

UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST CONGREGATIONAL
Wallace, Idaho

Alice M.C. Ling, Pastor

June 19, 2022

Second Sunday after Pentecost

PRELUDE “Amazing Grace”

WELCOME AND ANNOUNCEMENTS

CALL TO WORSHIP

The Holy Spirit has given us life and pours on us the power to become new people!

The winds of the Spirit have given us breath and the fire of the Spirit has enkindled in us a love for God and each other.

Come here in faithfulness, and be ready for the surprises that God’s Spirit brings.

We open our lives to the presence of God and trust God’s promise to us that we can live new lives of freedom and grace. May God help us to be true people of spirit, letting holy surprises fill our days!

(Sandra E. Graham, *Touch Holiness*)

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 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.

PRAYER OF INVOCATION

Gracious God, if we came to your house, we would find the door open, because there are no closing hours for the hospitality of heaven.

If we came to your house, we would hear many accents, ours just one among them, for there is no favored nation in the commonwealth of heaven.

If we came to your house, we would see people who never thought they would be allowed in, if entrance had been by merit rather than by your gracious invitation.

So, as we gather in Jesus’ name, let the characteristics you cherish become evident in all we do and share together. Gather into one the glorious assortment of unlikes, which is your true church.

Reveal within this community what we must do, what we must hear, and who we must welcome if we are to know Jesus among us.

God, give us the grace to surrender our presumptions as to what we should be or do; and then amend our lives until we become the people you intended.

Amen.

(*A Wee Worship Book, Fifth Incarnation, Wild Goose Resource Group*)

SCRIPTURE READING

Psalm 43

Vindicate me, O God, and defend my cause
against an ungodly people;
from those who are deceitful and unjust,

deliver me!

For you are the God in whom I take refuge;
why have you cast me off?
Why must I walk about mournfully
because of the oppression of the enemy?

O send out your light and your truth;
let them lead me;
let them bring me to your holy hill
and to your dwelling.

Then I will go to the altar of God,
to God my exceeding joy,
and I will praise you with the harp,
O God, my God.

Why are you cast down, O my soul,
and why are you disquieted within me?
Hope in God, for I shall again praise him,
my help and my God.

Galatians 3:23-29

Now before faith came, we were imprisoned and guarded under the law until faith would be revealed. Therefore the law was our disciplinarian until Christ came, so that we might be reckoned as righteous by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian, for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek; there is no longer slave or free; there is no longer male and female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise.

SERMON

I remember a funeral I did in my first parish, in the early 80's, for one of the elderly men of the congregation. Actually, I don't remember the funeral. I remember the visiting hours, when I found myself sitting two or three chairs down from the casket, beside the son of the deceased. He was a middle aged man who lived far enough away that I hadn't met him before his father died and it was time to make arrangements. So there we were, sitting in visiting hours, me trying to engage him and get him to talk about his father and his loss, when he looks at me and says, I don't believe in women ministers. The Bible says it's wrong, and I believe the Bible. I don't remember how I responded, except that it wasn't how I wanted to respond. We were in a funeral home and his father had just died, and it didn't seem like the time to let him have a piece of my well rehearsed, sharply honed biblical interpretation of the very passages I assumed he was referring to. In that moment, I bit my tongue, swallowed my anger and hurt, tried to stay present, while scrambling to figure out how in the world I could lead a funeral that this man would draw comfort from. Actually I gave up on that hope before I worked too hard on it. His mother was a member of the congregation, as his father had been. I would be who they had come to know me to be, and the son would have to deal with it. I wouldn't pretend to be somebody I wasn't, but I also wouldn't tackle him then and there. It was a compromise I could live with.

Paul writes that "there is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus." But just because Paul said it, doesn't mean everybody believed it – then or now. And then as well as now, beyond the shadow of a doubt, there will be people happy to step up and point out the exceptions to what Paul has just said. We're not all equal

and we're not all one. Some are good, some are bad; some are right and some are wrong; some are in and some are out. That's just the way it is. Except that that's not how Paul saw it. As far as Paul was concerned, if you are holding on to an us-them dichotomy, you need to let it go, because there is no them. We're all us.

