

UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST CONGREGATIONAL
Wallace, Idaho

Alice M.C. Ling, Pastor

June 26, 2022

Third Sunday after Pentecost

PRELUDE “O Spirit of the Living God”

WELCOME AND ANNOUNCEMENTS

CALL TO WORSHIP

The way of our God is holy.

Holy One, we seek your presence in our midst.

The way of our God is wondrous.

Wondrous God, we marvel at your works and marvelous deeds.

The way of our God is awesome.

Awesome God, we call out to you in hope.

(Rev. Dr. Cheryl Lindsay, UCC *Worship Ways*)

HYMN No. 262 “Holy, Holy, Holy”

Holy, holy, holy! Lord God Almighty!

Early in the morning our song shall rise to Thee;

Holy, holy, holy! merciful and mighty!

God in three Persons, blessed Trinity!

Holy, holy, holy! though the darkness hide Thee,

Though the eye of sinful ones Thy glory may not see;

Only Thou art holy – there is none beside Thee,

Perfect in power, in love and purity.

PRAYER FOR TRANSFORMATION AND NEW LIFE (in unison)

Restoring God, too often we accept the conditions of the world around us and impose limitations on what is possible. We bind ourselves to societal conventions, norms, and pressure rather than follow you and your way. We conform to the values of this world rather than pursue the fruit of the Spirit. Show us the path of life and freedom in you. Teach us to plant seeds of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. May we perennially bear that fruit. Amen.

(Rev. Dr. Cheryl Lindsay, UCC *Worship Ways*)

WORDS OF GRACE

The Guiding Spirit opens us to new life and leads us to right paths. Hear the voice that continually calls, leads, and companions with us. Life in the Spirit is constantly renewed and restored. Let the grace of God nurture our roots and allow our flourishing. (Rev. Dr. Cheryl Lindsay, UCC *Worship Ways*)

SCRIPTURE READING Galatians 5:1, 13-25

For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.

For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters, only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become enslaved to one another. For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” If, however, you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another.

Live by the Spirit, I say, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh. For what the flesh desires is opposed to the Spirit, and what the Spirit desires is opposed to the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to prevent you from doing what you want. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not subject to the law. Now the works of the flesh are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity, debauchery, idolatry, sorcery,

enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these. I am warning you, as I warned you before: those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.

By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things. And those who belong to Christ have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit.

SERMON

We have two cats that are totally indoor cats. I know there are people who think that's cruel. If you listen to and watch our cats, they'll likely spin a really good tale about just how cruel we are. There are lots of days when they stand in doors and windows, staring outside, quivering and squeaking with excitement, all nerves on high alert, because of the chipmunk or bird that is beckoning to them from the other side of the glass. Of course there are days, even when there's no obvious critter calling to them, that they just want to go out. They sidle up next to the door, whether we're coming or going, and push their noses into the opening, clearly communicating that if we give them more than half an inch, they're gone. There's some part of me that receives that message and believes it, but I can tell you that to date, when they have gotten out, they've taken 3 or 4 cautious steps at most, and then stopped. One day Crystal took 6 steps, before she disappeared into 8 inches of fluffy white snow; I think she was actually relieved when we retrieved her. Midnight loves to escape into the garage, but she virtually always runs 5 steps and then lays down and rolls over on the concrete. The scariest time was the evening Midnight was nowhere to be found. We eventually realized the screen door wasn't latched; you could probably figure this out, but I can tell you from experience that looking for an all black cat in the dark is to be avoided, if at all possible. But she took mercy on us: she was just hanging out under the house, within easy reach once we found her and convinced her it was time to come in.

How do you define freedom? Probably not like anything resembling Crystal and Midnight's lives. In fact, some might call them enslaved or captive. Freedom is probably more like our neighbor's dog. Leave Red unhitched and unattended for 30 seconds and she's gone, setting Scott and Terri up to spend hours calling and searching, scouring the fields and woods in search of their wayward companion. In fact, the dictionary defines freedom as the absence of necessity, coercion or constraint... , or secondarily, liberation from slavery or restraint or from the power of another. Consult a thesaurus and you'll find words like autonomy and independence, or in other words, freedom to do as I please. I expect we all know more than a little bit about that kind of freedom.

Was that what Paul was writing about when he said, "For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery." Unfortunately, no. Throughout this letter Paul is abundantly clear that the people have been set free from the law: they don't need to submit to circumcision or the strict dietary laws laid out in the book of Leviticus; but he doesn't say they are free to do whatever they want, wherever they want, whenever they want. In fact, he explicitly says they are not to use their freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence. Their freedom is in Christ; it's been established by him through his life, death, and resurrection, and so they are obligated to him, bound to his service. I know: given our rugged individualist, you can't tell me what to do, I know my rights culture, we may struggle hard with having any constraints on our freedom or being bound to anyone, but Paul is very clear. Christ has given us freedom from a legalistic adherence to the law, and in its place, given us a life of relationships and connectedness – with him and with our neighbors.

