

UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST CONGREGATIONAL
Wallace, Idaho

Alice M.C. Ling, Pastor

September 5, 2021

Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost

PRELUDE *“Praise My Soul the King of Heaven”*

WELCOME AND ANNOUNCEMENTS

CALL TO WORSHIP

O God, you summon the day to dawn; you teach the morning to waken the earth.

Great is your name, great is your love.

For you the valleys will sing for joy, the trees of the field shall clap their hands.

Great is your name, great is your love.

To you the monarchs of earth shall bow, the poor and the persecuted shall shout for joy:

Great is your name, great is your love.

Your love and justice shall last for ever, fresh as the morning, sure as the sunrise.

Great is your name, great is your love.

(A Wee Worship Book, Fifth Incarnation, Wild Goose Worship Group)

HYMN No.60 *“Morning Has Broken”*

Morning has broken Like the first morning, Blackbird has spoken Like the first bird.

Praise for the singing! Praise for the morning! Praise for them springing Fresh from the Word!

Sweet the rain’s new fall Sunlit from heaven, Like the first dewfall On the first grass.

Praise for the sweetness Of the wet garden, Sprung in completeness Where His feet pass.

Mine is the sunlight! Mine is the morning, Born of the one light Eden saw play!

Praise with elation, Praise every morning, God’s recreation Of the new day!

OPENING PRAYER

From before the world began and after the end of eternity, you are God. From the sea bursting from its womb to the wind ceasing from its chase, you are God. In the vastness of the universe and the forgotten corners of our hearts,

You are our God, and we bless you.

Because the world is beautiful, and beauty is a tender thing, and we are caretakers of creation, we need you, God.

We need you, God.

Because human knowledge seems endless, the world is our oyster and we do not know what we do not know, we need you God.

We need you, God.

Because we can live without you and are free to go against you and could worship our wisdom alone, we need you, God.

We need you, God.

Because you came among us, and sat beside us, and heard us speak and saw us ignore you, and healed our pain and let us wound you, and loved us to the end, and triumphed over all our hatred, we need you, God.

We need you, God.

Because you, not we, are God, we need you, God.

We need you, God. (Silence)

Listen, for the God who created us says, “Do not be afraid, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name: you are mine. You are precious to me. I love you, I honor you, I am with you.” *(Silence)*
So we respond:

**Maker of all, we are your children, the creatures of your kindness, the bearers of your name.
This day, we will walk by your light, follow your Son and live by your Spirit. This day, we will not offer to you offerings that cost us nothing. For this is the day that the Lord has made; we will rejoice and be glad in it. Amen.**

(A Wee Worship Book, Fifth Incarnation, Wild Goose Worship Group)

SCRIPTURE READING

Isaiah 35: 4-7a

Say to those who are of a fearful heart,

“Be strong, do not fear!

Here is your God.

He will come with vengeance,
with terrible recompense.

He will come and save you.”

Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened,
and the ears of the deaf unstopped;
then the lame shall leap like a deer,
and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy.

For waters shall break forth in the wilderness,
and streams in the desert;

the burning sand shall become a pool,
and the thirsty ground springs of water;

Mark 7:24-37

From there he set out and went away to the region of Tyre. He entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there. Yet he could not escape notice, but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet. Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. He said to her, “Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” But she answered him, “Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.” Then he said to her, “For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter.” So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.

Then he returned from the region of Tyre, and went by way of Sidon towards the Sea of Galilee, in the region of the Decapolis. They brought to him a deaf man who had an impediment in his speech; and they begged him to lay his hand on him. He took him aside in private, away from the crowd, and put his fingers into his ears, and he spat and touched his tongue. Then looking up to heaven, he sighed and said to him, “Ephphatha,” that is, “Be opened.” And immediately his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly. Then Jesus ordered them to tell no one; but the more he ordered them, the more zealously they proclaimed it. They were astounded beyond measure, saying, “He has done everything well; he even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak.”

