

UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST CONGREGATIONAL
Wallace, Idaho

Alice M.C. Ling, Pastor

October 10, 2021

Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost

PRELUDE “O Master, Let Me Walk with Thee”

WELCOME AND ANNOUNCEMENTS

CALL TO WORSHIP

God calls us to worship, lifting our voices and our hearts in praise.

God calls us to worship, lifting our hands and our resources to serve.

God calls us to worship, when we are together and when we are alone.

God calls us to worship, in the sanctuary, in our homes and on the street corner.

God calls us to worship, with our everyday choices and our Sunday best.

God calls us to worship, in song and prayer and in doing justice and loving kindness.

God calls us to worship.

(Teri Peterson, revgalblogpals.org)

HYMN No. 108 “Come, Christians, Join to Sing”

Come, Christians, join to sing Alleluia! Amen!

Loud praise to Christ our King; Alleluia! Amen!

Let all, with heart and voice, Before His throne rejoice;

Praise is His gracious choice: Alleluia! Amen!

Come, lift your hearts on high, Alleluia! Amen!

Let praises fill the sky; Alleluia! Amen!

He is our Guide and Friend; To us He'll condescend;

His love shall never end: Alleluia! Amen!

Praise yet our Christ again. Alleluia Amen!

Life shall not end the strain; Alleluia ! Amen!

On heaven's blissful shore His goodness we'll adore,

Singing for evermore, “Alleluia! Amen!”

PRAYER OF CONFESSION (in unison)

Almighty and Holy One, we cannot begin to count all our possessions. We have things in our closets, our attics, and our basements. We have things tucked away in boxes we haven't opened in years, and still we acquire more. We have so much stuff and yet, there are those in our communities who can fit all their worldly possessions in a shopping cart. We know that you, O God, will defend the poor and come to them in their need. But we, O God, need your forgiveness for we are more attached to our things than we willingly acknowledge. Help us confront our attachment to possessions and things more honestly so we can share our own abundance more equitably. Amen.

WORDS OF ASSURANCE

We draw false and fleeting comfort from our material things. True comfort comes from God's love for us and by responding with that same love to family, friend, neighbor, and stranger. By God's love we are forgiven. Let us do likewise. Amen.

(Rev. Quentin Chin, UCC Worship Ways)

SCRIPTURE READINGS

Hebrews 4:12-16

Indeed, the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And before him no creature is hidden, but all are naked and laid bare to the eyes of the one to whom we must render an account.

Since, then, we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast to our confession. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

Mark 10:17-31

As he was setting out on a journey, a man ran up and knelt before him, and asked him, “Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus said to him, “Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. You know the commandments: ‘You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; You shall not defraud; Honor your father and mother.’” He said to him, “Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth.” Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, “You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.” When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.

Then Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, “How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!” And the disciples were perplexed at these words. But Jesus said to them again, “Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.” They were greatly astounded and said to one another, “Then who can be saved?” Jesus looked at them and said, “For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible.”

Peter began to say to him, “Look, we have left everything and followed you.” Jesus said, “Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields, for my sake and for the sake of the good news, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this age—houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and children, and fields, with persecutions—and in the age to come eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first.”

SERMON

They weren't even on the road before they got stopped. Ever have one of those trips? For Jesus, it was a common occurrence. His life was full to overflowing with interruptions, and here they are yet again: just setting out on a journey when suddenly a man runs up out of nowhere and throws himself at Jesus' feet. Truth be told, it would have been unusual for Jesus if this hadn't been the way the day went. Except that usually when people threw themselves at his feet, they were there to ask for healing – for themselves or a loved one, for someone they had tucked under their wing and could he just take a look, or someone who is on the brink of dying at home and will he please come and restore their life?

For all it's familiarity, this time is different, because this man doesn't appear to be asking for healing. No, instead he has a question he wants to ask Jesus. But it isn't a laid back, casual sort of question: excuse me, but I've been working this checklist and just want to make sure all the arrangements are in place when my time's up; what have I missed and what more can I do to put my affairs in order? No, when you throw yourself down and let the gravel dig into your knees while the whole crowd looks on, the question is clearly one that's been keeping you up nights and tying your stomach in knots for weeks. This is big and pressing and of ultimate importance: Good Teacher, I beg you, tell me what must

I do to inherit eternal life? Jesus deflected the designation of “Good”, saying that only God is good, but then he pressed on and turned to the Ten Commandments. But he only referred to the second tablet, not the first; he didn’t ask the man if he worshiped only God or kept the sabbath and kept his mouth clean while refusing to take God’s name in vain. No, he skipped over those and pressed on to the second part that focuses on how we treat each other: You shall not murder; you shall not commit adultery; you shall not steal; you shall not bear false witness; you shall not defraud (except that isn’t in the ten commandments – that appears to be a revision specially for this man); honor your father and mother. He’d barely gotten through the list when the man answered, Teacher, I’ve kept them all since my youth. Wouldn’t think of crossing the line on a one of them. At which point, the story tells us Jesus took a long, penetrating look at the man, sized him up and loved him.

