

UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST CONGREGATIONAL  
Wallace, Idaho

Alice M.C. Ling, Pastor

October 25, 2020

Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost

SONG “Jesus Loves Me”

WELCOME AND ANNOUNCEMENTS

Good morning! And welcome, my friends, to worship as the United Church of Christ Congregational. We gather this morning in that strange time of year when snow and freezing temperatures have arrived with enough fanfare that there’s no doubt about their presence. Yet, many leaves cling to their branches and the tamaracks have yet to turn; pumpkins and mums are displayed everywhere that they aren’t covered with snow. We know fall continues, and yet, for today, it’s paused by winter’s greeting. As we gather for worship, I pray you’re warm and safe; and able to feel the warmth and grace of God as well as the love and care of our community. Truly God is with us, even as God calls us together to hear the Word of God, to listen again for God’s call for us and our lives so that we can commit ourselves to witness and service, prayer and discipleship in Christ’s name and in the world that God so dearly loves.

CALL TO WORSHIP

Let us start this service well, by reminding ourselves: That it is not we who chose Christ,

**but Christ who chose us,**

That we are not here because of our goodness

**but because of Christ’s grace,**

That we are not here to enlighten ourselves,

**but to allow Christ to enlighten us,**

That we have not come to be entertained

**but to worship God with heart, soul, mind and strength.**

(Bruce Prewer, <http://www.bruceprewer.com/>)

SONG “Joyful, Joyful, We Adore Thee”

Joyful, joyful, we adore Thee, God of glory, Lord of love;  
Hearts unfold like flowers before Thee, Opening to the sun above.  
Melt the clouds of sin and sadness, Drive the dark of doubt away;  
Giver of immortal gladness, Fill us with the light of day.

Thou art giving and forgiving, Ever blessing, ever blest,  
Wellspring of the joy of living, Ocean depth of happy rest!  
Thou our Father, Christ our Brother – All who live in love are Thine;  
Teach us how to love each other, Lift us to the joy divine.

PRAYER OF INVOCATION (in unison)

**The whole law and the prophets depend on these two commandments. “Love the Lord, your God with all your heart with all your soul and with all your mind. And love your neighbor as yourself.” Lord, let this be. Show us how. Let your love be the lens that lets us see, the search that takes us where we go, the power that enlivens our lives, the light that points to the path, and the very grace that saves us. O God, kindly fill us with your love. Amen.**

(Anne Osdieck, Saint Louis University.)

## SCRIPTURE READING Matthew 22:34-46

When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?" He said to him, "'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."

Now while the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them this question: "What do you think of the Messiah? Whose son is he?" They said to him, "The son of David." He said to them, "How is it then that David by the Spirit calls him Lord, saying,

'The Lord said to my Lord,

"Sit at my right hand,

until I put your enemies under your feet"?"

If David thus calls him Lord, how can he be his son?" No one was able to give him an answer, nor from that day did anyone dare to ask him any more questions.

## SERMON

Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest? Sounds simple enough. Open, inquisitive, from someone who wants to know how to focus and prioritize their behavior in order to be fairly certain that, even if they trip, stumble or fall somewhere along the way, they will at least have gotten the most important part right. But even if we read today's passage out of context, we still have a clue that things are not quite what they appear because we're told the question was asked to test Jesus. Maybe not so much an engaged and eager student, and more a tripping hazard in the hope that they can slow him down and lower his standing in the polls. But if we put the passage back in context, and pay attention to the mounting tension between Jesus and the Pharisees, the ways they've been sparring with each other for months and miles; and that now Jesus has entered Jerusalem on what we think of as Palm Sunday, and one by one, he's silencing the opposition, hostilities have raised the threat level to the top of the scale. On round three of his theological exam, the Pharisees have sent in their big gun in the hope they can finally have him bound, gagged and out of the picture, preferably before he sees what's coming. As one scholar writes, "The Pharisees take their best shot and it misfires. Jesus fires back and no one (even) bothers to reload." The lawyer has asked a "Do-You-Have-A-Clue-About-Being-Jewish? question," and "Jesus clearly has (more than) a (little) clue about being a Jew". (Richard Swanson)

Both from our reading of the Old Testament and the Gospels, we tend to think that in biblical times the Jewish faith was all about laws. There's no doubt about the fact that a lot of the tension between Jesus and the Pharisees was precisely about the law, what it means, where it draws lines, what it expects and allows, and why in the world he so stubbornly insists on breaking the laws that the law-keepers think are central. The objective truth of the matter is that they counted 613 commandments as making up the law; 248 of those told people what they could do and the remaining 365 told them what not to do. It sounds like a lot, but I have a hunch that if we took a serious look at the laws of the state of Idaho and added those to the laws of the federal government, we'd be well above the number 613. And no matter what number you work from, picking one to sit at the top of the pyramid sounds more than a little daunting, especially when the test comes from an opponent who at best wants you gone, and at worst, wants you dead and buried once and for all.