SERMON

I know. Christian tradition says Jesus is fully human and fully divine. I wonder how many of us buy the balancing act, perfect symmetry on both sides of the see saw, excel at each without compromising either one. Or do we lean more in one direction than the other? Maybe it doesn’t make sense to you that he was divine at all; flesh and blood, got hungry, stubbed his toe, put his pants on one leg at a time,

needed to rest just like everybody else. Or maybe you lean more toward the divine; he knew what he was doing without having to be taught, and what was going to happen before it did, able to leap tall buildings in a single bound and had a dedicated line open to God at all times.

Tell me if I'm wrong, but my guess is that no matter where you fall on that spectrum, you're not used to interacting with the Jesus we have in front of us today. The passage opens by telling us that Jesus left town, traveled to the region of Tyre (which was Gentile territory), entered a house and didn't want anybody to know he was there. He didn't just turn off the "Open" sign; he turned on the "We're sorry, We're closed" sign. I should have done more research than I did; I'm used to the Gospels telling us Jesus wanted to get away by himself for a time of prayer, but are there other places where it says he just wanted to be left alone? What's up with that? Sure, he'd just tangled with the Pharisees and the scribes. Again. And none of his disciples showed any promise when it came to understanding who he was and what he was about. The crowds were relentless, and the requests, the pressure, the needs, the resistance just wouldn't stop. So he got away. For what? A sabbath pause? A vacation? A sabbatical? Maybe nothing more than a moment to catch his breath and get a decent night's sleep.

I don't know what he had his sights set on, and it really didn't matter, because he hadn't been there long when a woman burst into the room, bowed down at his feet and begged him to help her daughter. Unfortunately for her, she had at least three strikes against her. We know what she clearly didn't – that Jesus was done for the day; in addition to that, Mark makes sure that we know she was a woman, a Gentile and Syrophenecian – from the wrong side of the tracks. She had no business talking with Jesus in public, and in private was scandalous. Be that as it may, we would probably like to think that our kind and loving Jesus would rise to the occasion and say, of course, I'd be happy to save your daughter. But no, not this time. His compassion is down. And out. And as fast as she can get her need out of her mouth, he shoots back, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs."

Yup, that's right. He called her daughter a dog. And while I don't know if he wished he could take it back as soon as the words were out of his mouth, I know that a whole bunch of scholars, preachers and followers have wished that he had. There's a whole heap of theories that have been spun to soften the sting, like maybe Jesus meant little dog or puppy – a household pet. Or maybe he was playing with her and setting her up so she could be the one to reveal the boundary crossing ways of God. Or maybe he was testing her to see how much this request mattered to her; or trying to teach her about what it means to be persistent in prayer and steadfast in asking. Maybe. But I'm inclined to go with the scholars who say, Jesus was human. And Jesus was tired. And even Jesus couldn't get everything done as fast as he wanted and it needed to be done, so he had to prioritize. He didn't say he wouldn't feed the dog, only that he needed to feed the children first.

I have no idea how many times she'd been called a dog, but as far as Mark tells us, she didn't blink, wince or take time to catch her breath. If he thought she was a dog, she'd be a dog – a bulldog, persistent, tenacious, protective, scrappy. She met Jesus nose to nose, accepted the category that he had put her and her daughter in, and said, yes, but even the dogs under your tables are allowed to eat the children's crumbs. She wasn't arguing for a place at the table, she wasn't asking for special treatment; and while she wasn't willing to be put on hold while he tended to the children of Israel, she was more than willing to settle for crumbs and leftovers – fully aware that when Jesus fed the 5,000 on the mountainside, he'd collected up twelve baskets of leftovers. Just a smidgeon of that abundance would be plenty to set her daughter free.

I wonder how long the two of them stared at each other and let those words hang in the air before either of them spoke, blinked or took a breath. Some of us avoid confrontation at all cost, or wilt in the presence of another's passion and challenge, but they stood toe to toe, weighing the words and needs

that had been put on the table. Jesus was the one who spoke first, saying, you are right, and because of what you have said, you may go; the demon has left your daughter. At which point the woman had to decide if she should pressure Jesus to come with her, so he could see and touch her daughter and then release her from the demon? Or if she could trust that it was as he said. She took his word for it, returned home, and found her daughter well and whole.

