

**UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST CONGREGATIONAL
Wallace, Idaho**

Alice M.C Ling, Pastor

November 15, 2020

Twenty-fourth Sunday after Pentecost

SONG *“All People that on Earth Do Dwell”*

GREETINGS AND ANNOUNCEMENTS

Good morning, my friends! And welcome again to worship. It’s good to gather together as the people of God in the presence of God. I’m pleased this morning to share with you a gift that I received this week from the Council of Conference Ministers of the United Church of Christ. The leaders of the 36 Conferences of the UCC have again put together a worship service for us to use as we choose in our online worship. They did this once last spring, and as I did that time, I’m sharing parts of their words with you today and interspersing them with my own. Specifically, the first portion of this service comes from Conference Ministers in a variety of places around the country, and then I’ll come back in and offer our prayer as well as some thoughts on stewardship. I appreciate the reminder in a time like this that we are connected to something bigger than us and serve alongside more people than we can see or imagine. I celebrate being part of the Church with you as well as with our siblings in Christ throughout the United Church of Christ. Let us worship God together.

CALL TO WORSHIP

Gather near you gifted people; you beautiful people; you wonderful people. Gather near for you are Beloved. (Gather even closer if you feel you are not.) Come gather in this place / no place sanctuary so that we can celebrate and honor the God of every place. We are both near and far; close and distant; together and apart, yet known and loved and treasured and held and blessed by a God who created us as a gift to the world. Gathered in this time of sanctuary, may we recognize and celebrate the gifts that are present here and ask for God's guidance as we discern how to share them. Gather near you gifted people; you beautiful people; you wonderful people. Gather near for you are Beloved. (Gather even closer if you feel you are not because the good news for today is that you are).

(Rev. Mike Denton, Pacific Northwest Conference UCC)

SONG *“I Will Sing of Your Love, Love, Love”*

Christopher Grundy

A PRAYER OF DAILY THANKSGIVING

I thank you Love, for the gift of this day: for its possibilities, for its challenges, for all that will draw me to you and your creation, in the work and rest that is your gift to me.

I thank you that the breath of life flows in and out of me as a gift not of my making but of your design, that I may remember your inspiration and call in each moment of each second, of each hour.

Let me now attend with a thankful heart to Your forming work that I may be molded Into whatever expression of love you desire. And in this may your highest hope be my deepest desire; formed by you, O Love, for the healing of the world. Amen. (Rev. David Long-Higgins, Heartland Conference, UCC)

SCRIPTURE READING Matthew 25:14-30

“For it is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them; to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went

away. The one who had received the five talents went off at once and traded with them, and made five more talents. In the same way, the one who had the two talents made two more talents. But the one who had received the one talent went off and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money. After a long time the master of those slaves came and settled accounts with them. Then the one who had received the five talents came forward, bringing five more talents, saying, 'Master, you handed over to me five talents; see, I have made five more talents.' His master said to him, 'Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.' And the one with the two talents also came forward, saying, 'Master, you handed over to me two talents; see, I have made two more talents.' His master said to him, 'Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.' Then the one who had received the one talent also came forward, saying, 'Master, I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed; so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours.' But his master replied, 'You wicked and lazy slave! You knew, did you, that I reap where I did not sow, and gather where I did not scatter? Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and on my return I would have received what was my own with interest. So take the talent from him, and give it to the one with the ten talents. For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away. As for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'

SERMON *"Thank God for Our Talents"*

This New Testament reading is from the Gospel of Matthew, and its known as the parable of the talents. It has traditionally been interpreted as a message about responsible stewardship, since a talent was a rather large sum of money. The theme of the departing and returning master was dear to the early Christian community because it reminded them of Jesus' departure and expected return.

The story has undergone several transformations in its journey from Jesus' original parable to the version that we now read in Matthew's gospel. A careful reading raises some disturbing elements that are often overlooked. One such element is the character of the master in the story. The absent master is called "hard" or "severe". We can tell in his treatment of the third servant that he's a severe man. I think this calls into question the understanding by some that the master represents God. Also to the Torah-abiding Jews to whom this story would have originally been told, the master's approval of receiving interest on the loans would have characterized him as no respecter of God's laws – laws which strongly discouraged profit-making from loans.

There can be no doubt that when Jesus told the story, the morality of the absent master was questionable. It is therefore not helpful to identify the master as either Jesus or God. A more likely interpretation is that the "hard" master in the story is a characterization of the harsh social and economic realities that people faced at that time. The primary focus of this parable should be the behavior of the third servant who does nothing with the talents that he has been given. What he does because of his fear is what is brought into question by Jesus' story. He is rebuked for not acting boldly, despite the danger. Cautious maintenance of the status quo is not applauded here in this story!

