

UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST CONGREGATIONAL
Wallace, Idaho

Alice M.C. Ling, Pastor

May 29, 2022

Seventh Sunday of Easter

PRELUDE “*Glorious Things of Thee Are Spoken*”

WELCOME AND ANNOUNCEMENTS

CALL TO WORSHIP

We come to this place of prayer,

for here we can bring our hopes and dreams, our hidden fears and the doubts we dare wear on our sleeves.

We come to this place of grace,

for here we learn compassion and joy, and discover how deeply we are loved.

We come with these people called the church,

to be blessed by the variety of gifts, to live as one for our God.

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

HYMN No. 560 “*For the Beauty of the Earth*”

For the beauty of the earth, For the glory of the skies,

For the love which from our birth Over and around us lies;

Lord of all, to Thee we raise This our hymn of grateful praise.

For the wonder of each hour Of the day and of the night,

Hill and vale and tree and flower, Sun and moon and stars of light:

Lord of all, to Thee we raise This our hymn of grateful praise.

For the joy of human love, Brother, sister, parent child;

Friends on earth and friends above; For all gentle thoughts and mild:

Lord of all, to Thee we raise This our hymn of grateful praise.

PRAYER OF CONFESSION

God, we believe you have called us to unity, but often we have isolated ourselves from others,

God, forgive us for the times we have turned our backs on those who are different.

God, we believe you have called us to live together as one body,

God, forgive us for the times we have created division within your worldwide church.

God, we believe you ask us to look, listen, and learn from others,

God, forgive us for the times we have ridiculed and attacked those with different viewpoints.

God, we believe you ask us to accept and seek to understand all who are called by your name,

Forgive us for the times we have offended you by failing to love others as we do ourselves.

God, we believe you call us to be one even as you are one,

Forgive us for the disunity we have harbored and make us one.

Silent Prayer

God and Creator of all humankind, your son Jesus Christ prayed that your church might be one even as you our God are one. May you renew our minds and rekindle your love in our hearts, so that by the power of the Spirit, we might find the Oneness that you intend for us.

God, may we see in your Oneness our need for unity; God, may we see in your Three-ness our need for community. God, may we see in your creativity our need for diversity; God, may we see in your Self our need to love each other. Amen. (Christine Sine, godspace.wordpress.com)

SCRIPTURE READING John 17:20-26

“I ask not only on behalf of these but also on behalf of those who believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. Father, I desire that those also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory, which you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world.

“Righteous Father, the world does not know you, but I know you, and these know that you have sent me. I made your name known to them, and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them and I in them.”

SERMON

For most of my life, I’ve been privileged to sing in a choral ensemble. There have been a few gaps, but precious few. Most everywhere I’ve lived, there has been a chorus within reach whose rehearsal schedule worked for me, and that was willing to include me in the alto section. I couldn’t begin to tell you how many songs I’ve sung, or in what languages, with what sorts of accompaniment and how many featured just voices with no accompaniment. What I can tell you is there have been a handful of songs over the years that have caught in my throat. Or my heart. Songs that latched on to something deep inside me and refused to let go. I think for the most part, I made it through the performances with my composure in tact, but largely because I longed to share it with the audience to the very best of my ability, so they would feel something of the power that I felt. One of those songs has been playing in my head for the past few days; I doubt I could make it through a performance of it right about now, but I hope I can share the words Kurt Bestor wrote with you.

Can you hear the prayer of the children
on bended knee, in the shadow of an unknown room?
Empty eyes, with no more tears to cry
Turning heavenward toward the light
Crying, Jesus help me to see the morning light of one more day
But if I should die before I wake, I pray my soul to take.

Can you feel the heart of the children
Aching for home, for something of their very own?
Reaching hands with nothing to hold on to
But hope for a better day, a better day.
Crying, Jesus help me to feel the love again in my own land
But if unknown roads lead away from home
Give me loving arms, away from harm.

Can you hear the voice of the children
Softly pleading for silence in a shattered world?
Angry guns preach a gospel full of hate
Blood of the innocent on their hands
Crying, Jesus help me to feel the sun again upon my face
For when darkness clears, I know you’re near, bringing peace again

Can you hear the prayer of the children?

I see the display of white crosses, 19 for children, 2 for their teachers. The honor roll student, good citizen award winner, soccer player, and the survivor who told a CBS reporter that the gunman came into their classroom and said, get ready to die. I see Ukrainian orphans getting by in a Polish theater, a

small boy living (if you can call it that) in an underground tunnel – the other children have left but he’s still there, playing with a Rubik’s cube; his drawings have changed from colorful trees outside to black and white expressions of death and destruction. And I look up into the sky and around me and into my heart, and ask why. I don’t understand the war in Ukraine; maybe it’s tempting to say, well, that’s the way Russia is, but that doesn’t really work for me. And even harder, I hear the statistics about violence in our country compared to other countries, and I just don’t get it. I’ve seen multiple Facebook postings of the endless list of schools that have faced shootings, starting back before Columbine, and I ask, what is wrong with us? What are we going to do about it? And when will it stop?

