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

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

**Online Worship & Sermon June 14, 2020**

**SECOND SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST**

PRELUDE Jieun Kim Newland

*The Peace May Be Exchanged | Dan Locklair (b.1949)*

ANNOUNCEMENTS Lori Yamashiro

CALL TO WORSHIP Rev. Jeannie Thompson

I am the resurrection and the life, says the Lord;

**Everyone who lives and believes in me will never die.**

Let us worship God.

OPENING SENTENCES

Come all who are longing for the peace that only God can provide. We seem so often to be tossed to and fro, blown about by every wind except that of the Holy Spirit. Let us draw close to the Holy One, and together, let us offer our worship and praise to God.

Lingering long with God’s Spirit, who speaks the truth to us in love, that we may come to the unity of faith and to the knowledge of the full stature of Christ.

PRAYER OF CONFESSION

As we gather our thoughts into quietness, let us prepare ourselves to hear the holy word of God by confessing our sins to the One who knows us—let us pray:

Lord, we are so easily distracted. We know ourselves loved, but we balk at the cost. Come, Lord, heal our brokenness, and have mercy on us as we confess our sins.

***(Prayers of confession in silence)***

Assurance of Pardon

God has poured out grace upon grace, freely, in great abundance, even on you, even on me, although we never earned it and don’t deserve it. We are made new through the love of Christ; all our sins crumble away. In Christ we are forgiven, signed with the Holy Spirit, lavished with gift upon gift, released into hope to live for praise and for glory. Amen.

PASSING THE PEACE OF GOD

*Even while keeping our “social distance” from one another,*

*let us extend God’s peace to each other.*

A READING FROM HEBREW SCRIPTURE Becky Kanenaka

Matthew 9:35-10:23 *Jesus’ Discourse on Mission*

*35Then Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and curing every disease and every sickness. 36When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. 37Then he said to his disciples, ‘The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; 38therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.’*

*10:1Then Jesus summoned his twelve disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to cure every disease and every sickness. 2These are the names of the twelve apostles: first, Simon, also known as Peter, and his brother Andrew; James son of Zebedee, and his brother John; 3Philip and Bartholomew; Thomas and Matthew the tax-collector; James son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus; 4Simon the Cananaean, and Judas Iscariot, the one who betrayed him.*

*5These twelve Jesus sent out with the following instructions: ‘Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, 6but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. 7As you go, proclaim the good news, “The kingdom of heaven has come near.” 8Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons. You received without payment; give without payment. 9Take no gold, or silver, or copper in your belts, 10no bag for your journey, or two tunics, or sandals, or a staff; for laborers deserve their food. 11Whatever town or village you enter, find out who in it is worthy, and stay there until you leave. 12As you enter the house, greet it. 13If the house is worthy, let your peace come upon it; but if it is not worthy, let your peace return to you. 14If anyone will not welcome you or listen to your words, shake off the dust from your feet as you leave that house or town. 15Truly I tell you, it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah on the day of judgement than for that town.*

*16‘See, I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves; so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves. 17Beware of them, for they will hand you over to councils and flog you in their synagogues; 18and you will be dragged before governors and kings because of me, as a testimony to them and the Gentiles. 19When they hand you over, do not worry about how you are to speak or what you are to say; for what you are to say will be given to you at that time; 20for it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you. 21Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death; 22and you will be hated by all because of my name. But the one who endures to the end will be saved. 23When they persecute you in one town, flee to the next; for truly I tell you, you will not have gone through all the towns of Israel before the Son of Man comes.*

SERMON *“The Essential Church” Pastor*

I hope we have all heard the news by now: the church is essential! In 21st century America, it has been deemed so and announced from the highest office in the land! In the midst of a pandemic, the church—and other entities like the post office, gas stations, grocery stores, construction projects, hospitals, and the police and fire departments—the church is also one more service that is considered indispensable.

Well goodness me…thank you! I was afraid you hadn’t noticed!

Essential. Goodness, yes, the church is essential. Christ has been saying this very thing to us for some time now—two thousand years, and counting. We see it especially in today’s reading from the Gospel of Matthew.

In the chapters leading up to this one, Jesus has been busy being very *essential*. Earlier, he climbed up on to a mountain and spent some time—two whole chapters—talking to great crowds of people about the love and grace of God in their lives.

It is important to note that the good and righteous life that he tells them about is not a “future-in-the-great-by-and-by” kind of life. Jesus was not talking about heaven. According to Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount, the good life God wants us to have is the life we have here on earth.

