

UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST CONGREGATIONAL
Wallace, Idaho

Alice M.C. Ling, Pastor

February 20, 2022

Seventh Sunday after Epiphany

PRELUDE “Amazing Grace”

WELCOME AND ANNOUNCEMENTS

Continuing to ask people to wear masks to worship, while local numbers remain so high
March/April Upper Room, Lenten Devotionals available (Ash Weds is March 2)

CALL TO WORSHIP

We come seeking the holy love of God, that we may become whole and loving.

**As Jesus Christ has shared the life of earth, through Christ we may share the life of God, in
growing holiness, justice and love.**

In awe, we rejoice in sharing life with God in Christ.

All: **In thanksgiving, let us worship God.**

(Ruth C. Duck, *Touch Holiness*)

HYMN No. 2 “Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing”

Come, Thou Fount of every blessing, Tune my heart to sing Thy grace;
Streams of mercy, never ceasing, Call for songs of loudest praise.
Teach me some melodious sonnet, Sung by flaming tongues above;
Praise His name – I’m fixed upon it – Name of God’s redeeming love.

O to grace how great a debtor Daily I’m constrained to be!
Let Thy goodness, like a fetter, Bind my wandering heart to Thee:
Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it, Prone to leave the God I love;
Here’s my heart, O take and seal it; Seal it for Thy courts above.

PRAYER OF INVOCATION (in unison)

**Steadfast Lover of humanity, we come to you searching for ways to love more wisely, more
genuinely, more steadily. Fill us with the love of Christ, that each day we may be passionate and
patient, faithful and forgiving, growing in love for one another and this world of many peoples.
Through your Spirit, build your church into a living temple, a sign of your presence on earth,
through Jesus Christ, our foundation. Amen.**

(Ruth C. Duck, *Touch Holiness*)

SCRIPTURE READING

Psalm 37:1-11, 39-40

Do not fret because of the wicked;
do not be envious of wrongdoers,
for they will soon fade like the grass,
and wither like the green herb.
Trust in the LORD, and do good;
so you will live in the land, and enjoy security.
Take delight in the LORD,
and he will give you the desires of your heart.

Commit your way to the LORD;
trust in him, and he will act.
He will make your vindication shine like the light,
and the justice of your cause like the noonday.

Be still before the LORD, and wait patiently for him;
do not fret over those who prosper in their way,
over those who carry out evil devices.

Refrain from anger, and forsake wrath.
Do not fret—it leads only to evil.
For the wicked shall be cut off,
but those who wait for the LORD shall inherit the land.

Yet a little while, and the wicked will be no more;
though you look diligently for their place, they will not be there.
But the meek shall inherit the land,
and delight themselves in abundant prosperity.

The salvation of the righteous is from the LORD;
he is their refuge in the time of trouble.
The LORD helps them and rescues them;
he rescues them from the wicked, and saves them,
because they take refuge in him.

Luke 6:27-38

“But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. Do to others as you would have them do to you.

“If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. If you lend to those from whom you hope to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to receive as much again. But love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High; for he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.

“Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven; give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back.”

SERMON

It may be a little late to be admitting this, but I still haven't decided if this is a perfect time for this morning's Gospel lesson, or the worst possible time imaginable. On the positive side, who doesn't have somebody spring to mind at the sound of the word “enemy”? This is such an angry, hostile, brittle time that it seems like everybody must have some enemy tucked into their back pocket, just waiting for acknowledgment or the hint that now is their time. Then again, this is such an angry, hostile, brittle time, who's open to hearing the instruction “to love” located just ahead of “your enemy”? While the whole world holds its breath, waiting to see whether or not Putin will invade Ukraine, he's one obvious target for the word. And as we hear news reports about the anger and aggression being unleashed on airplanes, the protests around Covid protocols that shut down bridges and have people being physically thrown out of meetings about mask mandates, the soaring numbers related to police deaths and random acts of violence, and the chasmic divide between political parties and those with differing opinions, the notion of enemies seems as much on the rise as grocery and gas prices.

But those examples are all ones that are “out there”, other people’s short fuses and frayed nerves. Is any of us exempt? We’re tired, we’re frustrated, we’re impatient with the choices that other people are making that prolong our Covid reality. UCC pastor Liz Goodman observes that while we used to think nothing of the little things we did to yield to others, we were maybe slightly frustrated but mostly tolerant, “...the pandemic and its social distance have put us out of practice of bumping up against one another in regular ways. We’ve become so tender as to be almost intolerant, easily triggered by the slightest sleight. Kids in school are fighting, even with other kids they’ve known for years. Adults in public are unable to keep their composure even over issues with the lowest stakes. The trauma of the pandemic, where it hasn’t wrought death, crisis, or ever more pronounced precarity, has been sneaky for its slowness. I’ve had it about as good as anyone could hope for, so I didn’t notice what trauma I’d felt until I found myself weeping almost every day for months on end.

