian Church USA website, revised)

SONG *“This Is My Father's World”*

This is my Father's world, and to my listening ears,
all nature sings and round me rings the music of the spheres.

This is my Father's world; I rest me in the thought
of rocks and trees, of skies and seas; God's hands the wonders wrought.

This is my Father's world, the birds their carols raise,
the morning light, the flowers bright, declare their Maker's praise.
Our God has made this world, and shines in all that's fair;
in the rustling grass I hear God pass, who speaks to me everywhere.

Our God has made this world; oh, let us ne'er forget
that though the wrong seems oft so strong, God is the ruler yet.
God trusts us with this world, to keep it clean and fair.
All earth and trees, the skies and seas, God's creatures everywhere.

CALL TO RECONCILIATION

When we fail to live as God's people, we are like flowers which give way to weeds. But God seeks us out, not to condemn us, but to comfort, to forgive, and to bring us home. Let us stop playing hide-and-seek with our God, as we confess our sins together, praying,

PRAYER FOR FORGIVENESS (in unison)

Insolently we turn against you, God of truth. When we follow those desires that control us; when we live for ourselves, shutting off the gifts of those around us; when we think we do not need to share love, hope, peace with others, we show how we have joined that league of hooligans who ignore your way of life.

Yet, you have chosen to adopt us as your children, God-who-stands-with-us, forgiving us and making us inheritors with Jesus of your grace and joy. So lead us by the Spirit, that we might follow Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior, into creation which groans for love and healing.

Silence is kept

ASSURANCE OF PARDON

In sorrow so deep we cannot find our way out, God cradles us in comfort; in moments so shadowed we trip over our fears, God lights the way for us; in joy which cascades into our souls, God fills us with healing. Even when we cannot see it, God's hope is all around us, surrounding us with peace and healing. Thanks be to God, we are forgiven! Amen. (Thom M. Shuman, Lectionary Liturgies)

SCRIPTURE READING Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

He put before them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to someone who sowed good seed in his field; but while everybody was asleep, an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and then went away. So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared as well. And the slaves of the householder came and said to him, 'Master, did you not sow good seed in your field? Where, then, did these weeds come from?' He answered, 'An enemy has done this.' The slaves said to him, 'Then do you want us to go and gather them?' But he replied, 'No; for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them. Let both of them grow together until the harvest; and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, Collect the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn.'"

Then he left the crowds and went into the house. And his disciples approached him, saying, "Explain to us the parable of the weeds of the field." He answered, "The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man; the field is the world, and the good seed are the children of the kingdom; the weeds are the children of the evil one, and the enemy who sowed them is the devil; the harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are angels. Just as the weeds are collected and burned up with fire, so will it be at the end of the age. The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will collect out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all evildoers, and they will throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. Let anyone with ears listen!

SERMON

I have a dear friend that I met 45 years ago this summer. Having done the math and said that number out loud, I want to tell you that we went to kindergarten together, but the sad truth is that I was half way through college when we met. Seems like yesterday. Anyway, there are a lot of reasons that Cathy is dear to me, but one of them is that she loves to weed. Loves it so much that a few years ago when she was at our house, she volunteered to tackle my mess. And spent several glorious hours in back and then in front, on her hands and knees, pulling up weeds, as well as thinning and relocating iris. Just so you know, it's a joy I'm willing to offer anyone who shares Cathy's energies. At our house, there are always weeds just hanging out waiting for attention.

I really don't mean to sound critical, but I do have a few observations I would make about her work. First of all, the weeds came back. Now I hadn't thought to blame it on an enemy until I read this

morning's parable (but if there was an enemy involved, I know exactly where to look). No, I just assumed that's what weeds do, especially the untended ones. And then there were the plants in back that excited her, so she decided to round them up and put them all in one place and leave them because she was sure we had strawberries. I was pretty sure we didn't, but I went along – until they grew and spread and yielded nothing and a couple of years later, I pulled them up. In front, she got even more excited when she discovered and announced that we have columbine. Even asked if she could take some seeds with her – to which I said, sure, knock yourself out. A year or so later, my sister-in-law came along and had the same reaction and took some more seeds. So now I know that I have a valued flower in the front yard, and I really do share their enthusiasm for its colors and beauty. But it would appear to have taken advantage of my hospitality and lack of attention, and it's woven itself through the daffodil bulbs and the iris fronds, even settling in in front of and behind the peony. And as I currently scrounge up a little energy to try and reduce the chaos of our front yard, I stand and stare and wonder what in the world I'm supposed to do with the mess. Sure they're pretty, but give me a break. Where do they start and stop and how is anything else supposed to exist when they've sprawled out and taken over the whole landscape?

