

UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST CONGREGATIONAL
Wallace, Idaho

Alice M.C. Ling, Pastor

September 13, 2020

Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost

SONG “*Amazing Grace*”

WELCOME AND ANNOUNCEMENTS

Good morning! And welcome to worship! It’s good to be together again, in the presence of God, as the people of God. We gather as the United Church of Christ Congregational in Wallace, and as members of the Body of Christ. We come together to sing God’s praise, listen for God’s Word, and offer our prayers in order that we can respond in faith and be sent again into the world on God’s behalf. Let us worship God.

CALL TO WORSHIP (based on Psalm 103)

Praise the Lord!

With all our hearts, we will praise God’s holy name!

Praise the Lord!

Never forget the good things God has done for us.

Praise the Lord, all the earth— everyone, everywhere!

We too will praise the Lord!

SONG “*It Is Well with My Soul*”

When peace, like a river, upholds me each day, when sorrows like sea billows roll,
Whatever my lot, you have taught me to say, “It is well, It is well with my soul.”
It is well with my soul, it is well, it is well with my soul

My sin – oh, the bliss of this glorious thought – my sin – not in part, but the whole –
Is nailed to the cross and I bear it no more. Praise the Lord! Praise the Lord, O my soul!
It is well with my soul, it is well, it is well with my soul

OPENING PRAYER

Peter asked Jesus, “How often should I forgive?”

Jesus answered him, “Not seven times, but seventy-seven times.”

What do we do when someone has harmed us?

How do we begin to do the hard work of forgiveness?

Jesus encouraged Peter to remember that he had been forgiven himself.

Forgiveness is a gift that God has given to us. Learning to share that gift of grace is the challenge of our lives.

We are asked to receive God’s forgiveness and give it to others. Let us pray:

Loving God, you ask us to forgive, and at times, we find that excruciating. You tell us to be welcoming, but we are tempted to close our hearts and our doors. You encourage us to treat others as we would like to be treated, but it is easier to judge others instead. Forgive us, God. Remind us of your mercy that you are always ready to give to us. Help us to receive your grace so that we may share it with others. In Jesus’ name, we pray. Amen.

(Susan J. Foster, *Before the Amen*)

SCRIPTURE READING Matthew 18:21-35

Then Peter came and said to him, “Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?” Jesus said to him, “Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.

“For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; and, as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, and payment to be made. So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.’ And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt. But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and seizing him by the throat, he said, ‘Pay what you owe.’ Then his fellow slave fell down and pleaded with him, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you.’ But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he would pay the debt. When his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. Then his lord summoned him and said to him, ‘You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?’ And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt. So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.”

SERMON

Is it just me, or do any of the rest of you have trouble counting? I’m not quite sure what my problem is, but recently I was making spiced peach jam, and when it comes to counting six cups of sugar, I get uneasy, and don’t trust myself. Was that four? Or just three? Couldn’t have been five and still be that small a pile. It’s even worse when I need seven for strawberry or raspberry jam. Granola calls for 8 cups of oatmeal, and when I’m adjusting for gluten free, I push it up to 9. I almost never start the measuring over, and I almost never feel confident of my count. Just me? Are you rolling with laughter now, or can I trust that someone knows what I’m talking about?

Actually, the more I think about it, the more I think that maybe it’s not counting that’s my problem. It’s doing more than one thing at a time, holding my place in the count while I reach back in for another scoop. God help me if I have to go open another package. I can count just fine. Seven’s a breeze. It would take me longer, but seventy-seven wouldn’t pose a challenge either. Not even seventy times seven, which for the record is 490 (I can multiply as well as count). I would definitely have to focus on paying attention if I wanted to count that high, but I know I could do it. So maybe the trick, when I’m counting over a period of time, or doing more than one thing at once, is to create a place to make a mark so that when I get lost, I can go back and check the record. I wonder if that’s what Peter did after Jesus answered his question: maybe if he really worked at it and things didn’t get too stretched out, he could keep track of the count up to seven, but once Jesus pushed the number out to 77, (or 70 times 7 depending on which translation you read) I wonder how he kept track then.

Or – just maybe – he listened to the answer and thought about it long enough to hear what Jesus was saying about keeping count. When it comes to forgiveness, don’t. Don’t count how many times you’ve already forgiven this one person for the same offense. Just do it. Forgive.

