

UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST CONGREGATIONAL  
Wallace, Idaho

Alice M.C. Ling, Pastor

July 17, 2022

Sixth Sunday after Pentecost

PRELUDE “*Leaning on the Everlasting Arms*”

WELCOME AND ANNOUNCEMENTS

CALL TO WORSHIP

Let us rejoice, for morning has dawned. A new day is born, and we are newly alive to enjoy it.

**We celebrate the beauty of creation and the wonder of human family. We remember those whose love has shaped our lives and those whose struggles for justice have been unsleeping in spite of opposition.**

We gather to worship God, to share prayers and gifts, to pledge ourselves to God’s work in the world.

**May God bless us, so that what we do in this time together may be honest, sacred, and filled with hope.**

(Maren C. Tirabassi, *Touch Holiness*)

HYMN No. 60 “*Morning Has Broken*”

Morning has broken Like the first morning,

Blackbird has spoken Like the first bird.

Praise for the singing! Praise for the morning!

Praise for them springing Fresh from the Word!

Mine is the sunlight! Mine is the morning,

Born of the one light Eden saw play!

Praise with elation, Praise every morning,

God’s recreation Of the new day!

PRAYER OF INVOCATION (in unison)

**Journeying God, come into our house and find welcome here. Draw each of us to sit at your feet and listen to your words. Help us set aside all that would distract us from receiving you. Center our restless minds; soothe our anxious hearts; quiet our overwrought bodies; call to our thirsty souls. Dear Christ, be gentle with us as we are, and lead us to the better part of life which you have in mind for us today. Amen.**

(Maren C. Tirabassi, *An Improbable Gift of Blessing*)

SCRIPTURE READING

Genesis 18:1-10a

The LORD appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat at the entrance of his tent in the heat of the day. He looked up and saw three men standing near him. When he saw them, he ran from the tent entrance to meet them and bowed down to the ground. He said, “My lord, if I find favor with you, do not pass by your servant. Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree. Let me bring a little bread, that you may refresh yourselves, and after that you may pass on—since you have come to your servant.” So they said, “Do as you have said.” And Abraham hastened into the tent to Sarah and said, “Make ready quickly three measures of choice flour, knead it, and make cakes.” Abraham ran to the herd and took a calf, tender and good, and gave it to the servant, who hastened to prepare it. Then he took curds and milk and the calf that he had prepared and set it before them, and he stood by them under the tree while they ate.

They said to him, “Where is your wife Sarah?” And he said, “There, in the tent.” Then one said, “I will surely return to you in due season, and your wife Sarah shall have a son.”

### Luke 10:38-42

Now as they went on their way, he entered a certain village where a woman named Martha welcomed him. She had a sister named Mary, who sat at Jesus's feet and listened to what he was saying. But Martha was distracted by her many tasks, so she came to him and asked, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her, then, to help me." But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things, but few things are needed—indeed only one. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her."

### SERMON

If my first name could be "food", my second would definitely be "hospitality." Or so I like to think. I love to eat. And to cook. And go out to eat. And invite people in for a meal. Or an overnight, weekend, extended stay; just about anything. But I'm also gradually beginning to admit that I haven't always done all that well at offering welcome and truly greeting people the way I intend. Having grown up on a working dairy farm, I didn't have a lot of experience throwing dinner parties. What I had was a mother who was always more than ready to feed anyone who showed up at the door, and extremely gracious when I wanted to bring friends home with me from school, whether for a weekend or a holiday, and either well planned in advance or as a complete surprise. Even from her hospice bed, when she was no longer able to eat solid food, I often told her who was coming to visit that day, and she inevitably responded by asking what we were going to have to eat. I learned well from her how to throw open the door and welcome people in. What it's taken me longer to learn is how to be ready to receive guests when they arrive. Even thinking about it this week has resurfaced some unattractive memories of dinner parties that were meant to impress, but I bit off more than I could chew and started much too late, and couldn't get myself out of the kitchen to visit or have food ready enough to invite them to the table.

Which means that while I am more inclined to apologies than outbursts, I can sympathize with Martha. She did what she'd been raised to do, and in truth, what was expected of her. Hospitality was a very important thing in her culture, and one of the first lessons she'd been taught as a young girl. When Jesus decided to drop in on her and her sister Mary, her first impulse was to get something going in the kitchen. This was in the days before frozen dinners or cellophane wrapped prepared foods that could be rushed through the microwave and ready to appear hot on the table in the blink of an eye; instead she went to work building a fire and boiling water, chopping vegetables and setting the table for three. She had assumed her sister would help her get a fitting meal for their guest, but Mary clearly had other thoughts. As Martha headed for the kitchen and reached for her apron, Mary plopped herself down on the cushions at Jesus' feet and planted herself there like she didn't have a care in the world, and all that mattered were the words coming out his mouth. In fact, what Mary did was assume the position of a disciple, which was very much NOT part of her upbringing! She'd been raised better than that, and who could blame Martha for banging a few pots and putting things down on the table with a little more thump than was necessary.

