

UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST CONGREGATIONAL  
Wallace, Idaho

Alice M.C. Ling, Pastor

February 7, 2021

Fifth Sunday after Epiphany

PRELUDE “O Master, Let Me Walk with Thee”

WELCOME AND ANNOUNCEMENTS

Good morning, my friends! And welcome again to worship. I am very pleased to report that we made it through the month of January. That even as we move toward days and nights with more of winter’s cold than we’ve experienced in a couple of years, we’re also appreciating the gift of longer days and later sunsets. That the pace is picking up on the roll out of the COVID vaccine, and some of us are beginning to feel the needle prick in our arms. While we’re far from home free or loosed from our confines, it is very good to begin to see a light grow at the end of the tunnel, and to have evidence to accompany the truth we’ve held fast to all the way through: God is good, God is with us, God holds all of this and each of us, safely, in the hollow of God’s hand.

A reminder that we will share communion again near the end of this worship service. If you haven’t brought anything with you to stand in as the bread and the cup, this would be a great time to pause the recording and get something, so that we can eat and drink together at Christ’s table. And now come, my friends; let us worship God together.

CALL TO WORSHIP

Good people of the church, lift up your eyes and see.

**Have you not seen? Have you not heard? Our God greets us here.**

Good servants of the Most High, open your ears to hear.

**Have you not seen? Have you not heard? Our God meets us here.**

Good children of the light, open your hearts and know what it means to delight in God.

**For we have seen, heard and known from the beginning to the end: Our God...is.**

(Rev. Kaji Douša, a UCC pastor of Park Avenue Christian Church in New York City)

SONG “I Woke Up This Morning”

Cathy Barker, Alice Ling, Dick Weaver

PRAYER OF CONFESSION

What do we hold and treasure most? Is it the promises of God? What captivates our attention? Is it the grace of God? Let us join together in confessing our sin:

**God of mercy and grace: We are vulnerable people who sometimes ignore the vulnerable. We are broken people who don’t always pay attention to the world’s brokenness. Heal us, O God, to make us better healers. Mend our rifts, that we might be better builders. Cleanse our hearts, so we can clear out the damage of hurt and oppression. We are yours, loving God. Help us to live and to know this better.**

*Moment of Silence*

ASSURANCE OF FORGIVENESS

Have you known? Have you heard? Our God lifts us up on eagle’s wings strengthening us so that we won’t be weary. The burden of sin is but a far and distant memory, for, through Christ, our sins – all of them – are forgiven.

**God is great in strength, mighty in power, and full of endless love for us all.**

(Rev. Kaji Douša, a UCC pastor of Park Avenue Christian Church in New York City)

SCRIPTURE READING Mark 1:29-39

Nancy Branstetter

As soon as they left the synagogue, they entered the house of Simon and Andrew, with James and John. Now Simon's mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they told him about her at once. He came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them.

That evening, at sunset, they brought to him all who were sick or possessed with demons. And the whole city was gathered around the door. And he cured many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons; and he would not permit the demons to speak, because they knew him.

In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed. And Simon and his companions hunted for him. When they found him, they said to him, "Everyone is searching for you." He answered, "Let us go on to the neighboring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do." And he went throughout Galilee, proclaiming the message in their synagogues and casting out demons.

SERMON

Mother-in-laws get a bad rap. Whether you think that is fair or not may say a lot about your experience – of either being a mother-in-law or having one. I remember looking at two of my favorite people some years ago and acknowledging that, for them, I wear two of the worst, most maligned titles there are in the world: step-mother and mother-in-law all at once. It doesn't get much worse – and I will forever be grateful for the ways they've welcomed me, incorporated me, called on me and loved me. I am indeed one of the lucky ones. I also scored really well when it came to having a mother-in-law. As is true with any two strong-willed women, Hermia and I had our moments, but overall, and especially over time, we did really well together and shared a unique and precious bond. I think Ben made out okay too with my mother. There was one moment, about 8 months into our marriage, that made us roll our eyes and that we still laugh about. We spent a week or more with my mom the first Thanksgiving we were married, and took on a major remodeling project in her bathroom. After one especially long and challenging day, we sat down together for supper and she offered grace, thanking God for her son-in-law and his wife... She was right... none of this would have happened without her new son-in-law, but still... I was her daughter long before I was his wife...

