

UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST CONGREGATIONAL
Wallace, Idaho

Alice M.C. Ling, Pastor

November 22, 2020

Thanksgiving Sunday

SONG “Come, Ye Thankful People, Come”

WELCOME AND ANNOUNCEMENTS

Good morning, my friends. And welcome to worship with the United Church of Christ Congregational. On this Sunday before Thanksgiving, it's good to gather together to ask for God's blessing on us and our lives, on our families and friends, congregation and community, country and world. It's so easy to focus on the challenges and difficulties in our lives, especially this year when we have a bumper crop of crises. So today, and hopefully throughout this week, we pause to give thanks, and to exercise our gratitude muscles as we turn our attention to the gifts and graces, blessings and beauty that are woven all the way through our lives. Thank you for joining me as we come before God with our thankful hearts and grateful praise.

I want to offer a word of thanks, again, for Indy and her gift of flute music. Along with that comes an invitation to any of you and all of you. If you would like to share some music in our worship, help with a reading, light Advent candles or participate in any way, please let me know. I'd love to work with you to create a plan for how you can safely participate and join with me in creating our worship.

CALL TO WORSHIP

Come to God with joy in your hearts.

We come, to praise God with thanksgiving.

Bless God's holy name, the One who made us.

We come into God's presence, singing songs of wonder and hope.

God is good! God's faithfulness never ends.

We are God's people, seeking lives of praise and service.

(Thom M. Shuman, Bearers of Grace and Justice)

SONG “Now Thank We All Our God”

Now thank we all our God With heart and hands and voices,
Who wondrous things hath done, In whom this world rejoices;
Who, from our parents' arms, Hath blessed us on our way
With countless gifts of love, And still is ours today.

O may this bounteous God Through all our life be near us,
With ever joyful hearts And blessed peace to cheer us;
And keep us still in grace, And guide us when perplexed,
And free us from all ills In this world and the next.

OPENING PRAYER (in unison)

**Wondrous Spirit, we raise to you our joyful noise: words of thanksgiving, songs of praise!
Rhythm-setter of tides and seasons, from the depths of the waters to the heights of the land,
creation declares your greatness. You dapple our days with sun and our nights with starlight.
Unceasingly flow your love and peace. May your goodness transform us, deepening our gratitude**

for the beauty around us, the kindness among us, the bread broken for us. Lead us, we pray, in blessing the lives of others, so that all your world may have reason to rejoice. Amen.

(Ann B. Day, *Before the Amen*)

SCRIPTURE READING Psalm 100

Make a joyful noise to the LORD, all the earth.

Worship the LORD with gladness;
come into his presence with singing.

Know that the LORD is God.

It is he that made us, and we are his;
we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture.

Enter his gates with thanksgiving,
and his courts with praise.

Give thanks to him, bless his name.

For the LORD is good;

his steadfast love endures forever,
and his faithfulness to all generations.

SERMON

Part of the ritual that I follow to begin most days includes reading a Daily Devotional that the United Church of Christ produces on line. Thursday's entry was written by a seminary classmate of mine, Talitha Arnold, who serves as Senior Pastor of the United Church of Santa Fe. In that piece, Talitha described a small whiteboard that is currently sitting on the front pew in their church sanctuary, with the words of a hymn written on it. She wrote out those words in Spanish, and then translated them into English, and while I can't know for a fact, there's a good chance she's describing a version of this song:

In all our living, we belong to God, and in our dying, we are still with God.

For in our living, and in our dying, we belong to God, we belong to God.

(“We Belong to God”, *One is the Body*, John L. Bell)

She writes, “The white board is from our final service before we suspended in-person worship last March. Our children's choir planned to sing the hymn as our call to worship throughout Lent. They (and we) only made it to the third Sunday. The sentences are a bit smudged, and the handwriting wasn't neat to begin with. Whenever the children's choir sings again, whoever is leading them will undoubtedly wipe the board clean and start anew. I should probably do it myself. The whiteboard hymn serves no purpose. Even if we were gathering for worship, no one should be singing.

“But I can't erase those words. They remind me of seven-year-olds singing about belonging to God, in their living and in their dying. That's quite a statement at any age, and it's taken on new meaning as this year has unfolded. I hope somehow this hymn has helped sustain our children and their families since last they sang together. I hope they still remember its last line:... “We belong to God”... which sounds a lot like Psalm 100...” and it's assurance that we are God's people, the sheep of God's pasture, held in God's love and care.

