

UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST CONGREGATIONAL
Wallace, Idaho

Alice M.C. Ling, Pastor

March 27, 2022

Fourth Sunday in Lent

PRELUDE “Joyful, Joyful, We Adore Thee”

WELCOME AND ANNOUNCEMENTS

CALL TO WORSHIP

Come, let us celebrate the forgiving, reconciling love of God.

For once we were lost and felt so far away; now we have been found and welcomed home.

Know that God’s love is lavished upon you forever.

We rejoice at the news of forgiveness and hope!

Come, let us celebrate and praise the God of Love.

(Nancy Townley, <http://www.ministrymatters.com/all/entry/3623/worship-connection-march-6-2016>)

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.

CALL TO RECONCILIATION

We know our faults -- the way we have treated others, our alienation from God, our unwillingness to be faithful people. We will not hide our sin or remain silent, but confess them to the One who surrounds us with steadfast love. Please join me as we pray, saying,

PRAYER OF CONFESSION (in unison)

On this very day, Waiting God, we admit all the lengths to which we go so we might avoid you. You offer us that kingdom of joy and wonder, yet we would hide in places where temptation waits. You invite us to feast on your grace and peace, but we stubbornly refuse, because you also welcome those we call 'outsiders.' We are quick to see all the mistakes that those around us make, but hope you will ignore our foolish choices. Celebrating God, before we come to our senses, we find you running towards us, sweeping us up in your arms, tears of grace mingling with our cries of confession, a mighty river washing away our sinful ways to restore us to new life. In Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior, we find no limitations on your grace, no reservations about your love, but a feast that overflows with wonder, a place we can finally call home. (Silence)

ASSURANCE OF PARDON

God rolls away everything that stands in our way - our past, our sin, our pain, our hesitation, and reshapes us into new people living in the new creation. What wonderful grace. We are forgiven!

Broken, we are made whole; lost, we are brought home; empty, we are filled with songs of gladness. We rejoice and give thanks to God who has graced us with mercy. Amen.

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

SCRIPTURE READING

2 Corinthians 5:16-21

From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way. So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.”

So he told them this parable: ...“There was a man who had two sons. The younger of them said to his father, ‘Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.’ So he divided his property between them. A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. But when he came to himself he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.”’ So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. Then the son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ But the father said to his slaves, ‘Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!’ And they began to celebrate.

“Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. He replied, ‘Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.’ Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. But he answered his father, ‘Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!’ Then the father said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.’”

SERMON

I wonder what the early years were like. Did they ever play well together? Share toys? Cooperate and scheme to surprise Dad and make Mom smile? Did big brother show the runt the ropes? Pass along the skills Dad had taught him, or how to find an escape hatch when chores got too hard? Did they work well together, or was the first born always the responsible type while the only skill the kid had was to disappear before assignments were handed out? Was the younger one always gasoline to his brother's fire, or did the tension build over time? Maybe the youngest got mixed up with the wrong crowd,

experimented a few too many times, wandered so far off course that he got lost in the forest and simply couldn't bushwhack his way back. Maybe the oldest was always a self-righteous pain in the neck, and his kid brother was astute and determined enough to know that there was no way he was going to spend his life living in that shadow or working under big brother's thumb, so when the final straw landed on the pile, he bolted, hit the road and never looked back. I wonder what family dinners and holiday gatherings were like – before as well as after. Once he was gone, did they leave a light on and look longingly at his empty chair, or repurpose his room and breathe a sigh of relief because the tension was gone and they could finally eat in peace. Eventually even begin to laugh together again.

If their family was anything like most of our families, there was more going on than meets the eye. Whether it came out of nowhere or was the predictable next step in the family drama, we have no idea; but from the outside looking in, it was a scandalous fracture that would have left heads spinning and hearts shattered. One day, the youngest went to his father and said, I'm done waiting around here for you to die; give me what I'll have coming to me when that day arrives and I'll be gone. As far as we're told, the father quietly acquiesced; he divided the property among his sons so that the oldest got his two-thirds, the youngest one third. It took a couple of days for the kid to liquidate the assets and collect his belongings, but once he had, he was gone, disappearing in a cloud of dust and heading to a distant country. I don't know how long it lasted, but not long enough; he squandered his money in dissolute living, whatever that means. Undisciplined, decadent, and self-indulgent were a few of the synonyms I found; I'll let your imagination fill in the blanks. About the time his pockets were empty, a severe famine emptied the cupboards and store shelves throughout the country. Since desperate times call for desperate measures, he took the only job he could find, which was working in the fields to feed the pigs. I've looked in enough pig pens to know that that's disgusting work; add to that the fact that where this guy came from, pigs were so vile as to be prohibited. About the time the famine became so severe and his stomach so empty that even the pods the pigs were chomping on looked appetizing, he decided it was time to head for home. So covered in pig slop and almost certainly hounded by flies, he got back on the road, rehearsing his schpeel every step of the way. "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands."

