

UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST CONGREGATIONAL
Wallace, Idaho

Alice M.C. Ling, Pastor

October 31, 2021

Twenty-Third Sunday after Pentecost

PRELUDE “*Joyful, Joyful, We Adore Thee*”

WELCOME AND ANNOUNCEMENTS

Budget Meeting, Stewardship

CALL TO WORSHIP (Deuteronomy 6:1-9, Mark 12:28-34)

Hear, O people of God: our God is one. Hear the commandments of our God.

First, love your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength

Hear, O people of God: our God is one. Recite the commandments to your children and hold them in your hearts.

Second, love your neighbor as yourself. There is no commandment greater than these calls to love. Amen.

(the Rev. Dr. Cari Jackson, UCC Worship Ways)

HYMN No. 61 “*Lavish Love, Abundant Beauty*”

Lavish love, abundant beauty, Gracious gifts for heart and hand,
Life that fills the soul and senses – All burst forth at Your command.
Lord, our Lord, Eternal Father, Great Creator, God and Friend.
Boundless power gave full expression To Your love which knows no end.

Who am I that You should love me, Meet my every need from birth?
Why invest Yourself so fully In a creature made of earth?
In Your loving heart You planned me, Fashioned me with greatest care;
Through my soul You breathed Your Spirit, Planted Your own image there.

I am Yours, Eternal Father, All my body, mind and heart.
Take and use me to Your glory, From Yourself in every part.
Lord, Your love brings joy and gladness Flowing forth within my soul.
May my very breath and being Rise to You, their source and goal.

PRAYER OF INVOCATION (in unison)

O Holy One, Source of all life and Ground of all love, we thank you for your love that never lets us go. Thank you for the privilege of gathering in this space with these your people – our neighbors – to worship you. We do not come merely to open the doors of the church, but we come that our hearts might be opened to you and to one another. As we worship you today, help us to respond to the call of love – to love you, our neighbors, and ourselves. May we be transformed from individuals to members of your one body. We pray for our nation that we be united as a people tied to a single garment of destiny. We pray for those elected officials who serve all citizens that they may be guided not by ego, politics or money, but by compassion for all people. Guide us as families, as a community of faith, as a nation to follow the path of love. Amen.

(the Rev. Dr. Cari Jackson, UCC Worship Ways)

SCRIPTURE READING

Ruth 1:1-18

In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land, and a certain man of Bethlehem in Judah went to live in the country of Moab, he and his wife and two sons. The name of the man was Elimelech and the name of his wife Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Chilion;

they were Ephrathites from Bethlehem in Judah. They went into the country of Moab and remained there. But Elimelech, the husband of Naomi, died, and she was left with her two sons. These took Moabite wives; the name of the one was Orpah and the name of the other Ruth. When they had lived there about ten years, both Mahlon and Chilion also died, so that the woman was left without her two sons and her husband.

Then she started to return with her daughters-in-law from the country of Moab, for she had heard in the country of Moab that the LORD had considered his people and given them food. So she set out from the place where she had been living, she and her two daughters-in-law, and they went on their way to go back to the land of Judah. But Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, “Go back each of you to your mother’s house. May the LORD deal kindly with you, as you have dealt with the dead and with me. The LORD grant that you may find security, each of you in the house of your husband.” Then she kissed them, and they wept aloud. They said to her, “No, we will return with you to your people.” But Naomi said, “Turn back, my daughters, why will you go with me? Do I still have sons in my womb that they may become your husbands? Turn back, my daughters, go your way, for I am too old to have a husband. Even if I thought there was hope for me, even if I should have a husband tonight and bear sons, would you then wait until they were grown? Would you then refrain from marrying? No, my daughters, it has been far more bitter for me than for you, because the hand of the LORD has turned against me.” Then they wept aloud again. Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her.

So she said, “See, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law.” But Ruth said,

“Do not press me to leave you
or to turn back from following you!
Where you go, I will go;
where you lodge, I will lodge;
your people shall be my people,
and your God my God.
Where you die, I will die—
there will I be buried.
May the LORD do thus and so to me,
and more as well,
if even death parts me from you!”

When Naomi saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more to her.

Mark 12:28-34

One of the scribes came near and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well, he asked him, “Which commandment is the first of all?” Jesus answered, “The first is, ‘Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.’ The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.” Then the scribe said to him, “You are right, Teacher; you have truly said that ‘he is one, and besides him there is no other’; and ‘to love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the strength,’ and ‘to love one’s neighbor as oneself,’—this is much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices.” When Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, “You are not far from the kingdom of God.” After that no one dared to ask him any question.

