

UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST CONGREGATIONAL  
Wallace, Idaho

Alice M.C. Ling, Pastor

February 28, 2021

Second Sunday in Lent

PRELUDE “O Jesus, I Have Promised”

WELCOME AND ANNOUNCEMENTS

Good morning, my friends. And welcome again to worship as the United Church of Christ Congregational. It’s good to gather in the confidence that no matter who we are, or where we are – in the world or on life’s journey – we’re welcome here. We come as individuals, and by God’s grace, are joined together as one in the grace and love of God. As God draws us in and knits us together, we become the Body of Christ, the Church, gathered for worship and called to serve. Welcome.

CALL TO WORSHIP

We gather today to worship our God, whose words and ways challenge us.

God invites us to lose our selfishness to find ourselves.

God calls us to be fools in the world to show forth the wisdom of Christ.

God urges us to empty ourselves to discover life’s fullness.

God bids us to be obedient to a divine will so we might know true freedom.

We come to worship our Creator, seeking to have our faith challenged into growth. We root our faith in worship, seeking to find nourishment for our spirits in this growing season of Lent.

(Glen E. Rainsley, *Touch Holiness*)

SONG “Before Your Cross, O Jesus”

Before your cross, O Jesus, our lives are judged today;

the meaning of our eager strife is tested by your way.

Across our restless living the light streams from your cross,

and by its clear, revealing beams we measure gain and loss.

The hopes that leads us onward, the fears that hold us back,  
our will to dare great things for God, the courage that we lack.

The faith we keep in goodness, our love, as love or pure,  
on all, the judgment of the cross falls steady, clear, and sure.

Yet humbly, in our striving, we rise to face its test.

We crave the power to do your will as once you did it best.

On us let now the healing of your great Spirit fall,  
and make us brave and full of joy to answer to your call.

PRAYER OF CONFESSION (in unison)

**Gentle and holy God, we acknowledge to you, to one another, and to ourselves that we are not what you have called us to be. We have stifled our gifts and wasted our time. We have avoided opportunities to offer kindness, but have been quick to take offense. We have pretended that we could make no contribution to peace and justice in our world and have excused ourselves from risk-taking in our own community. Have mercy on us, forgive us our sins and help us to live our lives differently, we pray in the name of Jesus Christ, whose call to follow haunts our every prayer. Amen.**

(Maren Tirabassi, *The New Century Hymnal*)

## ASSURANCE OF GRACE

One fact remains that does not change: God has loved you, loves you now, and will love you always. This is the good news that brings us new life.

## SCRIPTURE READING Mark 8:27-38

Rick Shaffer

Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" And they answered him, "John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets." He asked them, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter answered him, "You are the Messiah." And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him.

Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."

He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels."

## SERMON

Crosses are everywhere, especially in a church. Every one has at least one. Sometimes they're lustrous mahogany, sometimes rough, old barn wood, ready to give you a splinter if you get too close. We have at least two that sit up front in our sanctuary: one is polished brass, and these days is apt to hide out behind the readers of scripture in our worship videos; the other is wood and built into the stained glass window, surrounded by wonderful colors and bird nests and all manner of distractions during long-winded sermons; still others are stitched into the paraments and altar cloths that announce the color of the season. Every church has at least one, and while there are countless other symbols in our different buildings – candles, baptismal fonts, communion tables, Bibles and pulpits, I think it's safe to say that for all of us, the cross is one of the things we agree on as a central symbol of what it means to be Christian. Not that there aren't differences between them, the primary one being the question of whether or not Jesus is displayed on the cross. There may be exceptions to this, but in very broad strokes, it's fair to say that Roman Catholic crosses tend to include the crucified Jesus, as a reminder of his willingness to suffer and die for us; while Protestant crosses are most often empty, because Jesus has come down off the cross and been raised.

Crosses don't just live on church walls. They're also on book covers and t-shirts, bumper stickers and coffee mugs, and especially jewelry. Earrings, necklaces, eye glasses; you name it, they're there, all of them pointing to the death of Jesus and the Christian faith. I know I have an assortment of them: plain wood, simple gold, a gift from the Holy Land, this one bought at the cathedral in San Salvador and made in a women's prison, one whose silver work was done by Ray Giles and with a sapphire at the center of it that was mounted by Garth Crosby. Each of them and all of them precious gifts that declare my faith and point to the Savior whose disciple I strive to be.