Once again, Jesus' opponents were foiled. Not only did he, without taking a breath or blinking even one eye, know which law unquestionably stands at the head of the line every time, but he did it without leaving them any room to accuse him of having said the other 612 laws were unimportant. He made it exquisitely clear that they all hang together as one coherent whole; he melded two laws into one and reduced them down to one word: love. In effect, he told them "the whole notion of the law is about

love, not rules, about really loving God and one's neighbor, not about figuring out how to avoid stepping on cracks in the legal sidewalk". (Thomas Long)

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. They knew those words. They were the second half of the *Shema* from Deuteronomy 6, words that every observant Jew recited every morning and every night, every day. They said it more often than we say the Lord's Prayer. Even if they hadn't tried to memorize it, it was so ingrained in them by sheer repetition that it just rolled off their tongues, sometimes with immense meaning, sometimes when their mind was a hundred miles away. It was part of each and every one of them. Before anyone had a chance to comment or breathe, Jesus went on and quoted Leviticus 19: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. And then he tied a bow on the package by saying, everything else in all the law and the prophets hangs on on these two commandments.

I'm pretty sure Jesus' opponents didn't buy his answer, but they also couldn't find a way to argue with it. He had silenced them for the moment, but the disagreement wasn't over. And what about us? Do we buy it? How ready are we to hang all of the rules and regulations of our lives under the umbrella of love, love of God, neighbor and self? Are we confident, or even hopeful, or even open to giving love a try when it comes to solving all of the problems of 2020? I know, there's a difference between the expectations of our faith and the laws of our land in a way that wasn't really true for the Jews; but if we asked Jesus, I'm not sure he'd draw the distinctions as clearly as we'd like to. If we're people of faith, I don't believe we get to compartmentalize our lives or our hearts, and say this part is for love and this part is about law and order. As I listen to him, it seems Jesus wants love to always drive the bus. The challenge comes in figuring out what that means in each and every situation.

I expect our first objection will be to challenge how genuine love is if it is ordered by a commandment. We feel what we feel, and God knows better than any of the rest of us that there are people out there that we simply don't like, and unless God strikes us with lightning, its highly unlikely we ever will. And yet, in the Bible, the notion of love is just as much a verb as it is an emotion, something we decide to do regardless of how we feel. Jesus calls his followers to make a commitment to live in love that's really seen as a setting of the heart, like the way we set a GPS; something we choose to do irregardless of how we feel about the person in front of us, a way we freely choose to live our lives.

I don't for a minute want to suggest that committing our lives and positioning our hearts in a love setting is always going to be easy, but it seems to me that we've got a better chance of pulling it off if we start with the commandment that Jesus said comes first: to love God with everything we have in us, heart, soul and mind. The more we love God, live and move in God, walk beside and invite God close, allow ourselves to experience the extravagant love and grace of God being poured into our lives, the more that love is going to color, shape and spill out into our interactions with others. And in countless places, scripture assures us that one of the best ways we can express our love for God is in the ways we care for our neighbors. The three loves, God, neighbor and self, are so bound up in each other that it almost becomes a chicken and an egg question; we're never quite sure where one begins and the other ends; in their best, most faithful form, they create one love, each adding to and enriching the other.

Having said all of that, I suspect that most of us have serious questions about where love is called for, and whether there aren't times when it's not even an appropriate or constructive response. My response to that would be to challenge us to broaden our understanding of what love is. It isn't always soft and warm; sometimes it's a challenge, a limit, an expectation, a word that pushes back, not to hurt or harm, but to encourage the best in another person. Love listens for the anger and hurt that came before the damage another has done; loves says no when it needs to, but also offers itself as a companion and coach.

I was drawn to a story recently about a community that's working together to express their love of their neighbors by providing firewood. A small church community created a wood pantry, a variation on the food pantry we're familiar with. A small group of volunteers work together to cut, split, stack, truck and restack wood as people request it; last winter, they gave away about 7 cords of wood, and are set and ready to go again this winter, saying they'd be grateful for some younger help, but they'll keep going as long as they can.

