

UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST CONGREGATIONAL
Wallace, Idaho

Alice M.C. Ling, Pastor

October 11, 2020

Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost

SONG “*Love Divine, All Loves Excelling*”

WELCOME AND ANNOUNCEMENTS

Good morning, my friends! And welcome again to worship. It is good to be here, to be gathered together as the people of God, to be knit together by the Spirit of God, to be held in love and in hope by the grace of God. Let us join our hearts and minds as we prepare, once again, to worship God.

CALL TO WORSHIP

Let us rejoice, for morning has dawned. A new day is born, and we are newly alive to enjoy it.

We celebrate the beauty of creation and the wonder of human family. We remember those whose love has shaped our lives and those whose struggles for justice have been unsleeping in spite of opposition.

We gather to worship God, to share prayers and gifts, to pledge ourselves to God’s work in the world.

May God bless us, so that what we do in this time together may be honest, sacred, and filled with hope.
(Maren Tirabassi, *Touch Holiness*)

SONG “*All Are Welcome*”

Let us build a house where love can dwell And all can safely live,
A place where saints and children tell How hearts learn to forgive.
Built of hopes and dreams and visions, Rock of faith and vault of grace;
Here the love of Christ shall end divisions:
All are welcome, all are welcome, all are welcome in this place.

Let us build a house where prophets speak, And words are strong and true,
Where all God’s children dare to seek To dream God’s dream anew.
Here the cross shall stand as witness And as symbol of God’s grace:
Here as one we claim the faith of Jesus:
All are welcome, all are welcome, all are welcome in this place.

Let us build a house there hands will reach Beyond the wood and stone
To heal and strengthen, serve and teach, And live the Word they’ve known.
Here the outcast and the stranger Bear the image of God’s face;
Let us bring an end to fear and danger:
All are welcome, all are welcome, all are welcome in this place.

CALL TO RECONCILIATION

We are good at rules: making them and then breaking them. Paul reminds us that, when we gain Christ Jesus as our Lord and Savior, we receive exactly what we need – forgiveness, grace, hope. Let us confess our sins to God, that we might know God’s healing love for us!

PRAYER OF CONFESSION (in unison)

If we were to name all the gods we have before you, Rock of Redemption, we would be here a very long time. We elevate politicians into saviors, though they are as broken as we are. We

misuse your name so much during the day, we have trouble speaking to you in prayer at night. We are so busy, we do not notice how creation witnesses to your goodness and grace.

Forgive us, God our Hope. Help us to let go of what we value most, so we may open our emptiness, our hearts, our lives to the healing and loving presence of Jesus, our Lord and Savior, Friend and Brother.

Silence

ASSURANCE OF PARDON

Persistently, patiently, lovingly, God pours out grace and joy into our lives, healing our brokenness, forgiving our sin.

Loved, we are sent to love; forgiven, we are freed to forgive; graced, we can offer our gifts to everyone we meet. Thanks be to God. Amen. (Thom M. Shuman, *Playing Hopscotch in Heaven*)

SCRIPTURE READING Exodus 20:1-4, 7-9, 12-20

Then God spoke all these words:

I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me.

You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth.

....You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the LORD your God, for the LORD will not acquit anyone who misuses his name.

Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work.

Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you.

You shall not murder.

You shall not commit adultery.

You shall not steal.

You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.

You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.

When all the people witnessed the thunder and lightning, the sound of the trumpet, and the mountain smoking, they were afraid and trembled and stood at a distance, and said to Moses, "You speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, or we will die." Moses said to the people, "Do not be afraid; for God has come only to test you and to put the fear of him upon you so that you do not sin."

SERMON

We have a close friend who retired from parish ministry a little more than five years ago. After a lengthy and generous career of serving churches and living in parsonages, she sorted and sifted through everything, giving a lot away and packing most of the rest of her belongings into boxes so they could be placed in storage. She took her clothes, a few books, and the bare essentials that would fit into one room and moved in with her father, where she spent five years accompanying him through the final stages of the aging process. He died in May, and she spent the next couple of months working alongside her youngest brother, sorting and sifting the pieces of both their parents' lives as well as the generations that came before them – until the house was empty and ready for sale. That was followed by two months of camping with a different brother while she searched for her own place to live.

Thursday, after more than 5 years of tending to other people's needs and agendas, all of the belongings she had tucked into storage were delivered to her new – small – apartment. Now she sits surrounded by the stuff of her life, and the not insignificant task of making sense of it all. What will she keep, and

where will she put it? What does she no longer need or want? What can she simply not make fit in this new, reduced space? Slowly, eventually, as those pieces begin to be resolved and clarified, so will the shape and color, design and purpose of her new life begin to come into view. She's estimating that the apartment may take until Christmas. I don't know if she has a timeline for the emergence of her new life, or even much of an outline for it, but she knows it will take time, and that Covid will slow it down, but eventually, piece by piece, the new day will dawn.

