

UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST CONGREGATIONAL
Wallace, Idaho

Alice M.C. Ling, Pastor

August 29, 2021

Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost

PRELUDE “When Morning Gilds the Skies”

GREETINGS AND ANNOUNCEMENTS

Welcome to worship...

I sent an email to the congregation yesterday that was attempting to open a conversation about our behavior in relation to COVID. I expect we're all aware of the surge that we're in the midst of. News stories this week reported that Kootenai Medical is overflowing with COVID patients, setting up new sections for beds and treatment, and calling for volunteers for housekeeping and food. I heard some numbers that really put things in perspective for me in relation to positivity rates. The goal is to reach a rate of about 5%; nationally, we're currently at about 10.1%. Idaho is the 4th highest in the nation, with a rate of 33.4%; Kootenai County is at 28% and Shoshone 35. More anecdotally, I heard this week of a couple who live just over a block from the church who are both fully vaccinated and have had COVID. I say all of that as a backdrop for saying that it has increasingly felt to me like we as a congregation have to change our ways in response to all of this. I don't want to do that. We've been feeling good and comfortable and safe, but I don't think we have the luxury to assume that. And we need to do our part in helping bring this to an end. So for today, we're asking people who come to the building to mask and maintain a social distance. And we need to decide together, what our behavior is going to be going forward from here. I welcome your ideas, your input and your prayers.

CALL TO WORSHIP

Here, our Beloved speaks to us; the voice of our Beloved sounds in our hearts:

calling us to generous acts, to share the gifts we have been given.

Now, our Beloved speaks to us; the voice of our Beloved sounds in our land:

calling us to generous acts, to open our hearts to all in need.

In every place, in every moment, our Beloved speaks to us; the voice of our Beloved sounds in all creation:

calling us to generous acts, to stand with God's people: the least, the lost, the little, the last.

(Thom M. Shuman, LectionaryLiturgies.blogspot.com)

HYMN No. 450 “Lord, Speak to Me”

Lord, speak to me, that I may speak
In living echoes of Thy tone;
As Thou hast sought, so let me seek
Thy loving children lost and lone.

O teach me, Lord, that I may teach
The precious things Thou does impart;
And wing my words, that they may reach,
The hidden depths of many a heart.

O fill me with Thy fullness, Lord,
Until my very heart o'erflow.
In kindling thought and glowing word
Thy love to tell, Thy praise to show.

O use me, Lord, use even me,
Just as Thou wilt and when and where;
Until Thy blessed face I see,
Thy rest, Thy joy, Thy glory share.

PRAYER OF CONFESSION (in unison)

Dear God, you call us to be doers of the Word, not hearers only. You call us to love the world with your passion, and to let that love be expressed in justice, forgiveness, peace. Forgive us when our

hearts are constricted with fear and do not let your transforming grace open us to the world you cherish. Forgive us when we honor you only with our lips and not with our actions. Silence

ASSURANCE OF GRACE

Holy One, in Christ you have shown us the way into your Beloved Community of mercy, love and peace, in which you are making all things new. We come to affirm our covenant and sacred promise to be in loving relationship with you. Thank you for giving us life. Open us, body, mind and spirit to your truth. Fill us with your grace so we can fall in love with your world and offer—and experience—forgiveness, reconciliation and hope. (Rev. Bonnie Tarwater, UCC Worship Ways)

SCRIPTURE READING

Psalm 15

O LORD, who may abide in your tent?
Who may dwell on your holy hill?

Those who walk blamelessly, and do what is right,
and speak the truth from their heart;
who do not slander with their tongue,
and do no evil to their friends,
nor take up a reproach against their neighbors;
in whose eyes the wicked are despised,
but who honor those who fear the LORD;
who stand by their oath even to their hurt;
who do not lend money at interest,
and do not take a bribe against the innocent.

Those who do these things shall never be moved.

James 1:17-27

Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. In fulfillment of his own purpose he gave us birth by the word of truth, so that we would become a kind of first fruits of his creatures.