Do you think he meant it? Had he hit rock bottom, come to his senses, turned from his wasteful ways so that now he was willing to head home, admit his mistake and beg for a chance to start over again? Had he had an ah-ha moment that helped him see what an ungrateful, obnoxious punk he'd been, so that now he was ready to apologize? Or was he still conniving and scheming? It wouldn't have taken him long to realize what a sucker dad was, and head home to work one more con job. I know we tend to want to read this as a profound moment of repentance, and maybe it was; but it also might have been a demonstration of just what a masterful manipulator he was, and it seems conceivable to me that his return trip could have been more stomach driven than heart-felt. But maybe I'm getting cynical in my old age. I'll let you decide.

I don't know about your house, but I think in ours, once we saw him appear on the horizon, we would have had a conversation about what kind of welcome we were going to extend. We want to be loving, and we are, but we don't want to enable bad habits, so what's the right posture. What does love look like in this situation? Since we don't reach these conclusions easily or quickly, we might even have kept him standing in the yard for a bit while we consulted. But that's us; not the father in this story. For him, the moment he saw a form begin to take shape on the horizon, he bolted out the door, raced down the road until he could throw himself on his long lost son, hugging and kissing him in the ecstasy of his return. The son offered the first half of his planned speech: Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son. But that's as far as he got. Was it because his father was so busy smothering him with welcome that the words got lost, or because he decided to hold back the offer to serve as a slave in the hope that he might not have to stoop that far?

Some of the things I read about this text this week prompted me to look up the word “prodigal”, and what I found included words like wastefully extravagant, spending money or resources freely and recklessly, having or giving something on a lavish scale, a person who spends money in a recklessly extravagant way. I guess I understand why tradition has assigned that title to the son, but why not also to the father? We see no evidence that he ever stopped to calculate what this son had already cost him. Instead, he ecstatically threw himself on his son, and then ordered his slaves to produce the best robe, a ring for his finger and sandals for his feet, all of which welcomed the lost one back into the family fold like he’d never been gone, all without a moment's hesitation. His excitement was too great to be limited to a family welcome home dinner, so he ordered that the 4-H heifer be killed and served up for all in the community to come and celebrate.

The party was going full blast when the elder brother came in from the field. As he approached the house, he began to hear the music and dancing of a crowd, so he asked one of the help what was going on. He was told that his long-lost brother had returned, and his father had thrown open the gates, killed the fatted calf and invited all the neighbors to come and celebrate because he'd gotten him back safe and sound. And without so much as sending one person out to the field to let him know about this development. To say that that triggered the older son's anger would be an understatement. When he didn't scurry in to join the party, his father came to him and pleaded that he come in and join the festivities, to which the son protested how unfair his father's actions were. All these years, I've worked like a slave for you; I have never disobeyed your command, yet you have never even once offered me so much as a young goat so my friends and I could celebrate; but this trouble-making scoundrel of a son of yours comes back after devouring your property with prostitutes and what do you do? You give him a hero's welcome, which by the way you paid for out of what was supposed to be my inheritance. To which the father said, Son, you are always with me; what's mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because your brother was dead and has come to life, was lost and has been found.

Do you think the older brother went in to the party? Would you? Would any of us have grabbed a quick shower and headed in? Would we stand on the doorstep with the older brother and share in his protest that none of this is fair to us, the responsible, faithful, hard working ones, especially when there's little reason to dream that the long-lost scoundrel has changed one iota. What do you think the chances are that he'll get up in the morning to help with the chores? How likely we would be to say, this is good for our brother and for the family, see how happy Mom looks, let's go break the ice, welcome him home and share in the celebration?

When we find ourselves down and out, and are clawing our way back from some unthinkable mistakes, the extravagant grace of the father's welcome is breathtaking and transformative. But if we're the responsible, hard-working ones who can always be counted on to show up, this story can be more of a challenge. Then we find ourselves standing on the doorstep with the older brother, sharing in his protest that none of this is fair. We may even get to stand with the scribes who grumbled and complained about the company Jesus kept, how he dirtied himself with the lowlifes, when he should have stuck with the proper and good. If that's where we find ourselves, eventually we'll have to decide whether to join the party or stay out in the cold, keeping company with our principles and grievances.

Lutheran pastor David Lose has said that, “God doesn't really care in the end. Oh, of course God hopes we repent and learn and love each other better over time. But whether we do or not isn't, finally, the issue. The issue is that God loves us so much God doesn't wait for our confessions to forgive us. God doesn't wait for us to come to our senses to love us. God doesn't wait for sincerity to redeem us. God just comes after us, running toward us pell-mell like that desperate, crazy-in-love, just-glad-we're-home father.

“Why? Because in the end this story isn’t nearly as much about a reckless, even wasteful and extravagant son as it is about a reckless, and even wasteful and extravagant God who has so much forgiveness to grant that God dishes it out with abandon, so much grace to offer that God pours it upon us whether we deserve it or not, so much love to share that God simply can’t hold back but lavishes it upon us so recklessly that it’s just plain hard to believe. Until, that is, Jesus goes all the way to Jerusalem and the cross to show us just how serious God is about loving us, accepting, and forgiving us just as we are. Perhaps Luke tells a deliberately ambiguous story so as to be unambiguously clear about God’s determination to go after and win back all of God’s children, whether they’re truly repentant or not, whether they’re deserving or not, whether they even want to be saved or not...

