

UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST CONGREGATIONAL  
Wallace, Idaho

Alice M.C. Ling, Pastor

Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost

August 30, 2020

SONG “*It Is Well with My Soul*”

WELCOME AND ANNOUNCEMENTS

Good morning, my friends. And welcome to worship. A few nights ago, Ben and I watched the season finale of the TV show *All Rise*. I assume it was filmed in March, when the reality of COVID hit and people were sent to their homes to quarantine. It was fascinating to watch the characters in that episode struggle with what it meant to be connected when they weren't able to be together – and they finally did it by remembering the memories of times shared in the past, cherishing the shared convictions and purpose that remain alive between them in this day, and trusting the bonds and affection that continue to tie them to each other into the future.

It's been a long time since we've been in the same place at the same time, but I fully believe there is much that continues to hold us together, not the least of which is God's unlimited love for us, memories of shared handbell music and communion services, lining up for coffee and feasting on deviled eggs and a variety of cookies, our shared sense of faith and mission as members of the body of Christ and the United Church of Christ in Wallace, and the ways in which the Spirit continues to move among us, drawing us close, knitting us together, making us one. It's good once again and still to be together as the people of God in the presence of God. Let us worship God.

CALL TO WORSHIP

We who dwell in the shelter of the Most High

**Seek God here.**

We who come to be inspired and changed

**Seek God's Spirit here.**

We who know how little we know

**Seek God's Word here.**

(Rev. Kaji S. Doua, UCC Worship Ways)

SONG “*Gather Us In*”

Here in this place the new light is streaming, shadows of doubt are vanished away.

See in this space our fears and our dreamings, brought here to you in the light of this day.

Gather us in, the lost and forsaken; gather us in, our spirits inflame.

Call to us now, and we shall awaken, we shall arise at the sound of our name.

Not just in buildings, small and confining, not in some heaven light years away,

here in this place the new light is shining; now is God present, and now is the day.

Gather us in and hold us forever; gather us in and make us your own;

gather us in, all peoples together, fire of love in our flesh and our bone.

PRAYER OF INVOCATION (in unison)

**Almighty God, we have come to this time to find you; yet, you have been beside us all the time.**

**Our prayer, then, does not so much ask for you to be here as it asks you to make our hearts more aware of you. Creator, make an intentional and worshipful focusing of our minds a more constant**

**discipline in our lives. Timeless as the sunshine, it is easy to take your love for granted. Fill this moment with awe, loving God of our hope, and let us progress from a reverent hour into continual veneration, from a moment of devotion into a life of prayer. Amen.**

(Sheryl Stewart, *Before the Amen*)

SCRIPTURE READING Romans 12:9-21

Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; [b] do not claim to be wiser than you are. Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." No, "if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads." Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

SERMON

I don't know if it's to our credit or not, but Ben and I spent eight nights in the past two weeks watching first the Democratic National Convention and then the Republican. By the time we went to bed Thursday night, my head was spinning and my stomach was more than a little queasy. Over the course of the two events, I'd heard that Black Lives Matter and All Lives Matter; about peaceful protests and riots and looting from the radical left; about insisting on law and order and escalating tense situations with incendiary actions, about a plea for dismantling systemic racism and condemnation of anyone who doesn't stand for the flag. Whether they were talking about immigration or the Second Amendment, climate change or the pandemic, trade deals or health care, economic policies or abortion, their side sees things right and holds our hope while the other side is evil incarnate and certain to bring us down. While I care about most of those issues and have strong beliefs about the best course for us to take as a nation, there's little of it that I'm as passionate about as I am the tone of the conversation between differing views. The conventions weren't the problem nearly as much as they were representative of the dynamic at play throughout our country these days. It seems to me that we spend far too much time digging trenches and slinging mud, and far too little listening to the other's perspective or seeking enough common ground to be able to create even a tiny place to meet from which we have the possibility of building something together. A Facebook friend summarized the dynamic well for me when he wrote: "...I work hard to see what other people see and to understand. I can't do it anymore. There was a time when I could sit in the same room with a (member of the other party) -- we would talk about something that was happening -- we would disagree about the solution but there were basic facts we could use as a reference point. Now there is no fact-based starting point for a conversation or healthy debate. My facts are your fiction and my fiction is your reality. How did we get here? How do we get out of this insanity?" (Jim CastroLang)