You must understand this, my beloved: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; for your anger does not produce God's righteousness. Therefore rid yourselves of all sordidness and rank growth of wickedness, and welcome with meekness the implanted word that has the power to save your souls.

But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves. For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror; for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like. But those who look into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and persevere, being not hearers who forget but doers who act—they will be blessed in their doing.

If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless. Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.

SERMON

I just finished reading the book *The Brothers K* by David James Duncan, and while it took me awhile to get into it, once I did, I was captive to the story, the family, their experience of the 60's and the conversation on faith that was woven throughout the book. Mom was a hard-core 7th Day Adventist, Dad wasn't interested or involved in church, and together they raised 4 sons and 2 daughters who ran

the gamut from enthusiastic believers to skeptics about whether God even existed to a Buddhist. Irwin embraced the faith more than any of the others did, regularly went to the front of the church to confess his sins and embrace Jesus as his Savior; and years later, he still held the record for both perfect attendance and most memory verses absorbed. All of which was a powerful backdrop when he was drafted and landed in Vietnam. In a letter home to a brother, Irwin described the moment when he and his comrades saw a young Vietcong sitting in a tree on the other side of a river, eating his lunch, with a rifle laying on his lap. They watched him for a bit, and then Irwin was told to “Pop him good and let’s scratch gravel. He can’t be as lonesome as he looks.” (page 418) Irwin did as he was told and shot the man, and then watched him fall and float, drown and hold on all at once. At which point, he decided to try and go save him. Failing at that, he threw his rifle as far as he could into the Mekong and then tried to pray. Which is when the Sabbath School song “Zaccheus” got stuck in his head so he started singing,

Zaccheus was a wee little man, a wee little man was he

He climbed up in a sycamore tree for the Lord he wanted to see...

And then he started sobbing because he had killed Zaccheus, confident that Jesus had already saved the VC and had absolutely no interest now in the likes of Irwin.

It’s hard to tell if it was good news or bad, but they didn’t lock him up or toss him out, they also didn’t issue him another M-16; instead he ended up assigned as a gopher and servant to a captain. That assignment landed him in a base where a small Vietcong boy was handcuffed to the bumper of a jeep. While most of the soldiers around expressed their anger about the explosion that had killed their comrade, and pointed fingers at the one they blamed for his death, Irwin looked into his face, saw how young his eyes were, and realized that the streaks on his face weren’t dirt but tears. While the soldiers plotted ways to take care of the enemy without leaving any trace that he ever existed, Irwin imagined explanations and possibilities as to why he might have done what they said he must have done. And when the captain tossed him out of the tent to silence his alternative scenarios, Irwin ended up singing “This little light of mine” for no greater reason that it popped into his mind and he couldn’t get it out. From there, it was only a matter of time before he was trying to remember the exact wording of “*Whosoever shall humble himself as this little child something, something, whose shall help, or maybe receive, or anyhow shall stick up for one such child in My Name, receiveths, or sticks up for, or anyhow stands by Me.*” (page 449) And it went seriously down hill from there.

I’m not sure where those songs and verses belong, but clearly they didn’t fit on a battlefield anymore than Irwin did. And while I’d be very happy to have a conversation about how to interpret various stories from the Bible, teachings of Jesus as well as traditions of the church, and the ways I’m confident I differ from a 7th Day Adventist, there’s something about Irwin’s faith that I haven’t been able to shake. I don’t know if he was demonstrating the naive and simplistic recitation of songs and stories he’d learned as a child in Sabbath School, or if his was a faith planted deeper into his heart and soul than most of us are familiar with. If it was the latter, that’s exactly what the book of James encourages when he writes, “welcome with meekness the implanted word that has the power to save your souls.”