The early church would have found this story very meaningful because of the persecution they faced. I think it must be just as meaningful today, as we are called to think about how we worship together while keeping the Body of Christ, the community healthy and safe. The story is a call not to lose heart but to act boldly for Christ. It provides both a social criticism of unjust times and a warning against being too cautious, and encourages boldness and creativity in the face of systemic injustice.

So that's the scripture. And I don't know about you but this parable by Jesus has always been one that left me scratching my head. It seems to suggest some kind of investment crisis: the wealthy man gives each of three servants a very large amount of money – and believe me it was a whole lot of money. A “talent” was a sum of money equal to roughly twenty-years of wages for a day laborer. In today's currency, the sums granted to each servant would be somewhere about at least half a million dollars. Like I said, a whole lot of money. And the servant who is not seen as trustworthy is the one who simply buried the whole shebang and returned to his master exactly what he had been given to him. The master calls him a “wicked and lazy.” He did not do anything with the talents that the master had provided him with. So he is cast out “where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

Now, as I read this parable, I couldn't help but apply our modern definition of the word “talents” as gifts – not necessarily of cash, but rather of abilities – true gifts from God. Perhaps we can think of our talents as God's own currency. Reading the parable from that viewpoint, it seems that the untrustworthy servant is the one who does nothing with the gifts that he has been given. The first two servants take what they've been given and use it to increase the gift many times over.

As I was thinking about talents as gifts from God, I couldn't help but think that all of us have gifts – that each of us has talents that God has graced us with. Maybe our gifts are not as extraordinary as others but God has given talents of our own. And I think we are all called by God to use our gifts, our God-given talent to move this world just little bit toward the kind of world that God envisioned at creation... It seems to me, today, that this reading that speaks to us of talents, the gifts that we've been given by God ... I think they challenge us to look at what we are doing with our talents, what we're doing with our gifts. So, I'd like you to take the piece of paper – right now - and write down what your gifts might be. And when you've got one or two listed, I want you to hang it on your refrigerator and when you get a chance, talk about it with the person or people with whom you are sharing your safe place or phone a friend. Perhaps the two of you might strategize about how your gift could be used to build up the kin-dom of God. How your gifts could be shared with the church in a way that would benefit this Body of Christ. I'd like you to remind yourselves daily that God has gifted you and that your gifts can be used to partner with God to create the Beloved Community.

You know, it seems as if we are living in a time when God's kindom seems so far away. You know, when things will be as the Prophet Isaiah envisioned them: when the wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid; and the calf and the young lion and the fatling together; and a little child shall lead them. You know, we won't need to worry about hunger or oppression or racism in this world of God's kindom. We won't have to worry about senseless gun violence in the streets – perpetrated by our neighbors with too many guns or by the forces who take an oath to protect and serve. A time when all lives will matter because Black lives finally do.

You may think that what we do with our talents can't possibly make a difference in the world. But just imagine what the world would be if everyone used their God-given talent to make the world a better place. At that time, when that comes, Isaiah's prophecy will not seem so fantastical.

As you leave this worship service, let us all remember with thankful hearts, all that God has given to us, and let us rededicate ourselves to the building up God's realm here on earth. Amen.

(Rev. Marilyn B. Kendrix, Southern New England Conference, UCC)

PRAYER REQUESTS

For the residents of Florida, the Carolina's that have been effected by the hurricanes and flooding. For courtesy and care towards others as the virus continues to increase....life is too precious to be anything but that way.

Clearly, the political tension in our country is of concern to many. While we don't all see the situation the same way, I expect we are all uneasy about the situation we find ourselves in. One of you has asked for "Continued healing for our nation and protection for the incoming administration." Another has asked that we "please pray that (President) Trump will come to his senses before more people are dead because of his ego." In the midst of all of that, I pray that we work to remain respectful of each other in the midst of our differences.

PASTORAL PRAYER

O Holy One, you are indeed a generous God. We give you thanks for the abundance of gifts that you lavish upon us, some large and spectacular, obvious for all to see; others small and ordinary, so woven into the everyday fabric of our lives that we fail to recognize them for the gifts they are and the ways we carry your fingerprints. We thank you for our ability to untangle and resolve complicated conflicts, to soothe frayed nerves, to create a work of art or piece of jewelry, to play a flute, handbells, the piano or sing a song; for the ability to open new worlds to students through the patience and practice of teaching; for the ability to fix broken things – furniture and glasses, bicycles and cars, relationships and hearts; for the laughter that eases tension, the willingness to listen to another's story, the comfort someone knows simply because we're within reach. For our willingness to share a cup of soup, write a note, offer a ride, stop to say hello, speak a word of welcome, say no in the presence of abuse or a misrepresentation of the truth, thank you. Open our eyes to recognize the gifts you have planted within us; give us the courage to use them, the openness to share them, the humility to put them to work so others might know kindness and joy.