I often fret that I've become a one topic preacher, but the Bible doesn't help me with that even a little bit. And here it is again, in the midst of a conversation about freedom and slavery. Paul is writing about freedom and then says that through love they should become slaves to one another. For the whole law

is summed up in a single commandment: you shall love your neighbor as yourself. They've been fighting and fretting about adherence to the law; specifically, if Gentiles have been converted to Christ, don't they have to follow the same laws the Jews do before they can actually get to Christ? Don't they have to be circumcised, eat the proper foods, keep the rigid requirements, do it just like we do? To which Paul screams no! We're done talking about legalisms and requirements, externals and self-interest; from here on out, we're talking about love. We're not checking things off on a to-do list in order to keep track of who's in and who's out. We're living in love – for Christ and for each other.

A friend of mine writes about living overseas after she got out of college. The first six months were filled with loneliness, so late each weekday afternoon, she bought a paperback mystery and read as a way to endure her evenings alone. Every weekend, she met with a group of US teachers, and together they complained about how different this new culture was from the way they did things back home. Sunday nights were the worst as she made her way back to the flat where she was staying and her mattress on the floor, feeling profoundly homesick for the people and place she called home. She suffered in her loneliness for six months and then decided to visit a church near where she worked. The second time she showed up, the head usher remembered her, and just that kindness was enough to bring tears in her eyes. The third time, she didn't duck out before the final hymn, and gained an invitation to a home for Sunday dinner. She says, "The effect of that loving, laughing, singing congregation's connection to Jesus Christ would come to permeate every aspect on my life. It was a wondrous thing to stumble into the hands of the living God." And then she goes on to reflect on the ways she had tried to fill the void inside her that was really her need for God "... with escape literature, running complaints, and quasi-friendship. None of these make Paul's list of evils, but they were my own excellent ways of avoiding God." She recognizes that hiding in mysteries and isolating herself are not the same as the "works of the flesh" that Paul lists, but they are all about hiding from God, living outside of community and indulging ourselves by pretending to live for ourselves alone. (Carol Holtz-Martin, *Feasting on the Word, Year C, Vol. 3*, page 187)

We're not meant to live alone. And we're not meant to fixate on ourselves, our comforts, our pleasures, our inclinations. Paul is clear that we've been set free from the law and we've been called together into community, where the gifts of the Spirit are poured out upon us. And what a delightful line up of gifts it is: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self control. Which is in no way to be heard as an exhaustive and complete list, but enough to prime the pump and give you a good idea of the abundance of blessings that are headed our way from the overflowing heart of God's Spirit.

I've been thinking a lot about the story I've been hearing lately on the Spokane news, about the death of Candy Rogers in March of 1959. She was a 9-year-old girl out selling campfire mints when she was murdered, a murder that was only solved this past week. And it was solved in large part because of the cooperation of the daughter of Candy's killer. When John Hoff was identified as a possible suspect, his daughter came forward and offered a DNA sample and gave her permission for his remains to be exhumed. When it was confirmed that her father was indeed Candy's killer, she talked about the shame and guilt she felt, and the vulnerability of this information being shared, the pain she felt of knowing that someone she had loved had done this, but still she stepped forward. She's met Candy's family and they're all finding healing in the friendship that's growing between them. And together, they've applied to have a playground named after Candy. It was one she lived near, one where she would have played, maybe one she would have brought her own children to, had she lived. And so together, they're working to bring healing and recognition, by lifting up and remembering one who died much too young. One example of love, kindness, generosity, and gentleness given by the Spirit's hand and shared by the grace of loving people.

To return to my friend's writing, she tells of an incident between members of her congregation, when one of them carelessly hurt the feelings of another. She witnessed the planting of seeds of a rift, and then the next Sunday morning, found the one who had given offense waiting anxiously on the front steps of the church, his choir robe billowing in the breeze. When the offended one showed up, he held out his arms to her with words of apology. She forgave him with a brief, warm hug – and they remain friends to this day. Carol writes, "I remember the incident because of the readiness, promptness and sweet humility with which peace was made. I remember it because of its rarity. I remember it because Christians are charged with giving and receiving such forgiveness." (page 189)

Paul writes: For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another. For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." My friends, the gifts of the Spirit have already been poured all over us and planted in our lives, gifts of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self control, to name but a few. Let us receive and nurture these gifts, taking them into our lives, so that they might grow and blossom, bear fruit and become part of the fabric of who we are. Let us live in love for Christ, and for our neighbor – always. Amen.

