

UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST CONGREGATIONAL
Wallace, Idaho

Alice M.C. Ling, Pastor

February 6, 2022

Fifth Sunday after Epiphany

PRELUDE “O Jesus, I Have Promised”

WELCOME AND ANNOUNCEMENTS

CALL TO WORSHIP

It is by grace that we are who we are:

people who are called by Jesus, yet fearful to follow.

It is by God's grace that we can become followers:

people who are fearful, yet gifted with courage beyond wonder.

It is with God's grace that we become who we might be:

people who step out in faith, sharing the good news generously.

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

HYMN No. 108 “Come, Christians, Join to Sing”

Come, Christians, join to sing Alleluia! Amen!

Loud praise to Christ our King; Alleluia! Amen!

Let all, with heart and voice, Before His throne rejoice;

Praise is His gracious choice: Alleluia! Amen!

Come, lift your hearts on high Alleluia! Amen!

Let praises fill the sky; Alleluia! Amen!

He is our Guide and Friend; To us He'll condescend;

His love shall never end: Alleluia! Amen!

PRAYER OF INVOCATION (in unison) (based on Psalm 138)

Faithful God, we come into Your presence with thanksgiving, deeply grateful for the unfailing love and faithfulness You have shown toward us, Your people. When we call out to You, You answer. When we are exhausted, You give us the strength to go on. When we find ourselves in trouble, You are there, standing beside us. And so we come before You with gratitude and praise, offering You the worship of our hearts and lives. Open our eyes to see and know You here among us; open our ears to recognize Your voice. And then send us out from here, to live and work in the world as Your faithful disciples. In the name of Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen.

(Christine Longhurst, *re: Worship*)

SCRIPTURE READING Luke 5:1-11

Once while Jesus was standing beside the lake of Gennesaret, and the crowd was pressing in on him to hear the word of God, he saw two boats there at the shore of the lake; the fishermen had gone out of them and were washing their nets. He got into one of the boats, the one belonging to Simon, and asked him to put out a little way from the shore. Then he sat down and taught the crowds from the boat. When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, “Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch.” Simon answered, “Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing. Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets.” When they had done this, they caught so many fish that their nets were beginning to break. So they signaled their partners in the other boat to come and help them. And they came and filled both boats, so that they began to sink. But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus’ knees, saying, “Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!” For he and all who were with him were amazed at the catch of fish that they had taken; and so also were James and John, sons of

Zebedee, who were partners with Simon. Then Jesus said to Simon, “Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people.” When they had brought their boats to shore, they left everything and followed him.

SERMON

I've never worked the night shift, and have serious doubts about whether or not I could adjust to it. I've pulled more than a few all-nighters and survived them okay, but to routinely, day in and day out, drag myself off to work once the rest of the family is home and tucked in for the night? Only to return once everyone has headed back out to work and school? I have my doubts. But that's me, not Simon. He'd probably grown up watching his father collect his lunch box and head out after supper, maybe even teased to be allowed to go along. And now, he's been doing it so long, it just is what it is. Nothing to fuss about. But still, some nights, it's hard. When there aren't any fish, and they alternate between just sitting and moving the boat around, searching for any school of fish that are hiding in the neighborhood, yet the nets float free and empty, stubbornly refusing to fill. Those nights are endless, especially when they stack up on top of each other, when bills are coming due, when the kids are sick, and the pantry's getting bare. By the time morning rolls around, they can feel pretty beaten down, cloaked in weariness and dripping with discouragement. It's frustrating cleaning the nets when they haven't done anything all night but float, but still, they have to pick out the sea weed and random scraps from the lake bottom, so that things will be clean and stacked and ready to go again when night returns. They can always hope the next night will be more fruitful, but some days even that hope is out of reach.