We pray, O God, for those who suffer and struggle across our country and throughout the world. We pray for the residents of Florida and the Carolinas, the most recent victims of this year's endless string of hurricanes and tropical storms; even as we remember the Gulf Coast overwhelmed so many times already; the lands and homes destroyed by wildfires' voracious appetite, farmers' fields left barren because of drought or unharvested because of an absence of workers. We give thanks, great God, that you are present beside each shattered life, broken body, and shipwrecked community. Wrap them in your love, lead them along the long, slow road of recovery, and show us how we can walk with them, offering your care and our hands, doing what we can to share with them the gifts you've given to us. We pray especially for the sick, and for a pandemic that insists on spiking yet again. As numbers soar, records break, hospitals fill, medical personnel collapse in weariness, and equipment runs short, show us what we can do, the hard choices we can make to stay home, stay apart, stay safe so that others can stay well and alive. Spark our imaginations and creative instincts so that we might make and share joy and laughter, kindness and connection even in the days when we are apart.

And we bring before you once again our concerns about an election season that lingers. As a President has not conceded the race and a President-elect prepares to take office, we pray for the well-being of our nation, the health of our democracy, and the safety of all. Show us how to navigate our differences with wisdom and respect, humility and courage, compassion and honesty. Lead us as we seek to reduce the threat of violence and forge bonds of cooperation and collaboration. Help us to reach across aisles, to build alliances across divides, to work together to build up and protect the common good of our shared life.

Hear our prayers, spoken and unspoken. And hear us as we pray together the prayer that Jesus taught, saying: Our Father...

PRAYER OF OUR SAVIOR (debts)

OFFERING

I really appreciated Marilyn's questions to us in the sermon about our gifts: what we have and how we can put them to work for God and God's realm here and now. While she was asking about our talents, our unique skills and abilities, I believe the same questions can, and honestly, need to be asked about our resources. Our assets and our belongings. Our money. What do we have, and how do we use it? How can we put our money to work for God, for God's people and for God's church? What does the way we use our money say about our relationship with God? And with the church? About what's important to us and where we place our priorities? Does our giving come out of our leftovers, after we've paid the bills and planned our vacations and set aside money for a rainy day, or does it come first, and everything else has to fall in line behind what we've chosen to give away? None of us have the same amount of resources, and many of us have different responsibilities and pressures on us for how we need to use our money; and all of that makes the answers to these questions a highly individual matter. But I believe they are very important questions for us to consider, as it relates to the church's budget but more than that. As it relates to who we are as children of God and followers of Jesus: where do they fall in our list of priorities and our use of our resources?

Having said all of that, it is that time of year when you're being asked to consider what you will give to the church in the coming year. A couple of weeks ago, you received a letter sharing information about the church's finances for this year and for 2021, as well as information encouraging you to consider making a pledge to the church regarding your intentions to support and encourage the church's ministry. Pledges help the leadership of the church know what we can expect to receive, so we can budget accordingly; they also help all of us as givers consider and make a plan for what we will do, so that when January begins, we can put that plan into action. It's also fair to say that all of your giving to God doesn't have to come to the church. I can tell you that when Ben and I pledge to support the church, we do so knowing that we also want to give to some other charitable organizations. And there will be special offerings in the church and needs that surface throughout the year that we also want to support, so we factor that in to our overall giving. This is an important time of year for us to review these questions, so that we can move into next year ready, to the best of our ability, to put our resources to work for God.

As the letter you received said, and as you already knew, this has been a very strange year in the life of the church. We've been deeply grateful for the ways in which you have continued to support the work and ministry of this church, even though we haven't actually met together in the building for months. Since nobody has been passing a plate in front of you every time you come to worship, it's taken more effort on your part to see that the church received your gifts – but you've done that work. Thank you! I can also tell you that as of today, the Treasurer has received 3 pledges for the coming year, which represent an intention to give \$ 7,800. That's a good start, and we look forward to hearing from more of you, so that together we can make decisions about moving forward into another year. Another year of witness and worship, service and outreach, loving God and extending Christ's light in Wallace and the Silver Valley. Jesus' story encouraged his listeners to not hide their gifts in fear, but to act boldly to build up the realm of God in the people's midst. That charge is still ours today. Will you join us?

SONG *“God, Whose Giving Knows No Ending”*

God, whose giving knows no ending, from your rich and endless store,
Nature's wonder, Jesus' wisdom, costly cross, grave's shattered door:
Gifted by you, we turn to you offering up ourselves in praise;
Thankful song shall rise forever, gracious donor of our days.

Skills and time are ours for serving, that your will on earth be done:
All at peace in health and freedom, races joined, the Church made one.