*This* is the place where are to begin to see and experience God’s glory and goodness. We are to see God’s glory and goodness in lives that are dedicated to living with God and each other in ways that are filled with compassion, humility, and faithfulness.

*This* is how God is to be glorified.

After the Sermon on the Mount, we read Jesus’ story as he goes about from one village after another teaching and healing, casting out demons, and even raising a girl from death. The more people he cares for, the more he sees. There is so much need all around him.

Seeing all of that need, the Gospel tells us, that Jesus “has compassion for” the people he saw [9:36]. Jesus has compassion on the crowds because they are “harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.”

The word translated as “harassed” has the sense of being troubled, annoyed or maltreated, while a secondary translation from the Hebrew also suggests as “helplessness,” and infers being thrown or cast about. These two descriptions of being harassed or maltreated and helpless paint for us a picture of sheep wandering around without a shepherd to lead them to water, to food and to safety—this is what Jesus saw in the people all around him.

Seeing them, he wanted to reach out and care for all of them. That is Jesus’ essential nature. He wanted each of them to feel—in their own flesh and bones—the loving-kindness of God. But there are so many!

So, he turns to his disciples and asks them to pray for more “laborers,” more besides himself. More are needed to go out among the many people and places to bring God’s healing and guidance.

What is typical is that Jesus asks the disciples to pray for him in this verse, and then, in the very next verse, he sends *them* out to carry out that very mission! *They* are to be the persons he has invited them to pray for! So, they pray unaware that they are the ones whom God has provided.

After Jesus charges the disciples to pray, he commissions them to be the laborers. Jesus grants them the authority to cast out unclean spirits and heal every disease and sickness—they are to be an extension of his own prophecy-fulfilling ministry.

Then Matthew lists the names of the Twelve. It is a motley crew. Most of the men, if given any description, are further described either by their familial relationships or by their origin. Matthew and Judas, however, are given less-savory descriptions. Matthew has yet to overcome his title as “the tax collector.” Judas Iscariot, though, is given no redeeming quality in this gospel. He is listed simply as “the one who will betray Jesus.”

Before they are allowed to go out, and lest they decide to do whatever they want, Jesus gives them a rather detailed set of instructions on what they are to do, and how they are to conduct themselves. They are to go humbly, receiving the generosity that is offered so that they can do their work effectively. They are to stop only among people who are willing to receive the message and ministry they offer—no lingering, keep moving.

For those who will listen, they are to proclaim that: “The kingdom of heaven has come near” [10:7]. Although Jesus’ very actions prove the presence of God’s power, not all believe that he is indeed God’s kingdom manifesting itself. Jesus has already been accused of having the power from the prince of demons [9:34], and he knows that his followers will be accused of the same [10:24-25] thing. The kingdom of God calls sinners to righteousness, blesses the poor and powerless, and frees demoniacs. However, such faith will also stand children against parents and brothers against brothers. Its presence is radical, and its implications are both dangerous and life-giving. And so, Jesus knows that the announcement of God’s kingdom is not an easy message to carry and to share [10:16-23]. And so, he also tells them of the dangers they may face.

After giving them all of this—instructions, insight, warning, and commission—Jesus sets the disciples on the road. He sends them into mission, and the amazing thing is… they go.

I have always wondered if they knew this day was coming, or if they knew that *this* was going to *be* that day.

I can tell you from experience that when I signed myself up for seminary, I absolutely *did* know that it was going to lead to mission and ministry. It was an obvious conclusion to such a course of study. I don’t know that it was as obvious for those first disciples.

What is amazing to me is that we do not read about any grumbling or hesitation among the twelve. We do not hear Peter or Thomas asking any more questions. I could well imagine Andrew nudging his brother (or John his brother James), asking, “What? Jesus is sending us out?!”

But we hear nothing of this kind of conversation. No grumbling No second guessing. They go.

We hear this particular part of Scripture at this time of the year because, like the disciples, we have been prepared, and now the time is upon us to begin, again, God’s mission. We have been prepared through all of our travels with Christ these months (and years) from the beginning of Advent (back in December), where we watched and waited for God to do something miraculous and decisive in the world. We watched and waited for God’s own son to be born into the human community—Emmanuel, God drawing near. God with us. God coming here to live among us, and to bless us in a way that is completely original.

God did a new thing, and we read and re-read these stories to remind ourselves of God’s new and continuing adventure among us.

So, throughout the months since Advent and Christmas, we have listened again to the story of Christ’s life here among us. We have heard again the teachings. We have traveled with him and the disciples as he taught them and showed them the world through his eyes.

This is a world God loves. We are God’s beloved community, a people God longs to hold close and to bless with lives of care and purpose. God longs to heal every weakness in body and spirit; to make all of us whole.

