

UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST CONGREGATIONAL
Wallace, Idaho

Alice M.C Ling, Pastor

August 15, 2021

Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost

PRELUDE “*Love Divine, All Loves Excelling*”

WELCOME AND ANNOUNCEMENTS

CALL TO WORSHIP

Let us rejoice, for morning has dawned. A new day is born, and we are newly alive to enjoy it.

We celebrate the beauty of creation and the wonder of the human family. We remember those those love has shaped our lives and those whose struggles for justice have been unsleeping in spite of opposition.

We gather to worship God, to share prayers and gifts, to pledge ourselves to God’s work in the world.

May God bless us, so that what we do in this time together may be honest, sacred, and filled with hope.

(Maren Tirabassi, *Touch Holiness*)

HYMN “*All Are Welcome*”

Let us build a house where love can dwell
And all can safely live,
A place where saints and children tell
How hearts learn to forgive.
Built of hopes and dreams and visions,
Rock of faith and vault of grace;
Here the love of Christ shall end divisions:
All are welcome, all are welcome, all are welcome in this place.

Let us build a house where prophets speak,
And words are strong and true,
Where all God’s children dare to seek
To dream God’s reign anew.
Here the cross shall stand as witness
And as symbol of God’s grace;
Here as one we claim the love of Jesus:...

Let us build a house where hands will reach
Beyond the wood and stone
To heal and strengthen, serve and teach,
And live the Word they’ve known
Here the outcast and the stranger
Bear the image of God’s face;
Let us bring an end to fear and danger: ...

Let us build a house where all are named,
Their songs and visions heard
And love and treasured, taught and claimed
As words within the Word.
Built of tears and cries and laughter,
Prayers of faith and songs of grace,
Let this house proclaim from floor to rafter: ...

PRAYER OF CONFESSION (in unison)

God of love and justice, we long for peace within and peace without. We long for harmony in our families, for serenity in the midst of struggle, and for commitment to each other’s growth. We long for the day when our homes will be a dwelling place for your love. Yet we confess that we are often anxious, we do not trust each other, and we harbor violence. We are not willing to take the risks and make the hard choices that love requires. Look upon us with kindness and grace. Rule in our homes and in all the world, show us how to walk in your paths, through the mercy of our Savior. Amen.

(Ruth Duck, *New Century Hymnal*)

ASSURANCE OF FORGIVENESS

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 Ephesians 4:1-16

I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.

But each of us was given grace according to the measure of Christ's gift. Therefore it is said,

“When he ascended on high he made captivity itself a captive;

he gave gifts to his people.”

(When it says, “He ascended,” what does it mean but that he had also descended into the lower parts of the earth? He who descended is the same one who ascended far above all the heavens, so that he might fill all things.) The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ. We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people's trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming. But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love.

SERMON

I used to work with a man who is the Executive Director of a wonderful non-profit called Lumunos, that helps people address the question of call in a very expansive sort of way. One of the gifts of COVID is how much more of their work is now available on-line, so that when I read about offerings, I don't have to wish I lived close enough to attend a 6-week study on something, or consider whether it's worth it to me to fly to Denver or Chicago or somewhere for a weekend retreat. I've taken advantage of a women's book group that meets by Zoom once a month with people from all over the country and there are countless other possibilities. I think they're taking cautious steps toward getting back to some in-person programming, but it's clear that on-line has come to stay.

In that context, I wasn't surprised to see an email from Doug a couple of days ago, with the beginning of a subject line I recognized: something called PT for the Soul. I haven't paid much attention, but it's a periodic invitation to a Zoom meeting that offers tools and exercises to help us deal with challenging situations and emotions. The second half of the subject line gave the specifics on the upcoming topic: COVID anger. Now, that caught my attention and I thought, I've got some anger. And it's been building. You should hear me talk back to the news and my Facebook feed, numbers and attitudes that really get me going. For months I've been saying, it didn't have to be this bad; but increasingly, I find myself pointing fingers, assigning blame, and spouting about who and what has landed us in a surge like last winter's, with overflowing hospital beds and soaring numbers. Clearly, the subject line had my attention, so I decided to read further. I read that it would be a session that offered meditation and contemplative prayer to help participants release and transform their anger, using the prophets and poets for language and insight.

