

UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST CONGREGATIONAL
Wallace, Idaho

Alice M.C. Ling, Pastor

September 20, 2020

Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost

SONG “*Now Thank We All Our God*”

WELCOME AND ANNOUNCEMENTS

Good morning, my friends. And welcome again to worship. As we gather this morning, I give thanks for the cleansing, nourishing gift of some rain as well as the opening up of our air and sky. I give thanks for you, the people of faith who come together week after week for worship and prayer. And most of all, I give thanks for the God of love and grace who calls us together, who meets us here and who walks with us every day of our lives. Let us worship this great and glorious God!

CALL TO WORSHIP

In the prayers and the praise, in the words and the wonder:

we are given enough joy to live each day.

In the justice for the oppressed, in the unexpected generosity for the lost:

we are given enough compassion to use in service each day.

In the promises made to all, in the mercy offered to each:

we are given enough grace to share each day. (Thom M. Shuman, Lectionary Liturgies)

SONG “*Praise with Joy the World’s Creator*”

Praise with joy the world’s Creator, God of justice, love and peace,
Source and end of human knowledge, grace bestowing without cease.
Celebrate the Maker’s glory, power to rescue and release.

Praise to Christ who feeds the hungry, frees the captive, finds the lost,
Heals the sick, upsets religion, fearless both of fate and cost.
Celebrate Christ’s constant presence – Friend and Stranger, Guest and Host.

Praise the Spirit sent among us, liberating truth from pride,
Forging bonds where race or gender, age or nation dare divide.
Celebrate the Spirit’s treasure – foolishness none dare deride.

Praise the Maker, Christ and Spirit, one God in Community,
Calling Christians to embody oneness and diversity.
Thus the world shall yet believe when shown Christ’s vibrant unity.

CALL TO RECONCILIATION

We continue to believe that we must earn our way into God's heart. But God's grace is given to each of us, for all of us, freely, unconditionally, always. Let us open our lives to this mercy as we pray saying,

PRAYER FOR FORGIVENESS (in unison)

It seems we cannot decide, Cloud of Glory. We say we will live to serve others, but end up meeting only our needs. We claim to live in a way that honors Christ, but we do not take him to work, school, home. We believe that the gospel can transform lives, (at least, for those who need it – but surely, not us).

Forgive us, Presence of Peace. Instead of grumblers, may we be ambassadors of grace. Instead of continual complaining, may we carry compassion to the hurting. Instead of whiners, may we be workers with Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior, to reach out and bring the kingdom of God to everyone we meet.

Silence is kept

ASSURANCE OF PARDON

This is the good news: there is no ranking in God's kingdom. God graces everyone with the same gifts: mercy, restoration, new life.

God has kept the covenant. We have been forgiven, we have been made new people. Thanks be to God. Amen.

(Thom M. Shuman, Lectionary Liturgies)

SCRIPTURE READING Matthew 20:1-16 (New International Version)

“For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire workers for his vineyard. He agreed to pay them a denarius for the day and sent them into his vineyard. “About nine in the morning he went out and saw others standing in the marketplace doing nothing. He told them, ‘You also go and work in my vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.’ So they went. “He went out again about noon and about three in the afternoon and did the same thing. About five in the afternoon he went out and found still others standing around. He asked them, ‘Why have you been standing here all day long doing nothing?’ “‘Because no one has hired us,’ they answered. “He said to them, ‘You also go and work in my vineyard.’ “When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, ‘Call the workers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last ones hired and going on to the first.’ “The workers who were hired about five in the afternoon came and each received a denarius. So when those came who were hired first, they expected to receive more. But each one of them also received a denarius. When they received it, they began to grumble against the landowner. ‘These who were hired last worked only one hour,’ they said, ‘and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the work and the heat of the day.’ “But he answered one of them, ‘I am not being unfair to you, friend. Didn’t you agree to work for a denarius? Take your pay and go. I want to give the one who was hired last the same as I gave you. Don’t I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?’ “So the last will be first, and the first will be last.”