I wonder what the relationship was like between Simon and his mother-in-law. This is really the only reference we have that even confirms that he was married, and that's all we know; not for how long or if there were kids. It sounds like they probably lived under one roof, along with Andrew and whatever family he had, and who knows who else. One writer fleshed the setting out a little bit by sharing details of recent archaeological activity that places "...Simon Peter's house immediately south of the synagogue, with its northern wall right under the synagogue balcony. The house was a large complex of clan dwellings with three shared courts, surrounded by a common exterior wall with a single entrance. It's possible... that Andrew too had his own dwelling in the complex. To the east of the house, just outside the entrance, was a large open area where a crowd could assemble..." (Douglas R.A. Hare, *Mark*, Westminster Bible Companion, page 29)

All Mark tells us about her is that she was Simon's mother-in-law, doesn't even give her a name; anything I say from here is coming from my imagination, not from Mark. But let me start by admitting that when Simon and his brother Andrew dropped their nets and turned away from the Sea of Galilee to go fish for people instead of salmon and cod, I've tended to picture them walking away from everything – home, wife, children as well as occupation. Clearly they hadn't made a clean break, given that they went back home after the day of teaching and healing in the synagogue, and they took Jesus with them. But what do you think they were walking into? This woman wasn't a mother-in-law worthy of the title if she didn't have an opinion about Simon's change in course. Did she approve? Applaud

him for stepping out in faith and putting everything on the line for this new show stopper? Maybe, but you won't convince me she wasn't more than a little worried about what was going to come of her daughter and grandchildren. She couldn't exactly put the kids in daycare and go get herself a job. And what about Jesus? I doubt they had met, but again, I bet she had opinions. Was he worth the upheaval, chaos and precariousness? Or was he a trouble maker who never looked back to see what the fall out and devastation looked like when he was done?

We can't know what Simon knew when he went to the synagogue that morning, but by the time they got home late in the day, it was very clear that his mother-in-law was very sick. In bed with a fever, which in all reality was life-threatening. They told Jesus about her illness and without a word, he went to her bedside, took her by the hand and raised her up. Which is a lot stronger than just healed her; the Greek word used here is the same one used to describe Jesus being raised after his death. There was a new and transformed life waiting for this woman. Jesus didn't ask her if she wanted to be healed, and he didn't ask her to verify her faith. He took her by the hand and raised her up. And immediately, the fever left her and she began to serve them.

Now, I'll admit to having made some cheeky comments about that in the past; and not just me – lots of women have. Comments about how the boys must have been hungry for some supper after that long day in the synagogue, so they put her back on her feet and sent her off to the kitchen. But that's not what's going on here either. When Mark reports that she began to serve them, he used the word *diaconia*: a Greek word that he used earlier to report that the angels took care of Jesus' needs in the wilderness; he'll use it again in chapter 10 when Jesus says that he did not come to be served but to serve. Service is what discipleship looks like in the Gospel of Mark: something that Simon and Andrew, James and John had a very hard time comprehending, but which this woman knew instinctively at the touch of Jesus' hand and his gift of new life. Immediately, she was on her feet and back to her vocation of service and hospitality, extending welcome and offering kindness. And while I wouldn't suggest she was unphased when the whole town showed up at their door after sundown, bringing all of their sick and demon possessed along with them, I would be pretty confident she didn't whimper and whine either. Instead, she rolled up her sleeves and got things organized: setting up an assembly line in the kitchen, she pulled out all of the rations they had tucked away for later and set one group to fixing food, before she headed out to see how she could help Jesus with the crowd.

I don't know what opinions and perceptions she was carrying about both Simon Peter and Jesus before she was struck down by a fever, but I do know how she responded when Jesus took her hand and raised her up, returning her to life, to her family and community, and to her vocation of service and hospitality. She gratefully embraced the miraculous gift he offered, and did everything in her power to share it with others.