The epistle of James is one that is full of instruction for how we should live our lives if they are truly going to be lives of faith and lives that are connected to and grounded in God. Much of this letter can be summarized in the words, “be doers of the word and not merely hearers.” Faith is not about appearances or formalities, it’s not about lip service or pious language, it’s not about how often we go to church or how lovely our voices are when we sing the hymns. It’s about letting the word of God take root in our lives so that we act differently, so that we speak more carefully, so that we put our words into action and do what we can to make a difference in other’s lives. Talk is cheap, as are outward appearances and first impressions. James is urging us to invest in the work and the life that really make a difference, to let the seed of God take up residence in our lives, setting down roots, sending out shoots, infiltrating and growing until its presence is visible and tangible and unmistakable.

Another way to put it is with a proverb from Kenya that says: “When you pray, always remember to move your feet.” In James, theology is a verb, it’s not a noun. It’s something that we live and put to work, not just something we proclaim and set up in a display case or wear around our necks. Something we take to work with us, and out on the ball field, when we’re interacting with our neighbors and ready to raise our fist at the person who just cut us off in traffic. Our faith and our prayers need to show up in all of those places, and many, many more. Even, God forbid, we end up on a battlefield one day, I think James would like to see us putting our faith to work there.

One of the most specific directions this passage looks when it tells us to put our faith to work is in relation to words, starting with encouragement to bridle the tongue. I don’t know about you, but that one really gets my attention every time I read this passage. I can think of all sorts of reasons to bridle the tongue, some of which are real and personal struggles for me, some I’ve observed in others. Sometimes its flares of temper than flash and burn, cut people to the quick and leave a permanent stain; or stories that get passed along, maybe true, maybe not, it’s hard to say, and it doesn’t always matter, cloaked as caring and concern but not always a long way from gossip; then there’s confidences that are broken by a momentary desire to let someone else know what’s going on, success stories that allow us to strut our stuff, sometimes at others’ expense; and so on and so forth, the list is endless. James suggests that it might be a good idea to bridle it, to install some sort of controls so that it doesn’t run off on its own before we have a chance to even engage the brain; putting someone or something in charge of it so that it’s thoughtful and intentional, not running about wild and free, slashing down anything that stands in its way. All of which leads directly into the instruction that we should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to anger.

In addition to all this talk about putting our faith to work, the end of this passage takes a stab at summarizing what that faith should be about. James isn’t just encouraging any old set of beliefs and values, but in verse 27 he points us in a direction by saying, “Religion that is pure and undefiled before God... is this: to care for the orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.” It’s a familiar theme from the Old Testament and woven all the way through the gospels, and it appears throughout the rest of this letter: the instruction to love our neighbor, to care for the weakest and most vulnerable, to put our faith to work for the sake of the community.

Thom Shuman summarizes the call of this text with a poem entitled “through us”:

if we would be your people,
Blessed God,
we must look in the windows of the world:
to see as you see,
to love as you love,
to act as you act.

through us,
you would
stand by the poor,
rescuing them
at the beginning of their distress,
not when they are
at the end of their rope.

through us,
you would
side with the oppressed,
and challenge us

to release them
from their tyranny and torture.

through us,
you would
speak for the voiceless,
and call for the powerful
to meek and lowly lives.

through us,
you would...

Beloved Holy One
help us to be doers
not just hearers
of your heart. (*Dust Shaker*)

HYMN No. 382 “*Be Thou My Vision*”

Be Thou my vision, O Lord of my heart; Naught be all else to me, save that Thou art -
Thou my best thought, by day or by night, Waking or sleeping, Thy presence my light.

Be Thou my Wisdom, and Thou my true Word; I ever with Thee and Thou with me, Lord;
Thou my great Father, I Thy true son, Thou in me dwelling, and I with Thee one.

Riches I heed not, nor earth's empty praise, Thou mine inheritance, now and always;
Thou and Thou only, first in my heart, High God of heaven, my Treasure Thou art.

PRAYER REQUESTS

Christi's cousin, Carolyn Weil, is off the ventilator; she still has a long way to go, but this is very good news

PASTORAL PRAYER

It feels so good, God, to come together in prayer. So much seems to be falling apart. So many are so divided that it feels good to be united with you and with our friends in faith. It feels good to be protected from the winds that blow, to be shaded from heat, to be gathered in the sheltering love of your embrace.