Simon had washed those nets so many times that he could do it with half a mind, and let the other half wander as it chose. This morning, while he was at work, he was also watching the crowd circle in around Jesus even as he strained to hear what the man was saying. He thought back on the time Jesus had been to his home, and healed his mother-in-law; he was interested in what the man had to say, but it was hard to hear over the crowd. The next thing he knew, Jesus stepped over, climbed into his boat, and called to Simon to push the boat off shore a little bit, so he was in a better position for people to hear his teaching. I'll let you guess as to whether Simon felt more compelled to finish up his work so he could put the night behind him and go home to sleep, or drawn to Jesus, but it sounds like he did what the man asked of him. Later, when the teaching was done, and Jesus looked at Simon again and instructed him to turn the boat back out into the deep part of the lake, to drop the net again into the water, Simon protested just a little. Master, we have worked all night long and have absolutely nothing to show for our labor. Trust me, there are no fish here. Nothing good is going to happen here today. And let's not forget who the fisherman is. I know these waters, and I'm telling you, there's no point. Jesus didn't say a word in reply; just looked at Simon until the message was clear. And Simon said, okay, if you say so, I will let down the nets. From there, it was only a matter of minutes before the nets began to bulge and strain to hold all the fish. Simon signaled James and John to bring their boat alongside, and before long, both boats were straining to control the nets while they struggled to stay afloat. Overcome by the holy abundance, the surplus of nourishment in what moments before had been barren water, Simon fell at Jesus' knees and tried to send him away, convinced he wasn't worthy of such gracious abundance. Jesus said not to fear; all these fish were a sign of Simon's new vocation, his and all the disciples. At which point, they left their boats, nets and record-breaking catch of fish on the shore and just walked away from all of it in order to head out to catch people and follow Jesus.

There's a lot that I really like about this story. One of the first pieces comes in the opening line, when we're told that Jesus was busily teaching his listeners the word of God. The interesting part for me is that Luke doesn't tell us a thing about what Jesus said, because in this story, it isn't Jesus' words that make the difference, but his actions. Luke wants us to know about the way Jesus just showed up in the midst of Simon's everyday life, took hold of the tools of his trade, and transformed all of it with miracle and blessing, abundance and call. Whether we're out fishing or busy making supper, hitting the ski

slopes or in our workshop making new jewelry, standing in line at the grocery store or heading out to the driveway to clear away snow, talking on the phone with a family member or sorting through the clutter of a lifetime, Jesus just may show up and point out something we've never seen before. God uses the stuff of our everyday lives to catch our attention and toss us a new challenge. We may think we're just humming along, doing what we always do, when suddenly we see something that prompts us to wonder: what in my life would need to change in order for me to be the new person that God is calling me to be?

This all sounds well and good, but how do we know when God is beckoning us toward a new future, a new call? I don't know about you, but I've never had a messenger show up and dump a ton of shimmering, wiggling fish on my desk or dining room table. Like Simon, James and John, I think we have a part to play in all of this, most of which starts with paying attention, living with a certain amount of wonder and curiosity, and being open to hearing the unexpected. The disciples, weary and discouraged as they were, agreed to put their boats back into the water when Jesus asked them to do that. Like them, we need to be open to the voice of the stranger, the wandering Wise One in our midst. God may speak in the voice of an actual stranger we'd just as soon turn away as listen to, or through the words of a friend who provokes us with a word we didn't expect or want to hear. Maybe God comes in an inner voice we've tried and failed to silence, but that keeps tugging at us, suggesting a change, a risk, some adjustment to the way we've always done things. As one writer says, "We have to practice paying attention to the strange and surprising, because strange and surprising messages really do come to us, virtually every day, and they may bear an unlikely holy word for us in answer to our weary questions. Just when we are most prone to wonder, 'Is this all there is?' or 'What do I do now to get out of this rut?' Jesus comes along and drops something sloppy and squirmy into the midst of our too-small lives. The surprising catch becomes nourishment, if we let it." (Pamela Cooper-White, *Feasting on the Gospels, Luke, Vol. 1*, pages 124, 126)

The miracle of abundance in this story is totally an unexpected gift from God, the God who showed up in the every day, ordinary lives and work of Simon, James and John. Their task was to pay attention to that presence and to respond as they were called. Jesus asked them first to go out into the deep part of the lake, and to participate in something they knew painfully well was pointless. And then, once the overwhelming catch of fish was filling their boats to overflowing, he invited them to use the skills and abilities they already had, to work with him as partners in God's work in this world.

That call is more than a little disconcerting for me; I've never really liked being in deep water - literally or figuratively. I like being able to touch bottom, to maintain some sense of balance and control, to stay in my comfort zone and play by rules that are familiar, and preferably put in place by me. And honestly, leaving home for the adventure of serving God doesn't quite have the appeal it once did. And yet, God calls us as much as Jesus called Simon. What are we supposed to do with that?