I know we're not accustomed to thinking about Jesus needing to learn or figure out anything, but it seems to me that this is a story that shows an outsider who happens to be a woman helping Jesus expand the boundaries of his thinking and his mission, while also hitting the accelerator for the pace of his work. There are stories in the Old Testament where both Moses and Abraham take God on, and get God to change God's mind, both in terms of the punishment following the incident with the golden calf, and with the people of Sodom and Gomorrah. If God can change direction, it seems fair to me to accept that perhaps Jesus also still had things to learn. Which is what happens in the second half of our text: as the woman left him and made her way home, Jesus demonstrated that he'd learned his lesson, going on to heal another Gentile, this one a man whose ears were plugged and whose tongue was tied. He spoke the word "Ephphatha" which means, "Be opened," opening the man's ears and tongue as fully as the woman had opened his mind. And then there's the message Mark is trying to send to the fledgling church, saying their doors need to be open to welcome non-Jews as well as Jews. Just as Jesus expanded his thinking and rearranged the pecking order of who he would heal and teach, so Mark says, the church needs to find a way to welcome the stranger, free any who are demon possessed, and respond to the cries of those who are in need around us.

This is one of those biblical stories that astounds me every time I read it because of how current it sounds. In part, I'm reminded every day of the boundaries and divisions that have cut our society and world up into neat little packages defining who's in and who's out, who's right and who's wrong, who's deserving of our compassion and concern, a piece of our pie or a place at our tables. The aisle that runs between the two parties in Congress has become a chasm to scream across rather than a middle ground where they can meet to collaborate and cooperate. But not just them. We gather around us those who think and believe like we do, who talk and look like us, while turning our backs and erecting walls to keep out the others that we've decided pose a threat to our way of life and standard of living, or at least are different enough that we're not so comfortable being together. Whether we're deciding who to invite to dinner or offer a ride to church, what our immigration policies should be or what to do about the homeless who sleep in cars, huddle on street corners or couch surf from one friend's house to another, this text challenges us to open our doors and our minds, to break down the dividing walls of hostility and level the playing field. We have things to learn from each other, gifts and resources to share with each other, truths to name and hurts to heal. When I hear voices saying, this is food for our children first, we can't afford for it to become scraps for dogs, everything in me wonders who will push back and say that even dogs get the scraps that fall from the table. These others are people too, in need of food and shelter, welcome and a place to raise their young. Who will be a bulldog on their behalf? Can I wait for someone else to speak, or is the task as much mine as anyone else's ?

Jesus heard the pleas of the Syrophonecian woman, desperate to save her daughter, confident in his ability to heal and free. He blessed her and freed her daughter, and then continued to heal and teach, feed and welcome - both the children of Israel and the strangers in his midst who were also in need to what he had to give. Now he sends us out to be the church that Mark was addressing: to recognize that sometimes there are priorities that need rearranging, strangers that need welcome, sick that need healing, outcasts in need of love. Somedays we may even be asked to be bulldogs - persistent in prayer, demanding in love.

May it be so. Amen.

HYMN No. 381 *“Open My Eyes, That I May See”*

Open my eyes, that I may see Glimpses of truth Thou hast for me;
Place in my hands the wonderful key, That shall unclasp and set me free.
Silently now I wait for Thee, Ready, my God, Thy will to see.
Open my eyes, illumine me, Spirit divine!

Open my ears, that I may hear Voices of truth Thou sendest clear;
And while the wavenotes fall on my ear, Everything false will disappear.
Silently now I wait for Thee, Ready, my God, Thy will to see;
Open my ears, illumine me, Spirit divine!

Open my mouth, and let it bear Gladly the warm truth everywhere;
Open my heart, and let me prepare Love with Thy children thus to share.
Silently now I wait for Thee, Ready, my God, Thy will to see;
Open my heart, illumine me, Spirit divine!