SERMON

Have you ever known a word to be used so much that it got over used, all stretched out and useless like the elastic in my twenty year old sweat pants? Sometimes I wonder if we’ve done that to the word “love”. There’s romance novels and Hollywood films and greeting card sentimentality, t-shirt and

bumper sticker slogans, cell phone emojis and Facebook reaction options. Just how much do you think any of that helps us connect with the meaning of Christianity's love story and what Jesus was talking about mid-week in Jerusalem, half way between his triumphal entry and the cross that was waiting for him on Golgotha?

Step by step, Jesus was making his way through the city. The crowds were immense, and the reactions to his teachings were intense. The whole city was spellbound by his presence, and even the fig tree withered at his word. He stormed the temple and with the sweep of his arm, cleared it of money changers and dove sellers. One by one, the chief priests, Pharisees, Herodians and Sadducees took their best shot, tried to set him up and knock him down, and one by one, he bested each of them and slipped out of their traps. Finally, a scribe who had been standing near by, listening to the disputes and watching the exchanges, stepped forward and asked Jesus a question. As far as Mark tells us, the scribe asked a sincere question and was genuinely interested in hearing what Jesus had to say. He asked him, Which commandment is the first of all? Most Jews counted that there were a total of 613 commandments that they were supposed to follow, and this man asked Jesus to whittle it all down and sum it all up; point to one and tell me what comes first? To which Jesus responded with the word, "love". Well, actually, he quoted Deuteronomy 6 and then Leviticus 19: You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength. The second follows from the first: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. There simply is no other commandment greater than these. The scribe liked the answer, and then added his own surprising insight: to love God and neighbor is much more important than whole burnt offerings and sacrifices. In other words, love is more important than ritual, tradition, piety or penance. Love is more important than religion. Jesus' response to the scribe's insight was to tell him that he was not far from the kingdom of God. And then we're told that after that, no one dared to ask him any questions.

He silenced them. All of them. And I can't help but wonder the what and the why of that silence. Were they confused? In awe? Considering their answer? More importantly than trying to figure out what was going on for them, I think it's important to ask, when was the last time I was silenced by the call to love? What about for you? When has the very notion of love held so much power and insistence that I, we, any of us were silenced, while we considered changing direction and reordering our lives because of love? Love of God or love of neighbor?

This is part of where our comfort and familiarity with the concept of love begins to get us in trouble. We think of love as a warm and cozy feeling, something that draws us to others and motivates us to seek them out and snuggle up close together. But when Jesus was talking about love, he wasn't just talking about feelings, and he certainly wasn't just talking soft and fuzzy. Debie Thomas speaks to the disconnect with these words, "We assume that loving God and our neighbors means expressing friendly sentiments to God in Sunday worship, and exchanging warm pleasantries with the people who live near us during the week. We forget that in the scriptures, the call to love is a call to vulnerability, sacrifice, and suffering. It's a call to bear a cross and lay down our lives. Biblical love is not an emotion we feel, it's a path we travel. As the children of God, we are called to *walk* in love. Think aerobic activity, not Hallmark sentiment. ("Walk in Love", *Journey with Jesus*, posted 24 October 2021)

I'm sure there are countless examples we could lift up to help us get inside Jesus' use of the word love, but the one that caught my eye today lies in the other passage I read a few minutes ago, the opening of the book of Ruth. It's the story of a family of faithful Jews who were driven away from their homes by famine. They may have lived in Bethlehem, which means "house of bread" but there was no bread to be found, so they packed up and struck out for Moab, the land of Israel's bitter enemies. They arrived as hungry refugees, and when Elimelech, Naomi, and their two sons had no more than eaten a few healthy meals, Elimelech died. Before long, the sons got married, one to Orpah and the other to Ruth.

Ten years later and both sons were also dead, leaving three widows and no children. And in a culture where widows were among the very most vulnerable of people. Naomi was painfully clear that she was a foreigner in Moab, and well beyond the age of child bearing. She had heard rumors that there was food to be found back home, and she had every reason to believe that family would receive her and care for her, so she turned toward Bethlehem. But as she did so, she looked to Orpah and Ruth and set them free from any sense of obligation or commitment they might have had. She thanked them for caring for her sons, but pointed to the obvious: she had nothing left to give them, and her womb was shriveled enough that she never would. Orpah reluctantly and tearfully agreed to leave and go home to her family, while Ruth insisted that the only place she was going was with Naomi. Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God, my God. Where you die, I will die – there will I be buried.