I can't speak for seven-year-olds in Santa Fe, and I won't even speak for you, here in north Idaho, but I can speak for myself, and I'd give me a mixed grade for how much of the time since mid-March I've lived in the knowledge and assurance that I belong to God. It's been an eight month period unlike anything I've ever known in my lifetime, with a raging pandemic that launched an economic crisis, the eruption of protests and demands for racial justice and systemic change triggered by the nightmare

producing video of the brutal and senseless murder of George Floyd, a record breaking hurricane season and a record breaking wildfire season, all packaged alongside a record breaking and endless election cycle. We may be nearly three weeks beyond the official end of that season, but I don't know of anybody who's likely to step up to tell us where it's going or how long the consequences of this siege will be felt. Some days I've ranted and paced in impatience and outrage, some days I've frittered and stalled in frustration and depression, some nights I've twisted and turned in anxiety, and yes, some days I have walked quietly, confidently and even gratefully in the deep confidence that God's got this, and God's got us; together, we will get through this and a new day is coming. After those days, I've slept like a baby without a care in the world.

Holding on to trust and faith, living and walking in hope and yes, even gratitude is not always easy, and never to be taken for granted, especially when there's a storm raging and few signs of its retreat. True, on weeks like this, as families gather and people sit down for a Thanksgiving meal, most of us can find something to say we're thankful for, but this year, even that could be a challenge. I know some of you have cancelled your plans to travel to be with family, because the risks just seem too high. I know some of you have had an invitation withdrawn, as a loved said – regrettably – you can't come, not this year. I wonder how many of you will spend the day alone, and how the heart will feel, where gratitude will land in the list of options and possible emotions. Some days, it's just plain hard, if not impossible, to be thankful. Some days the storm is too intense, the winds too forceful.

I was struck to read of a study that focused on what the researchers call the Headwind/Tailwind Asymmetry, our all-too-common tendency to focus on the obstacles in our lives (headwinds) and overlook blessings (tailwinds). The very mention of that dichotomy pointed me toward walks Ben and I take every morning. We walk out our back door and onto the grass airstrip that stretches for nearly a half mile. First we turn right, and walk to one end where there's a spectacular view of Lake Coeur d'Alene; then we turn around and walk the entire length of the airstrip, until we get to mailboxes and a paved road. On a windy day, one length of that walk is horrendous, the other a piece of cake. Hopefully we struggle and strain to get to the overlook – because that's the shorter piece, and once we turn around and put the wind at our backs, the longer, uphill stretch isn't nearly as difficult as when the winds are reversed. The striking thing is how much I struggle against the headwind; but when I turn around and feel it's release, I barely give a thought to a tailwind. There's a moment of gratitude for the reprieve and then I move on and forget all about the wind. This Headwind/Tailwind Asymmetry study lifts up the ways in which focusing on headwinds breeds bitterness, while focusing on tailwinds breeds appreciation — and the act of thanksgiving helps call our attention to the winds at our backs.

In a year like 2020, we have no shortage of headwinds. There's much to brace ourselves against, to fight and resist, complain and struggle with. But we also live in the midst of an abundance of tailwinds, gifts and graces, supports and promises, encouragement and connections. It is all real. But the choice is ours in terms of where we put our focus. I admit I have days when the headwinds, the pandemic, the politics, the disappointments, the injustice, the cautions get much more of my attention and just about all of my air time; but I have to tell you that I do recognize that the tailwinds are at least as present and strong in my life – they just aren't noticed as much or focused on. Maybe you don't need to work on it as much as I do, but I'd encourage all of us to work at exercising our gratitude muscles more than we're sometimes apt to. One of the ideas I hear most often is to pause near the end of every day and identify three things you're grateful for that day. You can do it as you're drifting off to sleep, if you can remember; even better, get a gratitude notebook and write things down. That way when the storms get really strong, you can pull it out and remind yourselves of the beautiful and life-giving. Another idea is to take time to write notes or letters to people to express your gratitude for them, for their friendship, for their support, the lessons they taught you, the difference their kindness makes. And then there's the suggestion that we connect with a friend every week, and make sure to talk with them about our

gratitude, about the comforts that bring us peace at the end of the day, the sighting of birds and sunsets and frosty tears that make us smile.

