

UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST CONGREGATIONAL  
Wallace, Idaho

Alice M.C. Ling, Pastor

July 26, 2020

Eighth Sunday after Pentecost

SONG “*Spirit of God, Descend upon My Heart*”

WELCOME AND ANNOUNCEMENTS

Good morning! And welcome to worship. Welcome together as the people of God. Welcome to the online worship of the United Church of Christ Congregational in Wallace. We’ve been doing this online thing for awhile now, and leadership agreed this week that we need to keep doing it for awhile longer. I know all too well that it’s tempting to look back to the way things used to be and long for the good days of being together for prayer and fellowship. And it’s just as tempting to look forward, and ache for the day when we can do that again. All of us long for our building, for each other’s faces, voices, a body sitting next to us that we can make eye contact with, maybe someday even share a hug with. I get all of that and share it, but it seems to me that for now our work is to watch and listen for the presence of God in this moment, moving among us to bring healing and hope, to offer comfort as well as direction, to receive our prayers, restore our faith, cleanse us with forgiveness and send us out to be agents of hope and ambassadors of peace, reflectors of light and sowers of love. Our world urgently needs the gifts and graces of God, and who better to help deliver them than us? Let us worship and pray, listen and respond together, that we might go from this time ready to serve God in our world.

CALL TO WORSHIP

This church is a field where mustard seeds grow.

**Small faith is welcome here.**

This church is a loaf where love is the leaven.

**And this church has a hidden treasure in its heart.**

This church casts nets of tolerance over all people.

**And in this church, we are pearl hunters, even searching for holiness that grows around wounds.**

(Maren Tirabassi, *An Improbable Gift of Blessing*)

SONG “*May Jesus Christ Be Praised*”

When morning gilds the skies, My heart awaking cries, May Jesus Christ be praised!

Alike at work and prayer To Jesus I repair, May Jesus Christ be praised!

The night becomes as day, When from the heart we say, May Jesus Christ be praised!

The pow’rs of darkness fear When this sweet chant they hear, May Jesus Christ be praised!

Be this, while life is mine, My canticle divine, May Jesus Christ be praised!

Be this th’eternal song Through all the ages long, May Jesus Christ be praised!

PRAYER OF INVOCATION (in unison)

**Let the Spirit pray in us, God. Hear the silences between our words. As our lungs and lips breathe in and out, may true needs, deep longings, unglimped hopes, and paralyzing fears be exhaled into your heart through the Spirit’s sighing. Amen.**

(Maren Tirabassi, *An Improbable Gift of Blessing*)

SCRIPTURE READING Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

He put before them another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches.”

He told them another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened.”

“The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.

“Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it.

“Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and caught fish of every kind; when it was full, they drew it ashore, sat down, and put the good into baskets but threw out the bad. So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous and throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

“Have you understood all this?” They answered, “Yes.” And he said to them, “Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old.”

SERMON

When I first began to hear about a new virus in China last winter, I thought that was too bad, and then I moved on. Next time I heard about it, I sent fleeting thoughts in the direction of H1N1 and SARS and Ebola, and knew it really was too bad, sent up a little prayer for those likely to be effected, and then I moved on. At some point, I knew that 21<sup>st</sup> century global travel had changed everything forever and that the little germ wasn't going to stay in China, but would almost certainly accompany travelers around the world, but I still didn't think much of it. Never in my wildest imaginings, even when Italy shut down, and then state by state most of this country shut down back in March, never would I or could I have foreseen where we are today: with a global pandemic that has infected nearly 16 million people worldwide, more than 4 million in the US, and killed 148,000 people in this country, 641,000 worldwide – and is still going strong. And all of it sparked by a tiny little thing that's invisible to the eye, yet forceful and destructive enough to consume all our attention and resources, as individuals, communities, nations, and as a world.

It's striking to me at this moment in time to sit with another image of something virtually invisible to the eye and have it lifted up as a force for world changing good. No, I'm not thinking of a vaccine, but of the kingdom of heaven. Surely, if anything can beat back the madness of what's ravaging the world at the moment, it's God, right? What a great moment for Jesus to talk of the kingdom coming on to center stage, ready to set up and begin to reign. Now, I don't know about you, but when I hear of kingdoms, I tend to think pomp and circumstance, military might and unstoppable force; surely Jesus had some kings and princes lined up ready to help him with the effort he was launching. But sadly, no royalty or experts, no military generals or revolutionary leaders, no white horses or descending clouds. I'm sorry if I got your hopes up there for a moment. We do have more talk today of Jesus' kingdom, but along with it and the string of parables sent to introduce it, Jesus hands us common stories about ordinary people – a farmer and a baker woman, a merchant and fisherfolk, all doing every day, ordinary things – hand in hand with the power and love of God.