I honestly don't remember how far into the week and convention two we were when I read this morning's text from Romans, but I know when I did, I felt something in me begin to shift toward home. It wasn't a sense of escape, of I'm going to think about God now and ignore this nasty old world; it wasn't even a rosey-eyed naivete that said, what the world needs now is love, sweet love. No, it was a sense of clarity: that this is what we need, this how we have to live and approach each other if we stand

a chance; I don't know how we get there, but I know our only chance is through rolling up our sleeves and getting to work – with love. Paul's words, urging members of the church to let their love be genuine, offer hospitality, weep with those who weep, resist evil, and as far as possible, live peacefully with all, tug at something very deep in me. There's also the echo of the familiar words from earlier in this chapter that instruct the good folks in Rome – and us, if we're lining up as part of the company of Christ's followers – to not be conformed to this world, but transformed by the will and ways of God. Powerful words that ring loud and true for me, but that doesn't mean they come with a blueprint. What does genuine love look like, here and now, in flesh and blood, and in the quagmire that is 2020 or in any of the impossible situations that threaten to flood us out, burn us up and generally overwhelm and bring us down?

Romans 12 is packed full to overflowing with words of instruction and perspective. Paul spent the first eleven chapters of the letter assuring his readers that God's grace is extended to Jews and Gentiles alike – two groups of people divided by intense hostility; and then in chapter 12, he laid out the great big “therefore” that describes the proper response to all that grace, instructing every day saints to live in every day holiness. Here Paul laid out the implications for our lives, both individually and as communities of faith, of living in the light of the grace that has been showered on us. He began by urging the church to not be conformed to this world, to business as usual, to the way everybody else goes about dealing with the problems that confront them, but instead, to be transformed by the will and way of God. Today's text opens with the words that our love is to be genuine. *The Message* translates that as saying that we are to love from the center of who we are... to discover beauty in everyone. Perhaps those two lines are at the heart of the list of Paul's instructions, because loving from the center of who we are, and finding beauty in every single one of God's children, lead naturally to being generous and hospitable, forgiving and peaceful, humble and kind, which are precisely the instructions that follow in today's text.

I loved the story we heard on the news the other night of a bride and groom who, like so many, had their wedding plans totally rearranged by the pandemic. They scaled down their ceremony to a backyard event and let their dog stand in as their best man. Then, when their reception was cancelled, they sent the food to a shelter nearby in Cleveland, and they showed up still dressed in a tux and wedding gown and helped serve the meal. They wanted it to feel like the people at the shelter were going to a wedding, but they did adjust the menu. Most of the kids wanted big bowls of macaroni and cheese, so that was what they got. They also got a donation large enough to feed them for another 5 days. When the reporter asked them if they were planning to have their original fancy reception next year, they said no. What they had was just perfect – and they plan to make it an annual tradition. (CBS Evening News, 8/27/20) That strikes me as very genuine and generous love, humble and kind, hospitable and gracious – and grounded in God.

But that's not always the case. We live in a world that, all too often puts more faith in striking back than in discovering beauty in every single one of God's children. What would it mean to do that, and what difference might it make if we at least looked for the beautiful? If we could find it in us to love our enemy, to give our hungry enemy food instead of bombing them, to give our thirsty enemy a drink instead of striking them down? I expect doing that would at least confuse and confound them, and knock them out of the rut of knee jerk reaction. And if we believe the power of God is at work through us, it seems to me there's at least some chance that our acts of compassion and kindness, hospitality and forgiveness hold the potential for their transformation, as well as our own and a softening of the enmity between us.