“It’s fair to say we might find Jesus’ imperative challenging, that we bless those who curse us and pray for those who abuse us.” (“Living by the Word”, February 20, *The Christian Century*, February 9, 2022, page 18)

Or we might just want to shake our heads and say, not now, Jesus. Maybe later, once the pandemic is behind us and we’ve had some time to recover, but not now. We just can’t go there right now. And yet, I can’t think of a time that we’ve needed to go there more. How else are we going to lower the temperature, build some bridges and try to restore some sense of cooperation and civility. I know Jesus is asking for more than civility, but we have to start somewhere.

I love the subtle way this text opens. You may remember that last week, we looked at the opening of Jesus’ Sermon on the Plain, where he handed out blessings for the down and out, dirty and disreputable, and followed those up with woes for the rich and self-sufficient, comfortable and self-satisfied. Today he moves on from there, and says, I say to you that listen... Retired professor of New Testament Sarah Henrich says that it’s fair to emphasize the present participle and translate that instead to say, I declare to you who are still listening (*Working Preacher* for February 20, 2022). Partly that points to the fact that Jesus is directing this teaching to disciples and followers who have tuned in to his sermon and already received instruction from him; but I think there’s also a way to hear those words as asking who’s still listening and who has already checked out. It’s like he’s acknowledging, I know this is tough stuff, but if you’re still with me, let me turn up the heat a bunch more and tell you to love your enemies, to do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you.

Whether you focus on the word “enemies” or jump ahead a few sentences to the idea of forgiveness, this is an extremely challenging text – both for what it says and for what it does not say. Let me start with the second part. This text does not tell us to be passive in the face of struggle, or to roll over in the presence of abuse. I’ve always been extremely clear that I don’t ever want to be heard as a pastor who tells an abused woman to go home and be obedient to her abusive husband. Letting abuse continue is not faithful or loving or good for anybody, the abused or the abuser. I don’t believe for one minute that this text is telling the abused or bullied to stand still and take it.

What it is saying is that we should not let our enemy, our attacker or even our benefactors set the terms for how we respond or behave. It’s pretty common for us to interact with people so that we do unto them as they have done unto us – for good or for ill. If they hurt us, our instinct is usually to try and hurt them back; and if we can, we just might ratchet up the hurt a notch or two in order to outdo them. Comparably, when people are nice to us, we make every attempt to respond in kind, to return the favor; and if we think they have something we want, then we may lay it on a few layers thicker. Jesus here is calling a stop to all of that, and saying, don’t let those other folks set the terms for how you will behave, either the enemies or the friends. In place of reciprocity and retaliation, he lays the notion of the Golden Rule: do unto others as you would have them do to you. And he also summarizes the whole text by saying: Be merciful as God is merciful.

Be merciful as God is merciful. That's the standard by which Jesus calls his followers to live. Not a whole lot easier than when Matthew tells his listeners to be perfect as God is perfect. And neither one is offered as a goal that's easily within our reach. Instead, we're called to watch and listen – if we're still listening that is – to how Jesus describes the mercy of God, where he lives it out and how he puts skin on God's mercy. Like with the welcome home party thrown for the prodigal son, and the gracious caregiving offered by the good Samaritan, and Jesus own prayer of forgiveness from the cross for those who had nailed him there.

I think of the television show *This Is Us*. Last year, Randall came home late one night, only to find an intruder in his house. The man left, but Randall spent months profoundly traumatized by the intrusion. He had nightmares, especially once he and Beth realized some jewelry was missing, and a wedding photo. It wasn't just what they'd lost, but that the man had been in their bedroom. When Beth was asleep? How do you sleep peacefully again after that? Finally, Randall heard that the man had been caught and was being arraigned, so he went to the courthouse. He needed to see the intruder again, he needed to understand, he wanted to speak to him and ask him why. What he saw was a broken and confused man, a man who didn't remember the break-in, but who did recognize Randall as the man in his photo; and as Randall tried to confront him, the man just kept interrupting to ask, do you know what they did with my dog? Finally Randall went to find out. And he made arrangements for the man to check in to rehab. When he didn't show and left Randall standing on the sidewalk, Beth asked him why in the world he was doing this; he said because he was thinking about his birth father's addiction, and about his brother's addiction and his uncle's, and he has to do what he can to anyone he might reach. Be merciful as God is merciful.

