

UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST CONGREGATIONAL
Wallace, Idaho

Alice M.C. Ling, Pastor

May 22, 2022

Sixth Sunday of Easter

PRELUDE “*Spirit of God, Descend upon My Heart*”

WELCOME AND ANNOUNCEMENTS

CALL TO WORSHIP (based on Psalm 67)

May God be gracious to us, and bless us, and cover us with the radiance of grace.

May your way be known everywhere, God: in the hidden places of our hearts; in the comfort of our homes; in every corner of our world; in the farthest reaches of creation.

You transform us; you heal our lives; you renew the earth and every creature:

Let our praise for you shake the rafters with songs of joy! (John A. Nelson, *UCC Worship Ways*)

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)

God, we remember with wonder and joy that your spirit is reaching everywhere: rejoicing in the liveliness of all living things; touching what is wounded or ill with healing power; gathering in the lonely, the lost, the least; soothing ancient animosities; creating and recreating a vision of hope.

Come now, Holy Spirit. Let our worship rejoice in you, and lift our hearts, and bind us in one

family of loving grace. We ask in Jesus’ name; Amen.

(John A. Nelson, *UCC Worship Ways*)

SCRIPTURE READING

Psalm 67

May God be gracious to us and bless us
and make his face to shine upon us,
that your way may be known upon earth,
your saving power among all nations.

Let the peoples praise you, O God;
let all the peoples praise you.

Let the nations be glad and sing for joy,
for you judge the peoples with equity
and guide the nations upon earth.

Let the peoples praise you, O God;
let all the peoples praise you.

The earth has yielded its increase;
God, our God, has blessed us.

May God continue to bless us;
let all the ends of the earth revere him.

John 14:18-29

“I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live. On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you. They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me, and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them.” Judas (not Iscariot) said to him, “Lord, how is it that you will reveal yourself to us and not to the world?” Jesus answered him, “Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them. Whoever does not love me does not keep my words, and the word that you hear is not mine but is from the Father who sent me.

“I have said these things to you while I am still with you. But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything and remind you of all that I have said to you. Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid. You heard me say to you, ‘I am going away, and I am coming to you.’ If you loved me, you would rejoice that I am going to the Father, because the Father is greater than I. And now I have told you this before it occurs, so that when it does occur you may believe.

SERMON

One of the gifts I’ve received over the course of the past couple of years is a series of emails from our Conference Minister, Mike Denton, reflecting on and advising pastors about our shared life during the COVID pandemic. They came frequently in the early months, often weekly; it’s been awhile since I’ve seen one, but I’m virtually certain that as long as COVID is with us, there will be more. Sometimes they’ve included his reflection on one of the lectionary readings for the coming Sunday, but they almost always share information and perspective on what the virus is up to and what that means for life in the church. Early on, Mike took on an amazing discipline of checking about 4 websites regularly (I don’t dare tell you it was daily, because that seems impossible, but it might have been; at least weekly). The websites reported research and medical findings, where the vulnerabilities were, what practices had the potential for curbing spread, what was least safe and effective, how we could maximize children’s physical as well as mental health. He said over and over, I’m no doctor, but this is what I’m reading. He urged caution, care for the most vulnerable, attention to the most isolated and creativity in exploring new ways to be the church in an unprecedented situation. It probably won’t surprise you to know that a lot of those emails (most?) didn’t exactly reverberate with good news. The higher the numbers climbed, the longer the months dragged on, the more he urged patience. And calm. Stay the course. He dared to project a timeline or two that, I for one took seriously, but wasn’t about to spread around in the fervent prayer that it wouldn’t really be that long. It couldn’t be, could it?

One of the most distinctive pieces about those emails is the form Mike has developed. He says a couple of things and then pauses to say, take a deep breath; let it out; take another one; let it out. And then he goes on. That practice may well pre-date COVID, and while I’ve never asked him about it, what I experience is a way to help me, the reader, deal with my anxiety. When he says, it could be as much as another year before it’s safe to resume public worship, I need someone to talk me down so I can keep listening. I never wanted to hear that there was no safe way to sing together, but when he told me about his history with singing and told me to take a breath, I was able to hang in there. Without encouragement, without a reminder to breathe and a voice that tells me to stay calm, I could easily shut down, stop reading, hit delete and walk away. But his words helped me stay in the conversation.

