

UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST CONGREGATIONAL
Wallace, Idaho

Alice M.C. Ling, Pastor

August 8, 2021

Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost

PRELUDE *“For the Beauty of the Earth”*

WELCOME AND ANNOUNCEMENTS

CALL TO WORSHIP

You call your people to prayer and praise in many ways. This day, bring us together just as you called the people of Israel to gather manna in the desert to eat and sustain life.

God of unity, give us this day our daily bread.

Offer us the nutrients we need to remain connected to you. As spiritual beings, we desire to receive food that endures— faith, hope, and love.

God of grace, give us this day our daily bread.

All life is created and nourished by you! May we grow into new circles of understanding and being, reflecting the ways in which we have been touched by your holy manna.

Holy Spirit, come! Give us this day our daily bread.

(Rev. Kristina Lizardy-Hajbi, UCC Worship Ways)

HYMN (insert) *“Gather Us In”*

Here in this place, the new light is streaming, shadows of doubt have vanished away.
See in this space our fears and our dreamings, brought here to you in the light of this day.
Gather us in, the lost and forsaken; gather us in, our spirits inflame.
Call to us now, and we shall awaken; we shall arise at the sound of our name.

We are the young – our lives are a mystery; we are the old who yearn for your face.
We have been sung throughout all of history, called to be light to the whole human race.
Gather us in – the rich and the haughty; gather us in – the proud and the strong;
give us a heart so meek and so lowly, give us the courage to enter the song.

Here we receive new life in the waters, here we receive the bread of new birth;
here you shall call your sons and your daughters, call us anew to be salt for the earth.
Give us to drink the wine of compassion, give us to eat the bread that is you;
nourish us well, and teach us to fashion lives that are holy and hearts that are true.

Not just in buildings, small and confining, not in some heaven, light years away,
here in this place the new light is shining; now is God present, and now is the day.
Gather us in and hold us forever; gather us in and make us your own;
gather us in, all people together, fire of love in our flesh and our bone.

PRAYER OF INVOCATION (in unison)

Lord, the eyes of all look to You in hope; and You give them what they need. You open Your hand and satisfy the hunger and thirst of every living thing. We, too, turn to You again, longing to be filled— to eat of the Bread of Life, to drink from Your life-giving streams, to taste Your goodness and live. May the time we spend together in Your presence nourish our hearts and minds; may it strengthen our relationship with You, and renew our commitment to live in this world as Your faithful disciples. For You alone are God, the Source and Sustainer of life. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

(Christine Longhurst, re:Worship)

SCRIPTURE READINGS

Exodus 16:2-4, 9-15

The whole congregation of the Israelites complained against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness. The Israelites said to them, "If only we had died by the hand of the LORD in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger."

Then the LORD said to Moses, "I am going to rain bread from heaven for you, and each day the people shall go out and gather enough for that day. In that way I will test them, whether they will follow my instruction or not.

Then Moses said to Aaron, "Say to the whole congregation of the Israelites, 'Draw near to the LORD, for he has heard your complaining.'" And as Aaron spoke to the whole congregation of the Israelites, they looked toward the wilderness, and the glory of the LORD appeared in the cloud. The LORD spoke to Moses and said, "I have heard the complaining of the Israelites; say to them, 'At twilight you shall eat meat, and in the morning you shall have your fill of bread; then you shall know that I am the LORD your God.'"

In the evening quails came up and covered the camp; and in the morning there was a layer of dew around the camp. When the layer of dew lifted, there on the surface of the wilderness was a fine flaky substance, as fine as frost on the ground. When the Israelites saw it, they said to one another, "What is it?" For they did not know what it was. Moses said to them, "It is the bread that the LORD has given you to eat.

John 6:24-35

So when the crowd saw that neither Jesus nor his disciples were there, they themselves got into the boats and went to Capernaum looking for Jesus.

When they found him on the other side of the sea, they said to him, "Rabbi, when did you come here?" Jesus answered them, "Very truly, I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves. Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. For it is on him that God the Father has set his seal." Then they said to him, "What must we do to perform the works of God?" Jesus answered them, "This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent." So they said to him, "What sign are you going to give us then, so that we may see it and believe you? What work are you performing? Our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, 'He gave them bread from heaven to eat.'" Then Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world." They said to him, "Sir, give us this bread always."

Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.

SERMON

I read something recently where someone quoted someone else, but she couldn't remember who, as having said that Christianity is the eating-est religion there is. I'd have to do a whole lot more research into other religions than I've done to be able to confirm that, but I can't argue that the churches I've known and loved sure have loved their food. Who knows. Maybe that helps explain why I decided to spend my working life inside the Church. One of the first churches I served had a huge Labor Day event that featured chicken barbecue and bean-hole beans. Later I was at a church that served breakfast for two hours every Sunday morning throughout the school year; most of us managed to pull ourselves

away from the tables long enough for worship, and then we went back down stairs for a large spread of coffee hour. From there, I moved to a church that served free Friday night suppers to anyone who wanted to come, and a sell-out 3-serving Chicken Pie Dinner every October. Only to come here to the Chili Suppers, Soup and Pie Luncheon and Christmas dinner. And just about every church has claimed to have the best coffee hour anyone has ever seen. How can you argue with any of that? I can't, and I won't.

Contrast it, though, with an article I read by Kay Lynn Northcutt who started out her ministry as more of a purist that I've ever managed to be. About ten months into her first ministry, as she watched her congregation crowd 10 or 15 deep around the coffee pot and donuts, she wondered, "Why are these people here? They could have coffee and donuts at home... Why come to church for mediocre coffee and cold donuts and stand around chewing the fat about yesterday's football game? Can't we talk about God? Ecclesiology? Inclusive language? Justice? Liturgy? Anything that matters?" In truth, she said that the equation that assumed coffee + donuts = Christianity is what drove her to seminary in the first place. She announced to her first Intro to Ministry class that she hoped to save the church from irrelevancy by making worship as attractive as football, donuts and TV. When her professor said, "That's quite a trinity," she rushed on to clarify that she was "pretty certain the revitalization of worship has something to do with deconstructing the ubiquitous church coffee pot." To which the seasoned and wise professor said, do not interfere with a Christian's coffee. She went on from there to describe the studies she's done concerning worship, and the experiments in getting people to talk about God and faith, trying as she had promised in seminary, to revitalize worship. She writes about the failure and frustration she experienced and how it was more than 20 years later, the second Easter in the second Covid-tide of not being in church for 14 months straight that she finally understood. She woke up, said her morning prayers, and then cried out to her husband, "I want church coffee. Not our coffee. Not McDonald's coffee. Not Starbuck's coffee. Not espresso or latte or... Americano or cappuccino. Only church coffee will do!" Her voice was growing louder and more urgent while her husband tried to remind her she despised church coffee. To which she said, "Not since not having church coffee for almost two years. Now I thoroughly understand its importance. And anyway, the coffee is much, much better now that we attend a Lutheran church." And then she wrote, "Truth be told, I wanted to see Paula and Helen and Ted and Stephen and Joene and Allyson and Ricky and Phyllis and Scott – and to have a cup of coffee with them in the context of the church... I closed my eyes, at home with my kitten and my husband on the Best Day of the Year When We Ought to Be Able to Be in Church, and I sobbed. For the missing of almost two years of our lives. For want of church coffee and conversation. For the longing to be held in a cultural context of symbols that can see us through to eternity. But most especially, for the ache to be held within the human-divine embrace that is church." (*The Christian Century*, July 14, 2021, pages 12-13)

It occurs to me that Northcutt was struggling to comprehend much the same thing that Jesus wanted that crowd to comprehend in today's Gospel lesson: it's not all about the food. Blasphemous as it may sound to a foodie like me, the food really isn't even the point. Not the coffee, not the bread; forgive me for saying it, not the chili. Not even the signs and the wonders. Her discovery on the second Easter in Covid-tide was that it was about the community called church. In much the same way, Jesus wanted passionately for his followers to know that it was about God present in their midst, walking with them, meeting their needs, satisfying their hungers, quenching their thirst, offering them the bread of life.

