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

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

**Online Worship & Sermon October 18, 2020**

**TWENTIETH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST**

Prelude *Concerto in A minor* (after Vivaldi) - Adagio - J. S. Bach (1685-1750) Katherine Crosier

Announcements Lori Yamashiro

Opening Sentences Carol Hamada

 Come and rest here together. Come and listen to God’s invitation to each and everyone of us. It is an invitation to be clothed in compassion. It is an opportunity to be known. Our God is listening for our voice. God is calling us each by name. So, come and allow your mind, heart, and spirit to be met, to be welcomed, to be transformed by love.

Call to Confession Rev. Jeannie Thompson

 The Spirit of truth is waiting here for us. Come and let us lay upon the ground all that makes us hesitant or self-conscious. The Advocate the Savior promised is here to support and encourage us. The Spirit is here to strengthen us that we might serve with an unencumbered heart.

A Prayer of Confession

Holy and Living God, you are all truth and justice. You are all mercy and goodness. You draw us close so our lives may be filled with your righteousness.

Help us, Holy One, for as much as we want your presence in our lives, we confess that we are also afraid and reluctant. We are afraid that we are not good enough, not wise enough, not courageous enough to speak your perfect words of grace. We are reluctant to receive your gifts lest we be expected to share them with others.

The truth is, we are comfortable where we are, and how we are.

Help us, Lord, to put aside all that makes us slow to respond to your call and embrace.

You have given us the precious gift of your life.

Help us to cherish you so deeply that we cannot help but love and welcome your beloved people, showing all the wonder and blessedness of life with you.

In Jesus holy name we pray. Amen.

*A Moment of Silence*

An Affirmation & Passing the Peace

*In the safest way possible, please pass the peace of Christ to those who are with you.*

A Reading from Holy Scripture Carol Hamada

1 Thessalonians 1:1-10

*1Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy,*

*To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ:*

*Grace to you and peace.*

*2We always give thanks to God for all of you and mention you in our prayers, constantly 3remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. 4For we know, brothers and sisters beloved by God, that he has chosen you, 5because our message of the gospel came to you not in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction; just as you know what kind of people we proved to be among you for your sake. 6And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for in spite of persecution you received the word with joy inspired by the Holy Spirit, 7so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia. 8For the word of the Lord has sounded forth from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but in every place where your faith in God has become known, so that we have no need to speak about it. 9For the people of those regions report about us what kind of welcome we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols, to serve a living and true God, 10and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead—Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath that is coming.*

Sermon *“Thessalonica and Us”* Pastor

Last week, Ann Ito was gracious enough to offer the message. I was so glad she said yes to the invitation to speak on Access Sunday, and she did a wonderful job for which I am grateful.

Ann’s message was based on Paul’s letter to the church in Philippi, a city in eastern Europe. Today’s passage is also from a letter. This one is to the church Paul and Silas planted in Thessalonica. In fact, it is the first letter written by Paul that we have, and just like the letter to the Philippians, it is one of the warmest. Paul had a wonderful experience among the Thessalonians, and this letter shows it.

However, like the mission to Philippi, the mission to the ancient city of Thessalonica was also a challenge. While Philippi was filled with retired Roman soldiers—which gave it a very strong Roman nationalistic identity—Thessalonica was an ancient city in Greece. It, too, was under Roman rule.

So, the atmosphere in Thessalonica is both deeply entrenched in the pagan traditions and faith practices of the city’s Greek heritage, *and* they are heavily influenced by Roman rule and customs. This means that anyone turning to Christ is going to be surrounded by a community for whom Christianity was completely foreign. Indeed, new Christian converts were often alone and alienated even in their own families.

Despite this, a congregation made up of Greek and Jewish people gathered under Paul and Silas’ guidance, and began to worship and rejoice in the Good News about Christ that had come to them.

Unfortunately, as word about the Christian community began to circulate, one of the key factors of the faith—that there is only one God—ran-up hard against local tradition and practice. The Romans were especially aggrieved upon learning that Caesar was being displaced in the lives of these new people called Christians.

Soon, the Thessalonian Christians, as well as Silas, and Paul, were being harassed. The harassment turned into persecution, which became so intense that Paul and Silas had to flee the city. As we see from the opening lines of this letter, this was very hard for Paul because he had come to love this community of believers so much.

*“We always give thanks to God for all of you and mention you in our prayers,* writes Paul. *constantly remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.”* [2, 3]

What I would like us to notice is Paul’s admiration of the people of Thessalonica. Notice how the character and substance of their faith is so impressive that Paul fills his prayers to God with them. Notice how he remembers and so deeply respects their love and their steadfast hope in Christ.

The story of the Philippians and the Thessalonians, and many other communities like them are always impressive because in order to come together they had to accept a whole new way of thinking and being in the world.

Although I cannot help but believe that Paul was an altogether amazing preacher, there was something else going on here.

There was, of course, the message itself. There was the story of a God who did not regard us as puny little pawns pushed hither and fro by the whims of beings great than ourselves. What Paul and Silas told them about was a God who cared deeply for them; a God who knew their name, and even walked upon the earth in order to minister to us, and show us how deeply and dearly we are loved.