My lackadaisical approach to our yard and the vast array of weeds that choose to take up residence among the real flowers that were chosen to live there pales in contrast to the farmer in this morning's parable. This was a real farmer who was working hard to grow a real crop, presumably to at least feed his household, and likely to also provide some income. So he invested in good seed, prepared the soil and then went out and sowed the seed in the ground that was waiting for it. As the plants began to emerge and grow, even bearing grain, the farm workers became aware that there were also weeds in the field. When they asked the question they knew the answer to, the farmer said, no, I didn't plant weeds; an enemy has done this. They went on to ask if they should go out and gather up the weeds, purging the field of their presence; and again the farmer said no, if you try to gather the weeds, you will uproot the wheat along with it. Let them grow together until harvest, at which time I'll see to it that the wheat and weeds are separated. The weeds will be burned and the wheat collected in bundles to store in the barn.

For the folks in that story, it only took a little careful looking to know that the weeds were darnel, a plant that is related to wheat, looks like wheat and likes to hide out in wheat, but it has roots like a nylon cord and if too many of its small, black, poisonous seeds end up in the bread, it can cause blindness or even death. Palestinian farmers had learned to deal with it early, uprooting the darnel once or twice before harvest so they didn't have to separate the seeds by hand. To let the wheat and weeds grow together posed an unnecessary risk, but one that the sower in the parable seems willing to take. Only the odd and eccentric farmer would do that. Or one that had a point to make.

Even if you don't remember or didn't hear what I said last week, this week's parable opens with a clear statement: the kingdom of heaven may be compared to... We're not talking eccentric farming practices here; we're talking – again – about the kingdom of heaven, about the ways of God, about the way that God envisions our life together, what our life together would look like if we let God write the script.

The first thing I hear in this parable accompanies the talk of wheat and weeds, and then the enemy is introduced as opposition to the hard working farmer, and I find myself standing in the midst of the all too familiar Us-Them dynamic that we live every day. As this parable opens, we've got good guys and bad guys, right and wrong, ones that can stay and ones that have got to go. It looks and feels a lot like the world we live in, but before we have a chance to assume we know the rules of the road, Jesus throws us off balance by telling the servants to let the weeds grow side by side with the wheat until the harvest. Barbara Brown Taylor offers some perspective on what might be behind that teaching when she says, "Sometimes it is mighty hard to tell the difference between a good plant and a bad one, especially when it can act both ways. I suppose we have all had the experience of uprooting the

raspberries by mistake or protecting something interesting that turns out to be a thistle. I don't know what makes us think we are any smarter about ourselves or about the other people in our lives. We are so quick to judge, as if we were sure we knew the difference between wheat and weeds, good seed and bad, but that is seldom the case. Turn us loose with our machetes and there is no telling what we will chop down and what we will spare. Meaning to be good servants, we go out to do battle with the weeds and end up standing in a pile of wheat." ("Learning to Live with Weeds", *The Seeds of Heaven*, pages 35-36)

So if we're not supposed to destroy the weeds but let them grow alongside the wheat, does that mean standing idly by, twiddling our thumbs until the harvest when we're told the reaper will come in and clean things up? If the weeds represent evil and are busily choking the breath out of life-giving wheat, do we just turn our backs and walk away, and do nothing while the enemy has a field day sowing nastiness all over the place? I don't mean to be critical, but it seems to me that that approach isn't working out too well for us at the moment, and honestly, it's a part of this parable that I have the most trouble with. But before I managed to close the chapter and go off in search of a different text to preach on today, I found a writer who slowed me down and encouraged me to look a little deeper into the Gospel of Matthew. This gospel uses the word "enemy" three other times, the first of which is during the Sermon on the Mount when Jesus told his followers to love their enemies and pray for those who persecute them, and the other uses have a similar sentiment. The more I think about it, and put this parable in it's Gospel context, it seems to me that Jesus is calling his listeners, not toward passivity at all, but away from doing battle, away from getting so riled up and defensive that we start acting like weeds, full of prickles and poison, away from the temptation to be good guys who become bad guys while we try to put the bad guys out of business. Perhaps instead of being obsessed with eradicating the intrusive weeds and going after the enemy, we should focus on minding our own business, our business being the reconciliation of the world to God through the practice of unshielded love. If we will give ourselves to that, we've been told God will take care of the rest. Even in a messy field, our job is to go on bearing witness to the one who planted us in the first place.

Barbara Brown Taylor offers another parable of the wheat and the weeds. "One afternoon in the middle of the growing season, a bunch of farmhands decided to surprise their boss and weed his favorite wheat field. No sooner had they begun to work, however, than they began to argue – first about which of the wheat-looking things were weeds and then about the rest of the weeds. Did the Queen Anne's lace pose a real threat to the wheat or could it stay for decoration? And the blackberries? They would be ripe in just a week or two, but they were, after all, weeds – or were they? And the honeysuckle – it seemed a shame to pull up anything that smelled so sweet.

"About the time they had gotten around to debating the purple asters, the boss showed up and ordered them out of his field. Dejected, they did as they were told. Back at the barn he took their machetes away from them, poured them some lemonade, and made them sit down where they could watch the way the light moved across the field. At first, all they could see were the weeds and what a messy field it was, what a discredit to them and their profession, but as the summer wore on they marveled at the profusion of growth – tall wheat surround by tall goldenrod, ragweed, and brown-eyed Susans. The tares and the poison ivy flourished alongside the Cherokee roses and the milkweed, and it was a mess, but a glorious mess, and when it had all bloomed and ripened and gone to seed the reapers came.