Now I'm totally putting words in her mouth, but I think she'd be as impressed by a story I heard this week as I was. The story of a book club that calls themselves the Fabulous Ladies Book Club. One of their members is an Ob/Gyn doctor, one of only two in their New Mexico county. She fought tears while she talked with Nora O'Donnell about the ravages of COVID on their ICU system and the desperate need of their community to make their way through the pandemic, and then she described being asked to vaccinate her community. Without giving it a second thought and said yes and then turned to her book club. With one text, they were all on board to help her. The medically trained folks in the group give shots and the rest take care of logistics. They've already handled 21 clinics and are well on their way to vaccinating all 2,300 people in their community. (CBS Evening News, Feb 2, 2021)

When he learned that she was sick, Jesus went to the bedside of this nameless woman, took her by the hand and raised her up. As she received that gift of healing and on being handed the miracle of a new life, she embraced it with everything she had in her: serving her guests that day, the crowds that flocked to her door that evening and who knows how many more after that or by doing what. It's a call that Jesus issues to all who would follow and be his disciple: a call not to be served but to serve. To prepare meals and tend to logistics, to shovel snow and keep parking lots safe, to set tables and change diapers, to make beds and do laundry, to repair broken doors and care for wounded pets. To offer gifts of welcome and hospitality, kindness and mercy. And to do it all in Jesus' name and in the power of Jesus' love.

SONG *"Won't You Let Me Be Your Servant"*

Won't you let me be your servant, let me be as Christ to you?

Pray that I may have the grace to let you be my servant, too.

I will hold the Christ-light for you in the shadow of your fear;  
I will hold my hand out to you, speak the peace you long to hear.

I will weep when you are weeping; when you laugh I'll laugh with you.  
I will share your joy and sorrow till we've seen this journey through.

PASTORAL PRAYER

Holy God, you are the giver of every good and gracious thing, and we are your grateful people. We sing your praises for the wonders of creation: mountains' majesty and ice crystals' intricacies, panda bears' delight in the snow and hummingbirds' wisdom to fly south and escape the cold. We celebrate the miracle of love and the gift of those who make it most real in our lives: partners and parents, children and friends, people who teach us, accompany us, wait for us, encourage us, forgive us and believe in us – especially in those times when we are unable to believe in ourselves. We marvel at the ways in which you move among us, giving us gifts and skills through which we can care for one another, whispering peace into anxious hearts, strengthening us in times of weakness, healing our wounded bodies and broken hearts, forgiving us and inviting us to try again, calling us to come and dance, come and serve, come and love.

Loving God, we pray for our community, our country and our world. Into places of violence, we pray for the promise of peace and people who will give of themselves to bring an end to hostility and division, bringing hands and hearts together to seek healing and hope. Into places of hunger and need, we pray for the gift of food and nourishment, and for imaginative minds to come together to usher in a new day of sharing and cooperation, of longer tables and fuller stomachs, where no one goes without and everyone has enough. Into places of illness and suffering, we pray for healing and for hope, giving thanks for doctors and nurses, first responders and volunteers who give all that they can and more they can afford to, for the rollout of the vaccine, and all who labor together to make others well and keep people safe. Into places of homelessness and hopelessness, we pray for shelter and safety, for the restoration of an economic system that meets the needs of the most vulnerable, that recognizes each person as one of your children, and that listens for your will and your way. We seek your wisdom, O God, for our leaders and for ourselves, that in our life together, we might live by your love, walk by your light and serve with your grace.

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've spent a lot of time in the kitchen this past week getting things ready for a birthday box we'll put in the mail in the morning. Huckleberry jam, cookies, english muffins, with scones yet to be made. It's the kind of thing I love to do; partly because I like spending time in the kitchen, and yes, there's the selfish truth that doing this cooking for him gets goodies for us. But it's more than that. It's also about communicating love, about encouraging joy, about expressing my gratitude for the gifts that I receive from him. These gifts, as with most gifts, are about a lot more than is immediately apparent on the surface.

