

UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST CONGREGATIONAL
Wallace, Idaho

Alice M.C. Ling, Pastor

October 18, 2020

Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost

SONG “*Blessed Assurance*”

WELCOME AND ANNOUNCEMENTS

Good morning, my friends! And welcome once again to worship! I don't know about you, but as I live and walk through these days, watching the news, doing my best to pay attention to what's going on around me, I often feel buffeted about and beaten down by the bad news that seems to come at us from every direction. It's tempting to want to withdraw and hunker down in a dark cave where I can wait out the storm. Instead I come here to worship with you, to a time and a place where I pray all of us can be reminded that we don't walk this road alone, but as part of a community of care and compassion. We come here to hear the great good news of just how deeply and dependably, graciously and generously God loves us, and is present and at work among us and through us even now. In this time of worship, we come together to hear again God's word for us and for our lives, so that we can commit ourselves once again to do God's work in the world, to share God's love, to reflect God's light, to live God's hope. Let us worship God together, that we might also serve God together.

CALL TO WORSHIP

Each morning, God's grace awakens us, each evening, God's peace cradles us.

Compassion is our constant companion, as we go through work, school, the day.

In every moment, God is present with us; God whispers words which can change our lives.

Justice is our faithful teacher, pointing to where we can carry out fairness.

When we find ourselves groping in the shadows, God's light will provide a way home.

We turn the corner, and hope is waiting for us; we return home, and find a feast prepared.

(Thom M. Shuman, Lectionary Liturgies)

SONG “*I Sing the Mighty Power of God*”

I sing the mighty power of God, That made the mountains rise;

That spread the flowing seas abroad, And built the lofty skies.

I sing the wisdom that ordained The sun to rule the day;

The moon shines full at God's command, And all the stars obey.

There's not a plant or flower below, But makes Thy glories known;

And clouds arise, and tempests blow, By order from Thy throne;

While all that borrows life from Thee Is ever in Thy care,

And everywhere that we can be, Thou, God, art present there.

OPENING PRAYER (in unison)

Steadfast Hope: when we want to make all the rules so we can win every game, you call us to your side, put your arm around us and whisper, 'play fair!' When we tremble in fear, worried that our lives are about to crash to the bottom, you place us in the hollow of your heart, and give us safety.

Word of Joy: when we would follow those who pretend to be our saviors to achieve their own ends, you remind us that we have been chosen to be examples of faith to others. When we

would fill our pockets with the treasures of temptation, you ask us to empty them, so we can become servants of hope.

Crafter of Faith: when others judge us on our backgrounds, education, looks, you teach us how to treat all people as equal, to welcome each person as our sister or brother. When we wonder how our needs, our hopes, our lives will be made known to God, you mention us, by name, in all your prayers. God in Community, Holy in One, we know you as Glory, Grace, Goodness, and lift our prayer to you. Amen. (Thom M. Shuman, Lectionary Liturgies)

SCRIPTURE READING Matthew 22:15-22

Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap him in what he said. So they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying, “Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with truth, and show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality. Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?” But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, “Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? Show me the coin used for the tax.” And they brought him a denarius. Then he said to them, “Whose head is this, and whose title?” They answered, “The emperor’s.” Then he said to them, “Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s.” When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away.

SERMON

I sometimes refer to myself as a slow learner, but I’m a whiz compared to the Pharisees, Sadducees, Herodians, and all the others who were out to get Jesus. They kept trying to test him, trap him, set him up – all of which focused on the ultimate goal of shutting him down. But time after consistent time, they were the losers. They were the ones who were trapped and set up. They were the ones made to look like fools. And not only did his answers make them look ridiculous, but simultaneously, he always found a way to make another point to his followers. He always found the teachable moment – at their expense – and every time it happened, they hated him a little more. And they vowed that next time, they’d get him good. Silly boys should have learned faster: there was no outwitting Jesus!

Take today’s passage for example. The Pharisees sent their disciples to Jesus; and to drive home the point of how invested they were in this effort, they went with the Herodians. The Pharisees didn’t do anything with the Herodians. This is like Chuck Shumer and Mitch McConnell putting their heads together to explore ways to accomplish their shared goal. The Pharisees were fastidious observers of the law, and despised everything about the Roman presence in their country; the Herodians, on the other hand, appear to have forged a set of alliances with Herod Antipas and the occupying Roman government. In any other world, they worked for opposite and opposing things, but in Jesus they had a common enemy, so they went together. The most effective traps are usually set with irresistible bait, so they started with flattery: Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with truth, and show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality. For most of us, that much sweet talk would have us eating out of the other’s hand, so the questioners figured it was time to set the hook: Tell us then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor or not?