In making us whole individually, in drawing us toward God’s own embrace, we are also being made one with each other—one people joined together through God’s love.

This is the essential nature of the church, and what we hear this story now—after all we have learned—is that this is now our turn and our time to go out into the world to bless and to minister in God’s name. We are now the ones who are left to show God’s love, and to invite others to participate in this ministry and mission of blessing and healing.

Even in the world as we know it right now, even in the midst of a pandemic, we are called to Christ’s mission of reconciliation and love. And we are called to do it out among God’s beloved people—this is what is essential about the church, and about being a person of faith. As one UCC commentator, theReverend Kathryn M. Matthews has written:

*Yes, the church is “essential,” but opening buildings and gathering in the same place at the same time, is not the sum total, not the* heart *of what it means to be the church. Rather, it is* who *and* how *we are the church, out in the world, even if we have to exercise our call and our ministry across the heartbreaking distance prescribed, for now, by public health experts.*

*In our safe-distancing, we are protecting and prioritizing the most vulnerable in our midst, a core gospel imperative.*

The essential church is always going to be called out into the world, just as the disciples were called and sent, just as Jesus himself came into the world in order that he could go out into it, out among God’s beloved community.

I was glad that this Scripture was part of our worship this morning because it presented us with yet another opportunity to focus our thoughts and prayers upon what is essential about this church—Nu‘uanu Congregational Church.

For many months, even years, we have been preparing ourselves for the next chapter of our ministry in Christ’s name. Along the way, there have been a few significant challenges. This has made for an interruption in our deliberations with each other, and with God, about the way forward.

What I would like to reiterate—is something that I believe you know—is that our church Council has never stopped working on this. Indeed, they have been working very hard on getting us all back on the path that leads to our future in God’s mission together. They have worked together. They have prayed together.

We all worshipped together with one thought and one heart: that God will show us the ministries and mission for which God has prepared *this* essential church.

What I want you to believe is that this path is unfolding before us right now. We may not all see it right now, but we will. I know this because I know that God’s Spirit is always at work, always at work within and all around our lives. And I know that our work is, indeed, essential because it is the work of sharing and caring, or as Bishop-elect of the Episcopal Church in the Diocese of Missouri, Deon K. Johnson, puts it:

*“The work of the church is essential. The work of caring for the lonely, the marginalized, and the oppressed is essential. The work of speaking truth to power and seeking justice is essential. The work of being a loving, liberating, and life-giving presence in the world is essential. The work of welcoming the stranger, the refugee and the undocumented is essential. The work of reconciliation and healing and caring is essential. The church does not need to ‘open’ because the church never ‘closed.’ We who make up the Body of Christ, the church, love God and our neighbors and ourselves so much that we will stay away from our buildings until it is safe. We are the church.”*

So, church, celebrate and give thanks. You are essential. God’s work among us and through us is essential and we have been equipped, called, and commissioned to do it. The adventure awaits. Let us remember that we are in God’s hands, and let us go forth together.

Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER

Sovereign God, we give you thanks for all your gifts to us — for daily food, for health, for each breath we take, for the freedom to choose, and for the gifts of your word, your power and your love. Our hearts are truly overwhelmed, O God, when we consider how you have entrusted so much to us. May we be worthy of that trust. May we be a people who are unafraid to live as fully and as richly as you want us to live.

Help us, O God, as followers of Jesus,

to multiply all that you have given us,

to risk spreading your word and perhaps see it misunderstood,

to gamble by loving those whom others think worthy only of hate,

to take chances by doing good to those who have not done good to us.

Help us to be faith-filled and increase in our hearts the desire to increase your glory and your goodness in this world. Make us people who share in both word and deed all which you have given to us.

We pray for the church in the many places where we are receiving your word, and around the world, that it may encourage all of us to discover, develop and use all our gifts, those of nature and those of grace.

We pray for those who are poor in body or in spirit, for those who are oppressed and heavy laden, for those sick or in despair. Minister by your Spirit and by us, to all those for whom we have prayed, and help us walk faithfully in the path of our Lord Jesus Christ who taught us to pray saying… *“Our Creator, who art in heaven…”*

DOXOLOGY Lianne Chung

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**

Let us go from this place committed to live by faith:  
 faith in the Creator who is righteous and just;  
 faith in the Savior who is gracious and giving;  
 faith in the Spirit who is powerful beyond measure.  
Go in confidence and boldness for the triune God who goes with us. Amen.

POSTLUDE Jieun Kim Newland

*Little Prelude and Fugue in C Major | J.S.Bach (1685-1750)*