

UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST CONGREGATIONAL
Wallace, Idaho

Alice M.C. Ling, Pastor

July 24, 2022

Seventh Sunday after Pentecost

PRELUDE “*This Is My Father’s World*”

WELCOME AND ANNOUNCEMENTS

CALL TO WORSHIP

It is in this place of holiness that we can come with our fears, our doubts, all the questions of our hearts.

We come to this place, to hear the words of peace, of hope, of joy God speaks to us.

It is in this place of discovery that we can come searching.

We come to this place, to find the One who has been looking for us.

It is in this place of openness that we can come knocking.

We come to this place, to be embraced by the One whose heart is never locked.

(Thom Shuman, LectionaryLiturgies.blogspot.com)

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.

OPENING PRAYER

Our creator God, Ancient of Days, Holy Mother of all worlds and living souls: Your arms, that once flung galaxies of stars like grains of sand, are open wide, and close enough to carry each of us like a father cradles his child next to his heart. May your sacred name be praised! May your realm extend, a commonwealth of mercy, peace and justice. Your love knits all created nature into one whole. Your will for us always is love; and so we pray:

May your love be done on earth, in time, as it is in eternity. Give all of us each day the bread we need, and hope to all who hunger for your life. And as we share our bread along the way, pardon us the times we've broken faith. Forgive our lack of loyalty and love; and move us quickly to forgiveness when wrongs are done to us. Do not abandon us in the time of hard testing. Save us from evil’s every incarnation, From the powers that possess our spirits and our structures. Forever bind us to your liberating joy! For you alone are God of grace and glory, and Rock of our Redemption. Let it be so, God, let it be so. Amen.

(from the *New Zealand Prayer Book*. <http://anglicanprayerbook.org.nz/>)

SCRIPTURE READING

Psalm 138

I give you thanks, O LORD, with my whole heart;

before the gods I sing your praise;

I bow down toward your holy temple

and give thanks to your name for your steadfast love and your faithfulness,

for you have exalted your name and your word

above everything.
On the day I called, you answered me;
you increased my strength of soul.
All the kings of the earth shall praise you, O LORD,
for they have heard the words of your mouth.
They shall sing of the ways of the LORD,
for great is the glory of the LORD.
For though the LORD is high, he regards the lowly,
but the haughty he perceives from far away.
Though I walk in the midst of trouble,
you preserve me against the wrath of my enemies;
you stretch out your hand,
and your right hand delivers me.
The LORD will fulfill his purpose for me;
your steadfast love, O LORD, endures forever.
Do not forsake the work of your hands.

Luke 11:1-13

He was praying in a certain place, and after he had finished, one of his disciples said to him, “Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples.” So he said to them, “When you pray, say:

Father, may your name be revered as holy.
May your kingdom come.
Give us each day our daily bread.
And forgive us our sins,
for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us.
And do not bring us to the time of trial.”

And he said to them, “Suppose one of you has a friend, and you go to him at midnight and say to him, ‘Friend, lend me three loaves of bread, for a friend of mine has arrived, and I have nothing to set before him.’ And he answers from within, ‘Do not bother me; the door has already been locked, and my children are with me in bed; I cannot get up and give you anything.’ I tell you, even though he will not get up and give him anything out of friendship, at least because of his persistence he will get up and give him whatever he needs.

“So I say to you, Ask, and it will be given to you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. Is there anyone among you who, if your child asked for a fish, would give a snake instead of a fish? Or if the child asked for an egg, would give a scorpion? If you, then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!”

SERMON

Who taught you to pray? Mother or father? Minister or Sunday school teacher? Was it direct instruction with someone telling you what to do or say? Did they give you some words to recite, have you read them out of a book or let you make up your own? Or maybe you learned more by example – picking up clues by watching others. I don’t have many answers to my own questions today. I don’t remember that we said grace over meals, except when we had holiday feasts with my aunts, uncles and cousins, and then my cousin Betty was pretty likely to sing one; if Aunt Josephine was home from the mission field in Pakistan or Afghanistan, she probably said one. I don’t remember bedtime prayers, on or off my knees, but that doesn’t mean we didn’t say them. I was in church every Sunday, swinging my patten

leather shoes off the edge of the pew, so I obviously heard some there, and probably in Sunday school too, but I don't have any distinct memories.