Now to our ears that might sound like a simple, straight up, yes or no question, but everyone there knew it wasn’t. Jesus, in fact, recognized the malice dripping from their words. They were asking Jesus about a poll tax of one denarius a year that Rome required them to pay to support their own oppression. The Pharisees despised the tax and everything that went with it, and if Jesus encouraged them to pay it, they would accuse him of collaborating with Rome. They and the crowds would turn on him in a nano-second. If, on the other hand, he said no, they didn’t need to pay the tax, you can be sure the Herodians

would report his treason to Rome so fast he wouldn't know what hit him. There was nothing resembling mercy in Rome's response to treason. He couldn't win; no matter how he answered, they had him, so they just stood back and waited for him to drive the final nail in his own coffin.

I don't know how long Jesus considered his response, or what alternatives he pondered. If he'd been a candidate in our world and didn't like the question he'd just been asked, he likely would have ignored their question and answered the one he wanted to be asked. Jesus, on the other hand, was more inclined to ask than answer questions, so he turned things around, and asked his questioners for a coin. Now, the purists among the Pharisees would argue that they shouldn't even use the denarius because it was produced by Rome, but without a moment's hesitation, they pulled one out of their pockets and extended it for him to look at. When he asked whose head was on the coin and whose title, they answered, the emperor's – not wanting to read the actual inscription out loud: "Tiberius Caesar, august son of the divine Augustus and high priest". Tiberius Caesar might have thought he was divine, but they knew better. From the Jewish perspective, the coin was a graven image, and a bite-sized bit of blasphemy, and here they were holding it, and in the temple no less. They all looked at each other for a long few seconds, until finally Jesus broke the silence and said, Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's.

Over the years, this distinction has sometimes been read as Jesus setting up a dividing line that separates money and taxes, politics and worldly matters from God and faith and the spiritual realm; but as I read it, nothing could be further from the truth. Jesus does seem to be saying, go ahead and pay the tax; Caesar created the coin and now he wants it back – give it to him. But it's the second half of the statement that should leave us all at least a little unsettled, the part where Jesus said, give to God the things that are God's. And just what might those things be? If the coin bears Caesar's image, who or what bears God's image? The text tells us they were amazed by his response; after a moment's pause, they left him and went away, with more than a little to chew on. They were left to ponder on their own how to understand the distinction between the emperor's jurisdiction and God's jurisdiction.

We've read from the very beginning of the Bible, in Genesis 1, that human beings are made in the image of God. We have God's DNA flowing in our veins and God's fingerprints all over our lives; sure it may be more visible in some than in others, but each and every one of us were made in God's image. When I get to this text, I hear Jesus say that our whole lives should be "given" to God, who we are, how we live, the choices we make and the values we hold, all filtered through the love and grace, will and ways of God. Is there any part that Jesus would exempt from that instruction? Not as I hear it. Each of us has to discern for ourselves the specifics of what that means and how that looks, but for me it means, to the best of my ability, putting God first, striving to hear God's call, walking in God's ways, loving with God's love. Doing justice, loving kindness, and walking humbly with God. It doesn't mean withdrawing from the world in order to live alone with God, or dividing things up between "financial" and "spiritual," or "political" and "religious." As I hear Jesus, I think he's saying that God's realm encompasses all of it, finance, politics, and virtually everything else, including how we get along with others – or don't. Is it lawful to obey the emperor? Sure. And by the same token, how much more lawful is it to obey the God of love, justice, and mercy! To care first of all for the least of these, the most vulnerable of our neighbors, and to treat each other with honor and respect, not malicious, hypocritical questions meant to entrap.

As I work with this text this time around, it sounds and feels more pointed than it has other times when it's surfaced in the lectionary cycle. Given the election season we're in, the tensions and divisions that continue day after day to open up further and threaten to swallow us whole, I find myself wondering what difference it would make if we worked harder to walk through these days as bearers of God's image, and only secondarily as holders of positions, as members of parties and supporters of

candidates. It's not for a minute that holding convictions and supporting candidates isn't important, but none of that means setting aside who we are as people of faith. I regularly hear questions that are meant to entrap and slogans that are intended to ridicule, I hear quarrelsomeness and mean-spirited attacks. I see a lot of stridency and conviction, but not much compassion and conversation, and that troubles me deeply.

When reflecting on this text, Debie Thomas wrote: "As Christians, we don't have the option of fudging on the love and mercy of God for some "greater" political end result. We can't isolate our political choices and actions, as if they don't reflect who we are as image-bearers of our Creator. If everything belongs to God, then our spiritual lives and our political lives must cohere. They must not contradict each another. Which is to say: what is technically "legal" isn't always compassionate. What is politically expedient isn't always just, merciful, righteous, or life-giving. Our political leaders are not our gods. Our "rendering unto Caesar" must always take second place to what we render unto God.