If only it were as simple as measuring sugar or oatmeal. Forgiveness is hard work. Very, very hard work. And it stands at the heart of the Christian faith. And in the center of the Christian community. In the section just ahead of the one Geoff read this morning, Jesus gives instructions about how much energy members of the church should put into maintaining relationships between members. Don’t let

grudges and resentments, disagreements and misunderstandings pile up between you like dirty laundry and rotten food. Do everything in your power to heal the relationship. Only after you've tried everything anyone can think of can you let it go, and let them go. To which Peter asks, how many times should I forgive? Since even they had a version of three strikes and you're out, it would appear that Peter thought he was being generous by pushing the number up to 7. That's a good, holy number, so let's try that. To which Jesus said, I'll see your 7 and add – or multiply by – another 70 – which I really do think means forget the counting and get on with the forgiving.

I don't know if it was meant to clear or muddy the waters, but as soon as Jesus answered Peter's question, he proceeded to tell a parable: the realm of God is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his slaves. He began the reckoning by having the one brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents. That sounds like a big number to my ears, especially when we're talking about a slave, but you need to know that one talent was worth more than 15 years worth of typical daily wages. Multiply that 15 years times ten thousand, and then listen to Tom Long when he says that "The situation is something like our saying that a lowly mail-room clerk owed the CEO of IBM a 'bazillion dollars'. It is hard to know who was more foolish – the slave, for getting into that size debt, or the king, for extending that credit line to a slave." (Matthew, page 211) The king knew he didn't have a prayer of seeing the money again, so he decided to cut his losses and sell off the slave, his family and all their possessions. The desperate slave fell to his knees and begged for an extension: have patience with me and I will repay you everything. Right. And just how do you think you're going to accomplish that? But something about the ridiculous plea from the slave moved the king to rethink his approach, and he proceeded to forgive the debt – every last penny of it – and set the slave free. No threats, no strings, nothing – just extravagant forgiveness, free and clear.

I really wish the story had stopped there, but no, Jesus went on. As the slave was dancing his way out the door, he ran across a second slave who owed him a hundred denarii, something like 3,000 dollars, not pennies, but a debt that had a reasonable chance of being repaid. Unfortunately, the first slave wasn't inspired to pay it forward, so he grabbed the debtor by the throat and snarled at him to pay what he owed. At which point, the second slave repeated exactly what the first slave had said to the king: have patience with me and I will repay you everything. In this scene there is no mercy, and the second slave is thrown behind bars to rot until he can repay the loan. Their fellow slaves reacted with all the outrage I feel when I read that part of the story. Long asks: "How could that miserable creep come rolling out of the king's palace on a highway of mercy, fresh from being forgiven the equivalent of the national debt, only to shut off the water to his own debtor?" (page 212) When the king heard about it, he was furious with the outrageous display of greed, and proceeded to throw the thankless slave into a torture chamber. Before we have a chance to get too far pondering whether the ungrateful slave got what he had coming to him, Jesus turns the tables on his disciples – and on us – by saying, so will God do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.

The bookends of today's text call us away from a tally sheet on which we keep score of how many times we have forgiven someone, and toward the call of forgiving a sister or brother from the heart. I think it's fair in the midst of all of this talk about forgiveness to ask what it is – and what it isn't. Forgiveness is not an anything goes kind of embrace of abuse or injustice, an expectation that someone will roll over and take more of what's being dished out. Forgiveness also isn't stuffing feelings of anger or hurt, betrayal or cruelty and pretending that everything's okay now. Forgiveness can take an excruciating amount of work, or in some situations and for some people it can just show up and burst out into the light of day. Forgiveness is about letting go of past hurts and resentments, sometimes so that relationship can be restored, but at least so that the trauma isn't allowed to live on into the future. The hurt needs to be released and left in the past.

Rabbi Harold Kushner tells the story of a woman in his congregation who came to see him. She was a single mother, divorced, working to support herself and her three young children. She said to Kushner, "Since my husband walked out on us, every month is a struggle to pay our bills. I have to tell my kids we have no money to go to the movies, while he's living it up with his new wife in another state. How can you tell me to forgive him?" Kushner answered her, "I'm not asking you to forgive him because what he did was acceptable. It wasn't; it was mean and selfish. I'm asking to forgive because he doesn't deserve the power to live in your head and turn you into a bitter angry woman. I'd like to see him out of your life emotionally as completely as he is out of it physically, but you keep holding on to him. You're not hurting him by holding on to that resentment, but you're hurting yourself. (Charlotte Dudley Cleghorn, *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Vol. 4*, page 72)