Ben and the cats are getting tired of my questions, and honestly that approach doesn’t seem to be getting me anywhere, so I decided to bring them here to you today. I bet that makes you wish you’d found a better way to spend your time than hanging out here for an hour... But give me a minute, because I found a couple of things in this morning’s reading from John that actually helped me, or at least slowed me down and got me to thinking.

The passage I read from John is the final third of what we call Jesus’ High Priestly Prayer, the last thing he does before he heads into his betrayal, arrest and crucifixion. He begins the prayer by praying for himself, and then he moves on to his disciples. This section broadens his prayer beyond the circle of his current followers, and reaches to all those who will believe – the world is his concern, then and far into the future, even including us. And then as he goes on, he refers to that world multiple times in this one short reading. Here and elsewhere, it’s easy to hear his references to the world as being about a bad place that has rejected him, is filled with sin and opposed to the ways of God. But the Greek word John uses here for world is *kosmos*, the very same word he used back in John 3:16 – God so loved the world... Yeah, it’s got some problems, but Jesus loves it. And Jesus came to bring the presence and power and love of God to that world. And as he departs, Jesus is clearly sending his followers into that world to make the presence and love of God known to others. Matthew Myer Bolton writes, “Jesus’ prayer in John includes a vision of “the world” (*kosmos*) that is both tough-minded and tender, both realistic and hopeful. The presence of danger and evil... are all too real, and the world’s brokenness extends into every nook and cranny, including our own hearts and minds. And yet this broken world is the world God loves. God sees through and beyond the world’s distortions to the wholeness and beauty underneath it, the original dignity and goodness we imply whenever we say something is “broken.” And God seeks to restore that original beauty, and so sends Jesus “into the *kosmos*, for the love of the *kosmos*” — and likewise, Jesus sends us.” (SALT, “Loving the World”, May 24, 2022)

That’s the first thing I wanted to say: that God deeply, eternally, passionately loves this broken old world, and is sending us out into it to work with God and each other to help restore it to its original beauty. As tempted as we might be to throw up our hands and barricade the door on the mess out there, God is sending us out to love it. As much as I want to turn to God, pitch a fit and say, get down here and fix this mess, it’s entirely possible that God is looking right back at me, saying: what are you going to do about that mess? We can’t keep letting our children be slaughtered.

In case you’re wondering, there is absolutely nothing in me that feels equipped to turn this ship around, to make even a dent in the statistics and horror show and blood bath that surround us. While I’m willing to admit I have some opinions on steps that should be taken immediately, I also believe there is no one thing we can do to stop the violence. More than anything else, I think what we need to do is roll up our sleeves and go to work – talking to each other. Which isn’t exactly a concept that I see as having a lot of potential in this country right about now. We tend to talk with those who agree with us and scream at those who don’t agree with us, and all that’s accomplishing is adding to the hostility, which is feeding the violence. Vicious cycle.

Which brings me to the second piece I found in Jesus' prayer. Throughout the section I read this morning, he calls for unity. Jesus' deep yearning is for the community of his followers to be as tight as he and God are. That they may all be one. Might work if we get to define the boundaries of that community but we know that's how Jesus works. He'll throw open the doors and you then know we're not all going to get along! Or even like each other for that matter.

I was really caught by the writing of Episcopal Bishop Thomas Breidenthal, who defined "Unity as a relationship of mutual dependence and trust, such that our primary access to God is by way of one another." He points out that while we focus on our individual and private encounters with God, over and over and over again, scripture points us back to the community, the body of Christ, the things we can do and be together that we can't even begin to do and be on our own. Breidenthal wonders if we've been too quick to equate unity with agreeing with each other. What if, instead, we let the basic fabric of our life together become a place where we do the hard work of building unity. He writes, "Our first concern must be to make ourselves available to as broad and diverse a spectrum of believers as possible, so as to maximize our exposure to a multitude of witnesses. One might even say that disagreement goes hand in hand with Christian unity. On the one hand it is the inevitable byproduct of our engagement with many points of view. On the other, when we refuse to let it divide us, disagreement can be the catalyst for a deeper, shared engagement with Christ." Finally he says, "... if, as John's Gospel presupposes from beginning to end, a unity grounded in mutual love lies at the heart of all reality, then our own well-being depends on our availability to one another as brothers and sisters who cannot find life in isolation." (*Feasting on the Gospels, Year C, Vol. 2, page 238*)

If we would be the Church of Jesus Christ, it is essential that we find a way to live and work, walk and talk together as one, for the sake of all creation. If we have a prayer of quieting the violence, making our schools safe, as well as our grocery stores, churches, synagogues and mosques, movie theaters and even military bases, we must figure out, not just how we're going to tolerate and coexist alongside each other, but what it means to love in Jesus' name. Crawling inside our shells isn't the answer any more than screaming at each other is. We owe it to the children to take our hurt, our anger, our fear, our weariness, our thoughts and ideas, our hopes and our dreams for their lives on this beautiful, beautiful earth, and get busy building unity and love on the fabric that is our life together. A love that is both tough-minded and tender, realistic and hopeful. I assure you that when we decide to dedicate ourselves to the task, God will be right there in our midst, leading the way.