A significant part of what Paul was writing about to the fledgling church in Galatia was the law, what it's purpose was and what it wasn't. It all started back with Abraham, when God made a covenant and said that Abraham needed to be circumcised. Every man who came after him who wanted to be part of the same family of faith, needed to get in line behind him and do the same. And then more laws were added when Moses was guiding them through the wilderness. And the next thing you knew, there was a narrow road they had to walk. The people who walk this way are God's people. All the others are not. It's as clear and simple as that. And then Peter received a vision in which God threw open the door to Gentiles. When Peter protested that the law made it absolutely clear who and what was clean and good and who was unclean and condemned, and he was 100% sure where the Gentiles stood (outside!) God said, if I've welcomed them in, don't be thinking you get to keep them out. Throw open that door!

There were layers to the struggle, but a lot of it came down to the fact that things were changing, and people struggled to know what to hold on to. The law had always been front and center, but Paul was livid with the folks who insisted on keeping it there. In today's passage, Paul referred to the law as a disciplinarian, something like a nanny or a custodian that is responsible for protecting, educating and training the one who is coming up. The law's role in the community's life is to steer people toward the abundant life where everyone thrives, but the law can't guarantee or deliver that abundant life; it can't bring about transformation and doesn't have the power to create faith or to fill hearts with a love for God and neighbor. Those gifts and graces come through Jesus' death and resurrection, and the presence and power of the Spirit at work in the church. Now that faith has come, we don't need a nanny; we neither need nor want a world filled with dividing walls or tight little cubicles that separate good from bad, in from out, and us from them. Now that we've been clothed with Christ, as Paul writes, there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no longer male and female, for now we live and move as one. Wouldn't that be nice?

Last Sunday, we'd just gotten home from church and I was putting lunch on the table when my phone rang. It was a seminary classmate from South Carolina, calling to say that he'd heard the news out of Coeur d'Alene. Knowing that's our neck of the woods, he called to make sure we were okay and to ask what I was thinking and feeling. A short time later, I read an email from a New Hampshire friend with a similar kind of question. How could I be in light of 31 members of a white nationalist group being arrested and interrupted before they did whatever they intended to do to the Pride parade?(Other than frustrated that we hadn't talked or prayed about it here, of course.) I have no tolerance for violence, so that was part of my reaction. But it also took me back to the day that Marcie and Beth showed up to worship in a church I served. They introduced themselves to me, told me that Leanne had told them I would be safe and they should check us out. I told them I couldn't promise them anything about how they would be received, but that we're working on our welcome, and I was really glad they were there. They sat on the end of the back pew; the only thing that stood between them and the door was about 6 feet of carpet; and I think if anyone had sneezed they would have bolted. They were so frightened by stories of what churches can do, and have done to lesbians and gays, to not just withhold welcome but to shame and reject and condemn. I see their faces and countless other faces, and reflect on the stories and wonder when and what it will take for us to lean more fully into Paul's assertion that in Christ there is no longer Jew nor Greek, there is no longer slave nor free, there is no longer male and female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.

I'm also keenly aware that today is Juneteenth, a day that celebrates the emancipation proclamation declaring an end to slavery in this country... but a declaration that took 2 and a half years to travel to

Fort Worth, Texas. It's a day that celebrates freedom, that tells stories and encourages us all to dream of a new world. The holiday reminds me of a book I just read, *The Book of Lost Friends* by Lisa Wingate. One of the many compelling pieces of the book was the effort that former slaves went to to try and find family members they'd been separated from when slaves were sold from one owner to another. They wrote letters to the "Lost Friends Column" in the *Southwestern Christian Advocate* newspaper, asking that they be read in black churches, naming family members they wanted to find and telling where information could be sent. But the holiday doesn't let me linger long in the past; it also prods me with the story I watched a couple of nights ago in an episode of *NCIS: Los Angeles*, when a young black federal agent was stopped by police, for no other reason than his blackness made him look suspicious. I know it's TV, but I also know it's reality. I think of the stories I read in the book *Caste*, by Isabel Wilkerson, a black woman, about answering the door of her own home, and being asked if the owner was there, because surely the owner had whiter skin than hers. Or being challenged when she struggled to put her luggage overhead in the first class section of the plane, because there was plenty of space further back; and the flight attendant only reluctantly conceded that yes, Wilkerson did apparently have a first class ticket.