A sower went out to sow. A fisherman went fishing. A woman was making bread. A mustard seed is so small you can barely see it, and more than likely, if you buy a sack of seed, there are going to be a handful mixed in that you'll never find until they start to grow in your field. Those are the images Jesus offered his listeners as he tried to explain the kingdom of heaven to them. When Jesus came back from the wilderness, the first thing he proclaimed was that the kingdom of heaven had come near. Then he proceeded to demonstrate that nearness every time he healed someone, reached out to outcasts, respected women, or cared for the poor. And he demonstrated that nearness as he began to teach in parables. As one writer says, "For Jesus, God's realm is not some esoteric kingdom in the sweet by and by, but as close as the next mustard bush or the next loaf of bread... (Four of these five parables) envision God in every nook and cranny of daily life, from kneading dough to plowing fields. Jesus transforms human life not by scaring the he(ck) out of people, but by helping them see the heaven close at hand." (Talitha Arnold, *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 3*, page 286)

I think there's powerful significance in these images because of the ways they invite us all in and include us in the work at hand. If a microscopic little mustard seed is able to grow big enough to offer a nesting place to birds, maybe it's possible that we have something to offer too. Jesus didn't pick up on the Old Testament image of a stately cedar of Lebanon, but instead he used the image of an every day little mustard shrub. And the same with a kernel of yeast. You don't even have to live in the kitchen of a baker to have yeast readily available; it floats in the air and works its leavening magic whether we want it to or not. This work that God is doing in our midst and Jesus is calling us to be a part of is as close at hand and readily available to us as a tiny little seed or an instigating little fleck of yeast. Common, ordinary, close at hand, small and simple enough that anyone and everyone can play a part and find a role. We don't need to fuss and complain that we're too small and ordinary to do what God is envisioning. We can leave the multiplication up to God, and get busy doing what we can.

For a very long time, I've loved the story of a conversation between a coal mouse and a wild dove. The coal mouse asked a wild dove what the weight of a snowflake is. "Nothing more than nothing," was the answer. "In that case," the coal mouse said, "I must tell you a marvelous story. I sat on a branch of a fir, close to its trunk, when it began to snow, not heavily, not in a giant blizzard, no, just like in a dream, without any violence. Since I didn't have anything better to do, I counted the snow-flakes settling on the twigs and needles of my branch. Their number was exactly 3,741,952. When the next snowflake dropped onto the branch—nothing more than nothing, as you say—the branch broke off." Having said that, the coal-mouse flew away. The dove, since Noah's time an authority on the matter; thought about the story for a while and finally said to herself: "Perhaps there is only one person's voice lacking for peace to come about in the world." (from *New Fables Thus Spoke*)

The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that grows into the greatest of all shrubs and offers shelter and hospitality to a host of birds. The kingdom of heaven just might be like an accumulation of 3,741,952 snowflakes, the weight of nothing more than nothing working together with each other and the power and love of God in order to accomplish more than anyone ever imagined was within it's grasp. The kingdom of heaven is a like a woman who tucked a smidgeon of yeast into a hundred pounds of flour, mixed it and kneaded it, kept it warm and left it to rise, and when it was ready, she had enough to feed the whole neighborhood.

I recently read the story of Leymah Gbowee who won the 2011 Nobel Peace Prize. It all started with the leavening agent of moral outrage. In her native country of Liberia, young boys were trained as killers. Women and children were raped and beaten. Gbowee was overcome with the horror of the civil war that was unfolding in her country, so she reached out and found other women who were equally outraged; all of them felt powerless in the face of so much violence. Together they formed the Women's Peacemaking Movement with hundreds and hundreds of Muslim and Christian women. They sat

together in a soccer field in the heart of the capital city of Monrovia. Every day they gathered to pray – for an end to the killings and cruelty, and for a safe land for their children. The women met together for two years. Their seemingly small efforts worked the leaven of hope into their lives. With Gbowee’s leadership, the women mobilized their strength. They had no power granted to them through position or money, but they had something else. They had a holy and a divine spirit of justice and mercy. It pervaded their lives, enabling them to rise up with courage. It was a spirit that was alive and active in their gatherings. Their presence day after day eventually brought an end to the war and the beginning of healing for their nation. (Nancy Hastings Sehested, *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Vol. 3*, pages 383, 385)

The kingdom of heaven is like leaven in a hundred pounds of flour, and God thanks the woman who put it there. The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that a farmer went and put in a field, where it could take root and grow and offer welcome to the birds of the air. The kingdom of heaven inserts itself into our places of struggle and distress in order to give birth to joy; it leavens our limited resources and multiplies our possibilities; it disturbs our complacency, infiltrates the everyday, transforms our brokenness and hides in plain sight. The kingdom of heaven comes to us as one of the most blessed gifts of God, as well as an invitation to join in seed sowing, bread baking, love sharing, abundance making.

