

UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST CONGREGATIONAL
Wallace, Idaho

Alice M.C. Ling, Pastor

February 13, 2022

Sixth Sunday after Epiphany

PRELUDE *“I Love to Tell the Story”*

WELCOME AND ANNOUNCEMENTS

Copies of newly revised bylaws available

Putting together a directory of church members and friends; will want to hear if you want to be included and if our info is correct

CALL TO WORSHIP

Blessed are those who trust - in God!

We come in trust, to be grounded in God's love.

Blessed are those who hope - in God!

We come in hope, trusting in the One who gives us life.

Blessed are those who delight - in God's Word!

We come to hear God speak, hoping for healing and joy.

(Thom M. Shuman, Bearers of Grace and Justice)

HYMN No. 16 *“We Praise Thee, O God, Our Redeemer”*

We praise Thee, O God, our Redeemer, Creator

In grateful devotion our tribute we bring;

We lay it before Thee, we kneel and adore Thee,

We bless Thy holy Name, glad praises we sing.

We worship Thee, God of our parents, we bless Thee

Through life's storm and tempest our Guide hast Thou been;

When perils o'ertake us, escape Thou wilt make us,

And with Thy help, O Lord, our battles we win.

PRAYER OF CONFESSION (in unison)

We try to care for each other, especially when there is pain and sorrow, and when we witness injustice. But we cannot find blessing in poverty and hunger. Sometimes it feels just too hard to offer relief or to work for change. We prefer to stay in our comfortable spaces or choose to walk past those in need. Sometimes we are afraid. Forgive us when we serve ourselves more often than we serve you, O God. We come to you with humble hearts. (silence)

ASSURANCE OF FORGIVENESS

God knows your mind and knows your heart. God forgives those who seek forgiveness with sincere hearts and minds. God offers grace of hope and courage to change our ways and confront injustice.

Blessed are those who trust in God, whose trust is in God. Know that you are loved and forgiven.

Thanks be to God.

(Debbie Gline Allen, UCC Worship Ways)

SCRIPTURE READING Luke 6:17-26

He came down with them and stood on a level place, with a great crowd of his disciples and a great multitude of people from all Judea, Jerusalem, and the coast of Tyre and Sidon. They had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases; and those who were troubled with unclean spirits were cured. And all in the crowd were trying to touch him, for power came out from him and healed all of them.

Then he looked up at his disciples and said:

“Blessed are you who are poor,
for yours is the kingdom of God.

“Blessed are you who are hungry now,
for you will be filled.

“Blessed are you who weep now,
for you will laugh.

“Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man. Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven; for that is what their ancestors did to the prophets.

“But woe to you who are rich,
for you have received your consolation.

“Woe to you who are full now,
for you will be hungry.

“Woe to you who are laughing now,
for you will mourn and weep.

“Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets.

SERMON

I don't talk about it a lot, but you may have figured it out – depending on how long you've been listening to me and how much you try to hear what I don't say, or think critically about what I do say. When it comes to reading the Bible, I'm more of a storyteller than a historian. Not that I don't care about history, because I do – very much. But I don't put a whole lot of energy into trying to figure out exactly what happened and what didn't. Like, did God actually create the world in 6 24-hour days, with one leftover to admire the accomplishment, or in six long periods of time over the course of history or in some other way? Did Noah really build a boat big enough for him and his family and two, or was it seven, pairs of animals to peacefully co-exist for 40 days and nights of rain and another string of endless days and nights until the water receded? Is there a boat big enough for that? Were Abraham and Sarah really a hundred when they had a baby and was Mary actually a virgin? What about those miracle stories like the feeding of the thousands with five pieces of bread and two fish, and raising Lazarus back to life after he'd spent several days dead in the tomb? The list of places where the question gets asked is endless, and I mostly shrug my shoulders and say, I don't know. Does it matter? For me, what matters is what the story is trying to tell us: about God, about the life of faith, and about how God wants us to treat each other. I don't have a shadow of a doubt about the truth of the stories, but there are only a handful that I'd go to the mat for, defending their historicity.

