

UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST CONGREGATIONAL
Wallace, Idaho

Alice M.C. Ling, Pastor

January 23, 2022

Third Sunday after Epiphany

PRELUDE *“Lead On, O King Eternal”*

WELCOME AND ANNOUNCEMENTS

Annual Meeting next Sunday after worship; considering significant revisions to the bylaws

CALL TO WORSHIP

Let us sing a hymn in unison,

for we are not many, but one!

Let us praise our God in harmony,

for we are not one, but many.

Members are we, one of another: the body of Christ, the people of God.

Let our melody rise as if from one voice, while the chorus swells from each mouth of creation.

(Chalice Worship)

HYMN *“Gather Us In”*

Here in this place, the new light is streaming, shadows of doubt are 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 our 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.

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 peoples together, fire of love in our flesh and our bone.

PRAYER OF INVOCATION (in unison)

Gift-giver, you call us together, with our different gifts, our different ideas, our different tastes.

You call us together, to share what makes us special, to build each other up, to serve each other in

love. You call us together, knowing that we need all parts of the body if we are to be whole. You

call us together, to sing, to pray, to listen, to speak. To be refreshed so that we can go out and

serve. You call us together to be the Body of Christ, gathered in worship and active in the world.

Amen.

(Rev Gord, <http://worshipofferings.blogspot.ca/>)

SCRIPTURE READING

1 Corinthians 12:12-31a

For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.

Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. If the foot would say, “Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear would say, “Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a

part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. If all were a single member, where would the body be? As it is, there are many members, yet one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you," nor again the head to the feet, "I have no need of you." On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and those members of the body that we think less honorable we clothe with greater honor, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect; whereas our more respectable members do not need this. But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member, that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.

Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers; then deeds of power, then gifts of healing, forms of assistance, forms of leadership, various kinds of tongues. Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret? But strive for the greater gifts.

Luke 4:14-21

Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country. He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone.

When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

SERMON

While I don't intend to make a habit of it, I want to do again today what I did last week, and begin my words by sharing a story that comes from another culture. This one is from India, and the internet offers a multitude of versions of it. For a variety of reasons, this is the version I want to share with you today.

Once upon a time, long, long ago in a land far, far away, there were six blind men. Each of them was very wise and people often came from miles around and flocked to their door to get their advice. Each of them was happy to share what they knew with people who asked.

One day these six blind men went for a walk in the zoo. It happened to be a day when the zoo-keeper was distracted by problems at home. In fact, she had so much on her mind that she forgot to lock the gate of the elephant cage as she was leaving it.

Now, elephants are naturally curious animals. They waited for the zoo-keeper to move out of sight and sound, and then pushed on the gate of the cage. To their surprise, the gate swung freely on its hinges.

One of the more daring elephants walked over to the gate, looked left, and looked right, and then carefully tip-toed out of the cage.

Just at that moment, the six blind men walked by. One of them heard a twig snap, and went over to investigate. "Hi there!" the first blind man said to the elephant. "Could you please tell us the way to the zoo restaurant?" The elephant couldn't think of anything to say, so she just shifted her weight from left to right to left to right. The man was a combination of curious and concerned, so he walked over to see if the big silent person needed any help. With a big bump, he walked into the side of the elephant; he put out his arms to either side, but all he could feel was the big body of the elephant. "Boy, I think I must have walked into a wall."

By this time, the second blind man was becoming curious about what was happening. He walked over to the front of the elephant and grabbed hold of the animal's trunk. He quickly let go and shouted, "This isn't a wall. This is a snake! Step back in case it's poisonous!"

The third man quickly decided to find out what was going on, so he could explain to his friends. He walked over to the back of the elephant and touched the animal's tail. "This is no wall, and this is no snake. You are both wrong. I know for sure that this is a rope."

The fourth man sighed because he knew how stubborn his friends could be; clearly someone needed to get to the bottom of this, so he crouched down on all fours and felt around the elephant's legs. Fortunately, this elephant was very tame and patient and wouldn't think of stepping on a human being. The fourth man felt around, researched the situation, and then stood up and announced, "My dear friends, this is no wall, and no snake, and no rope. What we have here, is four tree trunks. That's it. Case closed. Conversation over. Can we go to lunch now?"

The fifth blind man was not inclined to accept other people's opinions lightly. He walked up to the front of the elephant and felt the animals' two long tusks. "It seems to me that this object is made up of two swords," said the fifth man. "I am holding something long and curved and sharp at the end. I am not sure what it could be, but maybe our sixth friend can help us."