I want to linger over that for a minute. Mark doesn’t throw words around or add frills and extras. None of the biblical writers do, and Mark is more terse and concise than any of the other gospel writers. When Mark says something, its for a reason; and this is the only place where Mark tells us, in the middle of an interchange, that Jesus loves the person he’s talking with. I don’t want to pretend to be a mind reader who can explain to you Jesus’ motivations and emotions, but there’s something about this man, about his search, his hunger and longing, that triggers Jesus’ love. And as harsh and demanding as the next words out of Jesus’ mouth are, it seems really important to me that we hear them as words spoken in love. Not condemnation or judgment, not to humiliate or drive to despair, but because he loves him. In love, he said, you lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, and follow me.

Let’s be honest. How many of us long to be loved that much? Not on the top of my list of hopes and dreams. And as much as I’m ready to let go of a whole bunch of the stuff that’s filling up and spilling over in most every corner of our house, I’ve always assumed I would pick and choose what I give away and what I keep. But all of it? Just spread it out in a giant yard sale and then give the proceeds to the poor, and the next day hit the road, free and clear and following Jesus? Not quite what I had in mind. Jesus, would it be okay with you if you loved me a little less?

On a first read, it’s a harsh and demanding answer that Jesus gives, and it’s no surprise to me that the man was shocked and saddened, and went away grieving. He had really cared about his eternal life, but this... this cost was just too high. How might the story shift if we wrap it in the love of Jesus? I picture Jesus reaching out and ever so gently offering to help the man empty his hands, clear a couple of chairs, open a few doors, lift some windows, delete some entries on his calendar and reminding him to breathe. All this stuff is crushing you, my friend. You’ve worked so hard, accumulated so much, observed and tended, obsessed and managed, and still you’re unhappy. Let it go. Look around you. And come, follow me. The man had stockpiles of assets and storage units of belongings, things passed down from his parents and grandparents, items collected to tend to his needs and those of his family, and Jesus told him to give it away. But don’t just take it out and burn it. Give it to the poor. Share it with the people who need it, the people who shiver in the cold, who don’t have the faintest idea where their next meal is coming from, who left everything behind when they fled the Taliban, those who are about to go under because of the mountain of medical bills that are crushing the life out of them. They need it, and you need to be free of it; let it go. And then come, follow me.

It’s true that it’s a hard word; not in any way what the man wanted to hear in answer to his question, and I dare to assume not what we want to hear as an expectation for our life of faith and discipleship. But there it is, and once the man had left his side, Jesus goes on to say how very hard it is for those with wealth to enter the kingdom of God. In case you’re wondering, they simply can’t earn their way into God’s realm, especially not while holding on to all their stuff any more than a camel can squeeze itself through the eye of a needle. It can’t be done. Impossible – except through the love and grace of God. It’s a teaching of extreme demands and extreme judgment. But the good news for us is that Jesus

isn't done yet; it's also a teaching of extreme promise. When Peter steps forward and points out that they've left everything to follow, Jesus is quick to go on and assure all of them that anyone who has left house or brothers or sisters or mothers or fathers or children or fields will receive all of that back a hundredfold in the age to come. Jesus is asking for enormous sacrifice, but he's also very clear that his work is about building new relationships, a new community, new family.

I think of the story Steve Hartman told Friday night in his weekly "On the Road" piece. He talked with Susan Thompson-Gaines in Arlington, Virginia who sponsors a giant yard sale every year. She and her neighbors go together and contribute treasures out of their attics, old clothes and gently worn pairs of shoes, some old jewelry and bits and pieces of just about everything else. Every inch of their space is filled with treasures and then sold. Susan uses every penny of the profits, last year the proceeds totaled more than \$12,000, to fund random acts of kindness throughout her community. She documents it all on a blog called "Kindness Activist." She's bought donuts for nurses, left flowers at veterans' graves, delivered presents for Santa and hosted a beach party for dementia patients. This year, she also took a high school student shopping for a homecoming dress, shoes and some jewelry she couldn't otherwise have afforded. (*CBS Evening News*, October 8, 2021) No, neither she nor her neighbors have given it all away, but they're taking steps to let go and to share, to build relationships and forge a new community; and that's a good place to start for any of us.

What did this man who knelt at Jesus' feet lack? I think he lacked the space and openness for God and God's people. What he needed was not anything he could buy, produce, collect or manage; only something that God could give him. What God had to give him was love, and a heart with which to love God's people. He was obsessed with possessions and belongings, as well as with observant behavior and righteous living; and Jesus called him to look up from all his anxious activity, and look instead on the needs and well-being of those scattered around him. It was time to empty his hands in order to open his heart; time to stop asking how he could put more feathers in his cap and start asking instead how his neighbor was faring, and what he could do to serve his community, nation and world.