I need to confess to you that reading and then processing that email was a frustrating experience for me, in large part because it was so darn even handed. It didn't take my side; instead, it got me to stop and think and admit that we're all angry. Whether we're burning masks and protesting vaccination

requirements or blaming the non-vaxxers for landing us here by refusing to do the responsible thing, we're all angry. As a person who's been standing with one foot on my soapbox, just waiting for the moment and the audience to let 'er rip, that email got me to stand down and wonder exactly what would be accomplished if all us angry people unloaded. On each other and at the same time. I suspect all we would achieve is the creation of more anger. Once I admitted that, it didn't take me long to name the obvious: more anger is the last thing we need right about now.

Because the email showed up while I was immersed in reading and thinking about the letter to the Ephesians and what I was going to say this morning, it wasn't much of a stretch to see connections. This letter was written to a fledgling church whose members were having more than a little trouble getting along. There was ancient hostility between Jews and Gentiles, and it's hard to tell who was more shocked when the Spirit sent Peter a vision telling him the Jewish Christians needed to throw open the door to the despicable Gentiles. They did as they were told but then the two groups proceeded to butt heads, jockey for positions of power and argue over the terms of membership. When this letter arrived in their mailbox, chapter two announced that the fight was over. Settled and resolved, over and done. God has torn down the dividing wall, and from here on out, you're all one; thanks be to God. Anyone who's ever been part of that kind of a feud knows that declaring a cease fire doesn't automatically make for peace. So while the first half of this letter announces what God has done within the new church, the second half comes along to spell out what they need to do to move this truce into a real and lasting peace and into the creation of a church where they can honestly all be one. In case you had any question about how important the notion of unity is to this writer, they quickly proceed to spell it out with no small amount of repetition. Hear me when I say, we are and we will be one, for in this thing called church there is one body and one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all. Now figure out how to live as one.

Easier said than done, but the text clearly gives clues and ideas about where to begin. Our passage opens with the writer begging members of the community to lead a life worthy of their calling. Not the kind of deal where they had to pass a test and prove themselves worthy of membership; rather, the grace of God has already given them membership, now they need to align themselves as closely as possible with the grace, love and calling of God, to extend to others what has been given to them. That might be a little vague, but the very next phrase lifts up words like humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, and making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. It's a mouthful, and it's a challenge, especially when you're hot under the collar and have been rehearsing your rant for weeks. But if we break it down, I think the clues are there.

There's a lot of talk in this text about love, and while that's one of my favorite words, I also think it's one of the most misused and misunderstood words there is. Being asked to love one another doesn't necessarily mean we should get all soft and squishy. It also doesn't mean I have to swallow my convictions and perspective because I know yours are different. This text encourages us to speak the truth in love, which I think means sharing with another how and why we believe what we do, while listening as openly as possible to where they're coming from and how they got to that position. It does not mean debating and arguing to speak the loudest, drive home a point and come out on top; nor does it mean opening up both barrels on the anger we've got stockpiled in our guts and letting the other have it. And as Brian Peterson, Professor of New Testament in Columbia, South Carolina writes, "That particular instruction sometimes becomes an excuse for abusive speech used to push down others and gain power for ourselves, all under the self-justifying banner of "truth-teller." It reminds me of a colloquialism in the American southeast which goes "Bless your heart," which usually means "Oh you poor thing, you don't realize how idiotically wrong you are, but I'll be glad to set you straight." It is not a blessing at all. Such is not the "speaking the truth in love" to which this text calls us." (Working Preacher, August 5, 2018) As I understand it, speaking the truth in love means saying what we see and

feel, believe and have experienced, but doing it in a way that maximizes the possibility that someone else will be able to hear it; it means sharing from the truth of our hearts, the vulnerability of our hurts and the core of our faith. It's possible that we'll learn some things even as we share some things, that we'll discover some common ground between us where we can come together and meet.

And then there's unity and the ways in which it is different than uniformity. The early church was filled with an overwhelming diversity of backgrounds and beliefs, cultural biases and ethnic differences; the task before the church wasn't to melt all those differences down until they didn't exist anymore, but to find a way to be one in the midst of their differences. And that's a task every bit as pressing for us. To quote Peterson again, he writes that "If we aren't encountering and learning to love people who differ from us within the church, then something is wrong; this is not the healthy community that God desires. Too often we act as though the purity of the church depends on dividing until only those who look, talk, think, and act alike are left together. But differences are not divisions, and Spirit-given differences within the church are not a problem but are God's good gift so that together we can learn how to "speak the truth in love"... (same)... and build up the body of Christ.

