

UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST CONGREGATIONAL
Wallace, Idaho

Alice M.C. Ling, Pastor

January 30, 2022

Fourth Sunday after Epiphany

PRELUDE “O How I Love Jesus”

WELCOME AND ANNOUNCEMENTS

Annual Meeting today

Words for prayers, hymns in video

CALL TO WORSHIP

God whose love is vast and measureless, wider than the universe, unlimited and infinite:

in wonder we worship you.

God whose love will never run dry, will never fall short, will never fail:

in wonder we worship you.

God whose love knows nothing of our distinctions, our notions of ‘deserving’ and ‘undeserving’, and which encompasses everyone:

in wonder we worship you.

(Louise Gough. <http://worshipwords.co.uk/>)

HYMN No. 92 “Love Divine, All Loves Excelling”

Love divine, all loves excelling, Joy of heaven, to earth come down;

Fix in us Thy humble dwelling, All Thy faithful mercies crown.

Jesus, Thou art all compassion, Pure, unbounded love Thou art;

Visit us with Thy salvation, Enter every trembling heart.

Breathe, O breathe Thy loving Spirit Into every troubled breast!

Let us all in Thee inherit, Let us find that promised rest.

Take away our bent to sinning, Alpha and Omega be;

End of faith, as its beginning, Set our hearts at liberty.

PRAYER OF INVOCATION (in unison)

God, we praise you that your love reaches us, in our struggles and our joys, in our hidden place of fear and shame, in our sorrow and disappointment. We praise you that in your love you meet us as we are, where we are, sweeping aside any sense of inadequacy, overturning misplaced dependencies, and opening a window of light and hope, until we see in you our one true home. We praise you that your love comes gently, a warm scented breeze in the winter hurricane, a creeping tide smoothing rough sand, a depth of stillness to a heart in turmoil. God, your love is beyond all we can tell, yet we know that you are here with us, and that you care for every detail of our lives. We offer you hearts filled with gratitude. In wonder we worship you. Amen.

(Louise Gough. <http://worshipwords.co.uk/>)

SCRIPTURE READING 1 Corinthians 12:31b – 13:13

...I will show you a still more excellent way.

If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.

Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

Love never ends. But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end. For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways. For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.

SERMON

“Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends.” Nearly 33 years ago, when Ben and I were married, a friend gave us a beautiful gift of those words. She embroidered them in shades of blue on a piece of white fabric and surrounded them with lace and ribbons, doves and flowers, all of it celebrating the beauty and the gift of love. I continue to be grateful for that gift and for the hours she spent laboring over it – for us; and I continue to love and cherish her dearly as a very special friend. But I have to tell you that these days when I read those words describing love, I’m more inclined to think of the Velveteen Rabbit than lace and ribbons. You know – the Velveteen Rabbit that was told by the Skin Horse that he’d never become real until most of his hair had been loved off, his eyes had dropped out, he got loose in the joints and was very shabby. But not to worry because once you’re real, you can’t be ugly – except to people who don’t understand.

Love is hard work. If you manage even a portion of those qualities and conditions at least part of the time, give yourself a pat on the back, because it’s not easy. And never to be taken for granted. Whether it’s the annoyance of having a mother who makes her weekly Sunday afternoon call just moments after kick off. She knows what you’re doing. Why does she insist on calling then? Or the pride that makes a grandparent’s chest burst with excitement over the applause surrounding a granddaughter’s science fair project. We all know how that kind of pride has to be shared, and more often than not bears a close resemblance to boasting. Or the irritability that follows answering the same question ten times, of giving instructions on how to handle a task only to be totally ignored once the work is finally underway. And then there’s the patience required when you’re late for an appointment because someone is primping in front of the mirror and you can’t get out the door on time. I’m not saying it isn’t worth it, or that I’d trade a minute of love for any of it; I’m just saying handling it with patience and kindness, and without envy or boasting or arrogance or rudeness, irritability or resentment is sometimes more than I can accomplish. How about you?

As important as these words are, it’s even more important to remember where they come from. When Paul wrote these words he wasn’t talking about a beautiful wedding or a lacy Valentine kind of love, or even the challenges of family life; but the *agape* kind of love that Jesus lived by, a love that embraces all people as God’s children, that forgives not just once or twice but 70 times 7 times, that speaks the truth because it needs to be spoken, that stands up for what is right and good and true, that goes out of its way to honor and protect the vulnerable and powerless, that doesn’t call it quits because it gets expensive or unpleasant but that goes on loving because of the needs of the beloved. In contrast, Paul was writing to a contentious community of Christians who were wrapped up in lots of competitive bickering and squabbling over who had the best gifts and who should receive the greatest respect and honor, who was baptized by whom and who should get communion first. Debie Thomas has described the community by saying, “... the Corinthian church is a church where all hell has broken loose. Far

from honoring each other as fellow members of Christ's body, the recipients of Paul's letter are tearing each other apart. While piety, self-righteousness, and spiritual one-upmanship are very much on display in their ranks, the love that never ends is not." (The Greatest of These", *Journey with Jesus*, 23 January 2022) Paul's words addressed this cantankerous group of would be followers and planted the suffering love of their servant Savior about a millimeter in front of their noses. Basically, he told them to let Jesus' kind of love be their guiding star and organizing principle.