SERMON

Are there any of us who have not complained, maybe even whined at least a tad, when it felt like life wasn’t being fair? I can’t even pretend that I’ve never succumbed to that complaint, but if you have – if you’ve managed to avoid it before, maybe this year is the one that’s prompted even you to fuss because changes, cancellations and closures just don’t feel fair. One of our daughters-in-law regularly quotes her mother’s response to that complaint as being: I never promised you life would be fair; I promised you I’d always love you. I heard a different approach from an Old Testament scholar (Rolf Jacobson) who said that when his kids used to protest that something wasn’t fair, he responded by saying, the fair’s in August, it’s where they judge pigs. His kids don’t bring that complaint to him anymore.

I read that a few years ago, Sarah Brosnan and Frans de Waal, two zoologists at Emory University, decided to study where our reaction to unfairness comes from, if it’s a cultural add-on or hardwired in us. To help them study the question, they designed an experiment using capuchin monkeys. Pairs of monkeys were placed in adjacent cages where they could see each other, and trained to take turns giving small granite rocks to their human handler. Each time a monkey relinquished a rock, she received a piece of cucumber as a reward. Capuchins love cucumbers, so both monkeys were happy with the arrangement and gladly handed over their rocks. But then, the handler changed the rules of the

game. After a few fair and even exchanges, the handler rewarded the first monkey with a chunk of cucumber as usual, but gave the second monkey a grape—the equivalent of fine wine or caviar in the monkey world. Seeing that the game had just gotten better, the first monkey perked up, and very eagerly handed over another rock, expecting to receive a grape, too. But no — the handler gave her another piece of cucumber. To add insult to injury, the handler then gave the second monkey another grape for free! The results — which I understand are available on YouTube — were dramatic. The first monkey just about lost her mind. Not only did she refuse to eat the cucumber; she hurled it at the handler’s face. She then proceeded to bang against the bars of the cage, throw her remaining rocks in every direction, and make furious gestures at her grape-eating companion. Apparently capuchins aren’t alone in their clarity about what’s fair and what’s not. Similar experiments with other primates have yielded basically the same results. Scientists have also studied the development of fairness in human babies, and found that infants as young as nine months old will react quite strongly and negatively when they perceive unfairness. The studies confirm what most of us know instinctively: fairness is an idea that none of us need to be taught, but something we’re pretty clear about all on our own. (Debie Thomas, *Journey with Jesus*, “On Fairness”)

All of which brings us to the text we heard Christi read. I hear tell that there are people who are not offended by this parable, but I think they’re in the minority. So while I am not here to encourage an insurrection, I do understand why you might be inclined to throw your cucumbers at God before we get done considering the parable that clearly stands our hardwired assumptions on their head with its unsettling and uncomfortable questions about fairness. What it is, what it isn’t, and what we can count on from God.

The workers in the parable from today’s Gospel lesson lived a hard life, infused with a constant struggle to make ends meet. If they were lucky and got work each day, they could almost keep the pieces of their lives in touch with each other and make the ends meet – one day at a time. They were day laborers, so the hale and hearty got up every morning and headed to the marketplace where they knew the crew bosses would be looking for help. The grapes were perfect, ripe and firm and juicy – and today was the day for harvesting, so the landowner went out to the marketplace at dawn as expected and rounded up a crew to spend the day picking grapes. It only took a moment for them to agree on the usual day’s wage for this sort of thing, which for them was a denarius. It wasn’t big money, but it was enough to feed a small family for a day. So they went out and got to work.

More workers arrived at nine, more at noon, and again at 3. No one worried about this because the grapes were being picked, and the workers had heard the boss promise to pay the latecomers what was right. They made assumptions about the landowner’s math and kept working. Everyone was surprised to see yet one more crew show up at five, just an hour from the end of the day, but they kept picking and figured he’d make it right.

Finally it was quitting time. Since they’d put in a twelve-hour day, they were eager to collect their pay and go home, and were a little surprised to realize that the latecomers were going to get paid first – but they waited. And watched as those people who had worked one hour were handed a denarius. To say they were shocked would be an understatement, but they began to feel their blood pulse as their minds calculated what this meant. If the people who had worked one hour got a day’s wage, it seemed reasonable to think the day workers would get a week’s pay. So they began to think about what they could have for dinner. Maybe more than bread and a fish. A choice cut of lamb, a fine bottle of wine, one of those pastry’s from the bakery window, and some firewood for the stove.