I can just imagine Martha muttering and sighing her way around the kitchen, with a bit of slamming thrown in for good measure. She was not one to keep a tight lid on her feelings, and it was clear to all of them that the steam building in the kitchen was not just in the pot on the stove. Interestingly, when she finally burst her seams and exploded into the living room, it wasn't even her sister that she confronted. No, she went straight for Jesus: Lord, don't you even care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself while she sits here staring into your eyes, hanging on your every word? How can you condone this kind of behavior? Tell her to get up off her lazy little duff and help me! Not exactly what I'd call hospitality... even if that was what Martha intended when the whole effort began.

Martha had worked herself up into such a frenzy that she flung her anger at Jesus and went on the attack, asking him if he cared about what was going on. The disciples asked him that once, when they

were in the middle of a lake, being swamped by a storm that had blown up out of nowhere; that time, Jesus calmed the wind and the waves, and set everything right. This time? This time the only thing he tried to calm was Martha. I picture him smiling as he said, Martha, Martha, my dear friend, you are distracted and worried about many things. He didn't address Busy Beaver Martha, but Worried and Distracted Martha. He was speaking to his friend who had worried herself into a state of anxious distraction over the meal she wanted to serve her guest. Even though she managed to use the very significant title of "Lord" when she addressed him, she did it with anger and frustration that overrode and undercut any sense of hospitality she was trying to offer. And besides, hospitality isn't first of all about food, it's about focus and presence and the gift of time together. Those were gifts that in that moment, Martha was simply incapable of offering Jesus.

Commentators and preachers have tried to make all sorts of meaning out of this story over the years – what's women's work and what isn't; the significance of an active life as compared to a contemplative life – is one more important than the other, or do the two need to be balanced? Is Jesus opposed to food and hospitality? Why is he pitting one sister against the other? None of that really resonates with me. The piece of this story that has caught my attention this year is Jesus' words to Martha, cajoling her that she's worried and distracted by many things, when only one thing is needed. That's something I can relate to. That language reminds me of nights of broken sleep when my mind chews on and dissects all manner of questions and concerns, some of them important and troubling during the day as well the night, others frivolous hitchhikers that aren't deserving of the time or attention my psyche wants to give them. "Distracted" reminds me of days when my mind is so caught up in something that I can walk right by someone without ever knowing I've done it, until I turn around and see them trying to get my attention.

The problem in this story is not the fact that Martha is busy or that she wants to serve Jesus a nice meal. The problem is that she is so distraught and overwrought that she is totally unavailable to him; she cannot enjoy his company, savor his presence, receive anything he wishes to offer her or show him genuine love. And then, she gets herself so worked up that she goes on the charge with her frustration and complaints. The problem is her focus on herself and her "me" language. In one verse, she uses the word "me" three times: when she approaches Jesus, she says, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me. In the life of faith, it's often not all about us. In fact, it rarely is. It's about the other, about focus, about listening, about service, about being present – to Christ, to God, and to the people of God who are among us.

A few years ago a column appeared on the op-ed page of the *New York Times* called "The Taxi Driver". The writer told of being driven by cab from the Charles de Gaulle Airport to Paris. During the one-hour trip, he and the driver did six things: the driver had driven the cab, talked on his cell phone, and watched a video (that one was a little nerve-wracking!), whereas the passenger had been riding, working on a column on his laptop and listening to his iPod. He wrote, "There was only one thing we never did: talk to each other." And then he went on to quote a technologist, who had written that the disease of the Internet age is "continuous partial attention." (*Feasting on the Word*, page 267)

Perhaps continuous partial attention has been around longer than the internet. Perhaps that's what plagued Martha as she fussed and fretted in the kitchen; wrapped up in her worry and distraction, she totally missed the very person she longed to encounter and impress. It's an ailment that can strike any of us most any time. Whether we're scrambling to prepare a meal or clean a house, laboring to support our families or make a birthday gift for a grandchild, it's totally conceivable that we can get swept up by distractions and concerns and become unavailable to the very people we set out to serve. And if that's true with the people who live with us and who share our lives, how much more true is it with Jesus? The one who has come to us to bring us close to God, to teach us the will and way of God, to show us love and to encourage us to walk and grow in that love. That's what Jesus was speaking to

when he tried to tell Martha that only one thing was needed – that she focus on him. Everything else needs to get in line behind him.

We’ve become experts at multi-tasking, at increasing productivity and monitoring efficiency, so much so that too often, we fail to be present to the people around us. That’s what happened to Martha – not only was she locked off by herself in the kitchen, but it didn’t take long before she had herself worked up into such a frothing frenzy that she was totally lost to her guest. The text calls us back to the moment, to the one who is with us and beside us. This text asks us to set aside the multitude of things that have us thoroughly distracted and preoccupied, even if they’re good and valuable things – and to listen for the word of God. To focus first on what it means to love God with all our heart, mind, soul and strength, and our neighbor as ourselves. After we’ve taken that into us, and felt its richness and steeped in its truth, then we can let it lead us forward. Amen.