I wonder if the Hebrew people were in any way as trusting and confident as our friend is. As is usually the case, the road behind them was more clear than the one ahead. Their parents had passed on the stories of ancestors Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and how the promise of food to eat in Egypt had morphed into years of slavery and oppression. That last part they were painfully clear about, as well as how incredible it felt to put it behind them. They still marveled at the sight of the waters of the Red Sea crashing in on top of Pharaoh's army, and had only gradually begun to trust that they didn't need to be looking back over their shoulders any more. But after awhile, sorting and sifting what lay behind them wasn't enough; they needed to know what was ahead. Three months away from Egypt and they were getting more than a tad restless with the lack of a horizon, just rolling sand and endless wilderness as far as the eye could see. Where were they headed, and when would they get there, and what would life in the new land look like?

God spoke into that void as surely as God had already spoken into their captivity, their hunger and their thirst. Chapter 19 of Exodus tells us that the people left Rephidim, where we saw them last clamoring for something to drink. When they got to Sinai, God spoke to Moses from the mountain and gave Moses a message for the people: you've seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I rescued you from captivity. Well, the free ride is over. I'm not going anywhere, but I need you to obey my voice and keep my covenant; if you will do that, then you shall be my treasured possession out of all the people everywhere. When Moses laid the expectation in front of the people, they said, of course, everything that God has spoken, we will do. At which point, God proceeded to articulate the covenant, beginning with the Ten Commandments.

I wonder how you perceive those ten articulations of God's expectations of the beloved community. One writer (Craig Kocher) suggests we may hear them as divine finger wagging or moral hand slapping, and I'll admit that resonates with me a bit. A lot of us have a way of reverting into a rebellious adolescent when someone looks at us and says, thou shalt not! Having said that, I also have to say that I think seeing God wagging a finger in my face does a disservice to what God offers here. These commandments aren't given as threat or ultimatum, and God isn't any less merciful and compassionate on the other side of this moment than before. Rather, they are given as a way to make sense of their lives, both in relationship with God and with each other, and to provide some order and structure for the new day they were hungering for. One of the things that's been developing throughout the wilderness wandering is the transformation of a motley assortment of individuals into a nation and these commandments cement that dynamic. The first four of the ten directives address the vertical relationship between the people and God, and they're followed by six more that speak to the horizontal relationship between and among people. Now, every bit as much as then, it's not all about how we come to God individually and privately but how we live together that matters, the respect we offer each other, how we encourage and honor one another's wellbeing and safety, the quality of the relationships between us. Barbara Brown Taylor sums up what's going on in the Ten Commandments, saying it's as if God had said:

"Here is a way of life that works... Sink these ten posts in the center of your camp, hang a tent on them, and together you may survive the wilderness. Ignore them and you flirt with your own destruction. Guard your life together. Guard your life with me. Here are ten rules that will help

you do that. Please accept them as a gift from me.” (Barbara Brown Taylor, *Gospel Medicine*, page 48)

I hear God saying to the Hebrew people that if they want to know what their new life in the promised land is going to look like, they should take these ten commandments and start with them. Obviously, it's not a life that's going to be delivered to them, but one they're going to have a hand in shaping; but if they start with these, they'll be well on their way to living the life God envisions for them. And while they may not have arrived at the place and time God has surely promised, the more they practice living as God's people, and honoring God's covenant, even as they make their way through the wilderness, the closer they will be to living the life for which they hunger and that God has promised.

I wonder. We clearly aren't traveling around a desert wilderness with all of our belongings on our back, expecting to pick our next meal off bushes and wondering where our water will come from. And as far as I know, none of us are even sitting in the midst of a mountain of boxes that hold all of our earthly possessions, wondering where we might find our flatware, how we'll ever make a place for our books or a home for our hearts. But are there any of us who aren't looking at the horizon, wondering when dawn will break and home will surface? When we can even dream of seeing the end of Covid restrictions and cautions? We may long to get to November 4, but I have to tell you my hope is dim that the campaign fights will be over then or anytime soon thereafter. And while I resonate with the memes I see that are counting the hours until 2020 is in the rearview mirror, I don't honestly think we're going to flip a magical switch at midnight, so 2021 will enter and make everything better.

And so I wonder. When I'm not despairing of the state of the world, I wonder what truth these ten commandments have to offer us. And what difference it might make if we stopped arguing about where to display the granite markers that spell them out, and focused instead on writing them on our hearts and displaying them in our lives. I wonder what might happen if we planted these ten posts around the circumference of our life together, and hung our tent on them? If we invested more energy in asking how we can care for our neighbors than in protecting and asserting our rights? If we really put God first in our lives above everything else, would that make a difference in how we treat others? If we embraced the truth that it's not all about us and put intentional effort into caring for others as much as we care for ourselves? If we came before God with more of a sense of humility and awe, and lived with one another with respect and care, compassion and courage, engaged in the give and take of living side by side, ready when the time comes to set our needs aside for the sake of another? Would it help? Could it hurt to try? Since they were given to us as commandments, and not options for extra credit, I expect God would like us invest ourselves in walking in God's ways.

May it be so. Amen.