When it was finally their turn in line, they held out their hands expectantly – and stared incredulously at the denarius that was placed there. One day’s pay. The same for twelve hours of labor as for one. The

text says they grumbled; I suspect there might be stronger words that could be used for what they said as they pointed out how long they had worked and how hard. To which the landowner said, I paid you what we agreed on. I have not done you wrong. I have not cheated you in anyway. Take what belongs to you and go; I've chosen to give to the last what I gave to you. Do you begrudge my generosity?

Do you begrudge my generosity? If we're going to be honest, yes, we do. We're offended because others are getting more than they deserve. We're angry that you've made them equal to us, and clearly they are not our equals. If you're going to play favorites, we want to be the favored ones – not these johnny come lately's that hardly broke a sweat. As Debie Thomas says, "...we know what fairness is, and we know how it's supposed to play out. Equal pay for equal work is fair. Equal pay for unequal work is NOT fair. Having our sincere efforts noticed and praised is fair. Having them ignored is NOT fair. Rewarding hard work and ambition is fair. Excusing sloth and sloppiness is NOT fair." ("On Fairness")

This parable is a hard one, and maybe we can tear it out of our Bibles and move on. Matthew's the only one who tells it, so that strengthens the case for hitting delete. But before we stomp off in disgust, let's listen to what Matthew – and his Jesus are trying to tell us. We're told it's a parable about the kingdom of heaven, about God's realm and God's ways and God's hope for our ways. We tend to hear it from the perspective of the first hired, the ones who stand at the front of the line. What about if we take a minute and try to listen from the perspective of the last in line, the ones hired last. Pablo Jimenez is a pastor in Puerto Rico, and he writes, "As a Latino, I have seen how day laborers stand in corners from the early hours of the morning, waiting for someone to hire them. I know that workers who are standing at the corner of the park, the market, or the hardware store in the early afternoon have probably been up since four or five in the morning. I also know that those who are not hired will probably have nothing to eat that night." (*Feasting on the Gospels, Matthew, Vol. 2, page 125*)

My study of this text this time around caught me up short, because I realized that I've assumed that the workers who were hired at 5 didn't show up until after 4. Maybe they slept in, played video games, shot pool, worked off a hangover, binged watched Netflix, but the story doesn't say that. It doesn't say that the owner hired everyone who was available every time he swung by the market. Maybe it's like a ball team where the strongest and most fit get picked first, and the weakest, least able, most unimpressive get picked last. Maybe some of them did sleep in, and maybe some of them were disabled and needed extra time to get their legs and arms working. Maybe some of them had to care for their mothers or their children before they could leave the house and go in search of work. Maybe some of them were mired in the deep dark blackness of depression, and it took them all day to talk themselves out from under the covers. I don't know any of that, and neither do you. I guess we have to trust God to have seen what we can't, and to know what we don't.

What I do know is that the landowner kept going back, and I found an interesting new piece of that waiting for me this year too. This story never says the harvest was plentiful and the laborers were few. The story never tells us the landowner needed more workers. It tells us that he kept going back to check on the workers who weren't working, and when he found them, he gave them work. And after they worked, he gave them what they needed to make ends meet – enough for one more day. Sort of like what we ask for every time we pray, give us this day our daily bread. The landowner made sure each and every one of those workers got precisely that. Some were more deserving than others, but all of them needed at least that.

I don't know that there's any reason to debate whether or not God is fair. Clearly, as this parable tells it, God is not fair; but what God is is generous. Attentive to the needs of all, both the responsible ones who show up early and work to the end of the day, and the late arrivals who show up with empty

stomachs and deep needs. God is generous and compassionate, and promises to send no one away hungry. We have to decide whether we're going to join the celebration of those who have received what's necessary to satisfy the needs of the day, even if it's more than we think they deserve. Or if we're going to grumble and fuss, walk away in resentment and envy, throwing away perfectly good cucumber because we didn't get grapes.

Amen.

PRAYER REQUESTS

Kasey is grateful for the prayers and support last week during her procedure. She's doing well.

She asks for continued prayers for her cousin Riyana

Dena had a second eye surgery on Thursday, and that eye is in recovery. The doctor has decided to redo the left eye on Oct 1, so there will be a third surgery.