We're not there yet. Probably not even all that much closer than the community in Ephesus was. But like them, we are still held in the love and grace, mercy and peace of God. Like that early church, God has made us one, and brought the dividing walls down and the hostility to an end. Now it's up to us to practice walking in humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace, learning to set our anger aside so that we can speak the truth in love. And together, live and grow into the truth that we are indeed one. Amen.

HYMN No. 281 *"The Bond of Love"*

We are one in the bond of love; We are one in the bond of love.

We have joined our spirits with the Spirit of God; We are one in the bond of love.

Let us sing now everyone; Let us feel God's love begun.

Let us join our hands that the world will know We are one in the bond of love.

PRAYER REQUESTS

PASTORAL PRAYER

O Holy One, the state of our world staggers us and wears us down: an earthquake rocks Haiti as it is reeling with political instability; the Taliban is on the rise in Afghanistan as US forces withdraw and seek their over due return home; flood waters recede throughout Europe while tropical depression Fred soaks Puerto Rico and sets its sights on Florida; wildfires turn Greece and too much of the western US to rubble and ash and smoke turns the very air we breathe toxic; Covid ravages towns and cities everywhere, overflowing hospitals, challenging schools, exhausting medical workers, fueling frustrations and impatience. Before we shut down and crawl inward or lash out and add to the chaos, speak your word of peace to us and help us to turn again to you. Give us the trust to know that you are present in each place of suffering and each moment of despair, that you cradle each broken body and shattered life. Give us the vision to see what we can do, know which hearts we can love, where we can offer your welcome, what it means to speak your truth; and then grant us the courage and the energy to do our part. Give us the faith to see beyond the shadow of death, to rely on you as the God of resurrection and new life, the Holy One whose last and final word is always Love.

We bring to you the fullness of our hearts: joy for the gifts and graces of summer, time with loved ones and quiet to rest and pause, bold new adventures and the chance to return to favorite spots, wildlife and gardens, huckleberries and osprey, the miracle of love and all the ways it colors and strengthens, blesses and sustains our lives. Thank you for the bounty of gifts that pour forth from your hand and fill

our lives with such rich and wondrous beauty. We also bring to you the concerns and burdens that we carry with us: prayers for healing for those who are sick, struggling with the realities of age, battling addictions, facing into moments of transition and change, overcome with grief and anxiety, weary of shouldering too much for too long. We pray for broken relationships, homes filled with tension and anger, lives touched by violence, bodies violated by abuse. We seek your healing and holding, the peace that comes with a sense of your nearness, the courage to say what needs to be said and take the steps that need to be taken, the confidence that by your mercy a new day is coming, and you will always see us through.

Hear our prayers, O God, spoken and unspoken, offered to you in the silence of our own hearts. *(Silence)* And hear us as we join together in the prayer that Jesus taught: **Our Father...**

PRAYER OF OUR SAVIOR (depts)

OFFERING

As we give today, may we do so in love, in joy, in prayer, in thanksgiving and in unselfishness.

DOXOLOGY

PRAYER OF DEDICATION (in unison)

Transforming God, take these expressions of our labor and turn them into hope for the weary, liberation for the oppressed, power for the dispossessed; take us flawed creatures and manifest in us your love that knows no end, your faith that can do all things, your service that spares no cost, your patient endurance that hopes to the last. Amen. *(Chalice Worship)*

HYMN No. 284 *“They’ll Know We Are Christians by Our Love”*

We are one in the Spirit, we are one in the Lord,
We are one in the Spirit, we are one in the Lord,
And we pray that all unity may one day be restored:
And they’ll know we are Christians by our love, by our love.
Yes, they’ll know we are Christians by our love.

We will walk with each other, we will walk hand in hand,
We will walk with each other, we will walk hand in hand,
And together we’ll spread the news that God is in our land: ...

We will work with each other, we will work side by side,
We will work with each other, we will work side by side,
And we’ll guard each one’s dignity and save each one’s pride: ...

All praise to the Father, from whom all things come,
And all praise to Christ Jesus, God’s only Son,
And all praise to the Spirit, who makes us one: ...

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