HYMN No. 381 “*Open My Eyes, That I May See*”

Open my eyes, that I may see Glimpses of truth Thou hast for me;  
Place in my hands the wonderful key, That shall unclasp and set me free.  
Silently now I wait for Thee, Ready, my God, Thy will to see;  
Open my eyes, illumine me, Spirit divine!

Open my ears, that I may hear Voices of truth Thou sendest clear;  
And while the wavenotes fall on my ear, Everything false will disappear.  
Silently now I wait for Thee, Ready, my God, Thy will to see;  
Open my ears, Illumine me, Spirit divine!

#### PRAYER REQUESTS

#### PASTORAL PRAYER

O Holy God, Creator of the humpback whale and the butterfly, huckleberries and threads of silver whose veins run through our mountains, we give you thanks for all that wears your fingerprints and points to you as its Maker. We thank you especially for our lives, for the loved ones who accompany us through our days, walk us around the block, greet us in the grocery store, and call us to check in. For the gift of summer and the ways in which it nourishes our spirits, whether time on the river or splashing in the pool, the adventure of travel or the rest of losing ourselves in a book, the crackle of a campfire or the joy of a bike ride. You are with us in all that we do and everywhere we go, the quiet of day’s end and the hope of each new day, and we give thanks for your faithful presence and overflowing love.

Beloved One, we admit to you how easy it is to get lost in the swirl of our own thoughts and worries, the unknowns that keep us awake at night, the distractions that interfere with our ability to be present to the one beside us, the anxiety that clouds our eyes and ears to your presence and your voice. Slow us down, calm our concerns, speak peace to our anxious spirits, help us to listen for you, to trust in you, to lean on you as together we make our way through the twists and turns of all the choices and changes that await us. We pray especially for our congregation, and our life together as pastor and people, as we move steadily closer to the day when we will go our separate ways. None of us knows what lies ahead for us in the month of August and beyond, and that leaves us more than a little unsettled. Remind us again of your promise to never abandon or forsake us, but rather to be present, to walk with us through the familiar as well as foreign landscape to come, to lead us, hold a light for us, speak peace to us, and ground us in your hope. Keep our ears tuned to your Word and our hearts open to your Love.

We pray for all those who are sick, for those who grieve, for caregivers who grow weary, for those battling addictions, scarred by abuse, estranged from loved ones. We pray for those whose home is the back seat of a car, a friend’s couch or a spot under the bridge, for those forced to choose between health care and a tank of gas, who simply can’t find a light or anything resembling the end of their tunnel. Be

with those struggling to survive brutal heat, recovering from severe weather, battling wildfires. We pray for our country, for the hostilities and tensions that divide us, the gun violence that continues to shatter every day activities and destroy lives, the brittle impatience that makes it easier to turn on each other than find a way through our differences. Pour out your wisdom on all of us, that we might dare to imagine new possibilities for our life together, live with compassion, act with courage, listen with patience, walk in love.

Hear our prayers, spoken and unspoken; and hear us as we join our voices in the prayer that Jesus taught his friends, when they asked him how they should pray: Our Father...

PRAYER OF OUR SAVIOR (depts)

OFFERING

God has richly blessed us, and asks us to be a blessing to others. Through the sharing of our lives, the giving of part of what we have, the offering of our time and energy, our talents and treasures, others are blessed, the church is strengthened, and God's love and presence are made real. Thank you for all that you do, and all that you give.

PRAYER OF DEDICATION (in unison)

**O God, through the offering of our gifts, may we become a more open people... open-minded in hearing your Word and wisdom, open-hearted in healing a broken world, open-handed in heeding your call for charity and enacted love. With thanks for all good gifts, we present a portion of our substance and the whole of ourselves. Amen.** (Glen E. Rainsley, *Touch Holiness*)

HYMN No. 297 "I Love to Tell the Story"

I love to tell the story of unseen things above,  
Of Jesus and His glory, of Jesus and His love.  
I love to tell the story because I know 'tis true,  
It satisfies my longings as nothing else can do.  
I love to tell the story! 'Twill be my theme in glory –  
thank you To tell the old, old story Of Jesus and His love.

I love to tell the story, for those who know it best  
Seem hungering and thirsting to hear it like the rest;  
And when in scenes of glory I sing the new, new song,  
'Twill be the old, old story that I have loved so long.  
I love to tell the story! 'Twill be my theme in glory –  
To tell the old, old story Of Jesus and His love.

BENEDICTION

So now we leave this time of worship. And while so much of the road ahead is uncertain, the path constantly changing, we know some things that are as solid and sure as the ground beneath our feet, and the sky above our heads.

We know God is love.

We know Christ's light endures.

We know the Holy Spirit is here, found in the space between all things, closer to us than our next breath, binding us to each other, until we meet we again,

Go in peace. Amen.

(Rev. Nora Vedress, Calvary United Church in Prince Albert, Saskatchewan, Canada)