Removed from their context, we may not hear the ways in which Paul's words landed on his readers. One scholar summarizes that "Paul manages to offend virtually everyone". (Beverly Roberts Gaventa, *Texts for Preaching, Year C*). And Carol Holtz-Martin fleshes that offense out a little more fully with these examples: "In the midst of complex immigration controversies, 'There is neither native born nor illegal immigrant.' In a society dramatically divided by income, 'There is neither monied nor working class nor poor.' In a society polarized by race, 'There are neither people of color nor people of no color. In the season of elections, 'There is neither Republican nor Democrat nor Independent...' And, to repeat Paul's own words: 'There is neither male nor female.' For you all are one in Christ!" (*Feasting on the Word, Year C, Vol. 3, page 165*)

I didn't have to deal long with that son of my church member, but I very much doubt that more time together would have changed either of our minds. Whether we agree or not isn't the question at hand. Nor is trying to decide unequivocally, once and for all, who is right and who is wrong. The fact is that we're both members of the same body; the question is how we're going to deal with that fact, and what it's going to mean for us to live the life of faith together, how we're going to work alongside and serve together, listen to and share with each other, honor and respect each other - because if we're part of God's family, we're going to have to. Those are the terms and the expectations that come with being part of Christ's company. Let us follow in faith and in humility, that God might lead us into the new reality. Amen.

HYMN No. 285 "In Christ There is No East or West"

In Christ there is no East or West, In Christ no South or North;
But one great fellowship of love Throughout the whole wide earth.

In Christ shall true hearts everywhere Their high communion find;
Christ's service is the golden cord Close binding humankind.

Join hands then, all you of the faith, Whate'er your race may be;
Who serves my Father as a child Is surely kin to me.

PRAYER REQUESTS

Father's Day: giving thanks for love, mindful of grief

PASTORAL PRAYER

Let us pray for the light... where the dark is doubly dark; where wrong dresses up as right and even saints can be distracted; where life has gone into a tunnel, and all that is known is confusing voices and

stumbling blocks in the darkness; where faith and hope and love are in ashes, needing an angel to blow on them. Let us pray for light. *(Silence)*

Let us pray for a word from the Lord... where human words can no longer be trusted; where voices from the past echo loudly saying, "You are not one of us" or "Keep quiet" or "I do not need you any longer" or "You never get it right"; where the voice of the church has been like sweet and sour water from the same rock, saying "Welcome" and "Watch it..."; where the voice of God has seemed silent or been submerged beneath jargon. Let us pray for a word from the Lord *(Silence)*

Let us pray for a friend of God... who will bring encouragement where there is despair; who will bring company where there is loneliness; who will listen where a hard truth has to be shared; who will bring change or conversion through kindness; who will speak truth to power; who will bring the gift that makes all the difference. Let us pray for a friend of God. *(Silence)*

Help us, most Holy One, to hear you in the words of scripture and also to recognize your accent in the voices of the world. Help us to see you in the good others do and in the need which calls for love or justice. Help us to love you, and so to trust you and follow you. Take from us any desire for recognition or reward, and replace it with the quiet joy, which comes from knowing that we do your will.

(A Wee Worship Book, Fifth Incarnation, Wild Goose Resource Group)

PRAYER OF OUR SAVIOR (debts)

Hear us as we join our voices in the words Jesus taught his friends when they asked him how they should pray: Our Father...

OFFERING

The amazing gift of one who fully embodied God's intention for humanity prompts us to make a grateful response. In Christ we have known a love that will not let us go. Through our offerings, let us share this love in our community and to the ends of the earth. *(Chalice Worship)*

PRAYER OF DEDICATION (in unison)

We shall love the Lord our God with all our heart, with all our soul, with all our mind, and with all our strength, and we shall love our neighbor as ourself. We make our offerings as a pledge of our love and loyalty; to God, to each other, and to our fellow human beings. We commit ourselves to live in love and to be loyal servants, in the name of Christ, our Servant Savior. Amen.

(Chalice Worship)

HYMN No. 212 "O the Deep, Deep Love of Jesus"

O the deep, deep love of Jesus, Vast, unmeasured, boundless free!
Rolling as a mighty ocean In its fullness over me.

Underneath me, all around me Is the current of His love;
Leading onward, leading homeward To my glorious rest above.

O the deep, deep love of Jesus, Love of every love the best;
'Tis an ocean vast of blessing, 'Tis the source of peace and rest.

BENEDICTION

And now go forth into the world in joy. Be of good courage. Hold fast to that which is good. Render to no one evil for evil. Support the weak, strengthen the faint-hearted, help the afflicted, honor all people. Love and serve the Lord, rejoicing in the power of the Holy Spirit. And the blessing of God Almighty, Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer, rest and abide with us all this day and forevermore. Amen.