It's important to track the way 1 Corinthians chapter 13 follows chapter 12. That after Paul has addressed the newborn church and urged them to think of their life together as a body, with all of the parts and each of the gifts working together in unique and interdependent ways in order to create the whole, he tells them that the most essential, effective and eternal thing is love. And then he points back to several of the gifts that he has just named, and says it doesn't much matter what your gift is; if it isn't rooted and grounded in love, it doesn't amount to a hill of beans. So maybe the Spirit did give you the gift of speaking in tongues; if you use it to point out how special you are rather than to demonstrate the love of God, you're nothing more than a whining, annoying alarm. Or maybe the Spirit gifted you with prophetic powers, the ability to decipher mysteries, the highest IQ ever recorded, or so much faith that you're able to move all of the Cascade mountains to Oklahoma; if those gifts don't start and stop in love, they're worthless. If you give everything you own to the homeless shelter, the thrift shop and the AIDS clinic and then hang a neon sign over your head so people will know how exceptionally generous you are, you'll gain no seal of approval from God. It's not worth the noise or the effort if love isn't woven all the way through it.

From there, Paul moves on to the paragraph we're most inclined to pull out and read on it's own: Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. Have you noticed that the first two statements are positive and say what love is and then Paul switches immediately to what it is not, almost as if he was pointing to specific behavior in the life of the community. I tend to hear Paul saying, love gets the most real once the socks start to stink, the clutter begins to irritate, the tension mounts and the conflict accelerates. Once we move beyond pretty words, roll up our sleeves and get busy with the hard work of listening, forgiving, caring for, negotiating with. If you can get through the rough times with patience and kindness, rather than insisting on getting your way or bullying others into agreeing with you, if you can defend yourself or someone else without beating up the offender or starting a smear campaign, then maybe you're learning what love is.

Debie Thomas points to some of the same dynamics, by encouraging us to " think *verbs*, not adjectives. Love is not an emotion. It's not something we wait around for, or fall into. It is muscle, movement, sweat, action. Love *acts* patiently and kindly. Love acts against the impulses of envy, irritation, and arrogance. Love yields, love rejoices, love refrains, love endures. In other words, love doesn't stand around waiting for warm fuzzies; love gets up and gets moving."

I think of the 11-year-old girl I saw on the news the other night who has a cousin with leukemia spending a lot of time in the hospital. The younger girl made a comment about the boring hospital gowns she had to wear all the time, and the 11 year old jumped into action. Now she's making colorful gowns for kids in the pediatric ward, letting them choose their style and their fabric. She's taught 4 of her friends to sew, and so far, they've delivered more than 170 gowns to the hospital, doing what they can to spread hope and joy. ("On the Road", CBS Evening News, January 28, 2022)

I also saw a story about an ICU nurse who used to be a professional photographer. He worked with his hospital for two years before they gave him approval to take photos and capture the reality inside the COVID wards, so that the public can see as well as families. Tender, heartbreaking, powerful photos. He admitted how weary he is and how much he's struggling as the pandemic stretches on. And he

talked openly about the range of emotions he goes through as he receives countless patients who have not been vaccinated. He hears about how many people are waiting for the one empty bed on the ward, and he feels angry, he knows none of this is necessary and thinks it's not all bad that they're getting what they deserve. But then, once the patient is in front of him, his anger dissipates and he sees a person in need of care that he can give, and that's all that matters. He moves into action providing care and treating each patient as a beloved person.

And finally I think about a story Episcopal Bishop Micheal Curry tells in his book *Love is the Way*. He spent quite a bit of time serving St. James Episcopal Church in Baltimore, and there came a time when they joined with other congregations in the neighborhood and confronted the question of how they could take the love of God to the streets, which were all too full of drug dealers and murders. Things evolved slowly but eventually they began to do street corner revivals, with singing, preaching and literature for rehab referrals and other public health services. And when revival was happening, dealing happened elsewhere.