"Carefully, gently, expertly, they gathered the wheat and made the rest into bricks for the oven where the bread was baked. And the fire that the weeds made was excellent, and the flour that the wheat made was excellent, and when the harvest was over the owner called them all together – the farmhands, the reapers, and all the neighbors – and broke bread with them, bread that was the final distillation of that whole messy, gorgeous, mixed-up field, and they all agreed that it was like no bread

any of them had ever tasted before and that it was very, very good. Let those who have ears to hear, hear. (pages 36-37)

PRAYER REQUESTS

Please pray for our nation (that our leaders inflict no more harm on us especially in this time of pandemic) and for our community that the damage done from the unauthorized music fest won't be as bad as it looks like it will be.

Prayers for Christi's cousin Burt Onstott who had back surgery on Monday. Prayers for his wife Pam also who is recovering from a bicycle accident and it has compounded her vertigo.

Prayers for Marama Howard and Rachel Andrews who are battling Covid 19...and Rachel's mom who has been hospitalized with it.

Please dear Lord, Give our leaders wisdom to unify our country. Give our people strength to unify ourselves. Give us all strength to live safely and do right

PASTORAL PRAYER

Holy and wondrous God, as the birds sing and cherries ripen, as summer temperatures arrive and trees bow to you in praise, we come before you again with grateful hearts. Day after day, you richly bless us with beauty and bounty that fill our spirits to overflowing: for moments of awe that take our breath away, whether the sight of a once-in-a-lifetime comet or a toddler's tentative first steps; for the joy of family, welcoming a daughter home, celebrating a graduation, a few days together even in the midst of separation and caution; for peace in the midst of a pandemic: a beautiful sunset, gentle breezes at day's end, an hour spent with a bike or kayak, music that soothes our weary souls and sets our toes to tapping. For the endless string of mercies and miracles with which you bless and renew, strengthen and surprise us, we bring our thanks and praise.

We also bring before you the needs of our wounded, bleeding world. Tired of carrying the weight of that world on our shoulders or in a knot in the pit of our stomachs, we lay it before you and seek your healing and holding, your wisdom and compassion, your mercy and strength. As coronavirus numbers soar yet again and move ever closer to us and our lives, we pray for the sick and vulnerable, the isolated and despairing, the exhausted and unemployed, the abused and grieving. As the summer marches on and questions swirl about schools and the fall, keep us mindful of the needs of children for learning and the psychological and social trauma they've already experienced, for the health and safety of teachers, and the well-being of families. In this time of racial unrest, we ask you to open our ears and our hearts to the anger and impatience with which many people of color cry out. Help us to not wait for it to die down so we can move on, but to listen deeply that we might learn and grow, heal and change. Lead us, great God, as a world, a country, a community and solitary individuals, that our decisions and actions might be wise and loving, mindful of the needs of others and the ways in which what we choose impacts our neighbors. Help us, especially in a time of campaigning, to set politics aside in order to build up and protect, serve and lead.

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

PRAYER OF OUR SAVIOR (debts)

OFFERING

At this time of thinking about the offerings we give to support God's work in the world, I'm aware once again of the ministry that N-Sid-Sen has provided for generations to so many in our congregation. This is the time of year when the camp would traditionally be full of youth camps as well as non-profit organizations who enjoy it's welcoming facilities. This summer, none of that is taking place because

there's no way to do it safely. Instead, the buildings that have their own kitchens are providing places where small family groups can gather for a few days. They are doing some online programming instead of the weeks of camping. And the cook and maintenance staff have been furloughed. I'm glad to say that we have responded to the campaign that is underway to help carry the camps through the pandemic. In addition to the church's \$200 budgeted for camp scholarships, 5 other donations have been received and we've sent a total of \$460 to support N-Sid-Sen's ministry. If others would like to contribute, just give a donation to the church that is clearly marked for that purpose.

Also, a word of thanks for the ways in which you are supporting the ongoing ministry of our church. While we're not meeting together or in the building, our ministry and expenses continue. Thank you for all you are doing to keep our church vital and active. We're in this together, and together we will get through this time .

SONG *“Come to Tend God's Garden”*

Come to tend God's garden, seeds of hope to sow, planting seeds of justice, watching mercy grow!
In an arid wasteland, spread a verdant heath! In a land of tumult, cultivate God's peace!

As we tend God's garden, from its furrows rise stems of fresh beginnings, stretching toward the skies!
Graciousness, our meadow, joyfulness, our root, unity, our foliage, righteousness, our fruit!

May God's garden flourish, may our toil succeed, may God bless the actions, every word and deed!
Serving Christ each season, with God's diagram, charted by the Spirit for the task at hand!

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 the blessing of God Almighty, Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer, rest and abide with us all this day and forevermore. Amen.