HYMN No. 249 *"Spirit of God, Descend upon My Heart"*

Spirit of God, descend upon my heart:
Wean it from earth, through all its pulses move.
Stoop to my weakness, mighty as Thou art,
And make me love Thee as I ought to love.

Hast Thou not bid us love Thee, God and King?
All, all Thine own – soul, heart and strength and mind.
I see Thy cross – there teach my heart to cling;
O let me seek Thee, and O let me find.

PRAYER REQUESTS

PASTORAL PRAYER

Creative and life-giving God, all around us seeds sprout and grow, sending their fruit into the world for the benefit of others. Peas, lettuce and the promise of garden fresh tomatoes. Rhubarb, strawberries and cherries. Acts of kindness, gestures of welcome, moments of reconciliation. Your creative hand and generous love are active in the midst of it all. Work the soil of our hearts and lives, and plant your seeds within us, that we might receive your Spirit's gifts of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness and self-control. Show us how to be receptive and how to nurture the gifts you give, so that we might know the comfort and blessing, promise and peace of your presence in our lives. Guide us in putting your gifts to work, that we not just collect them for our own comfort, but share them with our neighbors and do what we can to encourage the health and wholeness of our communities.

Holy God, we give thanks for the gift of healing and the miracle of new life, the renewal of time shared with those we love and the blessing of summertime fun. We bring before you all those who are sick and in need of healing – of body, mind, and soul. We pray for those who grieve, for caregivers who grow weary, for those battling addictions and those in search of new direction for their lives. We pray for those who struggle to make ends meet, and for whom rising prices present not just an inconvenience but precarious challenges that threaten their ability to stay on their feet and care for those they love.

Holy and Wise God, we bring before you the needs of our country in days that challenge and trouble most of us deeply. This past week, a House committee continued to make it's report, by which some are deeply troubled while others dismiss it as a partisan witch hunt. One day the Supreme Court expands

gun rights and the next legislators impose new restrictions. The Roe v Wade decision sends thousands into streets across the country, some in overwhelming celebration, others in heart broken protest. Beloved One, we are a divided people. Help us, especially in these times, to listen to the story that each can tell about what brings them to this moment. Guide us, that together we might seek the truth, protect the vulnerable and honor and preserve life – all lives. Shine your light on our lives, and lead us in paths of peace, in our walk of faith and in the work of sharing love.

Hear our prayers, O God, spoken and unspoken. And hear us as we join together in the prayer that Jesus taught, saying: Our Father...

PRAYER OF OUR SAVIOR (depts)

OFFERING

With lavish abundance, God pours gifts into us and upon us. Gifts of the Spirit, which include love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness and self-control, to name just a few. Also, gifts of resources and skills, time and ability. Gifts with which we can ease our neighbor's pain, build bridges of understanding, help feed the hungry, encourage a child, offer shelter to those on the street, provide companionship to the lonely, support a church. In each of these gifts and through all of them, God is richly blessed and the beloved community is strengthened. Thank you for all of the ways, large and small, that you participate in the work of God, here in our community and around the world. Please join me in dedicating our gifts to God:

PRAYER OF DEDICATION (in unison)

Gracious God, we ask your blessing upon the tangible expressions of our joy and care. Renew in us a sense of our abundance in all times and a never-failing compassion for all who need hope, for we pray in the spirit of Jesus Christ who is the source of hope and joy, of our gifts and our open hands. Amen
(Maren C. Tirabassi, *Touch Holiness*)

HYMN No. 43 “Great Is Thy Faithfulness”

Great is Thy faithfulness, O God My Father,
There is no shadow of turning with Thee;
Thou changest not, Thy compassions they fail not;
As Thou hast been Thou forever wilt be.
Great is Thy faithfulness! Great is Thy faithfulness!
Morning by morning new mercies I see;
All I have needed Thy hand hath provided -
Great is Thy faithfulness, Lord unto to me!

Summer and winter, and springtime and harvest,
Sun, moon and stars in their courses above
Join with all nature in manifold witness
To Thy great faithfulness, mercy and love.
Great is Thy faithfulness! Great is Thy faithfulness!
Morning by morning new mercies I see;
All I have needed Thy hand hath provided -
Great is Thy faithfulness, Lord unto to me!

BENEDICTION

The blessing of God, whose love creates new life and whose fire burns away our impurities, be with you on your journey of life.

The blessing of God, whose love has the power to transform our living from old habits into new hope, be with you always.

The blessing of God, whose Spirit blesses our spirit with wisdom and vision, emboldens you to
proclaim the good news of God's love to all. Amen. *(Chalice Worship)*