I'm sure you know that I often appreciate Friday night's episode of "On the Road" that comes at the end of the CBS Evening News; I talk about it enough. This week, Steve Hartman did video interviews with people who were at a Thrift Store and Food Pantry in New York state. The people he talked with named how difficult things are, the ways their struggling, how long they've been out of work. But when he asked them if they had anything to be thankful for, he got a flood of answers. One woman said, "I'm grateful to be alive, and breathing on your own is the best." Another woman said, "My arms work. My legs work. I can walk." Another woman: "I'm not living out on the streets. I have a roof over my head." Another said, "I'm grateful that we still have what we have." A man named Gabriel said, "I'm grateful for still being alive." And then he went on to describe how he was going to spend his Thanksgiving: "I'm going to have an amazing Thanksgiving all by myself. I will sit on a park bench, and I will think about the great Thanksgivings that I've had in my life and be thankful for them. One bad Thanksgiving out of 63 amazing Thanksgivings – that's pretty good odds. Maybe we should be a little more thankful for what we do have than constantly be complaining about what we don't have." (November 20, 2020)

I think Gabriel knows about tailwinds. And about blessings. And about gratitude. And I don't know if he knows he's one of the sheep of God's pasture, but it's almost like he does, and that he knows he's being held in the love and care of God. I hope the seven-year-olds in Santa Fe haven't forgotten. And us too. Even in the midst of the pandemic and the politics, the record breaking storms and shattered holiday plans, and having to go to church on our computers or read it on a pile of papers that come in the mail, even then, I pray we know how full to overflowing our lives are with blessings and beauty, gifts and graces, and how very much we have to be grateful for.

In all our living, we belong to God, and in our dying, we are still with God.
For in our living, and in our dying, we belong to God, we belong to God.

SONG "Leaning on the Everlasting Arms"

Indy Behrendt, Flute

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...

PRAYER REQUESTS

- That all people sharing Thanksgiving together will be cautious and safe.
- Prayers for Rayma who has had some tests that have come out questionable.
- Prayers for Father Montese, who is in Kootenai, with Covid. He didn't wear a mask, because God would keep him safe.
- Prayers for Christi's Aunt Ione in Louisiana who is going through a very turbulent time with a family issue, may she know she does not walk alone. God, bring comfort, peace, security and safety ever more present.
- Thanksgiving for our wonderful church family...may each one be blessed according to their needs. May the friendships and love, as brothers and sisters in Jesus Christ always be lifting us up in these difficult times.
- Protection and safety for those that will be getting out and traveling over the Thanksgiving holiday.

- May the transition of our nation's leadership be more amicable and respectful towards the incoming administration. Let hatred be replaced with love.
- Kasey will be having almost her whole family with her on thanksgiving and is thankful for family and the food they will be having
- Nancy's prayers for this week are thanks for family. JoHannah did a test for Covid yesterday, so they're waiting for those results, Sam and Arlo aren't feeling well either. Also, prayers for our church family, that their Thanksgiving is a blessed one. Very different this year! Also, prayers for anyone who is feeling depressed about the whole situation, and lots of people who get depressed this time of year anyway--they might be feeling worse this year.

PASTORAL PRAYER

We thank You, God, for everything we delight in – sunlight in autumn days, color in nature and art, rhythm in poetry and music; human achievement and family success; good humor; work well done; love and friendship and all your gifts to body and soul. Most of all we delight in Your salvation, the knowledge of Your love, the assurance of eternal life, through Jesus Christ our Savior.

We commend to You those who work in harsh conditions, and those who have no work; those whose lives are drab and grey; those whose poor health takes away delight in living; those who are lonely; those who have no home of their own. Grant them the human help and comfort which they need, and the spiritual encouragement which will enable them to live with hope and courage.

We pray for the elderly, asking for them clear faith and human support. We pray for those in middle years, asking for them wisdom in their choices, and the recovery of a sense of wonder. We pray for the young, asking for them good opportunities, and that their ambitions include the desire to serve. May we all continue to seek the God of every age, made known in Jesus Christ, the greatest friend of all.

We bless You, God, space-maker, cloud-rider, earth-lover. We bless You for the great company of saints who have gone before us and now delight in Your presence. With them we honor and praise Your holy name, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and as they were taught to pray so do we say, Our Father ...