We lament the heartaches unfolding in the world around us: Our neighbors in Haiti who seem never to be able to rebuild from tragedy before another disaster strikes. Our neighbors in central Tennessee, in Germany and elsewhere digging out and drying out from devastating flooding while weeping and mourning their dead and their missing loved ones. Our neighbors on the Gulf Coast confronting the winds, rain and surge of Hurricane Ida. Our neighbors locally and throughout the west, in Greece and elsewhere in the world fleeing fires and breathing smoke, praying for rain, enough, but not too much, praying for a future for the landscapes they call home. Our neighbors in Afghanistan clinging to hope, hiding out, crying out, for help, for safe passage, for a future, for freedom, for an end to suffering and war, for simple happiness. For the members of the military who grieve the loss of comrades while putting themselves at risk to aid evacuations. Our neighbors in hospitals and schools and businesses around the globe who are so very weary of COVID-19, who mourn those who have died, who grieve for those who are terribly ill today, who grow frustrated with those who do not do the simple things that can be done to slow the progress of this disease and bring it under control. Our neighbors anywhere who live under the threat of violence, absent safe homes, who are facing the likelihood of eviction, who are lonely, addicted or otherwise afflicted with heartaches and sorrows untold.

Help us, those fortunate to be gathered in the sanctuary of our fellowship, to do what is right by our neighbors. Help us to speak truthfully about ourselves and each other. Help us to know the truth, help us to be willing to change our minds and change our hearts and change our behavior when truth turns out to be different than we once believed. Help us to speak in ways that help and heal and make the world and all its inhabitants more whole. Tenderize our tongues that love alone is what we communicate. Help us to live with integrity. Help us to live so that what we say we believe and what we do line up with each other and with You. Help us to be honest. Help us to be fair. Help us to give advantage to others rather than taking advantage for ourselves. Help us to stand up for the least of these among us. Help us to be your people until all the world is a sanctuary and all our neighbors are welcomed safely home. (Rev. Dr. Rebecca Z. McNeil, revgalblogpals.org, edited)

Hear us as we join together in the prayer that Jesus taught, saying: Our Father...

PRAYER OF OUR SAVIOR (depts)

OFFERING

The amazing gift of one who fully embodied God's intention for humanity prompts us to make a grateful response. In Christ we have known a love that will not let us go. Through our offerings, we share this love in our community and to the ends of the earth. I invite you to drop your gifts into the mail slot at the church or put them in the mail/the plate that's in the narthex on your way out. And I encourage all of us to consider the ways and the places where we can share God's generosity and make God's love visible. All gifts are welcome, all givers are richly blessed.

PRAYER OF DEDICATION (in unison)

May all our lives be an offering. May what we give today be just the "tip of the iceberg" of our generosity, lived out in everything we do, in every thought we harbor, in every word we speak. As children of God who has given life as a gift, may we live our lives as generous gifts to one another—each of us a gift for the good of all in the name of the one who made us. Amen.

(Rev. Dr. Rebecca Z. McNeil, revgalblogpals.org)

HYMN "Here I Am, Lord"

I, the Lord of sea and sky, I have heard my people cry.
All who dwell in dark and sin, my hand will save.
I who made the stars of night, I will make their darkness bright,
Who will bear my light to them? Whom shall I send?
Here I am, Lord. Is it I, Lord? I have heard you calling in the night.
I will go, Lord, if you lead me. I will hold your people in my heart.

I, the Lord of snow and rain, I have borne my people's pain.
I have wept for love of them. They turn away.
I will break their hearts of stone, give them hearts for love alone.
I will speak my word to them. Whom shall I send?...

I, the Lord of wind and flame, I will tend the poor and lame,
I will set a feast for them. My hand will save.
Finest bread I will provide till their hearts be satisfied.
I will give my life to them. Whom shall I send?...

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.