I love the approach from the book *Anne of Green Gables*. Anne was an orphan, taken in by a pair of foster parents who are clear that if she's going to stay with them, she will have to become a proper young lady, and who figure out quickly that they have their work cut out for them. About the second night she was with them, Marilla told Anne to say her prayers and Anne immediately replied that she never does that. She offered to recite the entire catechism, but then said that if she was going to have to pray, she would need to be told what to say – at least for the first night. After she'd had some time to think about it, she would probably be able to come up with something, but for now, she needed some help. When Marilla replied by telling Anne to get down on her knees, Anne asked,

Why must people kneel down to pray? If I really wanted to pray... I'd go out into a great big field all alone or into the deep, deep woods, and I'd look up into the sky – up – up – up – into that lovely blue sky that looks as if there was no end to its blueness. And then I'd just feel a prayer. Well, I'm ready. What am I to say?

Marilla decided against teaching Anne “Now I lay me down to sleep”, because she didn't seem quite pure enough. So instead she told Anne to just thank God for her blessings and to ask humbly for the things she wanted. Which Anne did.

“Gracious heavenly Father – that's the way the ministers say it in church, so I suppose it's all right in a private prayer, isn't it?” she interjected, lifting her head for a moment. “Gracious heavenly Father, I thank thee for the White Way of Delight and the Lake of Shining Waters and Bonny and the Snow Queen. I'm really extremely grateful for them. That's all the blessings I can think of just now to thank Thee for. As for the things I want, they're so numerous that it would take a great deal of time to name them all, so I will only mention the two most important. Please let me stay at Green Gables; and please let me be good-looking when I grow up. I remain,
“Yours respectfully,
“Anne Shirley.”

Well, that's two approaches: thees and thous, heavenly Father and respectfully yours; or go out, lay down in a big field, take in the vastness of the blue sky and feel a prayer. Would you go with one of those or something different? What's the right way to pray? Is there just one? Do you have a favorite, or does it all feel awkward and gangly, beyond your level of expertise? I'm not primarily asking about public prayer, or out loud in front of others, but privately between you and God. How do you go about it, and how comfortable are you with the whole enterprise?

When today's reading from Luke opens, Jesus is just finishing up his prayers and one of his disciples steps forward and asks Jesus to teach them how to pray. Curious. We know the disciples were devout Jews who knew the scriptures and the prayer book backward and forward; they'd been taught by their fathers or rabbis or maybe both, so prayer wasn't a new concept to them. I tend to think they had their eyes fixed on Jesus and his habits. It's obvious how central prayer is to his life, and how alive his relationship with God is; they're impressed and inspired, and want some of what he has, so they ask him to teach them how to pray.

Jesus responds by offering a three part answer on prayer, a response that begins and ends with the notion of God as Father. I'm confident you've noticed that I rarely refer to God as Father, in large part because I think we've overused the title and wandered perilously close to thinking of God as an old man with a beard, like Moses but more so. The problem is that God is spirit, not flesh; God doesn't have hair or body parts or gender. The Bible uses countless rich and wonderful images for God, everything from Father to Mother to Mother Hen to Rock to Shepherd to Eagle. But the power and the beauty of using the notion of Father here, in talk about prayer, is the kind of intimacy that's being described. Jesus doesn't just say “Father”, he uses the Aramaic word *abba*, or Daddy. It's familiar and

intimate, trusting and faithful, loving with a wide open heart. That's who we pray to: the one who knows us inside and out, who's been there since before we can remember, who shows up for us, always has, always will. The notion of relationship is woven all the way through this text on prayer: our relationship with God and God's relationship with us. We are not only invited but also encouraged to bring all of who we are to God in prayer, and we can dare to do that, because we know God to be trustworthy and sure.