All of that, and much, much more, can be said about gifts we give to the church as well. Sure, we give to the church because the church needs money to operate. We also give because we value the church, and the role it plays in our lives and in the community. Our gifts are an expression of gratitude and commitment, and reflect the kind of priority we place on the church. When we give anything in God's name, whether money or love, volunteer hours or acts of kindness, we are also saying thank you to God, for God's mercy and grace, sustaining love and never failing presence. When we give in God's name, we communicate love, encourage joy and express our gratitude for all that we have so graciously received. Thank you, my friends, for every gift, and all of the love in which it is wrapped.

## SACRAMENT OF COMMUNION

### Words of Invitation

Ordinary bread made by ordinary people is holy when we take and eat and remember. Ordinary grapes taken by ordinary people and made into wine are holy when we hold the cup to our lips and drink and remember. This bread... remember his body was given for us. This cup... remember his blood was poured out for us. Bread and cup, from ordinary to holy... Remember.

### Communion Prayer

May God be with you

**And also with you.**

Lift your hearts.

**We lift them up to God.**

Let us give thanks to the God we love.

**We freely give God thanks and praise.**

It is right and meet, beautiful and holy that we should, in ceaseless joy, give our thanks and praise to you, holy and merciful God, through Jesus Christ, our Savior. And so, in grateful procession of endless praise, with the church that is, was, and shall be forever, we glorify you, joining this unending song:

**Holy, holy, holy God of love and majesty, the whole universe speaks of your glory, O God Most High. Blessed is the one who comes in the name of our God! Hosanna in the highest!**

Holy are you, Eternal One. You sit above, through, within the circle of the earth: setting light into being, casting the stars in the sky, founding the evolving earth and all that dwell within it. Limitless is your power, and great is your wisdom. You look upon the lowly as your most cherished creatures. You visit the downtrodden with presence, grace, and the promise of eternal justice. You sent to us your own child, Jesus, who reached into unexpected places, calling women beyond the limits of their times, equipping men for nurturing love, welcoming children into your holy embrace.

And so we recall that on the night of betrayal and desertion, the light of the world took bread, broke and gave it to the disciples, saying: "This is my body, given for you. Do this for the remembrance of me." And, in like manner, after supper, Jesus took the cup and after giving thanks gave it to them saying, "This is the cup of the new covenant, poured out for you and for all people for the forgiveness of sins. Do this, as often as you drink of it, for the remembrance of me."

Life's greatest feast before us, we excitedly proclaim:

**Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again.**

Dear God, you transform. You transform all that is before you so that at the touch of your grace we are never the same. Dear God, you illumine. You bring light to all peoples: Light to the nations, Light into our hearts, Light on your Way. Dear God, we pray for your Spirit. Transform, illumine, bless. Make these ordinary gifts of bread and cup into the extraordinary presence of Christ with us.

**In so doing, hold us as your own, renew us as your people for the sake of the world you love.**

For all honor and glory are yours, O God, through Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit in your glorious creation both now and forever. **Amen.**

### Sharing the Bread and Cup

Let us in our many places receive the gift of God, the bread of heaven.

**We are one in Christ in the bread we share.**

Let us with our many needs and many blessings, receive the gift of God, the cup of blessing.

**We are one in Christ in the cup we share.**

### Prayer of Thanksgiving (in unison)

**We have been fed, Holy One, by your presence. We have been led, Eternal One, by your light.**

**May we bask in this glow now and forevermore. Amen.**

(Rev. Kaji Douša, a UCC pastor of Park Avenue Christian Church in New York City)

### SONG "O for a Thousand Tongues to Sing"

O for a thousand tongues to sing My great Redeemer's praise,  
The glories of my God and King, The triumphs of his grace.

Jesus! The name that calms our fears, That bids our sorrows cease,  
'Tis music in the sinner's ears, 'Tis life and health and peace.

My gracious Master and my God, Assist me to proclaim,  
To spread through all the earth abroad, The honors of Thy name.

### BENEDICTION

Life is short. And we do not have much time to gladden the hearts of those who travel the way with us. So: be swift to love, and make haste to be kind. And may the blessing of God the source, Jesus the reconciler, and the Spirit who animates life be among us all. Amen.