And then there's the story Jennifer Finney Boylan told in a *New York Times* essay last December. Boylan, a trans woman, recounted going out to dinner one night with her mom, and receiving cruel treatment from their transphobic waiter. Boylan walked out feeling hurt and sad, but she noticed with surprise that her mom was unfazed. When she asked why, her mom said, "Oh Jenny, you know he didn't really mean it." Boylan almost retorted, "Of course he meant it!" But then she realized what her mom was saying: "She wasn't really talking about the man before her; she was talking about a better version of him, a self he had not been able to become, but in whom she had not lost faith. He was not yet that man. But, she felt, in receiving the gift of kindness, and of grace, maybe he still had a shot." (told/quoted by Debie Thomas, *Journey with Jesus*, posted 13 February 2022) Be merciful as God is merciful.

The work of forgiveness and mercy are some of the hardest work we can do in this world. They are also some of the most important work we can do in this world. So, may we stop drinking the poison of incivility and bitterness. May we glimpse the "better selves" that reside within the people who do us harm. May we continue to listen to Jesus' teaching and to his life, that his love and forgiveness, mercy and compassion might grow in us, and through us spill more and more into this world. Amen.

HYMN No.68 "There's a Wideness in God's Mercy"

There's a wideness in God's mercy, Like the wideness of the sea;
There's a kindness in His justice Which is more than liberty.

There is welcome for the sinner And more graces for the good;
There is mercy with the Savior, There is healing in His blood.

For the love of God is broader Than the measure of our minds;
And the heart of the Eternal Is most wonderfully kind.

PRAYER REQUESTS

Carol Belknap – recovering from knee replacement surgery

PASTORAL PRAYER

O Holy One, we can't begin to express our gratitude for the wideness of your mercy, and the ways in which you welcome and embrace, forgive and encourage, support and love each of us. We marvel that you, who sees and knows everything about us, even the attitudes and annoyances we try to hide, the impatience and curt comments we attempt to bite off before they escape our mouths, the focus on our own wants that so often prevent us from attending to our neighbors' needs; you know all of it and all of us, and still you love us. You believe in us, call to us, encourage the potential we have not yet realized, clear away the residue and debris when we stumble and fall, and set before us each day a clean slate and a fresh start. Thank you, Beloved God, for blessing us with a love and mercy beyond our comprehension. Nurture within us the ability and willingness to walk in your way, that we might do the work of forgiveness, grow in patience, reach out with kindness, speak your truth in love, listen with compassion, grow in your love and live by your mercy.

We pray, Holy One, for those who are sick, recovering from surgery, grieving the loss of a loved one, trying to wrap their hearts and minds around choices and actions that defy our understanding. We pray for the Covid weariness that has taken hold of most of us, and ask for your healing and holding. For the ability to make wise choices, choices that honor needs, encourage health, and embrace life. For the medical personnel who continue to labor far beyond their limits, we pray for an end to the surges, and for rest and comfort. For those beginning to travel again, we pray for safety and adventure, simple pleasures and refreshing joy. Help us to be patient with each other and with ourselves, and to seek out the mercies that will heal our hearts and restore our souls.

Holy God, much about our world is brittle and brutal, and so we bring it before you, seeking your wisdom and your loving way. We pray for those for whom each day is a failed attempt to make ends meet, for parents in search of food and shelter for their families, for those whose only home is a tent, whose worldly possessions fit in a shopping cart. We pray for those enduring severe storms, picking through the rubble of yet more destroyed homes, living in the aftermath of violence and destruction. We pray especially for the people of Ukraine; that as world leaders focus their attention and military might around its borders, they not just look to the threat on the other side, but also the people and the country in the center. Help us, O God, to choose the things that make for peace; and pour out your wisdom and mercy, courage and power, strength and love on all of us, that we might back away from the threat of war, and move instead toward a world of your making and mercy.

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

PRAYER OF OUR SAVIOR (depts)

OFFERING

The amazing gift of one who fully lived out God's intention for humanity, and our life with one another, prompts us to make a grateful response. In Christ we have known a love that will not let us go. Through our offerings, we share God's love in our community and to the ends of the earth.

PRAYER OF DEDICATION (in unison)

Loving God, you bid us take stock of our actions and bind ourselves to your will. You call us to invest our lives in Christian discipleship and service. You invite us to give generously in support of persons in need. As we make these offerings, we give thanks for a faith that asks much and that yields an abundance beyond measure. In Jesus name. Amen. (Glen E. Rainsley, *Hear Our Prayer*)

HYMN No. 1 "Joyful, Joyful, We Adore Thee"

Joyful, joyful we adore Thee, God of glory, Lord of love;

Hearts unfold like flowers before Thee, Opening to the sun above.

Melt the clouds of sin and sadness, Drive the dark of doubt away;
Giver of immortal gladness, Fill us with the light of day.

Thou art giving and forgiving, Ever blessing, ever blest,
Wellspring of the joy of living, Ocean depth of happy rest!
Thou our Father, Christ, our Brother, All who live in love are Thine;
Teach us how to love each other, Lift us to the joy divine.

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.