The sixth blind man scratched his head and thought and thought. While he was in the midst of his scratching and thinking, the worried zoo-keeper walked up and tried hard to sound calm as she greeted them, "Hi there! How are you enjoying the zoo today?" "The zoo is very nice," the sixth blind man answered. "Could you help us figure out the answer to the question that's puzzling us?"

"Sure thing," the zoo-keeper said, as she firmly latched on to the elephant's collar.

"My friends and I can't seem to figure out what this thing in front of us is. One of us thinks it's a wall; one thinks it's a snake; one thinks it's a rope; one thinks it is four tree trunks; and one thinks it is made up of two swords. How can one thing seem so different to five different people?" "Well," said the zoo-keeper, "You are all right. This elephant seems like something different to each one of you. And the only way to know what this thing really is, is to do exactly what you have done. Only by sharing what each of you knows can you possibly reach a true understanding."

The six wise men had to agree with the wisdom of the zoo-keeper. The first five of them had been too quick to form an opinion without listening to what the others had to say. Having solved that mystery and learned their lesson for the day, they went off to the zoo restaurant and had a really delicious lunch.

If the elephant really had been just a wall, it wouldn't have been much of an elephant. The same would have been true if it had just been a snake, rope, four tree trunks or something holding two swords. It only becomes an elephant when it has all of those things, and countless more parts than I can even begin to identify. And just to state the obvious, the same can be said of a human body. If there were one

that was all hands, or all eyes, all feet, or heaven help us, all mouth, it would be bizarre, maybe grotesque, certainly incapable of functioning as a human body. Yes, there are some body parts that a person can get along without, but for a body to be a person, there has to be some assortment of visible and not so visible parts working cooperatively. Not exactly a brilliant piece of insight. but what happens when we shift the analogy to the Church, the body of Christ? At first glance, it seems safe enough, and clear; we need a wide variety of gifts to function. But that's not all that Jesus and Paul have in mind, and so we need to listen carefully before we jump to any simple conclusions.

When Paul was writing to the church in Corinth, he used the image of the human body to describe the body of Christ. The idea wasn't new to him; many writers in ancient times had used a very similar analogy – except they had used it to keep people in their place. They pointed out to society that the body had one head, and that head assumed responsibility for making decisions and handing out orders. And then there were the low-lives who did the dirty work, the hands and feet who waited on people, cleaned the toilets and collected the garbage. That's your lot in life, your part of the body – and don't forget it. You do your job and I'll do mine. Paul came along and picked up the image, and did something radical with it. Wiping out the notion of hierarchy, he said that each part is essential to the functioning of the body, and in fact, the weaker and less presentable parts need more protection, respect, even honor than the more respectable parts do. Don't let there be any dissension in the body; learn to work together, care for each other and accept the fact that when one part of the body suffers, the whole body suffers. Now, we all know how a headache, toothache or sore toe can take over and completely dominate a day; but that doesn't mean we're inclined to give the same power to all the suffering ones among us, the single mother who works three jobs and still can't make ends meet, the unemployed worker whose only companion is a bottle in front of the television, Afghan refugees standing in line, waiting for a place to go and a way to make a new life for themselves and their children, the hundred thousands of new Covid diagnoses being handed out every day in this country. If we can't ignore them, we want to tell them to make better choices and get their act together. What do we do with Paul's assertion that we can't just say, I don't need you, anymore than a mouth can get a drink of water without some assistance from hands and throat muscles? Paul tells us that we're in this together; we need each other, we rely on each other; if one part of the body suffers, we all suffer.

Interestingly, the Gospel reading for today underscores the same teaching. Jesus came to his hometown, and while he was there he gave his inaugural address, the speech in which a leader lays out what they intend to do and identifies the guiding principles that they'll stand on as they lead. Jesus rolled the scroll to a passage from Isaiah 61, and told all of his listeners that he had been anointed by God's Spirit to bring good news to the poor, release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free. When one part suffers we all suffer, and Jesus has come to do what he can to bring an end to suffering, all of it.

One source I read says that Jesus' inaugural address is about the politics of compassion. In an age of excessive individualism, we would rather assert our personal rights and freedoms, or on a good day, maybe talk about "a thousand points of light," each one of us doing our thing to improve the world; rather than the idea of the community re-shaping itself, re-ordering its priorities, changing the system and transforming our relationships, whatever it takes, to meet the needs of all of God's children and to extend a compassionate response to the suffering of the world. Mercy suggests one person bending down to someone in need, but compassion is different – that means feeling with another, right alongside them. Not from above, but from right alongside (Marcus Borg, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*, quoted in Sermon Seeds).