For Ruth Bader Ginsburg and for our country

A general prayer for everything and everybody... these are scary times!

A prayer for voting to be open to everyone

Gretchen reports that the air is finally not too bad here in west Seattle, we are grateful for that.

Romy is moved in with 2 nice roommates, we are grateful for that.

Thankful for the rain!

Continued prayers for safety of the firefighters

Katie asks for continued prayers for our schools. We are grateful to have in-person classes and no coronavirus cases yet.

Christi asks continued prayers for nephew Rhay's healing and for both families involved in the accident

PASTORAL PRAYER

Holy and Beloved God, if ever we wondered, today's parable clearly reminds us that your ways are not our ways. There is much that we do not understand, a generosity of spirit that defies the logic we live by, a depth of compassion that sometimes feels reckless, a commitment to forgiveness that shatters our sense of the reasonable. Open our minds and our eyes to the ways that you live and move in this world, and teach us what you want from us and how you would have us live. Open our hearts to receive the bounty of your gracious, merciful love; let it put down roots and grow in us, filling us up and spilling over from us onto others. Help us to love with your love, to welcome with your welcome, to share our bread with the hungry, to receive and care for those you set before us.

You hear the prayers that we've shared with each other today, as well as the ones that we whisper to you in the silence of our own lives. We ask for healing and recovery – both of the body and of the soul. We pray for those who grieve the loss of loved ones, of homes, of work, of a sense of direction and connection to others. We continue to ask your protection on all those threatened by wildfires, especially the fire fighters who choose to put themselves in harms way in order to care for others. We give thanks for the start of another school year, safe this far, for teachers and administrators, staff, custodians and bus drivers who give so generously to encourage learning and growth.

Holy One, we continue to pray for our country, for the pandemic that continues to threaten, the storms and extreme weather that uproot and drown, burn and reduce to ash. In this moment, we are acutely aware of the death of one woman, Ruth Bader Ginsburg, and of the ways in which both her life and her death deeply impact the life of this country. We give thanks for her tireless work for justice and equality, for the rights of women alongside men, people of color, gay, lesbian, transgender, bisexual; for her insistence that we build bridges and coalitions, encouraging conversation and even friendship across great divides. May her memory be a blessing to her family and to us. Even as we remember her life, we are aware of the tensions that are even now building over her death: how, when and who should

replace her. We pray, O God, for calm and reason; that this moment not become one more reason to deepen our divides, but that by your grace, we might listen to one another and to you. We pray for this election season, for clarity about the issues before us, for a commitment to voting, and for a free and fair election. We pray for peace, that we find ways to negotiate and resolve our differences that do not include violence, that we honor and care for one another and learn again what it means to be “We the people”. Grant us wisdom and humility, courage and patience, respect and compassion. Help us to walk in your ways.

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

If you’ve been around the church in the past few weeks, you may have noticed some work going on. The first project involved trimming two trees on Fourth Street, one of which had a number of dead and bare branches that were making folks nervous, the other had branches leaning on the building. More recently, work has been done to repair and replace the cap on the chimney and repair the caps on the two partial walls on the front side of the building. What you probably can’t see is that inside the building, a portion of the kitchen ceiling has been repaired, and old tiles in the entry way have been removed. Once the new tiles arrive and are installed, the signs of some water damage will be erased. It feels good to be maintaining and caring for our building, and your gifts make that possible. So thank you for your ongoing generosity and support.

I’m also pleased to report that to date, we have received five gifts for the One Great Hour of Sharing, totaling \$435. Through those gifts, we assist the United Church of Christ in its work of development and disaster response around the world and in this country. Again, thank you for your generosity. When we share what we have on behalf of others and in God’s name, we build up the Church and serve God well. Thank you.

SONG “Great is Thy Faithfulness”

Great is Thy faithfulness, O God Creator, There is no shadow of turning with Thee;
Thou changest not, Thy compassions they fail not; As Thou hast been Thou forever wilt be.
Great is Thy faithfulness! Great is Thy faithfulness! Morning by morning new mercies I see;
All I have needed Thy hand hath provided – Great is Thy faithfulness, Lord, unto me!

Pardon for sin and a peace that endureth, Thy own dear presence to cheer and to guide;
Strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow, Blessings all mine, with ten thousand beside!...

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