

UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST CONGREGATIONAL
Wallace, Idaho

Alice M.C. Ling, Pastor

October 17, 2021

Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost

PRELUDE “*Are Ye Able?*”

WELCOME AND ANNOUNCEMENTS

CALL TO WORSHIP

In autumn beauty blue sky and golden land are clothed. Apple-gathering children and nut-gathering squirrels alike prepare for winter.

In our tradition, harvest is a time of rejoicing in God’s natural bounty and the ingathering of our lives.

We praise God for all we have received. Seasons turn but God’s love is changeless.

We praise God for all we have received. Pine trees dancing, crisp breezes blowing, the good news stories of Jesus’ sojourn in Galilee, and the restless winds of the Spirit rushing through our lives – all these assure us of God’s faithful presence. (Maren C. Tirabassi, *Touch Holiness*)

HYMN No. 556 “*Now Thank We All Our God*”

Now thank we all our God With heart and hands and voices,
Who wondrous things hath done, In whom this world rejoices;
Who, from our parents’ arms, Hath blest on our way
With countless gifts of love, And still is ours today.

O may this bounteous God Through all our life be near us,
With ever joyful hearts And blessed peace to cheer us;
And keep us still in grace, And guide us when perplexed,
And free us from all ills In this world and the next.

All praise and thanks to God The Father now be given,
The Son, and Him who reigns With them in highest heaven.
The one eternal God, Whom earth and heaven adore;
For thus it was, is now, And shall be evermore.

PRAYER OF INVOCATION (in unison)

Holy Dwelling Place, your tent is wide enough to provide shelter for all who seek you, food for all who hunger, and healing for all who suffer. Meet us here today, and fill us with confidence in your presence, that we may risk sharing Jesus’ cup and his baptism so the world may become the place of love and justice you desire for all. Shelter us with your light, and clothe us with your heavenly garments. Teach us how we may best serve ourselves and one another on this daring adventure.

Amen.

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

SCRIPTURE READING Mark 10:32-45

They were on the road, going up to Jerusalem, and Jesus was walking ahead of them; they were amazed, and those who followed were afraid. He took the twelve aside again and began to tell them what was to happen to him, saying, “See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death; then they will

hand him over to the Gentiles; they will mock him, and spit upon him, and flog him, and kill him; and after three days he will rise again.”

James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came forward to him and said to him, “Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.” And he said to them, “What is it you want me to do for you?” And they said to him, “Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.” But Jesus said to them, “You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?” They replied, “We are able.” Then Jesus said to them, “The cup that I drink you will drink; and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized; but to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared.”

When the ten heard this, they began to be angry with James and John. So Jesus called them and said to them, “You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.”

SERMON

I really do try hard to not point fingers and gawk. Or to make an object out of somebody else's ridiculous behavior, if not down right stupidity, especially given how many of my own attitudes and assumptions could stand an overhaul. On my good days, I manage to wait until we're out of earshot before I mutter something to Ben. But some days and in some situations, it's hard to keep moving instead of stopping in my tracks, spinning around, staring speechlessly, until I can finally ask, did you just say what I think you just said? What were you thinking???

Take this morning's Gospel lesson, for example. Jesus was still on the road to Jerusalem. As always, there was a crowd following him, and at some point, he pulled the twelve off to one side so they could confer. They were getting very close to Jerusalem, so he told them for the third time, but in the greatest detail yet, what was waiting for them: we are going to Jerusalem, and when we get there, the Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and scribes, they will sentence him to death, they will hand him over to the Gentiles, they will mock him, they will spit on him, they will flog him, and they will kill him. There will be a happy ending to the story, but not for three days, at which time he will rise again. Before you get there, the blood and guts will have driven all thought of a happy ending from your mind.

I have no idea how much time elapsed; if Jesus had time to take a deep breath, swallow the bile the conversation had triggered, and wipe the sweat off his brow before James and John came forward and said to him, Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you. Now, I don't know about you, but I'm pretty cautious when I get that sort of request. Promise me something? Depends on who's asking, and how much I trust that this isn't a trap.

Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you. That in and of itself is an outrageous request, and when Jesus replied with an open inquiry – not having promised anything, but ready to hear them out, they showed their true colors by saying, Promise us that when you get to your glory, we can have the seats of honor on your right and left sides. I know Jesus was a man of infinitely more patience than I am. He didn't say, haven't you heard anything I've been saying to you? What did I just say? Were you so busy talking that you missed the part about flogging, spitting and executing? What part of “kill” did you not understand? None of that. I don't know how long it took him to find words, how long he stared at them with his mouth hanging open. How pained, worn out or hurt he looked. When he finally spoke, he just said, you have no idea what you are asking. Here they were asking for the two cushy seats on either side of the throne, the prime cabinet appointments in his new administration, and

all he had to offer was the two crosses that would stand beside his, one on his left and one on his right. A baptism by fire, a cup of bitter drink, a road of cruel suffering. Maybe now, before they even caught sight of the Jerusalem skyline, they could promise they were ready and able to go the distance with him, but Jesus knew they weren't.

James and John set themselves up as the ultimate poster boys for outrageous and clueless, or at the very least, challenges to the number of times I've assured people there's no such thing as a stupid question. Before we get too busy judging them, we need to remember that the other 10 were also angry with them about their request. Every commentator I've read has said that that anger probably wasn't about their awareness of Jesus' destiny, but because they were mad that James and John smuggled the request in ahead of them. They all wanted to come in on top of the pile, to get the best seats in the house, to be Jesus' favorite, to claim the positions of privilege and power. Remember just a few weeks ago, when we heard Jesus ask them what they'd been arguing about on the road; they may have been too embarrassed to admit it, but he knew: they were arguing about which of them was the greatest. He'd tried to steer their thinking in a vastly different direction, but they were pretty stuck. And this time, James and John managed to slip in ahead of the others with their request for a special favor.

I don't know if you recognize yourself in that circle of followers or not, but I admit I do. I also recognized myself in this poem by Thom Shuman, entitled "able"

hand me a
steaming cuppa,
swirling with just
the right mixture of milk and sugar,
and I am content
to curl up in my chair,
listening to you
all day;

but offer me
your chipped, stained mug
filled with that vinegary
mix of discipleship and obedience,
well,
you'll forgive me (I'm sure)
if it slips through my fingers,
shattering on the cold, hard
floor of my soul.

I'd belly flop eagerly
(and all too easily)
into those warm
baptismal waters,
floating the rest of my life,
stretched out on my back,
watching the clouds
drift by, over my head;

but your invitation
to skinny dip in your
drudgery filled pool,
dodging death's icebergs

as they drift by?
you'll understand (I hope)
if I let someone else
go in ahead of me,
disabled by my penchant
for power and privilege.

how can I ever
do whatever
you
ask of me? (from *Dust Shaker*)

A steaming, sweet cuppa is infinitely more appealing than the vinegary mix of discipleship and obedience that Jesus offered James and John. As is floating in warm baptismal waters more inviting than a drudgery filled pool in which we dodge death's icebergs. Even as I shame and mock James and John, I do also recognize myself in them and in their requests, or at least in the frustration and annoyance of the other ten. I'm inclined to think a lot of us are made of some of the same stuff as James and John. Individually and culturally, we want to be out in front, leading the parade; we want to be on top of the heap instead of crushed under it all on the bottom; we face challenges and times of uncertainty by reaching for power and strength, safety and security. Jesus' answer to all of it is service. Even as he approached the certainty of a cruel, violent death, he told his disciples, whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. We scramble and strive for position and influence, recognition and accomplishment; the more insecure we get, the more self-absorbed we become, the more we grasp and clutch for power and privilege, our comforts and control. Jesus says, come down off your high horse and out of your safety chambers, roll up your sleeves and go to work. We're not going to change this world with power or might, securing positions of honor and glory for ourselves, self-promotion or self-protection. Only when we dare and bother to stoop down and serve, share and give, can we learn what true greatness really is.

It wasn't an easy word for those twelve followers to hear and comprehend, and it isn't easy for us. I was struck by a story from a pastor who described serving a large urban church where every day she saw homeless people who were looking for help. They had an Outreach Center that offered a lot of services. One day, a man was leaving the Center when he asked the pastor if he could borrow a stapler. He was standing in the hallway, while she was standing behind the safety of their office wall and glass window, and just happened to be holding a stapler. He didn't have any papers that needed stapling, and because she couldn't imagine what he needed the stapler for, she hesitated. She writes,

In that momentary hesitation, Christ came to teach me, again, the nature of discipleship. By God's grace, I went out and gave him the stapler. He bent down and began to staple his torn pant leg from his ankle to his knee. He had only wanted to shield himself from the bitter cold – and I had almost refused to serve in even that simple way. It did not cost me anything, yet it might have cost me my soul. I understand all too well James and John's wrongheaded request.