Let me close with a poem by Kenneth Sehested:

Bread-baking God...  
as you nourish us  
with the bread of life  
and the milk of your Word,  
let your Spirit hang an apron  
around our necks,  
fashioned and patterned  
like that worn by our  
Lord-become-friend, Jesus.

Instruct us,  
here in the halls  
of your kitchen-kingdom,  
with the recipes of mercy  
and forgiveness,  
of compassion and redemption.

Leaven our lives  
'til they rise in praise:  
Offered, blessed and broken  
For the healing of the nations (*Feasting*, page 385)

## PRAYER REQUESTS

A prayer for this country. People don't seem to care. Many want to do as they please and some think that this is all hype and we don't have to care about it. People are getting sick and some are dying and it is spreading in the valley because a lot of people care only about themselves and what they want to do. I pray that people will come to realize what is at stake for themselves and the people around them.

## PASTORAL PRAYER

Loving and holy God, your servant Paul wrote that we don't know how to pray as we ought, and so your Spirit helps us in our weakness, interceding for us with sighs too deep for words. We thank you for that assurance, because these are days when our hearts fill to overflowing with an abundance of cares and concerns, anxieties and anger, grief and gratitude, longing and love. We lay the tangled mess before you and ask you to hear the cries of our hearts and of our world, to separate that which is faithful from that which gets in the way and trips us up, to encourage that which nurtures life and blesses others while helping us loosen our grip on the fear to which we cling. By your wisdom, help us to grow in courage and compassion; teach us when to be patient and wait, and when to stop waiting and call for change; reveal to us the difference between anger that lashes out and anger that's rooted in love; disturb our apathy, open our ears and hearts to the pain of others and show us what we can do and where we can serve. Help us to honor our own needs and limits, and to hold them alongside the hungers and hurts of those around us. Open our eyes to recognize the ways all our lives are intertwined, and guide us in choices that protect and shelter, care for and honor all those whom you love.

Holy One, the needs of our community, our country and our world are great. You know them far better than we do, and so we bring them before you yet again, praying for the sick and grieving, healers and caregivers, scientists and researchers, the unemployed and hungry, homeless and those who fear they soon will be homeless, protesters and law enforcement, parents separated from children and children crying for their parents, teachers, students and parents struggling to forge a path for education. Tear down the walls that divide us from one another, and show us how to come together again – to listen and collaborate, care for and protect, honor and build up.

Hear our prayers, O God, spoken, unspoken and those sighed on our behalf by the Spirit's breath. Draw us together, hold us close, wrap us in your love and send us out to do your work in the world. And hear us as we join in the prayer that Jesus taught, saying: **Our Father...**

## PRAYER OF OUR SAVIOR (debts)

### OFFERING

Even though there is no way for us to pass an offering plate between us in this time of worship, I think it's important for worship to include a time in which we consider the gifts and resources we have available to us and how we will put them to work on behalf of God's presence and God's people in the world. An offering can be as simple as holding a door for someone with their arms full or as complicated as a Habitat for Humanity building project. It can be as small as a cold glass of lemonade on a hot summer day or as large as a scholarship fund that provides precious money for school. It can come as naturally as smiling at a child in a stroller or be as far out of our comfort zone as speaking up in the presence of abuse or racism. An offering can be a gift to the church, an errand for a neighbor, a kind word to a stranger, a visit to someone who is alone. When we offer ourselves in love, when we give of what we have to further God's work, when we do what we can to put flesh on God's Word, we build up Christ's Church and expand the reach of God's realm. Thanks be to God.

### SONG "Open My Eyes, That I May See"

Open my eyes, that I may see Glimpses of truth Thou hast for me;  
Place in my hand the wonderful key, That shall unlock and set me free.  
Silently now I wait for Thee, Ready, my God, Thy will to see;  
Open my eyes, illumine me, Spirit divine.

Open my ears, that I may hear Voices of truth Thou sendest clear;  
And while the wavenotes fall on my ear, Everything false will disappear.

Silently now I wait for Thee, Ready, my God, Thy will to see;  
Open my ears, illumine me, Spirit divine!

Open my mouth, and let it bear Gladly the warm truth everywhere;  
Open my heart, and let me prepare Love with Thy Children thus to share.  
Silently now I wait for Thee, Ready, my God, Thy will to see;  
Open my heart, illumine me, Spirit divine!

#### BENEDICTION

So now we leave this time of worship. And while so much of the road ahead is uncertain, the path constantly changing, we know some things that are as solid and sure as the ground beneath our feet, and the sky above our heads.

We know God is love.

We know Christ's light endures.

We know the Holy Spirit is here, found in the space between all things, closer to us than our next breath, binding us to each other, until we meet we again,

Go in peace. Amen.

(Rev. Nora Vedress, Calvary United Church in Prince Albert, Saskatchewan, Canada)