One of the lessons I learned really well in seminary is that each of the four Gospels is its own story. While they clearly drew on some common sources, each was written by a different person who was looking at the life of Jesus from their own unique perspective. They wrote in different years, to different audiences, and with different things happening in their lives, so the story came out a little differently. Just like it would have if I'd been telling my grandmother about my first love, compared to sharing all the details with my best friend. I'd tell both of them the truth, but you know as well as I do that the story wouldn't come out the same. Sometimes the differences can peacefully coexist, like in the birth stories. Luke tells us about Zechariah and Elizabeth giving birth to John, and Mary having the shock of her life when Gabriel visited. She and Joseph went to Bethlehem, and then shepherds found them there, cradling their newborn son. Matthew on the other hand never names Mary, an angel visited Joseph in a dream, and then magi from the east showed up sometime later, carrying rare and exotic gifts. They are very different stories, but we join them all together and let them fill out each other's stories.

Then there are the Beatitudes. The version of the story we're most familiar with is from Matthew and Jesus' Sermon on the Mount; contrasted with today's text from Luke, which is popularly known as Jesus' Sermon on the Plain. In Matthew Jesus opens with a series of 9 statements of blessing, all of which are softly spiritualized so that everyone can find their place: blessed are the poor in spirit, blessed are those who mourn, blessed are the meek and the merciful, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, the pure in heart and the peacemakers, the persecuted and the reviled. Contrast that with Luke who has only 4 statements of blessing: blessed are the poor, the hungry, those who weep, the hated; and before we have a chance to ponder whether or not there's a way that list includes us, Jesus rushes on to add four woes: to the rich, those who are full, the laughing and the ones of whom others speak well. I don't see a way that these two sermons can be woven together into one seamless whole, and I'm happy to tell you upfront that if the two passages stand side by side in front of me, I'm going to choose Matthew every time. Who needs the woes? And it seems to me we could all use as much blessing as we can get right about now. But this is where I have to go back where I started, and ask a different question. As I read scripture, it's not an either/or question of which one sounds right (which can easily slide into which one do I like best); rather it's a question of stopping to ask Luke what he's trying to say. Yes he said it differently than Matthew, and who knows what Jesus actually said. For now, let's just focus on what Luke is telling us.

Start to finish, the Gospel of Matthew is all about the ways in which Jesus came to fulfill Jewish expectations and teachings, and so, like Moses, Jesus went up on the mountain to God to receive God's word for the people. That's Matthew; not Luke. Luke wants us to know that Jesus was among the people, accessible and within reach; he didn't come to be above them, but among them. This text makes that breathtakingly clear when it tells us that Jesus came down off the mountain where he had spent the night praying and in the morning called his disciples; then he came down with the people and stood among them on a level place. He was surrounded by a great crowd of followers, and a great multitude of people from all Judea, Jerusalem, and the coast of Tyre and Sidon (which likely means Gentiles as well as Jews). All in the crowd were trying to touch him and he healed all of them – every last one of them. And then he looked up at his disciples and began to teach them. It's like he was on the ground, tending, healing, comforting, touching the masses of those who sought his help; not only was he not above them, but he had to look up to talk with them.