In Luke's version of the Lord's Prayer, Jesus begins by handing us an exquisite tension between a God who is among us so intimately that we can call him Daddy, while at the same time being hallowed, holy, totally other than us, a sovereign with a kingdom that Jesus instructs us to pray will come to earth just as surely as God has come to earth. Then all flowery speech is set aside and we're invited to be really honest with God about what we want. This prayer has no high and lofty words of thanks and adoration – just cut to the core basics: give us, forgive us, lead us, deliver us. It's so direct that it's almost pushy, and based on the assumption of absolute human necessity. There are things we cannot do for ourselves, try as hard as we might to insulate ourselves from that reality, and prayer is the way we carry those needs to God. Prayers don't need to be flowery or formal. It doesn't help for them to be offered in some professional or profound way. Just turn your heart to God with the truth of your need, and trust that God will answer.

I'm really caught by the ways in which this prayer asks some things of us, if not downright commits us to them. We often think of prayer as a time when we take our wish lists to God, and say, here's what we want you to do for us and for those we love. Jesus' prayer hands some responsibility back to us. Like when he says, Father, hallowed be your name. Karoline Lewis rephrased that just a bit saying, let your name be sacred – which is at least partly in our hands. Our actions as the people of God influence God's reputation in this world. (*Sermon Brainwave* podcast) How well are we doing at promoting and protecting God's name as sacred, at demonstrating who the loving, faithful God is? And then there's that phrase, "Forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us." Really? Everyone? Do you? I'm working on it, but I still have some people I haven't been able to forgive. I'm not quite sure how to read the two phrases. Are we asking God to forgive us our sins like we are already forgive everyone else's sins? I don't know if we're conceding that God doesn't have to do the forgiveness thing until we get it handled, but it seems very clear to me that we have some significant work to do to hold up our end of that one.

After Jesus lays out the prayer, he goes on to tell a parable about going to our neighbor's house in the middle of the night, and beating shamelessly on the door, pleading that our friend get up and give us some bread so we can welcome the guest who has just arrived. Our neighbor explains that he and the missus are down for the night, as are the kids, the dogs, the goats, the hens. This racket of yours is going to get them all up and then none of us will get any sleep, but still the neighbor persists. I hear Jesus encouraging us to demonstrate that very same persistence, or more accurately translated as shamelessness in prayer. If you want something, go after it. Open your heart, spill the beans, make your argument, persist, plead, throw yourself into it. Trust that God will hear you, receive you and answer you. Which is the very next thing Jesus says: Ask, and it will be given you; search and you will find; knock and the door will be opened for you.

This part is hard. Who among us hasn't had the experience of asking and not receiving, searching and not finding, knocking and no door being opened to us? My heart still breaks for the family who lost a daughter 40 years ago to leukemia; when she died, people told her parents that if only they had prayed harder, maybe she'd still be alive. I don't want to be part of that kind of abuse. So I go back and read the text more carefully, and see in the closing paragraph that Jesus promises to answer, to find, to open the door, but in Luke's gospel, he doesn't promise to give us what we're asking for. He promises the gift of the Holy Spirit: God's own, abundant, indwelling and overflowing self; God's loving, consoling,

healing, transforming, and empowering Spirit; the lifeblood that transformed the broken and frightened disciples into unstoppable witnesses and gave birth to the Church. When it comes to no-holds-barred, absolutely self-giving generosity, God's answer to all of our prayers will always be Yes through the gift of the Holy Spirit.

So here's the question for us: do we consider the "yes" of God's Spirit a sufficient response to our prayers? If God's guaranteed answer to our petitions is God's own self, can we live with that? Debie Thomas writes, "I'll be honest: sometimes I can, and sometimes I can't... The truth is, it's hard to persist in prayer and not receive the answers I'm hoping for. It's hard to accept the Holy Spirit as God's perfect gift when I'd rather receive healing for my son's chronic headaches, or an end to the toxicity that now governs American politics, or lasting freedom from anxiety, or commonsense gun control, or some reliable hope in the face of global climate change. My love for God, I realize, is thinner than I thought it was — often I want stuff from God much more than I want God. I want God to sweep in and fix everything much more than I want God's Spirit to fill and accompany me so that I can do my part to heal the world. Resting in God's yes requires vulnerability, patience, courage, discipline and trust — traits I can only cultivate in prayer.