There's a similar kind of dynamic at play in the passage I just read from John. It takes place on the night the disciples gathered with Jesus to observe the Passover. He's gotten down on his knees and washed their feet, and then told them to do the same for each other. He's predicted that one of them will betray him, another will deny him, and that his time with them needs to be measured in hours, not days, to say nothing of weeks. No matter what happens, they are to love each other as he has loved them, and to keep going with what they've started together. Judas has already stormed out, and Peter is exceedingly agitated by Jesus' certainty that his loyalty won't last the night. All of them are sitting with feet still damp from the washing, while Jesus proceeds full steam ahead with his Farewell Discourse: my friends, this is what you need to know when I'm gone; listen up, because in a very small amount of time, I will indeed be gone. Word by word their anxiety climbs. One by one, first Thomas, then Philip and finally Judas (not Iscariot) toss him questions, trying to make sense of what's happening, where things are leading, and what any of it means for them. It's in that context that Jesus says, Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I don't give as the world gives. Don't let your hearts be troubled, and don't let them be afraid.

Peace, I leave with you; my peace I give to you. As a starting point, I think there's some sense that Jesus is trying to talk the disciples back from the ledge of their anxiety and panic, and telling them to pause, to take a breath, to listen to him, to trust him, to love him and love each other. Don't let your hearts be troubled, there's no need for you to be afraid. Throughout the course of Jesus' entire farewell discourse, he offers his followers every kind of reassurance and the comfort of God's presence, whatever the circumstances may be. Here he offers the notion of "peace," which Richard Ward describes by saying, "Jesus' offering of peace does not include the assurance that one's life will be trouble-free. Neither is it offered simply to those who have the luxury of 'getting away from it all' for some alone time with God. It is not offered to those who claim to have blueprints for the future course of events or who have been able to put the final touches on their own personal doctrinal fortresses. It is, however, offered to those who learn that whatever trouble we go through in our lives does not disprove God's presence or render impotent God's promise to dwell with us. As Fred Craddock has put it, 'the peace of God is the confidence that God is God and neither our gains nor our losses are ultimate.'" (*Feasting on the Gospels, John, Vol. 2, page 169*)

Jesus didn't just talk nice, soothing words to his followers, encouraging us to shush, and reminding us to breathe. Just seconds before he spoke the word of peace, he promised the gift of the Holy Spirit, which he also referred to as the Advocate. The Greek word behind Advocate is *paraclete*, which means one who comes alongside, accompanies, encourages. Jesus talks about the Spirit teaching and reminding, but the notion of the Advocate also carries the sense of a defense attorney, someone who defends the believer against false accusations, serves as a freedom rider in times of oppression, and as a public relations specialist in times of humiliation. Jack Haberer goes on to say, "By implication, if the church is going to be aligned with the mission of God, then it in turn will be providing comfort, encouragement, advocacy, and defense for those falsely accused, those being oppressed, those suffering humiliation." (*Feasting on the Gospels, page 166*)

I love the notion of being given the gift of an Advocate, as well as the reciprocal task of serving as an advocate to support and accompany someone else, all the while serving God and doing what I can to follow Jesus' commandment to love one another. One of the most profound gifts of advocacy that I've ever received was from a family in my first ministry setting. The husband drove a logging truck and the wife was a full time homemaker; together they had 7 children. They were a simple family who often struggled to make ends meet, but they had hearts that were full to overflowing. They always had a place waiting for me at their supper table; every summer, I went away for a month of vacation, and when I came back, both the garage and the basement had my winter's worth of firewood delivered and stacked; and when I was raising money to take my parents to visit my father's birthplace in England,

they presented me with a 2-quart maple syrup can they'd filled with their loose change. Never have I felt more accompanied and encouraged, defended and loved.

And then there's a news story I heard earlier this week of a woman from Wisconsin who went to Houston after Hurricane Harvey, and took 125 sewing machines with her to give to the victims of that storm. By doing that, she was equipping people who had survived the storm with tools that supported their financial as well as mental health. Since then, she's created an organization that has given away more than 3,600 new and used sewing machines, giving them to survivors of Katrina, as well as Afghan and Somalian refugees. She enables them to do something they love while also working to rebuild their lives.

There are all kinds of Advocates at work around us, people filled with Spirit, coming alongside others to offer support and encouragement, companionship and compassion. There are all kinds of Advocates at work, and yet, I will confess to you how often I struggle to come up with even a clue of what I could do. I watch the news and feel powerless, asking how can I even make a dent in the midst of a global pandemic or a ruthless, life-consuming war, or round after round after round of mass shootings? I think of ideas and then dismiss them as unrealistic – especially for our setting. So I sit back and fuss about my uselessness – while kids all over the country are busy handing out sandwiches to the homeless, collecting shoes to ship to Africa, sewing pretty gowns for children in the pediatric ward at the hospital. They haven't learned they're helpless, and they haven't stopped to ask an adult for advice. They've just picked up a concern and taken on a solution, being busy as an advocate, sharing with others the peace of Christ.