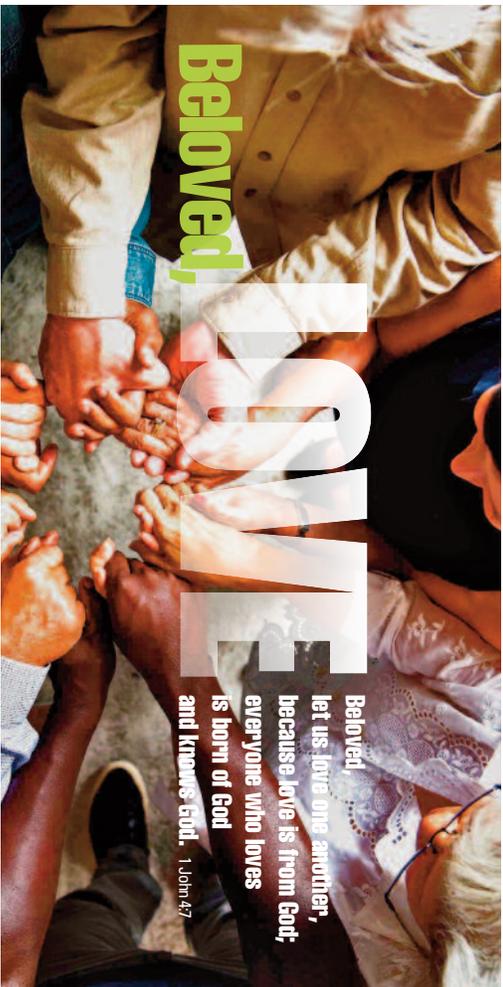
Now direct our daily labor, lest we strive for self alone;
born with talents, make us servants fit to answer at your throne.

Treasure, too, you have entrusted, gain through powers your grace conferred;
Ours to use for home and kindred, and to spread the gospel Word.
Open wide our hands in sharing as we heed Christ's ageless call,
Healing, teaching, and reclaiming, honoring you by loving all.

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)



Beloved, Love in Action

“Do your little bit of good where you are. It’s those little bits of good put together that overwhelm the world.” – Archbishop Desmond Tutu

Love is a verb. Not simply a feeling or thought. Grounded in God’s love for us, we are called to act, to love. 1 John 4:11 puts it this way, “Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another.” We take seemingly small actions to live out God’s love. Here’s the beautiful thing: together in community, we can change the world.

In 2019, Magnolia United Church of Christ in Seattle, WA, held its inaugural Community in Action Sunday. Determining that ‘church in action’ was a key to their vitality, instead of holding church worship as on a typical Sunday, they were love in action. Participating in five diverse service projects, the congregants restored habitat at a local park, made blankets for children, helped at their local animal shelter, tended an elder garden at the Native American cultural center, and cleaned up and cleared brush at a homeless encampment.

While average worship attendance runs about 50, that Sunday, over 150 people took part.



After participating in their service projects, the congregants gathered. The Reverend Marci Scott-Weis, Magnolia UCC minister, commented on her service: “It was messy, chaotic, oozing in vitality and a whole lot of fun to be the church that morning.” She continued, “one girl said to me, ‘That was so much fun, can we do church every week like this?’”

With such positive responses, Magnolia UCC held its second annual Community in 2020. “It was such an amazing morning seeing folks from our congregation and from our community join together to help our neighbors,” Scott-Weis said. “It was fun, crazy busy, church at its best.”

How can you put your love into action? Who would want to join you in that work? How can you have fun doing it? Love is a verb indeed. Our church can be God’s love through our serving and giving. Can you pledge to take part and live God’s love?

WEEKLY GIVING IF THE PERCENTAGE IS

(Rounded to the nearest dollar)

Annual Income	Monthly Income	Weekly Income	2%	4%	6%	8%	10%	15%
16,000	1,333	308	6.00	12.00	18.00	25.00	31.00	46.00
20,000	1,667	385	8.00	15.00	23.00	31.00	39.00	58.00
25,000	2,083	481	10.00	19.00	29.00	38.00	48.00	72.00
30,000	2,500	577	12.00	23.00	35.00	46.00	58.00	87.00
35,000	2,917	673	13.00	27.00	40.00	54.00	67.00	101
40,000	3,333	769	15.00	31.00	46.00	62.00	77.00	115
45,000	3,750	865	17.00	35.00	52.00	69.00	87.00	130
50,000	4,167	962	19.00	38.00	58.00	77.00	96.00	144
60,000	5,000	1,154	23.00	46.00	69.00	92.00	115	173
75,000	6,250	1,442	29.00	58.00	87.00	115	144	216
100,000	8,333	1,923	38.00	77.00	115	154	192	288
125,000	10,417	2,404	48.00	96.00	144	192	240	361