**Nu‘uanu Congregational Church, 2651 Pali Highway**

**United Church of Christ Honolulu, Hawai‘i 96817**

**Online Worship & Sermon May 17, 2020**

**SIXTH SUNDAY OF EASTER**

PRELUDE Jieun Kim Newland

Largo from Concerto in D Minor after Vivaldi | J.S. Bach (1685-1750)

ANNOUNCEMENTS Lori Yamashiro

GREETING/CALL TO WORSHIP **—**Psalm 66:8, 9; Acts 17:24

Bless the Lord, O people, sing!

**Let the sound of praise ring out!**

Come and hear what the Lord has done,

**the Lord who has made everything!**

OPENING SENTENCES

Friends, God honors us with free-will; the power to make decisions even though God is fully aware that, in one moment, one decision can turn the whole of our life toward rescue or loss, in the direction of life or death. Through Christ, we need never make any of life’s decisions alone. The Holy Spirit is our constant companion and guide. Let this truth rest upon your hearts as we listen to Scripture and open our minds, hearts, and lives to God.

PRAYER SEEKING Reconciliation

*Let us prepare ourselves to receive God’s gift of holy Scripture*

*by setting aside all that burdens our hearts and spirits.*

Brothers and sisters, —Psalm 66:20; Acts 17:30

God not only asks us to repent,

but also assures us of forgiveness.

Therefore, let us confess our sins

to the one who is steadfast love.

Let us pray: —1Peter 3:16, 21; John 14:15, 21

**Loving God, we do not always keep your commandments, we fail to love you; our conscience is not clear. Wash us in the water of life that we may live again through the grace and mercy of Jesus, our resurrected Savior. Amen.**

Let us keep a short silence to reflect on what we have prayed.

AN Assurance

Hear the Good News:

Sisters and brothers, God forgives, restores, and strengthens us through the risen Christ. Know that God’s grace to us flows exuberantly, and constantly. We only need receive it and live. So, let us do just that: let us give thanks and live as forgiven and forgiving people!

PASSING THE PEACE OF GOD

A READING FROM THE GOSPELS Carol Hamada

John 14:15-21 *“The Promise of the Holy Spirit”*

15‘If you love me, you will keep my commandments. 16And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you for ever. 17This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you.

18‘I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. 19In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live. 20On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you. 21They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them.’

SERMON *“No Strangers Here”* Pastor Jeannie Thompson

One of my favorite things in the whole world is traveling by train. Therefore, whenever I am on the mainland, I make a real effort to work-in at least one train ride.

About ten years ago, I was in Cleveland for a national church committee meeting, and I had decided to take some vacation time right after we were finished. I had made arrangements to go on retreat at an Anglican monastery in New York. It’s called the Holy Cross Monastery, and it is located just outside of Poughkeepsie, NY, along the Hudson River.

Aside from the notion of spending time following the Benedictine order for the day—which includes a “Great Silence” that begins at 8:00 pm and lifts twelve hours later the next morning, I was also attracted by the idea of spending my days resting, reading, and going to chapel for the daily round services of Scripture and prayer.

At some of the worship gatherings, the monks would offer to God a few Gregorian chants. The sound of their voices would echo off the bare hardwood floors and into the high ceilings.

Getting to the monastery from Cleveland was to begin with the train ride I so looked forward to. I had, I thought, carefully mapped-out the whole trip. From Cleveland, I would change trains in Buffalo—no problem. Well, none except that I had misread the time-table. Instead of a short stop, it turned out that I had a six-hour layover.

It was Sunday, and as I sat down in the waiting room in Buffalo, I thought I could just sit there and read—I always have more than enough reading material with me. Then I thought to myself—hey, it’s Sunday. I’m going to go to church!

So, I whipped-out my smart phone and looked for UCC churches that were close to the train station. One, Pilgrim-St. Luke seemed to be close. So, I gathered all of my belongings and went out and jumped into one of the taxicabs that always seem to be waiting around train stations. By my calculations, the church was only a few miles from the station.

Once again, I was wrong. It was more than a twenty-minute ride! What’s more: I got there fifteen minutes after the start of worship.

But get there I did, and in that beautiful old church, I settled into one of the back pews and found my place in the order of worship. I was in a strange new place and so it was really lovely to be able to sing from *The New Century Hymnal.* It was like being at worship at home…yet not.