One night on a mountainside, Jesus blessed and broke, multiplied and stretched five barley loaves and two fish until 5,000 people had filled their stomachs to the point of satisfaction, and then had his disciples gather up the leftovers and set them aside for another day and another need. When the crowd got wound up and tried to anoint him king, Jesus slipped away and disappeared into the night. Once they realized that both the head chef and his helpers had sailed away, they ran for their boats and

headed for Capernaum. When they found him on the other side of the sea, they asked him how and when he'd gotten there, and he accused them of only caring because they wanted to know where their next meal was coming from. Or because the flavor was still lingering on their lips and they wanted more of the delicacy they'd tasted the night before. Jesus said, don't waste your energy on food that spoils; get your head out of your stomachs and focus instead on the food that nourishes and will stick with you, food that lasts for life, which only the Son of Man can provide.

Then the conversation switched to the work of God and signs they could focus on to help them know what they were seeing. They asked what work he was performing. Anything like when our ancestors were in the wilderness, and Moses met their daily need for bread by seeing to it that manna appeared on the bushes every morning? Jesus interrupted their trip down memory lane and corrected: first of all, it was not Moses who provided that manna – it was God; and it wasn't just then, it is also now, every day, that God gives you the bread from heaven to eat. The bread of God came down from heaven and even now is giving life to the world. When they said, Sir, give us this bread always, Jesus said, I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.

As I said earlier, chapter six of the Gospel of John is a chapter that goes on at length, as only John can, about the notion of bread. That's especially interesting when you stop and remember that John is the only gospel that doesn't lay out the details of Jesus' Last Supper. There is no breaking of the bread and sharing of the cup in this gospel. This is the primary place in John's gospel, smack dab in the middle, where Jesus talks about bread. Even knowing that, I was surprised when Karoline Lewis, professor of preaching at Luther Seminary in St. Paul, as well as a scholar of the Gospel of John, suggested that perhaps here is where and how John introduces the notion of a sacrament involving bread. Not at the end of Jesus' life, and not as a remembrance or a commemoration of what has been, but in the middle of the Gospel, Jesus institutes the sacrament and calls those listening to see and feel the presence and the love of God. Through the ways he lived and taught, loved and cared for, Jesus made real and visible the presence of God, which is precisely what a sacrament is intended to do. (Sermon Brainwave podcast for August 1, 2021)

The more I think about it, the more struck I am with this take on John and sacraments. John's gospel doesn't describe Jesus' baptism, but he uses an interaction with the woman at the well to talk about living water that can quench deeper thirsts than every day water ever could. He doesn't bless a cup of wine at a Last Supper, but he does transform barrels of water into wine so that a wedding celebration can last long into the night and usher in an abundance of joy. And Jesus transforms simple little loaves of a poor boy's lunch to fill a hunger that reaches beyond the stomach and into the soul. A hunger for love, for belonging, for acceptance, for a home in the loving embrace of an ever-present God. He uses bread to make visible the presence and care, compassion and grace of God.

And in our own places and ways, our own lives and interactions, we're asked to do the same: to make visible the love and presence of God, with a gift of bread, a cup of wine, a glass of cold water, a gesture of kindness. To reach beneath the surface and the obvious, to get our heads out of our stomachs and to move our mouths beyond the coffee pot, so that we can see and feel, receive and celebrate the presence of God in our very midst, as real now as with the people of Israel plucking manna off the bushes and with Jesus on that hillside.

Robert Hoch has written about a move his family made to the United Kingdom last December to be closer to family. You can imagine what an awkward time that was to arrive in the UK. They had to quarantine for two weeks, and then they had to stand and look through a window to even see the family they'd come to be close to. And of course, there were no hugs. The feeling continued with their neighbors, Nancy and Mike who live in a nearby house. He writes, "We had waved to each other a few

times, but that's all. But one day as we stepped out of the cottage, Nancy came out of her front garden, calling out to us. In her hands, she held a freshly baked sourdough, still warm from the oven. It was for us, she said. No, it wasn't possible to visit as she would have liked. Yet maybe this is a sign of a future table that we can share as neighbors..."