Jesus offers us the gift of his peace. Peace I leave with you. My peace I give to you. I don't give as the world gives. Don't let your hearts be troubled, and don't let them be afraid. A peace we can lean on and draw strength from as we make our way through all of the challenges and obstacles that come our way. And he promises us the gift of the Holy Spirit, an Advocate who will come alongside us, offering instruction and encouragement, companionship and support. Let us live within the warmth and grace, healing and comfort of those gifts. And let us do all we can within our power and through the power of God's love, to make that Spirit visible, here and now, in this world so desperately in need of God's peace. Amen.

SONG *"Sweet, Sweet Spirit"*

sung by Cathy Barker

There's a sweet, sweet Spirit in this place, And I know that it's the Spirit of the Lord;
There are sweet expressions on each face, And I know that's it's the presence of the Lord.
Sweet Holy Spirit, Sweet heavenly Dove, Stay right here with us, Filling us with your love;
And for these blessings We lift our hearts in praise:
Without a doubt we'll know that we have been revived, When we shall leave this place.

PRAYER REQUESTS

Alice and Geoff's son Nathan, hospitalized in Japan, diagnosed with Bickerstaff Brainstem encephalitis; safe travels for Alice and Geoff as they go to be with him

PASTORAL PRAYER

O Holy God, there is no small list of concerns and adversities that trigger the anxiety we carry with us. We listen to the news and weep for the war that rages on in Ukraine, the parents spending hours at a time in search of formula to keep their infants healthy and well fed, the brokenhearted in Buffalo who grieve the loss of family and friends as well as a source of groceries in the neighborhood, those who are not just annoyed by the rising cost of everything but facing impossible choices because they simply can't afford what they must have, the crisis at the border and water shortages across the southwest and the hostile rhetoric in congressional stalemates and political campaigns. In the midst of public anxieties, we also carry our personal ones: concerns for Nathan and his confusing, concerning

symptoms, for Alice and Geoff as they prepare to travel to be with him, for strained relationships and failing health, for the clarity to make difficult decisions and the patience to walk beside those who rely on our strength, for the aches and worries that keep us awake at night and the weariness that grows under the weight of too much care for others, too little for ourselves. Add to all of that the needs of our congregation, as pastor and people begin the process of going our separate ways. We acknowledge our grief and sadness, as well as the unsettled uncertainty of what comes next, how we will hear your voice and what it will mean to walk in your way.

Holy One, we bring all of that and more to you, for your healing and holding, for the compassion and care that you alone can provide. But before we walk away, leaving it in your hands, satisfied that we've done all we need to do, help us to sit with the needs and hurts within and around us. Slow us down enough to begin to untangle the knot of anxiety, in order to listen to the Advocate who offers encouragement and advice, to recognize the gifts we have to offer, the hope we can share, the peace we can plant, the love we can live, the wisdom we can speak, the difference we can make. Breathe your peace into our troubled hearts and anxious world, that we might feel the love with which you accompany us, and then open our hands and hearts to share that peace with others.

Beloved God, we give you thanks for all of the beauty and hope, mercy and promise by which you surround and bless us. For the new life taking shape in the wonder of spring, the loving presence of family and friends, the insights and encouragement of strangers and neighbors, the miracle of healing and the advancements of medicine. For the energy of children, the affection of pets, the ability to learn, the wonder of a sunset, the gift of time with those we see too little, rest at the end of the day, and the peace that comes to remind us of your presence and fill us with your love. Thank you, Blessed God, for all of the ways that you fill our lives with joy and share with us your love.

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

PRAYER OF OUR SAVIOR (depts)

OFFERING

God has shown us the meaning of generosity in the beautiful diversity of creation, in the overflowing love of Jesus Christ, and in the never ending gift of the Holy Spirit! God has abundantly blessed us and called us to be a community that blesses others through the sharing of our love, our talents, and our material possessions. Let us rejoice now in what we have been given and in what is ours to give.

PRAYER OF DEDICATION (in unison)

We dedicate our lives and all that we have to the work of life, of love, of peace. Receive our gifts and lead us in wisdom and courage. Amen.

HYMN No. 498 *"Peace Like a River"*

I've got peace like a river, I've got peace like a river,
I've got peace like a river in my soul,
I've got peace like a river, I've got peace like a river,
I've got peace like a river in my soul.

I've got love like an ocean, I've got love like an ocean,
I've got love like an ocean in my soul,
I've got love like an ocean, I've got love like an ocean
I've got love like an ocean in my soul.

I've got joy like a fountain, I've got joy like a fountain,
I've got joy like a fountain in my soul,

I've got joy like a fountain, I've got joy like a fountain,
I've got joy like a fountain in my soul.

BENEDICTION

The peace of God which surpasses all understanding, that peace which the world can neither give to you nor take away from you, keep your hearts and minds in the knowledge and love of God, and of Jesus Christ; and the blessing of God Almighty remain with you always. Amen.