This had been going on quite awhile, when one day Curry had a knock on his door. A young man in his early twenties stepped in and asked if they could sit down and talk. Curry didn't recognize him, but he stiffened with anger at the request. The truth was that this was one of the dealers who regularly stared at them from across the street, and clearly he represented everything Curry was working against: selfishness, violence and exploitation as a way of life. He took a deep breath, remembered that church is the one place where everyone was welcome, and invited him to sit. The next words out of the young man's mouth were, "I want out." When asked, he said he wanted out of the drug world and wondered if Curry could help. They reviewed every option he could think of, and all of them were rejected. But they kept talking, and the young man kept coming back. Curry wrote, "The more I came to know his background and to know him, the more I realized that we weren't very different at all, and it became harder and harder to dislike him. (He) wasn't a drug dealer; he was a person, a child of God, like me. I was now in relationship with him – and the result was love, whether or not I saw it coming or even wanted it." (page 155 and following)

"Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends." Nobody ever said it was going to be easy, and nobody expects us to get it right and do it completely all the time. But if we remember that love is a verb, something we can put into action instead of waiting for the warm fuzzy feeling to kick in, we can also trust Christ to join us in the effort. To meet us in love, to walk with us in love, to equip us with a love that never gives up and never gives in. Trusting that truly faith, hope and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love. Thanks be to God. Amen.

HYMN "All Are Welcome"

Let us build a house where love can dwell And all can safely live,
A place where saints and children tell How hearts learn to forgive.
Built of hopes and dreams and visions, Rock of faith and vault of grace;
Here the love of Christ shall end divisions:
All are welcome, all are welcome, all are welcome in this place.

Let us build a house where prophets speak, And words are strong and true,
Where all God's children dare to seek To dream God's reign anew.
Here the cross shall stand as witness And as symbol of God's grace;
Here as one we claim the faith of Jesus:
All are welcome, all are welcome, all are welcome in this place.

Let us build a house where hands will reach Beyond the wood and stone
To heal and strengthen, serve and teach, And live the Word they've known.
Here the outcast and the stranger Bear the image of God's face;
Let us bring an end to fear and danger:
All are welcome, all are welcome, all are welcome in this place.

PRAYER REQUESTS

Dallas' grandson Brandon went to the hospital yesterday with trouble breathing, has pneumonia
JoHannah Branstetter: an injection on Tuesday 2/1 in her ankle to try and grow some cartilage and
alleviate pain from an earlier injury. Prayers that the procedure works

PASTORAL PRAYER

Your love, O God, is patient; we give you thanks for all those who have been patient with us and have
taught and cared for us; and we pray for the patience to love others as you have loved us.

Your love is kind; give us the courage to be kind to others and to serve those with patience who are so
often unkind, rude, difficult to love, or our enemies. They are your children and our sisters and brothers
and they were made in your image.

Your love is not pompous; give us insight to speak the truth in love and for the sake of your kingdom
and not out of a need to appear clever or right and in all our relationships give us the wisdom to listen
far more than we speak.

Your love does not seek its own interests; we thank you and pray for those who serve the poor and
those in need, who give tirelessly of themselves and who have much to do and little time for
themselves.

Your love is not quick-tempered; we pray for those who are angry and for the violent and their victims;
for children who fear, elders who are abused, and people trapped in relationships that injure and harm.

Your love bears all things; we remember before you those with heavy burdens, many cares, much
stress, and too little comfort and help. Open our eyes to those around us and their needs and give us the
wisdom to offer help without any prying or a sense of superiority.

Your love never fails; even death does not trespass on the breadth and depth of your love. We thank you
for those we have loved in this life and who now dwell in the peace and joy of your presence and let
your comfort settle on those who are grieving or are lonely this day.

In the name of Jesus we pray, and using the words he taught his friends when they asked how they
should pray: Our Father... (The Presbyterian Church in Canada; <http://presbyterian.ca/>)

PRAYER OF OUR SAVIOR (depts)

OFFERING

Having received new life through the generosity of God and the hope Christ brings, let us give
thankfully and abundantly that we may be called God's generous people. Gifts to support our church's
ministry can be dropped in the mail slot outside the main door of the church, or mailed to the church at
408 Cedar Street. Thank you for all of the ways you support our life together.

PRAYER OF DEDICATION (in unison)

**O God, we often affirm our love for others by presentations of gifts and vows of commitment.
Receive our offerings as sincere affirmations of our love for you. Put to holy use our giftedness
and our committed lives. In the name of Jesus Christ, we pray. Amen.**

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

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,
We will walk with each other, we will walk hand in hand,
And together we’ll spread the news that God is in our land:
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 work with each other, we will work side by side,
We will work with each other, we will work side by side,
And we’ll guard each one’s dignity and save each one’s pride:
And they’ll know we are Christians by our love, by our love,
Yes, they’ll know we are Christians by our love.

BENEDICTION

The world is now too dangerous and too beautiful for anything but love.
May your eyes be so blessed that you see God in everyone.
Your ears, so you hear the cry of the poor.
May your hands be so blessed that everything you touch is a sacrament.
Your lips, so you speak nothing but the truth with love.
May your feet be so blessed that you run to those who need you.
And may your heart be so opened, so set on fire, that your love, *your love* changes everything.