“... we worship a prodigal God who loves us so recklessly, extravagantly, even wastefully that God will simply not give up on us, not let go of us, not turn away from us... ever. (David Lose, In the Meantime) Thanks be to God. Amen.

HYMN No. 177 “*What Wondrous Love Is This*”
What wondrous love is this, O my soul, O my soul!
What wondrous love is this, O my soul!
What wondrous love is this That caused the Lord of bliss
To bear the dreadful curse for my soul, for my soul,
To bear the dreadful curse for my soul.

To God and to the Lamb I will sing, I will sing,
To God and to the Lamb I will sing.
To God and to the Lamb Who is the great “I Am,”
While millions join the theme, I will sing, I will sing,
While millions join the theme, I will sing.

PRAYER REQUESTS

Christi asks prayers for the family of Janelle Flores, 46, who died recently; she attended our nursery and Sunday School; Gail Carlson's niece, June Gilseth granddaughter.
Prayers for recovery for Christi’s friend Kathy's grandson Colt who had the horse fall on him.
Continued prayers for Gordon Bair, and sons and Geri Bair - Leah's memorial service in Auburn. WA March 31st. Continued healing of the loss and grief.
Dallas’ daughter Janine, having surgery on April 13

PASTORAL PRAYER

Holy God, thank you for the countless ways you bless and nourish us, with the return of warmer days and shorter nights, signs of new life and fresh growth that are beginning to emerge around us, for the gift and grace of love, for friends with whom we can laugh and learn, listen and share, and for the support and strength we find in community. We pray for our families, for all that is encouraging and nurturing in our life together, for the safety of a place to try and learn new things, the quiet of a place to be still and rest, the shelter of people who know us for who we really are and who love us without limit or question. We pray as well as for the wounds and wants, anger and pain that too many carry with them as they come away from home. Help us to grow in understanding and patience, to speak with love in ways that build up rather than cut down, to listen with openness and touch with gentleness within our families and beyond. You call us to a ministry of reconciliation, and so we come to you to listen and learn what that means and how that looks. Much about our families and communities, country and world is broken, polarized and divided, as people hurl accusations and lift up obstacles, deepen the divides that separate us more than we seek to build bridges of cooperation and understanding. Turn our eyes and our hearts to Jesus’ example of humble service, unfailing love, healing touch, welcoming embrace, gentle strength and courageous compassion.

We pray for all those who are sick, recovering from accidents, facing into surgery, struggling with diseases of the body, mind and spirit. We pray for those who grieve the loss of a loved one, those who battle addictions, for caregivers who grow weary, and for all who search for a sign of hope to guide them into a new day.

We pray especially for the war that continues to rage in Ukraine, for the millions who have been displaced and who continue to search for safety and shelter; for the hungry, cold, people without medicines, families separated from each other. We pray for those who fight on both sides of the conflict, for leaders in need of wisdom and protesters who seek the courage needed to say no. We give you thanks for all those who provide meals, who open their homes to strangers, who cradle orphans and care for the wounded. Lead us, O God, along the paths that make for peace. Show us how we can be about the work of sharing your love, protecting life and promoting understanding and nurturing hope.

Hear our prayers, 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

One Great Hour of Sharing funds given by individuals and congregations are sent across this country and around the world to assist with the hard work of recovery after disaster strikes, and to encourage development so that people and communities are more able to feed and care for themselves and those they love. In 2021, grants were given to assist with clean up from winter storms in Kentucky and Texas, multiple congregations as they work to settle Afghan families, recovery from Hurricanes Dorian, Harvey and Ida, flooding from Tropical Storm Isaias, assistance for food pantries and soup kitchens, support for fire evacuees in Montana, the earthquake in Haiti, response to hunger and violence in Sudan, assistance with Covid surges (especially in those parts of the world where vaccines have been unavailable), drought response in Kenya, aid to refugees in Liberia. To name just a few of the places and ways that our gifts are put to work. In addition to where the money goes and what it's told to do, it's also important to know that 100% of your gifts will be put to work improving others' lives. The United Church of Christ uses other funds to pay for the overhead costs of administering this money, so that all of our gifts can be put to work on behalf of others, maximizing the response we're able to offer for recovery and development. Any gift that you feel led to share will be gratefully received and faithfully put to work. Make checks payable to our congregation, and mark them for One Great Hour of Sharing (OGHS).

PRAYER OF DEDICATION (in unison)

We offer our gifts, O God, in the spirit of love. May the gifts that we offer embody our loving response to your great love for us. Through our gifts, may others feel the love of Christ. In Jesus' name. Amen (UCC One Great Hour of Sharing resources)

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.

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.