

UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST CONGREGATIONAL
Wallace, Idaho

Alice M.C. Ling, Pastor

May 15, 2022

Fifth Sunday of Easter

PRELUDE “*Blest Be the Tie that Binds*”

WELCOME AND ANNOUNCEMENTS

CALL TO WORSHIP

Come with what you have. For you who grieve this day know that you are invited to bring the broken pieces of your heart.

Loved by one another, we discover God's love for us.

Come with what you have. For you who come with gladness know that your melody will find harmony.

Accepting God's love for us, we are called to love one another.

Come with what you have. For you weighed down by too many 'shoulds' and 'what-ifs' know that here you may lay down the burdens of guilt and shame.

Loved by one another, we discover God's love for us.

Come with what you have. For you who have the answers, know that new questions await you.

Accepting God's love for us, we are called to love one another.

Come with what you have. For you who come seeking, know that your questions are safe in the presence of God.

Loved by one another, we discover God's love for us. (Katherine Hawker, <http://liturgyoutside.net/>)

HYMN “*Gather Us In*”

Here in this place, the new light is streaming, shadows of doubt are vanished away.

See in this space our fears and our dreamings, brought here to you in the light of this day.

Gather us in, the lost and forsaken; gather us in; our spirits inflame.

Call to us now, and we shall awaken; we shall arise at the sound of our name.

Not just in buildings, small and confining, not in some heaven, light years away,

here in this place the new light is shining; now is God present, and now is the day.

Gather us in and hold us forever; gather us in and make us your own;

gather us in, all peoples together, fire of love in our flesh and our bone.

PRAYER OF INVOCATION (in unison)

Gracious God, gentle in your power and strong in your tenderness, you have brought us forth from the womb of your being and breathed into us the breath of life. We know that we do not live by bread alone but by every word that comes from you. Feed our deep hungers with the living bread that you give us in Jesus Christ. May Jesus' promise, “Where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them,” be fulfilled in us. Make us a joyful company of your people so that with the faithful in every place and time we may praise and honor you, God Most High. Amen.

(New Century Hymnal)

SCRIPTURE READING

Revelation 21:1-6

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying,

“See, the home of God is among mortals.

He will dwell with them;

they will be his peoples,
and God himself will be with them and be their God;
he will wipe every tear from their eyes.
Death will be no more;
mourning and crying and pain will be no more,
for the first things have passed away.”

And the one who was seated on the throne said, “See, I am making all things new.” Also he said, “Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true.” Then he said to me, “It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life.

John 13:31-35

When he had gone out, Jesus said, “Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him. If God has been glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself and will glorify him at once. Little children, I am with you only a little longer. You will look for me, and as I said to the Jews so now I say to you, ‘Where I am going, you cannot come.’ I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”

SERMON

Their heads were spinning. Not that things had been even remotely normal or ordinary lately, but this night had ratcheted it up a few more notches. They thought they had gathered to observe the Passover, and I guess they had, but never before had they taken part in a Passover festival where their Teacher and Lord had taken off his robe, wrapped a towel around his waist, gone down on his knees and proceeded to wash their feet. That was servant’s work! What was Jesus doing down there? And yet he insisted, saying they should follow his lead and wash each other’s feet. Unsettling would be a good word for it all, and disorienting. The next thing they knew, he was telling them that one of them, one of the twelve would betray him. Their jaws dropped; they looked around the circle and they looked at each other. Finally Peter nudged the Beloved Disciples to ask the question none of the rest of them dared ask: Lord, who is it? While the disciples didn’t understand the interchanges that followed between Jesus and Judas, they did understand that Judas stormed out of the room and into the night, leaving the rest of them behind, trying to figure out what had just happened.

The notion of betrayal, and at the hands of one of their own, was more than they could even begin to wrap their heads around. Little did they know that it would only be a matter of minutes before Jesus moved on and began to talk about denial by one of the others. And yet here they sat, swirling in a whirlwind of confusion and dismay. Looking at the door Judas had just slammed on his relationship with Jesus and on this circle of friends; they could hear the tenderness in Jesus’ voice as he spoke to them, but they couldn’t, wouldn’t hear him saying he’d only be with them a little longer. Be that as it may, whether they could receive his words or not, Jesus knew he didn’t have much time left with them, and so he pressed on and gave them the best and most important thing he had left to give: a new commandment, saying just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.