"So we pray. We pray because Jesus wants us to. We pray because it's what God's children do. We pray because we yearn and our yearning is precious to God. And we pray because what we need most — whether we recognize it or not — is God's own Spirit pouring God's self into us. With words, without words, through laughter, through tears, in hope, and in despair, our prayers usher in God's Spirit, and remind us that we are not alone in this broken, aching world. God's Spirit is our Yes. God's Spirit is our guarantee." ("When You Pray", *Journey with Jesus*) Thanks be to God.

HYMN No. 429 "Lord, Listen to Your Children Praying"

Lord, listen to Your children praying,
Lord, send Your Spirit in this place;
Lord, listen to Your children praying,
Send us love; send us power; send us grace.

PRAYER REQUESTS

PASTORAL PRAYER

Take our hands, God, not to lift us out of the world, but to lead us through it as a mother fondly leads her son and a father his daughter. God, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Take from us the worn clothes of adulthood and dress us up like children, so that we can dream and imagine and play again without fear or contradiction. God, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Speak to us in the silence we learn to cherish, and let our conversation with you move from formality to friendliness, until all of life and all of us become open to your Spirit. God, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Graciously treasure us, God, as a lover embraces the beloved. Reveal to us in fond intimacy all that you wish us to receive from you and all you wish to receive from us. God, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Give us a deep cherishing where we have had our fill of shallow pleasures; give us affection for ourselves where we have neglected the beauty that you planted in us; give us love for you, especially if respect is all we usually offer. God, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

And this day, to those who are anxious bring calm, and enliven those impaired by apathy. To the sick, in body, mind and spirit, bring healing, and to their caregivers bring skill and sensitivity. To the abused, bring safe affection, and send an angel to forestall their abusers. To the war-torn and oppressed, bring the dawn of a different day, and to those who wield power, give the wisdom to use it wisely.

And now we put into your hands, which cradle creation, our souls, our bodies, our hopes, our fears, our past and our future; for you alone are God, from whom all goodness comes, and through whom all life is made new. (A Wee Worship Book, Fifth Incarnation, Wild Goose Resource Group)

Hear us as we join together in the prayer Jesus taught, when his friends asked him how they should pray: Our Father...

PRAYER OF OUR SAVIOR (depts)

OFFERING

What an abundance of gifts we have to offer: musical talent, the melody of laughter, the use of our hands in cooking and repairs, the use of our minds in problem solving, curiosity, compassion, patience, urgency, spiritual reservoirs, financial resources, obedience, and courage to act. All these gifts, and others which bear our personal marks, are symbolized in our offering for the work of the church. Let us commit ourselves in service as we dedicate our offerings to God's use.

PRAYER OF DEDICATION (in unison)

Loving God, you permit us in worship to collect our thoughts and feelings, then focus them in prayer. You encourage us in worship to collect our offerings and intentions, then release them for your use. We ask that you receive our prayer and guide the use of all our gifts. In the name of Jesus Christ, we pray. Amen. (Glen E. Rainsley, *Hear Our Prayer*)

HYMN No. 435 "What a Friend We Have in Jesus"

What a friend we have in Jesus, All our sins and griefs to bear!
What a privilege to carry Everything to God in prayer!
O what peace we often forfeit, O what needless pain we bear;
All because we do not carry Everything to God in prayer!

Have we trials and temptations? Is there trouble anywhere?
We should never be discouraged, Take it to the Lord in prayer.
Can we find a friend so faithful Who will all our sorrows share?
Jesus knows our every weakness, Take it to the Lord in prayer.

BENEDICTION

God go with you in all that is gentle
Christ go with you in all that is brave
And the Sprit go with you in all that is free.
Go now in peace, to love and serve our God. Amen.