When he began to speak, he said: Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled. Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh. Blessed are you when people hate and exclude you because of me; your reward is great in heaven. Debie Thomas summarizes these words by saying; "Unlike Matthew, who softens the Beatitudes with phrases like "poor in spirit," instead of "poor," and "those who hunger and thirst for righteousness," instead of plain old "hungry," Luke keeps Jesus's "Sermon on the Plain" raw, terse, and close to the bone. There's no way around it; as far as Luke's Jesus is concerned, God's preferential option for the poor is crystal clear. God's blessing rests on those who have absolutely nothing to fall back on in this world. No credit line, no nest egg, no fan base, no immunity. If we want to know where God's heart is, we must look to the world's most reviled, wretched, shamed, and desperate people. They are the fortunate ones." ("Leveled", *Journey with Jesus*, 6 February 2022)

From the very beginning, Luke has been telling us about Jesus' focus on those most in need, and about turning things upside down through Jesus' ministry. Mary started it with the Magnificat in Luke 1, in which she sang about bringing down the high and mighty and lifting up the lowly, filling the hungry with good things and sending the rich away empty. Jesus continued that song in his inaugural address in Luke 4 when he said he'd come to bring good news to the poor, proclaim release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, and to let the oppressed go free. In Luke's Gospel, Jesus is absolutely clear that he has come for those who have nowhere else to go and no one else to turn to, the ones who

are totally dependent on God. While the rich are inclined to take comfort in themselves and their own resources and accomplishments, the poor are more inclined to entrust themselves to God's care and mercy. And God very much wants us to trust in, lean on, turn to and depend on God.

I think one of the most difficult things about this passage is the way in which the four beatitudes are followed by the four woes. I can't speak for you, but I'm tempted to hear this language as setting up an either/or dichotomy: the chosen and the damned, the blessed and the cursed. It even sounds like God has made up God's mind and our future lies in one category or the other; the choice is made, the door is closed. But as I read and listen to scholars, it seems clear to me that that's not what Jesus is saying. The word translated as "woe" doesn't mean cursed; the word behind "blessed" doesn't even mean blessed. The Greek word *makario* is translated here as "blessed", sometimes even as "happy", but as I read, it more accurately means something like respectable, content, being on the right track. By contrast, the word *ouai* is not a word of condemnation nearly as much as it's intended to be an attempt to get our attention: look out, you're headed in the wrong direction. The words *makario* and *ouai* are saying that if we have a Kingdom of God perspective, we're not looking at the rich or the powerful, but to the ones who depend on and trust in God and God alone.

In Luke's Gospel. Jesus has a very different world view than ours tends to be. Writer Frederick Buechner describes it this way: "The world says, 'Mind your own business,' and Jesus says, 'There is no such thing as your own business.' The world says, 'Follow the wisest course and be a success,' and Jesus says, 'Follow me and be crucified.' The world says, 'Drive carefully — the life you save may be your own' — and Jesus says, 'Whoever would save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.' The world says, 'Law and order,' and Jesus says, 'Love.' The world says, 'Get' and Jesus says, 'Give.' In terms of the world's sanity, Jesus is crazy as a coot, and anybody who thinks (w)e can follow him without being a little crazy too is laboring less under a cross than under a delusion." (quoted by Debie Thomas)

Luke tells us that Jesus came among us, welcomed and healed all who came to him, and set to work turning the world upside down so that the empty might be filled, the hungry fed, the outcast welcomed, the weeping comforted. And Jesus moves among us even now, calling to get our attention, inviting us to trust, to follow, to bless, to serve. Jesus said, Blessed are you who are poor, hungry, sad, and expendable. Why? Because you have everything to look forward to. Because the Kingdom of God is yours. Because Jesus came, and comes still, to fill the empty-handed with good things.

May the God who gives and takes away, offers comfort and challenge, grant us the grace to sit with woe, and learn the meaning of blessing. Amen.

HYMN No. 202 "Amazing Grace"

Amazing grace! how sweet the sound – That saved a wretch like me!
I once was lost but now am found, Was blind but now I see.

Through many dangers, toils and snares, I have already come;
'Tis grace hath brought me safe thus far, And grace will lead me home.

When we've been there ten thousand years Bright shining as the sun,
We've no less days to sing God's praise Than when we'd first begun.