He reflects on her gift this way, "Nancy was saying more than the 500-grams of flour, more than the 75-grams of starter, more than the water, the folding, the rising, the sleeping, more even than the joyful eating. Instead, the gift was almost vow-like: "With this bread, I do pledge" (*Working Preacher*, August 1, 2021, Commentary on John 6:24-35)

With our bread and our water, our coffee and our wine, we do pledge to live love, to extend mercy, to address hunger, to welcome others in, to make visible for ourselves and for others the steadfast and faithful presence of God. We do what we can and trust God to do more than we can imagine so that those who come to God will never be hungry, and whoever believes in God will indeed never thirst. May it be so. Amen.

HYMN No. 343 "Be Still and Know"

Be still and know that I am God, Be still and know that I am God.

Be still and know that I am God.

I am the Lord that healeth thee. I am the Lord that healeth thee.

I am the Lord that healeth thee.

PRAYER REQUESTS

- For the family and friends of Evy May Burkett, who passed away on Thursday
- Julie Robbins, grieving Evy May's death and recently exposed to Covid (she has underlying health conditions)

PASTORAL PRAYER

Holy God, we rejoice in the stories of scripture that tell us of the ways you were present among your people long ago, liberating them from slavery and leading them through the wilderness, calling them by name and equipping them for the work of ministry, challenging them to lives of faithfulness and comforting them in times of bewilderment and loss. You were especially present in Jesus' life and work, and we give you thanks for stories of healing and feeding, teaching and welcoming, confronting and cajoling. Open our eyes and our hearts that we might also recognize your presence among us: in the splendor of a sunset and the grace of a running deer, in the refreshment of a glass of lemonade and the nourishment of fresh picked produce, flickers of insight into another person's perspective and moments of cooperation instead of antagonism, the joy in giving and receiving random acts of kindness and a restlessness that nudges us toward growth and change, whispers of mercy and glimpses of peace. In each of those ways and so many more, we feel your presence and are grateful.

Holy One, we bring to you now the woundedness of our world and the heaviness of our hearts. Acutely aware of fires that burn out of control, we pray for all those whose homes are at risk or have been turned to a pile of ash, and for firefighters who labor long hours to keep communities safe. As Covid numbers surge yet again, we pray for the sick and exposed, for educators and business owners who make difficult decisions about how to keep people safe, for medical workers who continue to labor and serve at great cost to themselves. Move among all of us in these days, and help us to recognize the ways in which we are connected to one another, how our choices and actions can impact the lives of many. As we remember and cherish the life of our friend Evy May, we give you thanks for the strength of her spirit, the depths of her faith, the power with which she bore witness to you, and the gratitude with which she received acts of kindness (especially Berta's little blue bus). We rejoice with her that

she has been welcomed home to your loving embrace, and we ask for your comforting presence with all who loved her and who grieve her absence from our midst.

Loving God, hear our prayers, spoken and unspoken. (*silence*) And hear us as we join together in the prayer Jesus taught his friends when they asked him how they should pray: Our Father...

PRAYER OF OUR SAVIOR (depts)

OFFERING

As this is the second Sunday of the month, we once again invite your gifts to support the Emergency Aid Fund. Because of the gifts you've already given to this fund, I was recently able to respond to a person in need of a place to sleep. She was expecting her family the next day, but rather than spend another night in her car, she asked if there was any way I might be able to provide her with a room, a bed and a shower. With your help, I was able to say yes. Thank you for those gifts, for all of the ways that you support the ministry of our church, and for the ways your acts of kindness and generosity help to share the love of God with others.

HYMN No. 278 "*Glorious Things of Thee Are Spoken*"

Glorious things of thee are spoken, Zion, city of our God,
He whose word cannot be broken Formed thee for His own abode.
On the Rock of Ages founded, What can shake thy sure repose?
With salvation's walls surrounded, Thou mayst smile at all they foes.

See, the streams of living waters, Springing from eternal Love,
Well supply thy sons and daughters, And all fear of want remove.
Who can faint while such a river Ever flows their thirst to assuage?
Grace which, like the Lord, the Giver, Never fails from age to age!

Round each habitation hovering, See the cloud and fire appear
For a glory and a covering, Showing that the Lord is near!
Thus deriving from their banner Light by night and shade by day,
Safe they feed upon the manna Which He gives them when they pray.

BENEDICTION

God go with you in all that is gentle
Christ go with you in all that is brave
And the Spirit go with you in all that is free.
Go now in peace to love and serve our God. Amen.