I liked the report I heard from a woman who was fortunate several years ago to hear Mother Teresa speak. If ever there was a poster child for what it looks like to walk away from everything to serve God through the poor, it was Mother Teresa, and yet this woman reported Mother Teresa's words, and her calm, non-judgmental voice, as she observed that Americans are always saying they want to leave their lives here and go to India to work with her. Her response: "Stay here, right where you are, and love the people God has given you to love. Care for people right where you are." (Kathryn Matthews, Sermon Seeds) That may or may not prove to be easier or less risky than leaving home to follow Jesus, but it may very well be every bit as faithful.

God calls us much as Jesus called Simon, to use the skills and abilities we already have to draw other people into the fullness of Jesus' abundant harvest and the sweeping embrace of God's love. That may mean leaving home and going where we've never been before, or it may mean staying where we are

and loving more openly, speaking our truth more boldly, offering forgiveness in places of brokenness and shelter to those cast out into the cold. It may mean using our words, but more than likely, responding to God's call means acting and reaching through our lives, joining with others through the skills and abilities we have to share. Or as Madeleine L'Engle put it, "We do not draw people to Christ by loudly discrediting what they believe, by telling them how wrong they are and how right we are, but by showing them a light that is so lovely that they want with all their hearts to know the source of it."

God still comes among us, much as Jesus joined Simon on the beach, in the midst of the every day ups and downs of tending to business and applying our skills. Our work is to stay open and attentive, responsive and faithful, even when we're asked to go out into deeper water. The miracle of transformation and abundance is God's to give, ours to gratefully receive and pass along to others. Amen.

HYMN No. 375 *"Jesus Calls Us"*

Jesus calls us: o'er the tumult Of our life's wild, restless sea,
Day by day His sweet voice soundeth, Saying, "Christian, follow Me."

Jesus calls us from the worship Of the vain world's golden store,
From each idol that would keep us, Saying, "Christian, love me more."

In our joys and in our sorrows, Days of toil and hours of ease,
Still He calls in cares and pleasures, "Christian, love Me more than these."

PRAYER REQUESTS

Continued prayers for Geri, Gordon, Dalton and Joshua Bair as they grieve Leah's suicide death Mark and Rita Mus, friends of Christi's, and their two grown sons; Mark has been diagnosed with glioblastoma, likely to have 2 – 8 weeks left

PASTORAL PRAYER

We marvel, Holy God, that you come among us in the midst of the ordinary, every day activities of our lives. Whether we are fishing or cooking, cleaning or reading, teaching or learning, skiing or resting, caring for loved ones or repairing a broken toy, you join us in what we're doing, offer the grace and abundance of your transforming touch, and invite us to join you in tending the needs and hungers of our neighbors. Open our eyes to your presence and our hearts to your call. Give us the grace and courage, the trust and faith to follow where you lead, to place the tools and resources of our lives in your hands, that together with you, we might harvest an abundance of blessing for those around us.

We pray, Loving God, for your world, for those we know and love and whose needs weigh heavy on our hearts: for the sick and struggling, those recovering from injury and surgery, undergoing treatment as well as those facing into a devastating diagnosis; for the grieving and especially those trying to make sense of a choice that makes no sense; for those battling addiction, estranged from loved ones, staring into the darkness of their own despair. Touch them with your healing and wrap them in your mercy, that each and all might know your faithful presence and redeeming love.

We pray as well for those whose faces we see on the news and whose cries rise up out of the headlines: for Covid patients filling hospitals to overflowing, gasping to catch a breath, fighting for a chance to live, and for the medical personnel who labor endlessly in an attempt to bring healing and hope; for athletes from around the world gathering now on the ice and slopes of the Olympics, competing as individuals and teams, doing their part to restore the unity of our one world; for mounting tensions on the Ukraine-Russia border, those waiting for power to be restored after ice storms, digging through the rubble and ash of tornadoes, mudslides and fires, for those who approach the end of their rope and hover on the brink of giving up. Show us, O God, the things that make for peace, and the ways we can

live and work, touch and serve in your name. Fill us with your wisdom, ground us in your truth and lead us with your love.

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

PRAYER OF OUR SAVIOR (debts)

OFFERING

Whether it's the nets and tools we use in our every day lives or the resources that live in our wallets and bank accounts, the ways we use our time or the look on our faces when we see a stranger in need, God assures us that no gift is too small to make a difference, no smile wasted when offered in love, no kindness beneath the reach of God's transforming touch. Let us give freely and generously to the work of Christ's church and the wellness of God's world.