Interesting that into that room full of troubled hearts, Jesus would offer, not a detailed transition plan or an organizational chart of who should report to whom, not a list of essential beliefs or doctrinal do’s and don’t’s, not a litmus test for who’s allowed in and who needs to be kept out or a set of spiritual exercises to help his followers stay in ship shape, but the simple instruction to love one another. It is love that will sustain them when he’s gone. The love they share with each other will enable them to feel the love of Jesus and God active among them, even when Jesus is absent. It is by the look and feel, vitality and genuineness of their love that others will know they are his disciples.

As I worked with this text this week, and lived with all of the knowns and unknowns of what I had done by mailing a letter with a retirement date in it, I found myself drawn back, over and over again, to Jesus' lead of looking around a room of troubled hearts and talking about love. It seems far better than anything else I have up my sleeve. There will be plenty of time for the other thoughts and images I've been pondering as I approached this moment. But for today, and as a starting point, here we are, looking once again at Jesus' instruction that we are to love one another as he has loved us. And with the reminder that others will know we are his disciples, if we have love for one another.

I called them simple instructions a couple of minutes ago, but you know as well as I do that the commandment to love is far from simple. One modern New Testament scholar has observed, "(This) new command is simple enough for a toddler to memorize and appreciate, and it is profound enough that the most mature believers are repeatedly embarrassed at how poorly they comprehend it and put it into practice." (D.A. Carson, quoted in *Feasting on the Word, Year C, Vol. 2*, page 470)

Love one another; just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. What does that mean? What does love look like? Where does it lead us? There's no one answer to those questions, so instead I'll tell a story, one I'm sure I've told before, but not for a long time, so here it is: There was an old monastery that had once been large and thriving, and drew people in for worship and prayer; but that was a very long time ago. Somewhere along the way, they'd fallen on hard times, and their numbers fell off. The buildings were old and minimally maintained. It had been years since they'd welcomed any new brothers, and many of the ones they'd had had long since died. In truth there were only a handful left, and they were all over 80. The monastery didn't appear to have much of any future, but they kept asking questions and exploring new options.

There was a Jewish community nearby, and sometimes their rabbi went to a hermitage in the woods to pray and meditate. The old monks had developed a kind of sixth sense about when the rabbi was nearby, so one day, when the abbot thought he was there, he went to the hermitage and knocked on the door. When the rabbi answered the door, the abbot introduced himself and explained the reason he had come. His monastery was struggling and they couldn't see where their future might lie, or if they even had one. Did the rabbi have any insight or wisdom he could offer? The rabbi shook his head and said, boy, I know how that is; the spirit has gone out of the people; they just don't seem to care any more, they rarely come to services. I don't know what to tell you. The two men talked together for a long time. They prayed together, and broke bread. When it came time for the abbot to leave, he asked again, so you don't have anything you can suggest, any advice I can take back to my men? The rabbi sadly shook his head, and then slowly said, well, there is one thing I can say. The Messiah is among you. Then the two men embraced, saying it's been good to finally meet, we must do this again; and then they said farewell.

When he got back to the monastery, the old brothers gathered around the abbot and asked him what the rabbi had said. He shook his head sadly and said, nothing. Except for one thing, as I was leaving, that was actually pretty cryptic. He said that the Messiah is one of us. Each of the brothers looked around and looked at the abbot and said, us? The Messiah is one of us? And then they began to ponder which one of them it might be. Probably the abbot. He is very wise. He's been our leader for generations; he's strong and good and faithful; if the Messiah is one of us, it's probably the abbot. Or it could be Brother Philip. Everyone knows that he's a man of light and truth. But not Brother Eldred. He's crotchety and cantankerous. But then again, he's often right about what he thinks. Often very right. So maybe it could be Brother Eldred. But not Brother Thomas. He's a real nobody, has nothing to offer, never speaks up or gets anything done. But you know, come to think of it, he has an uncanny way of showing up just when you need somebody. Maybe it is Brother Thomas. But it couldn't be me. There's no way I could be the Messiah. I couldn't be that much for you, God; could I? But suppose I am... And so on the off chance that each of the other brothers might be the Messiah, they started to treat each other with

extraordinary respect. And on the off, off chance that each brother himself might be the Messiah, he started to treat himself with extraordinary respect.