I remember the protests in Charlottesville, Virginia three years ago, when a young woman, who had gone to Charlottesville to stand against the hatred in the streets was run down by an angry driver. I

heard an interview in which her mother said that when she was informed of her daughter's death, she expressed concern for the other mother--the parent of the young man who drove the car into a crowd--who also "lost" a child that day. That kind of grace and compassion don't come naturally or easily to most of us. I can only pray that, were I in a similar situation, I would be willing to let God's love flow from the center of who I am and how I respond, that I could open my eyes to look for the beauty in everyone, no matter how hidden it appears to me to be.

As I think back to the two conventions that have just taken place, I can't even begin to count the number of stories and testimonials we heard to people who have been gunned down, many killed, some seriously wounded. I expect that it's fair to say that the Democrats told more stories of black people being killed, often but not always at the hands of the police, and Republicans told more stories about police being killed in the line of duty. While it's complicated and there are many things to talk about on both sides of that equation, it seems to me that one place to start is in acknowledging that each of those deaths is tragic and unacceptable. I do believe that there is some serious racism in play that we have got to comprehend and address, and that black people living under the threat of being stopped, being arrested, and being killed primarily because they are black has got to stop. I don't understand a knee on the neck that suffocates a man, or seven gun shots into the back of a man in front of his children. But that doesn't make it okay to kill police officers. The good ones need and deserve to be honored and respected; and everyone deserves a right to get home safely at the end of the day. We need desperately to stop throwing slogans around, to listen for the facts and the back story, and to try, by the grace of God, to let love live at the center of who we are, so that we can begin to look for the beauty in each person we meet. When we can do that, I believe we'll be on our way to turning things around.

My friends, let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in Spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers. Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. And may the grace of God shine on us and lead us with every step we take. Amen.

#### PASTORAL PRAYER

Let us join our hearts and minds in prayer.

*(Silence)*

Holy and wondrous God, far beyond our comprehension and wildest imaginings yet also closer than our next breath, we come to you in humility and awe, in gratitude and praise. You who formed all creation, from the majesty of mighty mountains to the tenderness of a sun ripened tomato, from the vastness of outer space to the intricacy of a human cell, you also made us. In your image. And you love us, walk with us, believe in us, catch our tears and encourage our dreams. When we are tempted to think you too distant, too holy to care about us, you come close and surprise us with the flicker of joy and a gift of quiet peace. If we begin to presume that we know you enough to finish your sentences, you remind us of what we don't know, can't see and will never comprehend. You are God and we are not, and still you love us, call to us, empower us and bless us. Thank you, Holy One.

We bring before you and place into your loving care all those in need of your healing touch, your comforting presence, your forgiving embrace. We pray for all those who are sick, undergoing

treatment, slipping away from life in this world. We pray for those who are separated from loved ones by miles, misunderstandings, deep wounds and painful grievances, a piece of glass and a sign of quarantine. Even as we give thanks for medical personnel and first responders, we also ask for their safety and wellbeing and their ability to go home at the end of their shift. As a new school year begins, we pray for teachers and staff, students and families, that in this tenuous, nervous time all might be safe. We pray for the resources and support that will help each person succeed and learn, grow and thrive.

We pray, O God, for the needs of our country and of our world. The places of destruction and disaster are too numerous to name, and yet we try, remembering the devastation from Hurricanes Laura and Marco, the wildfires that are ravaging far more miles than the news can begin to identify, threatening and destroying homes and livelihoods, the wind destruction in Iowa, the explosion in Beirut, the drought in far too many countries and continents. We pray for all those who respond and serve in the midst of these catastrophes: firefighters who rush in when others are told to evacuate, FEMA and the Coast Guard and local helpers who search for survivors and rescue the stranded, for those who work on recovery and years of rebuilding. And we pray for our leaders, in this state and country and around the world. For them and for us, we pray for wisdom and courage, the willingness to speak the truth when it needs to be spoken, the ability to stay silent when others need to speak. Bind us together. Help us to reach out across the divides that too often isolate and separate. Show us how to live by love, in your name and after Jesus' example.