(Rev. Jock Stein, <http://www.churchofscotland.org.uk/>)

PRAYER OF OUR SAVIOR (debts)

OFFERING

We managed to get out with our little travel trailer three times this past season, twice with close friends from Helena, Montana. During the first trip, we camped along the edge of Lake Koocanusa, just north of Libby, Montana. One afternoon, while we were sitting around enjoying a lazy day, Cathy pulled out a jigsaw puzzle and wondered if we'd be interested in putting it together. A few minutes later, she and I took our places at the picnic table and began laying out pieces. Finding the border pieces and the corners, matching up colors, getting things organized so that slowly, piece by piece, we could recreate the whole. Ben and Dick wandered by now and then, and stopped off to help with the organization, picking up pieces and wondering if they fit where either one of us was working, snapping a few more pieces into place. It was a relatively small puzzle, and it didn't take long before all of the holes were filled in and the picture was intact. It was a group effort, where each of us contributed different amounts and in different ways, but all of those gifts came together to create the whole. It would have taken much longer and been a lot less fun without all of the eyes, ideas, hands and offerings working together.

Our church's ministry is a lot like that. It's not a task that any one person can or should try to do on their own. We meet the budget and fund our ministry through combining the gifts of many people, each

one doing what they can, chipping in as they're inclined, contributing ideas and energy, money and observations until piece by piece, the whole takes shape and emerges into view. Our life together is a community effort; each person's gift enhancing the endeavor, filling in holes, tending to details, adding creative flair, expanding the creation. Some gifts are large, some are small; some are prominent, some behind the scenes; some flashy, some ordinary; some break the mold and others are among the tried and true; each of them makes us who we are, and more than we could be on our own.

I can report to you that as of today, the treasurer has received 5 pledges of support for the coming year, totalling \$9,200. Our proposed budget projects that we'll receive \$32,000, so we have a ways to go. You may also have noticed the piece in the stewardship letter that identified the fact that we're going to need to replace the church's heating system in the coming months. We hope to be able to do that without dipping in to the trust fund, and in Sunday's budget hearing, we talked about our ability to accept year-end gifts for that purpose if people are interested in doing that before the end of December. Wherever we focus, whatever need we address, we'll do it piece by piece, gift by gift, contribution by contribution. Your gifts are essential to the process of building up the church and our response to Christ's call for our life together. Thank you for whatever part you feel able and inclined to play.

SONG *"In Thanksgiving, Let us Praise God"*

From the first bright light of morning, To the last warm glow of dusk;
Every breath we take is sacred, For it is God's gift to us.
In thanksgiving, let us praise God; In thanksgiving, let us sing
Songs of praise and adoration To our gracious Lord and King.

In the season of our plenty, In the season of our need;
We will find God's grace sufficient, We will find God's love complete...

Safe within God's hand that guides us, Hidden in God's healing wings;
Day by day, God's love provides us Every good and perfect thing...

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 Creation.

“We may think we are nurturing our garden, but of course it’s our garden that is really nurturing us.” - Jenny Uglow

From the beginning of the creation narrative in the Bible, we learn about the design of stewardship. The beloved story of Adam and Even in the garden portray an understanding of care for creation – tending of the garden. The original Hebrew translates with the words “till” and “keep.” The word “till” implies “to be bound in service to” and the word “keep” in its original form implies “to preserve” for the future. This understanding is the foundation of stewardship in any form. Our role as stewards of creation can best be understood by our connection to creation, that it was made for our own sake. Most importantly, that by our own actions of love and care we are fed – literally physically and spiritually.

To Love creation was the call of the beloved community at St. Mary’s United Church of Christ in Maryland when their pastor reported for summer military duty, far away from his church and congregation. Tasked with maintaining the parsonage’s flower garden, the community grew flowers for the shut-in and hospitalized members.

The success of this effort inspired the development of a raised bed garden adjacent to the church, which is now tended by the entire congregation. St. Mary’s connected with a sister church in this effort. Together, their efforts provided produce for the food pantry in their community. Through this project, all generations cultivated the bounty and beautiful blessings of creation together.

As we think about stewardship, can we expand our definition of harvest? What are the needs of your broader community? And who are your partners in answering those needs? Do you provide a tangible or physical product? Or is your harvest more intangible, like an experience of community? Whatever it may be – may it be fruitful and multiply.

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