I'd like to close with a prayer written by Thom Shuman, entitled "How shall we pray in such moments?"

God whose heart
is as shattered as ours,
please do it once again.
out of the chaos which
swirls around us, create
those living waters into which
we may pour our tears, watching
them mingle to become pools
of gentleness and love from which
we may drink to make it through
the coming hours and days.
send the sun to light the way
out of the shadows of stunned
grief, anger, and loss.

how shall we pray in such moments?

Word who is as speechless
as we are in these moments,
offer us that simple prayer
which sustained you and so many
who have gone before us,
'do not be afraid.'
as difficult as it may be
for you to continue to utter
and for us to hear and believe,
whisper to us that hate will not win,
that fear will not control us,
that death's power is but an illusion.

how shall we pray in such moments?

Spirit whose breath has been knocked
out of you by this punch to your soul
as well as to all of us, breathe.
breathe peace into all the fractured
hopes and homes in Texas and
so many other places.
breathe hope into all who wonder
how we can continue to go on
seeking to find another way.
breathe compassion
into all those hearts hardened
by indifference to such horrors.

how shall we pray in such moments?

God in Community, Holy in One,
continue to create,
continue to speak,
continue to breathe
for us, on us, through us, for us
until we can do it for others. Amen. (© 2022 Thom M. Shuman)

HYMN No. 286 *"Blest Be the Tie That Binds"*
Blest be the tie that binds Our hearts in Christian love;
The fellowship of kindred minds Is like to that above.

Before our Maker's throne We pour our ardent prayers;
Our fears, our hopes, our aims are one, Our comforts and our cares.

PRAYER REQUESTS

- Dorothy Thielman's brother, Tom Hayman, 87; his children have made the difficult decision to put him in an assisted living home in St. Marie's. Prayers for the adjustment and strength needed for all
- Alice and Geoff and their son Nathan in Japan (they've seen him, he's in the hospital, headed for rehab)

PASTORAL PRAYER

Holy One, together on this Memorial Day weekend, our hearts fill to overflowing yet again. We are deeply grateful for a long weekend poised to usher in the summer, welcoming us to play and rest, to

adventure and exploration, to time with loved ones and many of our favorite things. We give you thanks for the abundance of promise and possibility that surround us as plants grow, buds fatten, nests fill, bikes and boats emerge from winter storage. Help us to soak in the bounty this season offers, that we might know rest for our souls, exercise for our bodies, and joy for our spirits.

In the midst of our weekend activities, we are acutely aware, Mighty God, that these days have been set aside, not to give us an opportunity to say hello to summer, but as a time to pause and remember the cost of war, and to say thank you to those who gave of themselves in service of our country and to protect the vulnerable and threatened. As we honor them and thank them, we acknowledge the holes created in families when loved ones didn't make it home, the children who barely knew their parents. Lead us, Holy One, along the paths of peace, to that great and glorious day when flag-draped coffins aren't carried home and war lives only in history.

We pray, Beloved God, for all those in need of healing and of hope: for those battling illnesses of the body, mind and spirit, the ongoing presence and lingering effects of Covid, the daily struggle with addiction; for caregivers who grow weary and parents worn out by the daily challenge of keeping all their balls in the air at one time. We pray for those who grieve the loss of a loved one, from old age or a protracted battle with illness, or because of bullets that interrupted a trip to the store or a 4th grade reading lesson. We pray for the children and parents, teachers and officers, neighbors, businesses and houses of worship in Uvalde, Texas; the families, coworkers and community of Buffalo, New York; and all of those in countless communities across this country whose peace has been shattered by senseless violence. Show us another way, that together we might live in safety, respect differences, replace walls of hostility with bridges of cooperation, learn to speak the truth in love, and work together to promote the common good.

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

God has abundantly blessed us and invites us to be a blessing to others, in the offering of our gifts, the sharing of our time, the use we make of our possessions, the willingness we present to help build a unity between and among God's people. Thank you for the ways you contribute to the ministry of this church, and may God bless and guide all of us as we bear witness to the presence and love of God at work among us and in the world.

PRAYER OF DEDICATION (in unison)

Great and gracious God, though we offer our prayers in secret and refrain from publicizing our giving, we ask that you encourage us to make visible our faith. May our deeds serve as enacted prayers and our giving bear witness to your abundant love. In the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.

(Glen E. Rainsley, *Hear Our Prayer*)

HYMN "Help Us Accept Each Other"

Help us accept each other as Christ accepted us;
teach us as sister, brother, each person to embrace.
Be present, God, among us, and bring us to believe
we are ourselves accepted and meant to love and live.

Let your acceptance change us, so that we may be moved
in living situations to do the truth in love;
To practice your acceptance, until we know by heart
the table of forgiveness and laughter's healing art.

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.

(Janet Morley, *New Century Hymnal*)