The man asked Jesus about eternal life, and Jesus invited him to follow him, urged him to focus on this life and the people around him who were in need. Salvation isn't something he – or we – can do for ourselves, by focusing on ourselves. It's about opening our hands, letting stuff go and living in love, here and now, with God and for others. May it be so. Amen.

HYMN No. 249 *"Spirit of God, Descend upon My Heart"*

Spirit of God, descend upon my heart; Wean it from earth, through all its pulses move.
Stoop to my weakness, mighty as Thou art, And make me love Thee as I ought to love.

Hast Thou not bid us love Thee, God and King? All, all Thine own – soul, heart and strength and mind.
I see Thy cross – there teach my heart to cling; O let me seek Thee, and O let me find.

Teach me to feel that Thou art always nigh; Teach me the struggles of the soul to bear -
To check the rising doubt, the rebel sigh; Teach me the patience of unanswered prayer.

Teach me to love Thee as Thine angels love, One holy passion filling all my frame:
The baptism of the heaven descended Dove – My heart an altar and Thy love the flame.

PRAYER REQUESTS

- Concern about Covid numbers; prayers for wisdom in knowing how to be part of the solution, and not just point fingers and assign blame

PASTORAL PRAYER

Holy God, the One who walked with the people in the wilderness, the One who walks with us even now, we gather in worship today to receive your grace, to learn your love, to explore your wonders, to

become fully people of your heart. From those first days when your Spirit blew over the chaos, you have carried us, providing for our needs, loving us, and showing the way to life. Even though we struggled to learn from the lessons of history, you believed in us so much that you sent your Son, Jesus of Nazareth, to show us life as your beloved creation. Through his time on this earth, you revealed to us that we are to be people of surprising grace, of generous love, of daring justice, and of hope, always hope.

So we come together as a reminder that you are inviting us to be part of an unfolding story of your life-giving presence. It is a story that unites people of all times and all spaces, a story that unites people of differences and division, a story that becomes the Church, the living Body of Christ in and for this world. But like the people in the wilderness, we tend to grumble and focus on what we do not have, neglecting to see the abundance of You all around. Your Spirit breathes through our lives with the message that You are enough, enough for all the brokenness, for the divisions, for the uncertainty. You are enough. Open our eyes to the wonders around and within us. Open our hearts to the many and diverse ways in which you are present. Open our very beings to you so that we might continue this journey to envelop the world with your love and together find your peace that passes all understanding.

As we sit in the sacred silence of this moment, hear the prayers of our hearts – for the world, for others, for ourselves..... (*time of intercession*)

God of the manna, you offer us life, life for ourselves but above all, life for the world. May we become instruments and not merely consumers of that life. May this journey lead us home to you. We pray because of the One who is life, and using the words he taught his friends when they asked him how they should pray: Our Father... (Melodie Long, revgalblogpals.org)

PRAYER OF OUR SAVIOR (depts)

OFFERING

God has richly blessed us with an abundance of blessings, and invites us to share freely from those gifts. On the second Sunday of the month, we remember our Emergency Aid Fund, and the ways in which it enables us as a church to respond to needs in our community and requests for assistance. We are also invited to give gifts to support the church's ministry, gifts that allow us to open for worship and care for our building, extend the love of God beyond our walls and into the community and to welcome people in to the space we call home. We are also encouraged to share who we are and what we have throughout the week: offering random acts of kindness and living lives of service, opening doors and speaking truth, sharing laughter and catching tears. For all that you do, for all that you are, for all that you give, thank you. Know that together, you and God are transforming lives and multiplying joy.

PRAYER OF DEDICATION (in unison)

Loving God, you bid us take stock of our actions and bind ourselves to your will. You call us to invest our lives in Christian discipleship and service. You invite us to give generously in support of persons in need. As we make our offerings, we give thanks for a faith that asks much and that yields an abundance beyond measure. In Jesus' name. Amen. (Glen E. Rainsley, *Hear Our Prayer*)

HYMN No. 379 "Take My Life and Let It Be"

Take my life and let it be Consecrated, Lord, to Thee;

Take my moments and my days – Let them flow in ceaseless praise, Let them flow in ceaseless praise.

Take my hands and let them move At the impulse of Thy love;

Take my feet and let them be Swift and beautiful for Thee, Swift and beautiful for Thee.

Take my silver and my gold – Not a mite would I withhold;

Take my intellect and use Every pow'r as Thou shalt choose, Every pow'r as Thou shalt choose.

Take my love – my Lord, I pour At Thy feet its treasure store;
Take myself – and I will be Ever, only, all for Thee, Ever, only, all for Thee.

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