(Kimberly L. Clayton, *Feasting on the Gospels: Mark*, page 331)

How different would our lives, our community and our world be, if we started from a place of service and care, rather than seeking the places of honor and power, rather than focusing on our needs and comforts, our conveniences and control? What if, instead of going to God and saying, we want you to do for us whatever we ask you to do; instead, we turned the question around, and asked Jesus, what do you want us to do for you? How do you think he might answer? How ready are you to ask the question and listen for an answer?

HYMN No. 427 *“Dear God, Embracing Humankind”*

Dear God, embracing humankind, Forgive our foolish ways!

Reclothe us in our rightful mind; in purer lives Thy service find, In deeper reverence praise.

In simple trust like theirs who heard, Beside the Syrian Sea,

The gracious calling of our Lord, Let us, like them, without a word, Rise up and follow Thee.

Drop Thy still dews of quietness, Till all our strivings cease;

Take from our souls the strain and stress, And let our ordered lives confess The beauty of Thy peace.

Breathe through the heats of our desire Thy coolness and Thy balm;

Let sense be dumb, let flesh retire; Speak through the earthquake, wind and fire,

O still small voice of calm.

PRAYER REQUESTS

Dorothy and John Thielman have both tested positive for Covid. Once Dorothy tests negative again, she will be transitioning into an assisted living facility.

PASTORAL PRAYER

Holy and loving God, you call us to praise and wonder, as we give thanks for the bounty and beauty of creation; for the abundance of your love and grace offered freely to us each and every day of our lives; and for the blessing of those who share our lives, offering us companionship and care, the giving and receiving that accompanies love. We give you thanks for the miracle of new life, even as we seek your sustaining presence with those who face into the challenge of increasing years and failing health. We pray for all those impacted by the ongoing ravages of Covid: the sick with mild symptoms and those fighting for their lives, medical workers who grow weary and lose hope of making it to the other side, people confronted with vaccine mandates and choices; show us how to care for each other while also caring for ourselves. We pray for our community, our country and our world; for those places recovering from fire and wind, flooding and drought, earthquakes and volcanoes; for places of division and hostility, suspicion and accusation; for those who go to bed hungry and those who don't know where they will sleep tonight, for those who look for work and employers who search for workers; for decision makers and leaders, those who protect and serve, deliver and clean, cook and provide. Pour out your wisdom upon us, Holy God, that we might learn how to live together, protecting life, sharing love, nurturing joy, holding fast to hope. Help us to live and walk, love and serve as your people. In the words of St. Francis:

Lord, make (us) instruments of your peace:

where there is hatred, let (us) sow love;

where there is injury, pardon;

where there is doubt, faith;

where there is despair, hope;

where there is darkness, light;

where there is sadness, joy.

O divine Master, grant that (we) may not so much seek

to be consoled as to console,

to be understood as to understand,

to be loved as to love.

For it is in giving that we receive,

it is in pardoning that we are pardoned,

and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.

Amen.

PRAYER OF OUR SAVIOR (debts)

OFFERING INVITATION

As the days become cooler and the leaves of summer begin to wear their fall colors, we are reminded of the many ways God interacts with the world in order to meet its many needs. The cycle of life goes on and we are among the actors. But more importantly, we are stewards and caretakers of the earth because we are made in God's image. We share in that responsibility when we set aside a portion of our wealth to fulfill our role as stewards of the earth. A reminder that you can mail a donation to the church or drop it into the mail slot anytime. Any gift you give will be gratefully received.

(Paul B. Robinson, *Touch Holiness*)

PRAYER OF DEDICATION (in unison)

O God, through the offering of our gifts, may we become a more open people... open-minded in hearing your Word and wisdom, open-hearted in healing a broken world, open-handed in heeding your call for charity and enacted love. With thanks for all good gifts, we present a portion of our substance and the whole of ourselves. Amen. (Glen E. Rainsley, *Touch Holiness*)

HYMN No. 293 "Rise Up, O Church of God"

Rise up, O Church of God! Have done with lesser things;
Give heart and mind and soul and strength To serve the King of kings.

Rise up, O Church of God! God's kingdom tarries long;
Bring in the day of neighbor love And end the night of wrong.

Rise up, all ye of God! The Church for you doth wait,
Our strength unequal to the task, Rise up, and make her great!

Lift high the cross of Christ! Tread where His feet have trod;
As followers of the Son of Man, Rise up, O Church of God!

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.