PRAYER OF DEDICATION (in unison)

Holy God, we bring to you the ordinary things of life – food and drink and money – and with them we bring ourselves. Take us, and our gifts of money, to do your work in the world. Take this food and drink from our tables and feed us from your table with your love. Accept the praise we offer; through Jesus Christ our Savior. Amen.

THE SACRAMENT OF HOLY COMMUNION

Words of Invitation

This is the table, not of the Church, but of the Lord. It is to be made ready for those who love him and who want to love him more. So, come, you who have much faith and you who have little, you who have been here often and you who have not been for a long time, you who have tried to follow and you who have failed. Come, not because I who invite you. It is our Lord. It is Christ's will that those who want him should meet him here.

Communion Prayer

Gratitude, praise, hearts lifted high, voices full and joyful... these you deserve.

For when we were nothing, you made us something. When we had no name and no faith and no future, you called us your children. When we lost our way or turned away, you did not abandon us. When we came back to you, your arms opened wide in welcome.

And look, you prepare a table for us, offering not just bread, not just the cup, but your very self so that we may be filled, forgiven, healed, blessed and made new again. You are worth all our pain and all our praise.

So now, in gratitude, we join our voices to those of the Church on earth and in heaven:

Holy, holy, holy God of love and majesty, the whole universe speaks of your glory, O God Most High. Blessed is the one who comes in the name of our God! Hosanna in the highest!

Holy God, as we come to share the richness of your table, we cannot forget the rawness of the earth. We cannot take bread and forget those who are hungry. Your world is one world and we are stewards of its nourishment.

God, put our prosperity at the service of the poor.

We cannot take the cup and forget those who are thirsty. The ground and the rootless, the earth and its weary people cry out for justice.

God, put our fullness at the service of the empty.

We cannot hear your words of peace and forget the world at war or, if not at war, then preparing for it.

Show us quickly, God, how to turn weapons into welcome signs and the lust for power into a desire for peace.

We cannot celebrate the feast of your family and forget our divisions. We are one in spirit, but not in fact. History and hurt still dismember us.

God, heal your Church in every brokenness.

For us you were born, for us you healed, preached, taught and showed us the way to heaven, for us you were crucified, and for us, after death, you rose again.

Lord Jesus Christ, present with us now, for all that you have done and all that you have promised, what have we to offer?

Our hands are empty, our hearts are sometimes full of wrong things. We are not fit to gather up the crumbs from under your table.

But with you is mercy and the power to change us.

So as we do in this place what you did in an upstairs room, send down your Holy Spirit on us and on these gifts of bread and cup, that they may become for us your body, healing, forgiving and make us whole; and that we may become for you, your body, loving and caring in the world until your kingdom comes. Amen.

(Taking and breaking the bread) Among friends, gathered around a table, Jesus took bread, broke it and said, "This is my body, it is broken for you."

(Taking and pouring the cup) And later he took the cup of wine and said, "This is the new relationship with God, made possible because of my death. Take this – all of you – to remember me."

Look, here is your Lord coming to you in bread and cup.
These are the gifts of God for the people of God.

Sharing the Bread and Cup

Take and eat. The body of Christ broken for you.

Take and drink. The cup of salvation poured out for you.

Prayer of Thanksgiving (in unison)

Lord, Jesus Christ, you have put your life into our hands; now we put our lives into yours. Take us, renew and remake us. What we have been is past; what we shall be, through you, still awaits us. Lead us on. Take us with you. Amen.

(A Wee Worship Book, Fourth Incarnation, Wild Goose Worship Group)

HYMN No. 76 "O for a Thousand Tongues to Sing"

O for a thousand tongues to sing My great Redeemer's praise,
The glories of my God and King, The triumphs of His grace.

Jesus! the name that charms our fears, That bids our sorrows cease,
'Tis music in the sinners ears, 'Tis life and health and peace.

My gracious Master and my God, Assist me to proclaim,
To spread through all the earth abroad, The honors of Thy name.

BENEDICTION

Life is short. And we do not have much time to gladden the hearts of those who travel the way with us. So: be swift to love, and make haste to be kind. And may the blessing of God the Source, Jesus the Reconciler, and the Spirit who animates life be among us all. Amen.