That is the thing about the church and church life, and what I believe Christ was trying to convey to his disciples—that the love he offers us can instill, in the farthest places from home, a sense of the familiar. It can become a place where even being far from home can still be a place of welcome and safety.

The passage from the Gospel of John we just heard is part of what is known as “the farewell discourse.” It begins late in chapter thirteen, right after the last supper, and will continue on through chapter seventeen.

This farewell discourse of Jesus is the type of speech that was well-known in ancient times. It was usually offered by an important person in which he would sum-up his life and actions in the world. It was also usually offered as a preface to the individual’s impending death and in some cases offers it is meant to comfort in the face of the grief this announcement produces. The speaker may also predict what will come in the future, including, in different cases, evil or God’s care. This is in keeping with the ancient belief that one about to die is given prophetic powers. These farewell discourses also contain instruction on how those left behind should behave, and at times the discourses conclude with a prayer for those left behind.

Jesus follows this form rather closely. Yet his is also an appeal to them that they should embrace the love he has lived among them as a goal for their lives. Coming quickly to the close of his earthly ministry, he can only speak of love.

Jesus also departs from the regular form of such speeches when he tells them that his and God’s love for them is going to continue to provide for them. They need not fear the future. They need not think of themselves as alone and abandoned. His place with them, he assures them, is going to be filled by the Holy Spirit. (In the Gospel of John, the word used to describe this is the word Paraclete which can mean advocate or counselor—either way, it is the promise of help and support.)

In a time when the world was dominated by all the trappings of empire—that is: a power that cared only about maintaining itself and its grip on control and supremacy, Jesus speaks to them of the power of love. It is a power that can and will maintain an intimacy with and among humans, even in the face of death itself.

The love of God can do this because God’s love looks outward. God’s love does not dwell only on its own needs. God’s love looks to the hopes and needs of the beloved. In this way, God’s love builds strength in the loved one. It builds the future wherein both God and human creatures live together in unity and security. Love creates sanctuary.

We know and see this most immediately in the way we raise and nurture children. We work at giving them whatever they need to grow and thrive. Although most parents would love it if their children stayed close and never left home—at least not too far from it—most find their greatest joy in supporting their children as they gain wisdom and self-sufficiency.

In effect, you raise your children not to need you! But of course, they will and they do, because you have given them your time, your trust in their abilities. You have truly loved them and who they are.

This is the kind of relationship God wants to have with us, and the kind of relationship God wants us to have with each other. This what Jesus is conveying to the disciples.

He is telling them of this love knowing full-well the kind of world they will continue to inhabit. In providing for them—in the form of the Holy Spirit—he is acknowledging that choosing to encounter the world with love—as he has done—is going to be very difficult. They will need help.

Just as we need help.

That is why we still need the Holy Spirit. It is why we must celebrate that this Spirit is still available to us—and always will be.

We must also cultivate the Spirit. This is to say: that our relationship with the Spirit is like every other relationship we have—it must be cultivated and nurtured so that we trust in it, and come to rely on it.

How do we do that?

Believe it or not, you are doing it right now.

This time of quarantine is a difficult time. Being isolated in our own homes, away from regular pleasures of life—like simply meeting a friend for coffee or a meal—is very hard. Some of us live in retirement communities which, I believe, is even a bit more difficult. You live in wonderful places with staff and other personnel that are doing everything they can to keep you safe and healthy, but I have at least some idea of how constraining it must be.

This, however, is one of the things we are asked to do for one another. We are asked to make sacrifices for each other; to bear one another’s burdens as Jesus bore ours, and then sent the Holy Spirit to live with us, that we need never be alone and without support.

You see, the love of God and Christ is a love that encourages us to ask ourselves: what do we owe each other? And then to take up that burden, and to allow with grace, others to do the same.

All of this, glorifies God because it trusts that love is real. It allows love—not fear or selfishness, to shape our lives and our actions. In short, we praise God when we live his love. We remember Christ and give thanks for his life when we live his love. We invite and embrace the realness of the Holy Spirit when we live his love, when we love others.

I started this sermon by telling you about my train trip into New York which had an unintended detour in Buffalo, and a UCC church called Pilgrim-St. Luke…there is a little more to the story:

Well, after worship, I was invited to coffee. When they found out I was from Hawaii, they were thrilled. Then they asked me if I knew Pastor Kaleo Patterson.