Sometimes forgiveness is for the sake of the one doing the forgiving as much as it's for the one being forgiven, if not more so. And sometimes forgiveness is born in a place that only God can see. Not unlike the king in the parable, forgiveness can be the gift of a grace that is not deserved, can never be earned and often isn't understood. Pure gift, unadulterated grace. I was blown away by a You Tube video of a young black man sitting in the witness stand of a courtroom in Dallas, speaking to the white woman on trial. Amber Guyger, an ex-police officer had just been convicted of murdering his beloved older brother, Botham Jean, in his own apartment. She entered Botham's apartment by mistake, thinking it was hers, mistook him for an intruder, and shot him in the chest. That part of the story was familiar to me, but I don't remember hearing that at her trial a year later, Botham's heartbroken younger brother Brandt took the stand and told Amber that he forgave her, that he wanted only the best for her, and that he wanted her to give her life to Christ, something that he said Botham would have wanted as well. And then, after asking permission from the judge, Brandt walked across the courtroom and embraced the woman who killed his brother. She clung to him, sobbing. She's serving time in prison now, and I can only guess at the difference his words and that hug made in her life, but I expect it was tremendous.

I don't know where that came from or how much effort it took for Brandt to say and do what he did in that courtroom, but I do believe it came from his heart. And I'm confident it was healing for both him and Amber. And perhaps even for others who witnessed it, and who have watched the video since then. There's no small amount of anger and hurt, betrayal and cruelty, resentment and misunderstanding floating around this world. But when we manage, by the grace of God to offer the gift of forgiveness to another, we release a little more of their power and reduce the stockpile at least a tad. We set our brothers and sisters free from the burden they're carrying, and we help restore the community of which we're all a part. It's not easy, but when we know how much we've been forgiven, it's the obvious, faithful and loving response. Amen.

PRAYER REQUESTS

-For the remembrance of 9-11.

-Dena had cataract surgery that did not go well, and the other eye is also scheduled for cataract surgery. She asks for prayers that these docs will come up with a fix that works and BOTH eyes will be healed

-Kasey is having surgery Thursday, part of her IUD is stuck

-Prayer requests for the Freiburger family...especially Rhay's healing physically and emotionally. -- Prayers for Sonia Vega family as they grieve her death.

Several of you requested prayers related to the fires:

-Prayers for all the fires to stop. And for relief from the smoke that is making us physically sick.

-Prayers for the fire fighters, those who have lost their homes, friends or family, livestock and pets.

-Prayers for the countless firefighters responding to all the fires in the west....prayers for the lost lives, the rebuilding processes and healing. Prayers for a change in the weather and some rain without lightning to help extinguish the fires.

Because of the intensity of those prayers and the enormity of the fires, I want to share with you a brief video we received from the officers of the United Church of Christ expressing their care and support. It ends with a prayer, and after that, I will continue with a brief prayer.

PASTORAL PRAYER

Holy God, hear the prayers of our hearts and minds, of our community, nation and world. We pray for healing for all those facing procedures and treatment, overcoming allergic reactions, searching for the correction that didn't come the first time. For those battling the coronavirus, isolated from loved ones because of risk, grieving the unfathomable loss of 193,000 people in this country, 917,000 worldwide, for those struggling to hold on to hope as it threatens to slide from their hands. We pray for two families traumatized by a car accident, left scarred and grieving and in need of comfort and care. We pray for our country, for the controversies and suspicion, division and hostility that tear at the fabric of who we are. As we pause once again to remember and grieve the loss of life nineteen years ago, on 9-11, we also remember the ways in which we came together in that crisis, paused our squabbling and reached for each other in the dark. Show us how to do that again, that through your wisdom and grace we might recognize what binds us together, honor the needs of all your people, and join as one to build a society of safety and kindness, justice and peace.

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

God has shown us the meaning of generosity in the beautiful diversity of creation, in the overflowing love of Jesus Christ, and in the never ending gift of the Holy Spirit! God has abundantly blessed us and called us to be a community that blesses others through the sharing of our love, our talents, and our material possessions. Let us rejoice in what we have been given and in what is ours to give.

SONG "There's a Wideness in God's Mercy"

There's a wideness in God's mercy Like the wideness of the sea;
There's a kindness in God's justice Which is more than liberty.

There's no place where earthly sorrows Are more felt than in God's heaven;
There's no place where earthly failings Have such kindly judgment given.

For the love of God is broader Than the measure of our minds;
And the heart of the Eternal Is most wonderfully kind.

BENEDICTION

May God bless you and keep you,
and may God bless you and give you away to others.

May God's face shine on you,
and your face reflect an irresistible good news.

May God lift up everything that is fallen in you,

and give you more pieces of peace than you alone can hold. Amen. (Maren Tirabassi, *Touch Holiness*)