Moreover, the Good News that Paul and Silas offered the Thessalonians was about a God who loved us so that we would learn how to love each other. This Christian God was the one who told us that the greatest truth we could ever know was that we should love God with all our heart, all our mind, and all our spirit. And that, loving God also means that we should love our neighbor as ourselves.

What the Thessalonians, and every community of believers has found is that the love that God pours out to all of us—no matter who we are—is a love that can create new relationships among people, and also with God. What God’s love does is create a new world of equality among us—all are loved equally. No one is first or above another. We are all equally loved.

The Thessalonians heard this message and reached out for it with all of their hearts; with their whole lives. As a matter of fact, as we go along in their story, what we find is that the persecution they have been suffering grows even more intense after Paul leaves them. Yet, Timothy, the missionary who comes after Paul and Silas is able to report that despite the growing discrimination and torment, the Thessalonians are still a vibrant community of believers who still rejoice over the love and care they have found in the Good News of God’s love.

Once upon a time, Christian communities heard this story and rejoiced over the steadfast faith of the Thessalonians because it was so foreign to their own experience. I wonder, though, if we can make that same claim.

True, we are no longer persecuted in the way the Thessalonians were. We live in a country that prides itself in the religious freedom we all enjoy.

What I would like to suggest to us all is that, while we are not physically abused (the way the Thessalonians, and many of people of faith throughout history have been), we too are persecuted in a way that is just as real.

While I am hesitant to use the word “persecution,” what I would like to propose is that these days the habit so many people have of ignoring our faith, and the love and ethical claims it makes on us—and to which we give our promise to hold in esteem—often has the same effect as physical persecution. It lessens our own adherence, and makes our faith seem “other worldly” or unrealistic.

In fact, that is one of the criticisms we hear all of the time: that we live in a fantasy world of hearts and flowers.

Actually, love—real, deep, sacrificial love—is one of the hardest things in the world to maintain. It is often the hardest thing in to carry out into the world, too. After all, the one who brought it to us first was hung upon a cross as a warning to anyone who would follow in his footsteps.

Our Good News is that Paul, Silas, the Thessalonians, the Philippians, and so many others down through the ages have not listened to the nay-sayers, and the ones who called them “suckers” and fools for loving with all their hears and souls and with all of their lives.

Our Good News is that there have been countless others who have picked up the story of Christ and made it *their* story.

Across the world, you will find schools and hospitals built by people of faith who sought to bring wholeness and education to millions of people throughout the ages. In our own context, our church owes its life to a young Hawaiian man who jumped onto a ship, and sailed with it to the East Coast. There, Henry Opukahaia learned something that brought out the love he already had for his people here in Hawaii, and he would not rest until he had secured a promise that God’s word would come here, to these islands.

Our Hawaii Conference of the United Church of Christ has just celebrated the 200th anniversary of the first mission to the islands.

What is even more important is that we renewed our faith in the purity and honor of the love God offers us in the workshop many of attended on the continuing desire our church has for reconciliation with the Hawaiian people over our part in the overthrow of the Hawaiian Kingdom in 1893.

We apologized in 1993, on the grounds of Iolani Palace, and we offered financial restitution, but reconciliation is on-going.

Why is it taking so long? All that I can tell you is that where there is deep hurt, the path back to wholeness between peoples is often long and arduous. However, I am glad to tell you that we are still committed to it—our new Conference Minister, David Popham, has committed himself to it. Many people outside of our relationship (and, truth be told, many people *inside* our church family) would say, “get over it!”

This is not our way. Instead, we will be as faithful as the Thessalonians and remember that God knows each and every one of us, and cares about our wholeness and love for one another, and we will continue the quest for resolution and unity with our brothers and sisters.

We will not give into frustration or weariness, we will listen and learn and make a stronger bond with God and each other so that we may have a future together. It will mean leaving behind a lot of what we have been comfortable—old preconceptions and bias—but we will go forth because that is what we do, that is what Christ modeled for us and calls upon us to do.

So, we will have a future with our Hawaiian brothers and sisters, and not only them, but also with our black brothers and sisters, with our poor brothers and sisters waiting for their justice, for our brothers and sisters everywhere who hunger for food and for life, itself. We will not grow weary of their pleas, but will go forth until all of God’s beloved children are covered with God’s love, abundance and generosity.

That is the hard part of our faith, it is also the part that is the most rewarding: knowing that leaving behind some of the old comforts is the only way we can continue on into the future—and *yes* we do have to go forward because that is where Christ is waiting for us. Christ’s Holy Spirit never leaves us where we are but leads us forward. Indeed, the Spirit waits in a future that is already being blazed with new paths (by others) toward fellowship, patience, generosity, understanding and unity.

So, let us rise with that Spirit and celebrate with it and let us go forth to meet this future and our future together.

Amen.

Music for Meditation *Song* - Claudin de Sermisy, c. 1490-1562 Katherine Crosier

Pastoral Prayer Pastor

Doxology

*Thank you for your faithfulness to this church and its ministry.*

*You may send your gifts and pledges directly to the church.*

**Benediction**

**The Lord bless you and keep you;**

**The Lord look upon you with peace and grace.**

**You forth from this time of worship to love and serve**

**in Jesus holy name.**

**Amen.**

**Postlude *Hornpipe (Water Music)* - Georg Frideric Handel (1685-1759)** Katherine Crosier