So. When I look to Jesus to think about how to practice my faith in the political realm, I see no path to glory that sidesteps humility, surrender, and sacrificial love. I see no permission to secure my prosperity at the expense of another person's suffering, no evidence that truth telling is optional. I see no kingdom that favors the contemptuous over the brokenhearted and no church that thrives for long when it aligns itself with power." ("What Belongs to God", Journey with Jesus)

"Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's." What belongs to whom? To whom or to what do we pledge allegiance? Our friends? Our country? Our employers? The dollar? Our comfort and security? Or the God who created us to bear God's image to the world? Often all of that peacefully coexists, but when push comes to shove where do our loyalties lie? What image do we reflect in the choices we make, the business we conduct, the ways we live our lives, our interactions with others? Give to the emperor only the things that rightfully belong to the emperor. And give to God all that is God's. May it be so. Amen.

PRAYER REQUESTS

Thank you God for bringing moisture in every form..rain and snow to your earth..

For the Ed Champagne family: his wife's step-mom Francis passed away suddenly last Saturday from a massive stroke. Bring comfort to her dad Bob as he grieves this great loss.

For Christi's cousin Karen's brother, Kevin Chamberlain and his family. They are in the midst of danger in Colorado and the wildfires..at this moment facing evacuation and uncertainty.

Safe travel for Gretchen, Rick and Romy as they travel to and from Seattle to vote

A prayer for a friend of Gretchen's in Iowa getting her life back on track.

A prayer that the rest of the year will bring no more bad things for this country

PASTORAL PRAYER

Holy and gracious God, we come to you yet again with hearts full to overflowing for the beauty and wonder of the world that you have given us to inhabit and protect. As the seasons turn and we move further into fall, we give thanks for the abundance of the harvest, for crisp mornings and falling leaves, for scurrying squirrels and scavenging deer that scramble to stock up for winter, for warming fires and sheltering homes that call us in and draw us together. We are especially grateful for the moisture that falls on our land, perhaps for rain more than snow, but grateful for all of it, and the ways in which it quenches the thirst of trees and land, deadens fires and promises the return of new life. We give you thanks for families that celebrate the gift of time together, and seek safe travel for all those who are away from home.

As wild fires continue to rage and consume, to expand and threaten, we pray yet again for safety, protection, shelter, a reduction of wind and increase of rain. Hearing the names of one family who sits

in harms' way, poised to flee if the call comes, we lift before you all whose homes and livelihoods are at risk, those who have already left home and those who fear they may yet need to go, those who have lost everything and those whose homes have been spared. We pray for the safety of firefighters who put themselves in danger every day, for those who don't dare turn to shelters because of Covid fears, for those who had just begun to rebuild from an earlier fire only to face destruction again. We pray also for all of the communities that have been devastated by hurricane after hurricane, soaking rains and pounding winds. We need your compassion and mercy, but we also need to find ways to care for one another. Show us, O God, how to widen the shelter of our love and expand the depth of our care.

We also continue to pray for our country in these ongoing days of danger and disagreement. As the number of Covid cases spike around the country, we pray for those who are sick, fighting for their lives or working to overcome the lingering effects of the virus, for health care workers who grow weary and despair their inability to do enough, for families separated to keep one another safe, and for those who grieve the loss of loved ones. Pour out your wisdom upon us that we might make choices that encourage good health and minimize risk. We pray for our political system, for the fast approaching election day, for tensions and hostilities that threaten and demean our life together. Even as we pray and work for a free and fair election season, we also seek your wisdom in healing the chasms of hostility that divide us. Open our ears and our hearts to listen to one another. Lead us in resolving our differences without violence and detailed plans of destruction. Help us to rediscover and rekindle the unity that has grown and can again grow from our differences, binding us together, adding color and depth, diversity and beauty to the fabric of our life together.

Hear our prayers, O God, 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

About a year ago, a broken sewer vent was repaired, but in order to do that, a hole had to be cut in the kitchen ceiling. Most of us weren't even aware it was there, but fortunately the Trustees didn't lose sight of it and had the ceiling repaired this summer. Recently when Lou was at the church to be recorded reading scripture, she heard us talk about needing to complete the task and get the ceiling painted, and volunteered to do the work. And as of this last week, she and Iver have completed the project, leaving the kitchen ceiling clean and white and without signs of a patch. I love the way that works around this church. Let someone know there's a need and it's taken care of; sometimes even before we let people know about it. You are generous and invested, ready to step up and give of yourselves. You share what you have and who you are within the church and well beyond, into the community and the world. Thank you for all that you give, for all that you do, for all that you are.

SONG "Take My Life and Let It Be"

Take my life and let it be Consecrated, Lord, to Thee;
Take my moments and my days – Let them flow in ceaseless praise,
Let them flow in ceaseless praise.

Take my hands and let them move At the impulse of Thy love;
Take my feet and let them be Swift and beautiful for Thee,
Swift and beautiful for Thee.

Take my will and make it Thine – It shall be no longer mine;
Take my heart – it is Thine own, It shall be Thy royal throne,
It shall be Thy royal throne.

BENEDICTION

May you love God so much that you don't love anything else too much;
And may you fear God enough that you need fear nothing else at all.