Love can look like a lot of different things. It can be firewood or bags of groceries, it can be phone calls or a place for a person to sleep in out of the cold, it can be a ride to the doctor or crossing the street to say hi to someone everyone else avoids. There are other places where I don't know what love looks like, so I pray: God, show me how to love the person that, if I'm being honest, I'd rather hit up side the head with a 2x4; tell me what it means to love the 524 children that have been separated from their parents, parents who have yet to be found; lead us all in listening and going the extra mile, filling in chasms and healing divides, while insisting that violence and abuse, racism and oppression come to an end.

Living in love, committing ourselves to love God with all of our heart, all of our soul and all of our mind, and our neighbors as ourselves, setting our hearts to live and walk, serve and care along the path of love is meant to be a way of life. One that will become more clear and more natural the longer we walk in that way. And we can know, without a doubt, that every step of the way, God in Christ will accompany us, guide us, lead us and empower us. Thanks be to God.

#### PRAYER REQUESTS

Please pray for the spike in COVID cases in Coeur d'Alene and in the Valley, that more people will wear masks more often, and all of us will do all we can to flatten the curve.

For those women and men dealing with breast cancer.....thankful it is in the national spot light and the medical progress continues to avail a better survival rate.

For Christi's cousin Clyde Horning who is battling liver cancer and awaiting a transplant...for safe travels back and forth to Seattle's Harborview Medical Center.

For the homeless in the changing of the weather season...that they may find warm shelter and a helping hand.

#### PASTORAL PRAYER

Holy and beloved God, we marvel at the great good news of your love for us. Many of us carry a ready awareness of the ways in which we have failed or disappointed you, been distracted or too comfortably complacent to respond to the needs of your people, and yet you love us,. You believe in us and in the gifts and strengths you've planted within us, and so you call to us, beckon us to love you, to walk with you and to join you in caring for our neighbors near and far. Show us how. Teach us to love as you love, to share with others the wondrous mercy and grace that you so freely pour upon us, to encourage second chances, to extend hospitality, to welcome the stranger, to look for your image in all of the faces we see.

Loving God, we come to you yet again carrying the needs of the sick and the struggling. We pray for all those who battle cancer, who recover from surgery, who seek your healing touch. We pray for those who have been infected by the coronavirus, for hospitals that are full to overflowing and staffs that work themselves to the point of exhaustion to care for the sick. Give us wisdom to know what we can do and how we can make a difference, and show us, O God, when to set aside our rights and freedoms for the sake of the community. We pray too for those who feel the effects of isolation, of separation, of restriction. Remind us of those for whom life has become a lonely, dark place and send us to shine your

light and usher in your love, that together, we might walk through these days – not alone, and confident that a new day awaits on the other side.

We pray as well for our country, for the wildfires that continue to rage, the aftermath of hurricanes and the destructive power of wind and too much rain. As the countdown of days between now and November 3 continues, we pray for our nation: for those who are campaigning, organizing the details of voting booths and mail in ballots, fielding reports of scandal and foreign interference, and committing to vote. Walk with us through the tensions and accusations, threats and risks of these days; help us to be people of kindness and love, peace and hope, that we might come through on the other side a stronger, wiser, more united people. Keep us attuned to your will and your way; help us to walk with you in faith; and to set our hearts on your path of love.

Hear our prayers, spoken and unspoken. And hear us as we join together in the prayer that Jesus taught: 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 calls 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 “*Lord, I Want to be a Christian*”

Lord, I want to be a Christian in my heart, in my heart;

Lord, I want to be a Christian in my heart.

In my heart, in my heart, Lord, I want to be a Christian in my heart.

Lord, I want to be more loving in my heart...

Lord, I want to be like Jesus in my heart...

BENEDICTION

The world now is too dangerous and too beautiful for anything but love.

May your eyes be so blessed you see God in everyone.

Your ears, so you hear the cry of the poor.

May your hands be so blessed that everything you touch is a sacrament.

Your lips, so you speak nothing but the truth with love.

May your feet be so blessed you run to those who need you.

And may your heart be so opened, so set on fire,  
that your love, *your* love, changes everything.

And may the blessing of the God who created you, loves you,  
and sustains you, be with you now and always. Amen.

*(Black Rock Prayer Book)*