Ruth speaks exquisite words of poetry and love, and it's no wonder that many a couple has chosen to have them read at their weddings, but if we keep them in their context, there's nothing about them that resembles the hope-filled fresh face of love that we recognize from weddings. Naomi is a woman who has given up, a woman so overcome with grief that she literally renames herself: from Naomi (which means pleasant) to Mara (meaning bitter), and then she points to God as the source of her affliction. Ruth didn't pledge herself to a person who was easy or fun to be with or with any hope whatsoever of a good and happy life. To quote Debie Thomas again, "Ruth's vow...is one of tenacity, fortitude, and sacrificial loyalty... It is the vow of one grief-stricken, traumatized, and profoundly vulnerable woman to another. Ruth recognizes that Naomi is far too broken to offer her much reassurance or comfort. She knows that leaving Moab with her mother-in-law and traveling to Judah will render her an unwelcome foreigner in a culture that has a history of expelling foreign women as dangerous. She knows that money will be scarce, her prospects for remarriage uncertain, and any future reunion with her birth family unlikely. She knows that sticking with Naomi will require a reordering of her life. And yet she puts her legitimate worries, losses, and fears aside, and vows to love Naomi as herself." Debie goes on, "I would venture to say that Ruth's version of love is the version that silences the crowd in Mark's Gospel story, centuries later. Hers are words spoken in the aftermath of catastrophic loss, and on the cusp of ongoing uncertainty and danger. When Ruth pledges to "walk in love" with Naomi, she knows that her path will not be flower-strewn. It will be jagged. It will be unfamiliar. It will be costly. And yet, as we know from the end of Ruth and Naomi's story, it will also be the path that leads to healing, redemption, joy, and new life."

It's true that love is a many splendored thing, but it's not true that it's all butterflies and beauty, glorious sunrises and breathtaking sightings. Love is born in the heart of God, calls for the richest, most precious gifts we have to give, may lead us in directions we never dreamed of going, and promises to deliver us into the very presence of God. When we walk in love with God and with each other, we help to usher in the realm of God among us and between us. When we give of ourselves, we receive oceans of love from the generous hand of God.

The scribe asked Jesus which of the commandments was first of all, and he answered, love. Love God with all you have in you: heart, soul, mind and strength. And the second is also love. Love your neighbor as yourself. I'll meet you there, in the midst of that love, so come, and walk with me. Amen.

HYMN "Lord, I Want to Be a Christian"

Lord, I want to be a Christian in my heart, in my heart;

Lord, I want to be a Christian in my heart.

In my heart, in my heart, Lord, I want to be a Christian in my heart.

Lord, I want to be more loving, in my heart, in my heart...

Lord, I want to be like Jesus in my heart, in my heart...

PRAYER REQUESTS

Dorothy Thielman, after a couple of days in the hospital, is at the Autumn Haven Assisted Living home; getting oriented, will have PT and OT a couple of times a week, still not eating well
Prayers also for the Hayman family as they grieve Jim's death; especially his mother Ethel, wife Tina (even as they were divorcing) and their children
Geoff and Alice's son-in-law Jonathan, home with a picc line to his heart for a couple of weeks, antibiotics for infection

PASTORAL PRAYER

O holy God, we hear you call us to love you with everything we have in us, heart, soul, mind and strength. And so we bring our gratitude and praise, devotion and commitment to you, and lay them at your feet. You give us life, and grace that life with companions who share the journey with us. You pour blessings upon us, gifts and graces, skills and mercies with which we cherish life, confront challenges, delight in wonder, grow in love, and take hold of the grace that allows us to admit failure while embracing the gift of a clean slate from which we can try again. You call to the best that is in us and invite us to stretch and grow, serve and care – with you and in love. Accept the love that we bring before you, and help it to blossom and grow, until our very lives glow with your presence and your love, your mercy and your grace.

Loving God, you also bid us to love our neighbors as we love ourselves; so we begin with the needs and longings of our hearts, for ourselves and all those we love: for Dorothy, as she recovers from Covid and adjusts to life in a new place; for all those who love Jim and grieve his death, especially his mother, wife and children; for Jonathan and the infection that courses in his blood. For those who seek healing, who have given up on hope, who battle the toxins of addiction, who dread the dark and cold, isolation and added expenses of winter, who feel vulnerable in the face of the challenges before them. You know the hurts and disappointments, wounds and worries that keep us awake at night, the hopes and dreams we turn away from because they seem out of reach or ask too much. Help us to grow in trust and live with courage, to be as gentle with ourselves as we are with others, to offer to others the mercy and grace that we so freely receive from your loving hand.