Both Paul and Jesus call us to live alongside each other, and to respond to one another with compassion, all the one another who share this body with us. I'm not sure there's much room for debate around the question of whether or not we share one body as human beings. The question is how

we will live together within that body. We can claim our place and our role, and tell everybody else to do the same. Find your place in the body and stay there. You do your job and I'll do mine. But if we are going to be Christ's body, Christ's hands and hearts, ears and eyes, minds and mouths, we need to recognize our connectedness, and find ways to live together in which we build one another up. If we're going to be Christ's body, we don't get to say, I don't need you; I don't have to care about you. Instead, we are called to understand that when one part of the body suffers, we all suffer. And together, we are called to respond with compassion, doing what we can to lessen the suffering of any and of all.

Perhaps the zoo-keeper was speaking to us at the same time that she was speaking to those six blind men. Remember when she said, "You are all right. This elephant seems like something different to each one of you... Only by sharing what each of you knows can you possibly reach a true understanding." Only by listening and sharing, discerning and bending, working together and cooperating alongside each other can we be the very best elephant, and the very best body, and the very best Body of Christ we can possibly be. So may it be. Amen.

HYMN No. 281 *"The Bond of Love"*

We are one in the bond of love; We are one in the bond of love.

We have joined our spirit with the Spirit of God; We are one in the bond of love.

Let us sing now, everyone; Let us feel God's love begun.

Let us join our hands that the world will know We are one in the bond of love.

PRAYER REQUESTS

PASTORAL PRAYER

For the healing of bodies we pray: for a holy healing that deals with both pain and its causes; for healing that leads to a new love for the body; and also, where mortal life wearies for the end, for the healing of death. *(pause)* Holy God, hear us.

For the healing of minds we pray: for a holy healing that deals with memories as well as madness, abuse as well as anxiety, depression as well as dementia, stigma as well as the suffering of a tortured mind; and also, where people have been hurt by religion, for the healing of faith. *(pause)* Holy God, hear us.

For the healing of relationships we pray: for a holy healing that will not make things nice, but will make things possible; for the mending of love that has been fractured; for the cherishing of those whose true sexuality has been deemed aberrant; for holding, in their brokenness, those for whom love has been undermined by deceit. *(pause)* Holy God, hear us.

For the healing of our world we pray: for a holy healing, for the tearing down of cruel barriers and the building of bridges of peace; for the ending of needless exploitation and the growth of reverence for our planet; for replacing what the wealthy want with an abundance of what the world needs. *(pause)* Holy God, hear us.

So we pray, so we trust, so we will do in Jesus' name. And with the prayer that he shared with his friends: Our Father... *(A Wee Worship Book, Fifth Incarnation, Wild Goose Resource Group)*

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, the use of our minds in problem solving, curiosity, compassion, patience, urgency, spiritual reservoirs, financial resources, obedience, and courage to act. All these gifts, and others which bear our personal marks, are symbolized in our offering for the church, in acts of kindness

extended to friends and strangers alike, and in our service to this community and beyond. Let us join together in dedicating our gifts to God through prayer.

PRAYER OF DEDICATION (in unison)

Loving God, may our sense of belonging within a community of faith nurture the longing to be your faithful servants. Teach us to build a partnership with your Spirit that advances the ways of generosity and grace. Accept our giving and receive our gifts. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

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

HYMN No. 277 "The Church's One Foundation"

The Church's one foundation Is Jesus Christ her Lord;
She is His new creation By water and the Word:
From heaven He came and sought her To be His holy bride;
With His own blood He bought her, And for her life He died.

Elect from every nation, Yet one o'er all the earth,
Her charter of salvation One Lord, one faith, one birth;
One holy name she blesses, Partakes one holy food,
And to one hope she presses, With every grace endued.

'Mid toil and tribulation And tumult of earth's war,
She waits the consummation Of peace forever;
Till with the vision glorious Her longing eyes are blest,
And the great Church victorious Shall be the Church at rest.

BENEDICTION

You are the body of Christ.
May you have the heart of Christ, tender for mercy.
May you have the eyes of Christ to see a world in need.
May you have the feet of Christ to bring good news.
Go in peace! And God go with you.

(posted on **Literature & Liturgy**. <https://jesusscribbles.wordpress.com/>)