Because the monastery was located in some beautiful woods, people occasionally still came for walks and to enjoy the trees. Gradually they began to notice the aura of extraordinary respect that began to radiate between the brothers. And so people came more often. And sometimes they brought picnic lunches and stayed for prayer. And eventually some younger men began to talk to the brothers, and ask about life in the monastery, and to study and explore the idea of joining the community. And eventually, the monastery was once again a thriving center of faith and light in the region – all because of the Rabbi's gift.

Jesus said, I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another. That love might mean treating the people around us with extraordinary respect; looking beyond their crankiness and around their nothingness to the gifts they do bring. It might mean weeping with those who weep, laughing with those who laugh, receiving a stranger, feeding the hungry, welcoming the child, forgiving the sinner, being patient with those who need extra time, washing each other's feet, holding each other close, telling each other the truth, guiding each other home. God is present among us as we love. In the midst of troubled hearts and uncertain days, as we walk – together – in love, we'll walk with God, and find our way into the new day that awaits. Amen.

HYMN No. 281 *“The Bond of Love”*

We are one in the bond of love; We are one in the bond of love.

We have joined our spirit with the Spirit of God; We are one in the bond of love.

Let us sing now, everyone; Let us feel God's love begun.

Let us join our hands that the world will know We are one in the bond of love.

PRAYER REQUESTS

- Alice and Geoff's son Nathan, hospitalized in Japan: narrowing the possible diagnoses, being treated through a medically induced coma; friends provide daily updates; visa applications should be reviewed Monday, tentatively planning to travel week after
- Million Covid deaths in the US
- Tensions between Israel and Palestine, particularly in relation to reporter's death
- War in Ukraine

PASTORAL PRAYER

How wondrous is your great forgiving love, mighty God! How wondrous is your life-giving power! With joy we revel in the glow of the sun this day, and we wonder at the life everlasting that you have opened for us in raising Jesus from the dead.

As people born of his Spirit, we are awakened to a world that is caught still in the night-shades of sin, and broken by its suffering.

And here, in the midst of all death, we long to bring life; we would see Jesus, and we would lift him up as a beacon of your love and promise to our world.

Hear our prayers for those who are suffering this day— the hungry and homeless, the sick and imprisoned, the angry, the lonely and lost. We pray that you would not let our concern pass from our hearts as these words pass from our lips, but rather that you would empower us to do your work of healing and reconciliation in their lives.

We especially lift to you this day all those who are close to our hearts, whose needs we are so often reminded of, and for ourselves in our own needs.

As you made a fearful and disjointed band of disciples into your holy church, we pray that you would make us anew, that we, your body in our world, would serve you in joy and hope and thankfulness all the days of our life together in Christ Jesus our Lord, in whose glorious name we pray. And using the words that he taught: Our Father... (posted on <https://lifeinliturgy.wordpress.com/>)

PRAYER OF OUR SAVIOR (debts)

OFFERING

We have the tools we need to love one another. Through the use and sharing of our talents, treasures, and time, we can create God's Realm here on earth. Our contributions – no matter the size – to our church and in our community, will craft a world which reflects God's love.

PRAYER OF DEDICATION (in unison)

Loving God, Holy Vessel of Kindness - We glorify you by sharing our gifts of love with this community. We celebrate your presence by caring for your creation. May our offerings and gifts nourish a world craving more love, peace, justice, and hope. Amen.

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

May the God who shakes heaven and earth,
whom death could not contain,
who lives to disturb and heal us,
bless you with power to go forth
and proclaim the gospel. Amen

(Janet Morley, *New Century Hymnal*)