I'm starting to get close to the place where I feel a fair amount of tension. Crosses are routine and familiar to us, symbols displayed and worn with pride and joy. I guess it's fair to say they were routine and familiar to Jesus' disciples too, but there was nothing prideful about them. They were everywhere,

but that was about gore and brutality, unspeakable suffering and the ever-present oppression of Rome. And as Peter made abundantly clear, the very notion that God's Messiah would end up on one was so scandalous and outrageous that it was a notion that couldn't be allowed to see the light of day. Squash it fast and hard, and then go wash your mouth out with soap before anyone else hears what you're saying. This can't be and this won't be. Not on my watch; no way, no how.

Mark is clear that Jesus taught that he must suffer and die, and as hard as Peter tried to correct him, he insisted on sticking with that message. I know there's a popular belief out there that the whole reason Jesus came was to suffer and die, but that's not what I hear in these words. I don't believe it was the preplanned intention of God that Jesus spend his last hours on earth nailed to a cross, but that it was the inevitable outcome of the sort of life he came to live. He came to care for the most vulnerable, to welcome the outcast, to heal the sick, to speak truth to the powers of oppression and domination, to live a life of love so thorough and complete that he couldn't and wouldn't back down to soothe over ruffled feathers or save the skin on his own neck. If the laws of the land and the traditions of the faith got in the way of healing and liberation, he would side with the needs of the wounded and oppressed. He defined strength, not with military might or political coercion, but with vulnerability and weakness. He answered wrong doing with forgiveness, met violence with peace and refused seats of honor while insisting on serving as a slave. As Paul wrote in the first letter to the Corinthians, he came to live a life that the world defines as foolish, fully aware that the cost would be high, and willing to accept that cost because of his complete and utter trust in God.

It's funny. I've gotten comfortable enough with the notion that Jesus suffered and died on the cross (you can decide what that says about me), that I applaud how he lived and what he stood for and am ready to cheer him on every step of the way. You go, guy! We need more of what you're peddling! But man, I wish he'd stopped there, with his teaching and predictions about what lay ahead for him. But he didn't. Instead, he turned so that all of the crowd that was present could listen along with the disciples. And he told them that if they were serious about being his disciples, they'd need to deny themselves, and to take up their own cross and then they could follow him.

Jesus said, if any would be his disciples, let them deny themselves, take up their cross and follow him. Somehow I don't think that was an invitation that expired with Jesus' earthly life. In truth, I believe that it's still current. Doesn't even have an expiration date. Unfortunately. But what does it mean? And what would it look like for us, were we to take him up on his offer? Let me first say what I don't believe it means. I think one of the ways this teaching has been abused over the years is to coach people to put up with suffering because it's their cross to bear. Go home and stay with your abuser. Don't fight your spouse's addiction. Stick with that miserable job where you are harassed every day. So what if you get stopped by the police and are accused of driving a car that is obviously too good for a person with your skin color? It's your cross to bear, so just ride it out and let it be. Not for a minute do I believe that that's what Jesus was asking for here. There is nothing redemptive about suffering for the sake of suffering.

What I do believe is that he's asking us to live the kind of life he lived, to put love at our center, to care for the most vulnerable, to welcome the outcast, to speak up in the presence of oppression and violence, to live a life of love so thorough and complete that we can't and won't back down to soothe over ruffled feathers or save the skin on our own necks. Lutheran pastor and preacher David Lose has written, "... I ...know that we tend to favor strength, health, and self-sufficiency, or at least the appearance of these things, over weakness, pain, and dependence. But while this predisposition may be understandable, I think that ultimately it is neither faithful to the Gospel nor likely to draw us more deeply toward becoming the persons we have been called to be. Indeed, my reading of this passage... is that we are called to take up our cross expecting that God is most clearly and fully present in the

suffering and brokenness of the world. We are called to take up our cross by being honest about our brokenness and thereby demonstrate our willingness to enter into the brokenness of others. We are called to take up our cross because we follow the One who not only took up his cross but also revealed that nothing in this world, not even the hate and darkness and death that seemed so omnipresent on that Friday we dare call good, can defeat the love and light and life of God.” (“Take Up Your Cross” *In the Meantime*, 2/25/18)

In a world where, more often than not, we are encouraged to focus on ourselves, our comfort, our needs, our frustrations, our self-interest, Jesus calls us to follow in his way – looking out for others, joining our hearts with theirs in order that we can find healing and wholeness, compassion and companions, the love and light and life of God. Or to use the words of Catholic priest Richard Rohr, “Now is no time for an academic solidarity with the world. Real solidarity needs to be felt and suffered. That’s the real meaning of the word ‘suffer’ – to allow someone else’s pain to influence us in a real way. We need to move beyond our own personal feelings and take in the whole.” (The Christian Century, February 10, 2021, page 23)