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

PRAYER OF OUR SAVIOR (debts)

#### OFFERING

Sometime early in the year, the Executive Committee set dates for the One Great Hour of Sharing offering at the end of April and beginning of May. Then COVID hit, we were sent to our homes and started meeting in this new way. We agreed, temporarily, to postpone the offering until later, but when we met on Thursday, we agreed we need to stop postponing our participation in this vital ministry, especially as we consider current events that draw on its resources. One Great Hour of Sharing is an offering of the United Church of Christ, and is a way that we help with development globally as well as responses to disasters in the US and around the world. The page that's a part of today's PDF describes vital work that's being done to help provide education, vocational training, basic necessities and community support through the New Life Center in Thailand. That's just one example of the ways in which, with this offering, we enable people and communities to care for each other rather than being dependent on hand-outs. The funds raised are also used to help in times of disaster, here and abroad. When I checked the UCC website, I found information about our responses to the destruction in Iowa recently as well as the California wild fires. I expect that in the next few days, we will also be able to find a post about first steps to respond following the devastation caused by Hurricane Laura in the Gulf Coast. I know that when I was a pastor in Vermont and our community suffered serious flooding and the destruction of many homes, we received a grant from One Great Hour of Sharing that we passed along to two of the home owners most seriously impacted by Hurricane Irene. If it sounds far away and distant to life here in the Silver Valley, Paul reminds us in 1 Corinthians 3 that we are co-workers in God's service; we are God's field, God's building. This offering is one way we can fulfill that ministry.

I invite you to read the enclosed material and to prayerfully consider your response. You can make a gift through the church; just mark it clearly for OGHS; mail it to 408 Cedar Street or slide it into the mail slot to the left of the church door. Thank you, in advance, for your response.

SONG    *“They’ll Know We Are Christians by Our Love”*

We are one in the Spirit, we are one in the Lord,  
We are one in the Spirit, we are one in the Lord,  
And we pray that all unity may one day be restored:  
And they’ll know we are Christians by our love, by our love,  
Yes, they’ll know we are Christians by our love.

We will walk with each other, we will walk hand in hand,  
We will walk with each other, we will walk hand in hand,  
And together we’ll spread the news that God is in our land:...

We will work with each other, we will work side by side,  
We will work with each other, we will work side by side  
And we’ll guard each one’s dignity and save each one’s pride:...

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.

# Invest in futures

Give to One Great Hour of Sharing



In Thailand, a 13-year-old girl arrives at the New Life Center, seeking relief from the cruel conditions that have brought her here. Her life up to this point has been mostly about survival. Here, she meets others like her. Some are survivors of sexual abuse, domestic violence or human trafficking. Some have been forced to work when they wanted to go to school.

What will the future be like when she is empowered to share her gifts with her community and the world?

At the New Life Center, she is met with the investment of time, support, and resources. And she is loved. She is allowed to imagine a new future. Finishing school. Learning a trade. Even going to University to earn a degree. In I Corinthians 3:9 Paul writes that we are all co-workers together in God's service. Some of us plant. Some of us water. But God gives the growth. Paul reminds us that we are all called into the service of God, who cares for each and every one of us. What could the future be like when we work to plant and water together, and trust God to give the growth?

When you give to One Great Hour of Sharing, you invest in the futures of these girls and countless others like them. Your gifts go to provide education, vocational training, basic necessities, and much-needed community support. When we share the love of Christ in this way, we see lives transformed. Not just their lives, but ours as well. Because when we empower girls to build a life for themselves, we help God build a better world for us all.

As we invest in futures and serve as co-workers with God, the future becomes one of endless possibility and opportunity. What a great return on our investment!