PRAYER REQUESTS

Prayers for healing for Nancy's cousin Stephanie who has had a number of back procedures and now has an infection

Geoff's oldest daughter Mary has just been diagnosed with Crones and is just starting treatment.

The food bank is doing well - they are providing for about 60 households in Wallace and a similar number in Osborn. The new service in Mullan has about 15 families so far.

Let the rain from the sky fall please God.

Continued prayers for firefighters battling the fires still going on

Prayers for all people that are struggling through cancerand the added stress of the Covid limitations they have had to deal with.

Prayers for Nancy for her physical and emotional health. Surgery is a tough thing and progress can seem slow to her, even though she is doing well.

Prayers that all the hunters stay safe and careful.

Prayers for Dena who broke two toes Wednesday night. Also, after three eye surgeries, her right eye seems better than it was, but she continues to seek healing and clearing in the left eye.

For a cure to the virus and a hope that we can all get back together at the church soon

PASTORAL PRAYER

Holy and beloved God, all creation sings your glory and bears your fingerprints. We marvel at the wonder and majesty, fragility and intricacy, strength and tenderness, abundance and beauty that surround us and give you thanks and praise for the ways in which your creative hand continues to work in our world. We bask in the gift these early days of fall have offered us, giving opportunity for hikes and bike rides, adventures and new discoveries. As pears ripen and we compete with deer for their sweetness, as leaves color and fall and flutter across property lines, as pumpkins and mums, skeletons and witches reappear, we give you thanks for the turning of seasons, the comfort of warm fires and playfulness of autumn antics. We praise you for the return of rain, the relief it offers to fires, the gracious long drink it provides trees and shrubs, rivers and lakes.

As the season of fall turns us back to school and learning, we continue to seek your protective care for all those who teach, who learn, who clean and support, drive buses and coach, giving thanks for the network of families and friends coming together to support at home learning. Keep them safe, and help them make wise choices to encourage learning and growth at every age.

As another hunting season opens and hunters head to the woods, we pray for safety and care, that whether they know the woods well or travel to new places to seek new game, all might return at the end of the day. As fire season continues, we pray for relief from the destruction, support for those who have lost loved ones and everything they owned, protection for those firefighters who place themselves in harms way in order to protect and serve others. In the midst of a record breaking hurricane season, we pray for all of those who have faced the destructive powers of wind and rain, storm surge and debris becoming projectiles. Give them shelter, support, the tools and resources they need to even begin to face into the devastation.

In this frustrating, wearying time of Covid and pandemic, of restrictions and cautions, we seek your wisdom and your guidance. We pray for the sick, the grieving, the lonely and isolated, the frustrated and impatient. Let us not grow complacent about hundreds of thousands of deaths, and help us fulfill whatever part is ours in slowing the spread. As flu season approaches, keep us safe, keep us careful, keep us mindful of the needs of those around us.

We pray to you, O God, as we make our way through this election season, and all of the challenges and complications that lie before us. Help us to sort truth from falsehood, to disagree with civility, to debate with integrity, to vote safely and in ways that are free and fair. And in all of this season of our discontent, we pray to you for patience and courage, for the healing of racial tensions and domestic terrorism, for wisdom and courage, leadership and strength, mercy and compassion.

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

We have a long tradition, one that predates me, of inviting donations to the church's Emergency Aid Fund on the second Sunday of each month. It's one of the many aspects of our routine that have been set aside in these weeks of online worship, but I want to bring it back to our awareness this morning, by

telling you about two requests I received over the summer. I think you know that the church's phone number is now on a cell phone that lives at our house, which allows me to be more available to the community. I received a call one day from a man who explained why he was stranded in Kellogg, and then said that another pastor had agreed to buy him a train ticket to his destination, and was even willing to take him to Spokane the next day, but he had no place to spend the night. Could we help? Using the money you've made available to me, I was able to respond over the phone and book a room for him, for which he was deeply grateful. A few weeks later, a woman called and described the car problems that had overwhelmed her and landed her beside the interstate in Wallace. Could we help? Through the Emergency Aid Fund, we provided her with two nights at the Brooks, a gift certificate at the 1313 and some groceries at Harvest Foods. I can tell you that both hotels I worked with over the phone gave us helpful discounts when I described the situation to them, and both people were deeply grateful. So thank you for your generosity in the past, and I invite you to consider further contributions to this valuable fund. As you do with other gifts, use an envelope or write on a check to designate it's for the EAF, and drop it in the mail slot or put it in the mail to the church. And thank you for the ministry that you make possible in our community and beyond.

SONG *“Leaning on the Everlasting Arms”*

What a fellowship, what a joy divine, Leaning on the everlasting arms;
What a blessedness, what a peace is mine, Leaning on the everlasting arms.
Leaning, leaning, Safe and secure from all alarms;
Leaning, leaning, Leaning on the everlasting arms.

What have I to dread, what have I to fear, Leaning on the everlasting arms?
I have blessed peace with my Lord so near, Leaning on the everlasting arms...

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