We wear crosses and hang them on walls, put them on our bumpers and drink coffee out of mugs adorned by them. And we do those things to proclaim ourselves Jesus’ followers, giving thanks for his life and teaching, suffering and death, as well as his resurrection and invitation to new life. I pray we’ll also let those very same crosses call to us to come and follow him, to unfurl our self-centered lives into lives of love, to recover our true selves as the loving creatures we were made to be. To grow in giving instead of grasping, generosity instead of vengeance, humility and service instead of self-promotion and fear. To walk and live and follow in trust that God will be with us always, and that love will carry us through. Amen

SONG “*Ubi Caritas*”

Cathy Barker, Alice Ling, Dick Weaver

Live in charity and steadfast love; live in charity, God will dwell with you.

#### PRAYER REQUESTS

- Prayers for Nancy’s cousin Deanna. Her dog ran into her and she broke her leg. She can't have surgery because of complications from prior surgeries she's had, so has to just wear a brace and not put weight on it for 3 months. She has had a lot of surgeries since childhood because of a genetic condition that affects her joints, so prayers of strength to get through another challenge.
- Prayers of gratitude for opportunities to be vaccinated. Rick Ehram got a last minute call that one was available; Rick and Dena have appointments because age limits were lowered to keep vaccine from going to waste. We continue to pray for those who are eager but unable to receive the vaccine.

#### PASTORAL PRAYER

Holy God, you call us to come and join with Jesus, to take up our crosses and follow him. To move our focus on our selves and our comforts to one side so that there is room to also take in the needs and longings of others; to grow in love, to walk in mercy, to live by the light of your open-hearted kindness and over-flowing generosity. Show us what that means in our lives, where you would have us love, where you would have us serve, when you would have us speak and with what words, when we should stay silent and listen more attentively. Help us to trust you to stay by our side, give us comfort and rest, bring new life out of loss and pain.

Loving God, the pains and hurts of this world are overwhelming, and so we bring them to you once again. Our country marked another milestone this week, and we are staggered by the reality of 500,000 dead from COVID. Before we close our hearts off to the enormity of it all, move among us that we might remember that each one had a name, a face, and a story; most of them have left family and

friends who grieve their absence, all of them were precious to you. Hold all of these hurts and open our hearts too that we might grieve with those who grieve, weep with those who weep, comfort those who mourn. Keep us vigilant and careful so that each of us does our part in bringing the count to an end, the death to a halt. We pray for health care workers who continue to work tirelessly to treat and care for patients in need, and who far too often stand in for family in the lonely last moments of their lives. For all who are sick, fighting for their lives, waiting for bones to heal, reaching for a release from pain. For schools and teachers, students and families as they seek the next steps of learning and growth. For the unemployed, the hungry, those threatened with eviction, those whose homes have broken pipes and water-logged sheet rock, and unsafe drinking water.

We pray for our country and our leaders, for divisions and disagreements, for political posturing and partisan bickering. Give them wisdom and strength, a willingness to listen and compromise, an openness to learn what they may not yet know and the courage to hold fast to what they believe to be right. Plant within each of them and all of us a vision for our life together, one that builds up and protects, that honors differences and promotes peace. Lead us in your ways, now and always.

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

PRAYER OF OUR SAVIOR (depts)

#### OFFERING

When I welcomed you to this service, I said something that I believe deeply: that we come to worship individually, and the Spirit of God meets us here, knits us together and makes us one, transforming us into the Body of Christ. The same can be said of our gifts to the church. Each of us give as we feel able as well as motivated. God receives those gifts, blesses and multiplies them, transforming them into the work of the church, an expression of God's love, a visible reminder of the presence of God at work among us and through us. It takes all of us working together to make the church the church. It takes all of our gifts, large and small, offered into the love and grace of God to build up the body of Christ. It takes all of us working and giving together to shine God's light, live God's love and share God's Word. Thank you for the ways you contribute to our life together.

#### SONG "When I Survey the Wondrous Cross"

When I survey the wondrous cross On which the Prince of glory died,  
My richest gain I count but loss, And pour contempt on all my pride.

Forbid it, Lord, that I should boast, Save in the death of Christ, my God;  
All the vain things that charm me most – I sacrifice them to his blood.

Were the whole realm of nature mine, That were a present far too small:  
Love so amazing, so divine, Demands my soul, my life, my all.

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