Hear us, O God, as we also bring before you the needs and realities of those we don't know, whose faces we sometimes see in the news, whose cries come to us, if at all, through social media and the voices of other people. We pray for those who sleep under bridges and in their cars, for those who wait in line for a cup of soup and search for a safe place out of reach of their abuser. For those who dig out from floods and rebuild from tornadoes, look at the emptiness of silos in the wake of a devastating harvest and the ash and rubble of what used to be home. You know the names and heart break of those who suffer and cry out, holy God, and so we ask you to heal and hold, love and comfort, guide and bless all your people. Even, or maybe especially the ones we find it most difficult to love, the ones who have hurt or betrayed us, who seek to destroy all that we hold dear, who live on the other side of the wall we've worked to build between us.

Loving God, take whatever love lives within us, and help it to grow, to put down roots and send up shoots. Nurture our hearts with your great and glorious love, that we might follow in the way Jesus set before us, living with kindness, extending forgiveness, offering welcome, speaking the truth in love, and doing what we can to share your love and your light with all we meet. Ground us and guide us in your love, and hear us as we join together in the prayer that Jesus taught: Our Father...

PRAYER OF OUR SAVIOR (debts)

OFFERING

Houston is home to the second-largest Vietnamese population in the US. Houston's branch of Boat People SOS provides a wealth of services to the Vietnamese community, as well as other refugees and

immigrants. Most of their clients are from underserved and low-income families, many of whom have just arrived in this country and are facing the enormous challenge of a language barrier. When Houston was confronted by the winter storm last February, this population was especially hard hit. Coming from a warm country, most of them had never been so cold. The city set up warming centers, but the language barriers made it difficult to know where they were or that they even existed. Pipes froze and burst and homes were badly damaged. People needed food, water and other basic supplies – and they needed to figure out how and where to charge their phones.

Boat People SOS began their response by reaching out to partners. They got a corporate sponsorship to buy Asian food and make packages for families. And they were introduced to Church World Service by a mutual partner. They provided CWS blankets, hygiene kits and emergency cleanup buckets to match the 250 packages of food they were ready to distribute. They held a community event and distributed the supplies to hundred of families. The director said, “Each supply and each kit is going to a family that has gone through a really traumatic experience... Each little thing counts to them. When people picked up the blankets, they were hugging them. When they picked up the hygiene kits, they were so excited that there was a comb and towel in there. They lost these things when water went through their homes. I can tell you that these families will hold onto those hygiene kits for a very long time. They will remember that. We told them that the supplies came from volunteers. People are thinking about you, we told them. You should never give up...” CWS also provided a grant of \$4,500 to help families repair burst pipes. With that grant, they were able to help more than 20 families with \$200 grants to buy parts and pieces for their pipes. After those repairs were completed, they might still have hundreds of dollars of home repairs to do, but once they had water, they could function.

That’s just one of the places that Church World Service has been at work, offering blankets and other resources to those in times of disaster and ongoing need. If you’d like to contribute to this vital ministry, make a gift to the church and mark it clearly for Blanket Sunday. The treasurer will send it along promptly, and all of us will be grateful for the care and outreach made possible through Church World Service.

PRAYER OF DEDICATION (in unison)

Holy One, whose heart abounds with gifts, receive our offerings as sign of our intention to live surrounded by your mercy, inspired by your Spirit, open to the joy of your presence, hospitable to one another, and generous toward your world. Amen.

HYMN No. 284 *“They’ll Know We Are Christians by Our Love”*

We are one in the Spirit, we are one in the Lord,
We are one in the Spirit, we are one in the Lord,
And we pray that all unity may one day be restored:
And they’ll know we are Christians by our love, by our love,
Yes, they’ll know we are Christians by our love,

We will walk with each other, we will walk hand in hand, (twice)
And together we’ll spread the news that God is in our land:...

We will work with each other, we will work side by side, (twice)
And we’ll guard each one’s dignity and save each one’s pride...

All praise to the Father, from whom all things come,
And all praise to Christ Jesus, God’s only Son,
And all praise to the Spirit, who makes us one:...

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