PRAYER REQUESTS

Christi's cousin, Carolyn Weil, died last Sunday from Covid, so prayers for her family and friends

PASTORAL PRAYER

Holy God, this is indeed a day you have made, perfect in so many ways. The sun is shining, the breezes and temps delightful, and in the middle of a holiday weekend no less. What could be better? Thank you for the beauty and bounty of this day, for the love that will grace it, the joy that appears and flutters about our heads, for laughter that visits and lightens our hearts and minds. Thank you, for activities under the freeway, picnics on the river, bike rides and hikes, ice cream cones and garden ripe tomatoes, kayaks and paddle boards, and for a community of faith with whom we can worship and pray, serve and grow. All of these gifts and so many more come to us from you, covered with your fingerprints and wrapped in your love; and we give you thanks and praise for all of it. Help us also to recognize your presence and sing your praises on the days that aren't as perfect, when smoke clogs the air and COVID lurks around every corner, when the news is bad and the load we carry feels heavier than we can bear. Even then, especially then, open our eyes to recognize your presence, our ears to hear the rhythm of your steps, our hearts to receive your mercy and our mouths to sing your praise and offer to others your compassion.

Loving God, you know better than we do that much about our world is far from perfect, and so we bring it before you once again. We pray for all whose lives have been upended by Hurricane Ida and its aftermath, throughout the Gulf Coast and up the eastern seaboard. For places of flooding and devastation, for those left homeless, without water or power, for those that evacuated who now have no place and no work to go back to, for those who didn't evacuate and seek shelter from the heat and humidity, something to eat, clothes to put on their backs. We pray for all who have tested positive with COVID, those with mild symptoms and those in ICU beds, fighting for their lives; and for the medical personnel who give everything they have to care for the sick, while being confronted everyday with the enormity of need that continues to stretch before them. As a new school year begins, we pray for students and teachers, administrators and staff: for safe places to learn and work, thrive and grow. For the wildfires that continue to burn and spread, and the firefighters who work so hard to protect properties and lives. For Afghan refugees who wait to see what will unfold before them, and for those who even now, long for a way out and the possibility of a fresh start. We give you thanks for miracles of mercy that appear in the midst of it all: rescue boats and bottles of water, restaurants cooking up food and giving it away, ski resorts fighting fire with snow and teachers in search of students they've lost. Bring healing and hope, and use us to spread your kindness, serve your people, share your love.

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

PRAYER OF OUR SAVIOR (depts)

OFFERING

What an abundance of gifts we have to offer: musical talent, the melody of laughter, the use of our hands in cooking and repairs, curiosity, compassion, patience, urgency, spiritual reservoirs, financial resources, obedience and courage to act. All these gifts, and others unique to each of us, are symbolized in our offering for the work of the church. Whether we place our gifts in the plate in the narthex/the mail slot at the church or support other programs and ministries, volunteer in our community or offer acts of kindness to friend and stranger alike, we serve God, share Christ's love and do what we can to strengthen the Body of Christ. Thank you for all that you give, all that you share and all that you are.

PRAYER OF DEDICATION (in unison)

O God, we cannot calculate the measure of your grace, we cannot put a name to the extent of your love, we cannot picture the full majesty of your power. And yet we can respond to you, for our gifts express a thoroughgoing gratitude born of the Spirit that moves in our midst. Draw from us our best that we might offer it to you. In the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.

(Glen E. Rainsley, *Hear Our Prayer*)

HYMN No. 76 "O for a Thousand Tongues"

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 charms our fears, That bids our sorrows cease,
'Tis music in the sinner's ears, 'Tis life and health and peace.

Hear Him, ye deaf; His praise, ye dumb, Your loosened tongues employ;
Ye blind, behold your Savior come; And leap, ye lame, for joy.

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

BENEDICTION

Go in peace, open to the call and the grace of God. The blessing of God's unfailing love, Christ's unceasing presence, and the Spirit's unsurpassed gifts be with us all now and forever. Amen.

(Ruth C. Duck, *Touch Holiness*)