I nearly choked on my coffee. Of course I knew him. Also, Pastor Kaleo was the pastor of Kapaa First Hawaiian Church for several years—the church that sat directly across the street from Kapaa UCC. I had also spoken to him just a week and a half before that trip!

How did they know him?!

It seems that Pilgrim-St. Luke was the home church of one of the presidents of the United States, Grover Cleveland. Cleveland was the president who had tried to thwart the takeover of the Hawaiian kingdom and the house-arrest of Queen Liliuokalani. He was not, of course, successful, but his efforts are remembered by many Hawaiians to this day.

The folks at Pilgrim-St. Luke know and remember this because every year, Kaleo Patterson and some members of the Hawaiian community travel to that church. They worship together and they give thanks for the love that dared stand-up for justice, even in a time when imperial movements, like the one that brought Hawaii under American rule, were common and supported by most people.

Because of that connection, my experience at Pilgrim-St. Luke became even more like a homecoming. The hymns had been the first point of connection. Now their history and their values—their understanding of what love can and will do—became another point of unity.

I was no longer a visiting stranger. I was welcomed like a friend, taken out to lunch, and driven back to the train station to continue my journey.

This is the kind of love Jesus had had with the disciples. It was the kind of love he wanted them to continue to have for one another, and for all the others to whom they would tell the story of God’s love.

It is the kind of love that God wants us to have; the kind we can have because God’s relationship with us is still strong and good. It is nurtured by guidance and support, which is the Holy Spirit. It is made real in our lives when we trust it and live it.

These have been hard weeks and months for many of us in a variety of ways. I want to thank you for your patience and perseverance through them.

The bad news is that there are more challenges ahead, this is not yet over, but I pray that none of us will fall into despair, but will instead remember and embrace the Spirt of love and hope that surrounds us even now; giving us strength and confidence in his promise to stay at our side for all of our lives. And I pray, knowing all of this, we will find the strength and confidence to turn and love others, to find ways in which to make God’s love real and true in others’ lives, as it is in ours.

I pray that God will keep you safe and inspire you to do all of this and more. May this be so. Amen.

HYMN OF RESPONSE *“Joyful, Joyful, We Adore You”* Kristen Young

PRAYERS OF INTERCESSION & THE LORD’S PRAYER

*Let there be a brief time of silence after each petition.*

The Lord be with you.

**And also with you.**

Let us give thanks to God who listens

and cares about each appeal we make to God,

each need we express about our own lives, and the lives of others.

**We praise and bless you our true and loving God.**

We pray for all who search for you;

may they find their way in you.

Bless us with lips that sing your praise

and lives that tell the stories of all that you have done for us.

Open our eyes to find you among us

as we share your love with others.

Lord in your mercy, **hear our prayers.**

We pray for all who are oppressed by governments or institutions:

for those whose voices are not heard or believed,

those with no one on their side.

Bless us with a joy for justice

and the strength to persevere as we work toward your coming realm.

Lord in your mercy, **hear our prayers.**

We pray for all who hunger,

and those who worry each day how they will care for their families.

Bless us all with meaningful work that we can return to soon with a heart and mind assured of safety and protection from all harm, as we love and care for each other and find our true sustenance in you.

Lord in your mercy, **hear our prayers.**

We pray for all who suffer the violence and scars of war,

for all soldiers and their families,

and all who live and serve in war-torn places.

Give them courage in the face of fear;

in times of trouble, do not let their feet slip.

Bless us with your vision of peace,

for you have made us one family by giving life and breath to all.

Lord in your mercy, **hear our prayers.**

We remember before you all who have died and pray for all who will die today, that they may know your peace. Bless us with the gift of faith, that we may know you and love you, and enjoy eternal life shared by you, through Jesus who taught us to pray saying: “*Our Creator who art in heaven…”*

DOXOLOGY

Praise God from whom all blessings flow;

Praise God all creatures here below;

Alleluia! Alleluia!

Praise God above, ye heavenly host;

Creator, Christ and Holy Ghost.

Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia!

**BENEDICTION**

May God, who creates, redeems, and sustains,

keep you steadfast in faith, buoyant in hope, and abounding in love.

And the blessing of God,

Creator, Christ, and Holy Spirt

be among you and remain with you always.

Amen.

POSTLUDE Jieun Kim Newland

Allegro from Concert in A Minor after Vivaldi | Bach