PRAYER REQUESTS

New Members: Carol Belknap, Dwaine and Mary Fulton

Carol Belknap, knee replacement surgery tomorrow

PASTORAL PRAYER

Holy God, as we look toward a day of hearts and roses, candy and cards, we turn again to you, the source of all love. Thank you for those who have shared with us the beauty and wonder, simplicity and extravagance of love: classmates and co-workers, parents and siblings, friends and teachers, neighbors and pets. We thank you too for the gifts we receive from them: the miracle of being accepted, the mystery of forgiveness, the grace of patience, the closeness of sharing laughter as well as tears, and the kindness of loving us enough to challenge and confront us. Most of all, we thank you for the ways that you love us, believe in us, equip and forgive us, join us in our lives and invite us to join you in sharing the gift and joy of love. By your grace, help us to love as we have been loved, to extend to others the mercy and compassion, welcome and embrace that have so graciously been offered to us.

We give you thanks for Mary and Dwaine and Carol, for the home they're making among us, for the experiences and gifts they have to share with us, and for the ways we can walk and work together, growing in faith and reaching with love. Bless each of them and all of us that together we might serve you with joy.

In the shelter of your welcoming love, we lift up those in need of healing and holding: the sick who are facing into or recovering from surgery, undergoing treatment, living with the painful truth of a diagnosis, doing the hard work of recovery. We pray for those who grieve the loss of a loved one, the ability to care for themselves, the people and place they called home. For caregivers who grow weary, the lonely who crave a companion who will listen to their stories and with whom they can share a cup of tea, the overworked and overburdened in desperate need of a rest. We pray for the hungry and homeless, the hated and unforgiven, the outcast and overlooked.

We pray, O God for our world, for the differences that divide and the tensions that intensify and threaten our life together. We pray for city streets and private homes, grocery stores and schools where violence too often intrudes and destroys; for school board meetings and border bridges, legislative hearings and courtroom proceedings where differences of opinion become hotbeds of hostility instead of brainstorming opportunities in the search for a path forward. We pray especially for the people of Ukraine, for their safety and freedom, well-being and hope; that leaders from both East and West might listen and speak, negotiate and deescalate, seek and find the things that make for peace.

Hear our prayers, O God, spoken and unspoken. And hear us as we join our voices in the prayer that Jesus taught, saying: Our Father...

PRAYER OF OUR SAVIOR (depts)

OFFERING

On the second Sunday of the month, we're invited to consider a gift to the church's Emergency Aid Fund. This fund allows us to respond to people within the congregation as well as those beyond our walls, people living in the Silver Valley and those just trying to pass through on their way to somewhere else; people in need of some assistance and encouragement: a place to spend a night, a warm meal, some groceries, a tank of gas or help with a utility bill. Because of the funds you give, when I get a request, I can say yes, we can help. Thank you for those gifts, and for all of the ways you support our church's ministry and witness.

PRAYER OF DEDICATION (in unison)

Transforming God, take our gifts and turn them into hope for the weary, liberation for the oppressed, power for those who are dispossessed; take us flawed creatures and manifest in us your love that knows no end, your faith that can do all things, your service that spares no cost, your patient endurance that hopes to the last. Amen. *(Chalice Worship)*

HYMN No. 354 “*What a Fellowship*”

What a fellowship, what a joy divine, Leaning on the everlasting arms;
What a blessedness, what a peace is mine, Leaning on the everlasting arms.
Leaning, leaning, Safe and secure from all alarms;
Leaning, leaning, Leaning on the everlasting arms.

What have I to dread, what have I to fear, Leaning on the everlasting arms?
I have blessed peace with my Lord so near, Leaning on the everlasting arms.
Leaning, leaning, Safe and secure from all alarms;
Leaning, leaning, Leaning on the everlasting arms.

BENEDICTION

May God bless you and keep you, and may God bless you and give you away to others.
May God’s face shine on you, and your face reflect an irresistible good news.
May God lift up everything that is fallen in you, and give you more pieces of peace than you alone can hold. Amen.
(Maren C. Tirabassi, *Touch Holiness*)