

“Loving Church”

A sermon preached by Margaret Wallin at
First Congregational Church UCC, Gaylord MI
January 22, 2023

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable to you, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer! Amen.

There were basically 4 threads that came together for me as I prepared this sermon. First, I recognized that this is the second sermon in a series based on themes found in Tired of Aologizing for a Church I Don't Belong To, by Lillian Daniel. In this book, Daniel argues that we need to be careful about how we talk about the Christian community and that we need to find ways to share our Christian faith journeys that are “reasonable, rigorous, and real.” She describes the different groups that are not currently participating in religious community, and attempts to illuminate ways in which NOT to approach them, and some ways that might be more successful. It is the book being used for the study group under Greg’s leadership on Thursday nights by Zoom. I believe the link is provided in the bulletin. Or contact the church for more information.

Second, was the artwork provided by Sharon Wade. I want to take this opportunity to again lift up our resident artist for her work creating the art related to this series. Her work reflects the connection between us and the divine in Jesus’ saying to the disciples “I am the vine, you are the branches . . .” Like Greg, I was impressed with Sharon’s work, loved the colors and design. When Greg first showed it to me as we were thinking about what aspect I could contribute to the series, I noted that the leaves of the vine were all heart-shaped, which for me at least, was a sign of the love that exists and is **meant to be** a constant thread through every Christian community – loving one another.

Third, there were the scripture readings this morning. The first of those from Corinthians, reminds us that each person in the church should be valued for who they are. We need different talents, different views, different skills, and experiences in our participants for the whole to prosper. Each part, each one a treasure from God, and each beloved by God. No one more important than another; each with a task or call to fulfill; each one needed, valued, loved.

Then the Gospel reading, is one that is particularly important for us to hear, remember, and heed. The reading comes from the Gospel of John from the portion that is often referred to as the farewell discourse – the words that Jesus says to his disciples as his earthly life comes close. It is a poignant message, when we consider

that Jesus knows he is about to leave his disciples to finish the work he came to do. He loves them and needs them for his mission to succeed. It at this time that he gives these beloved men their last instructions – so we would expect that they are important to heed. When you know death is imminent you don't waste time on the unimportant details. No, you concentrate on getting said what NEEDS to be said, to provide what comfort and direction you can, to continue the loving connection after death. Last week's reading had Jesus speaking about the relationship between God the father, Jesus, and the community. And he used the metaphor of the vine and branches – we looked at living connected to God through Jesus, so that everything we might do might be used to build the Kingdom of God on earth. This morning's reading builds on and to a little extent repeats last weeks, Jesus expresses how as the father loves him, he loves his disciples and pleads with them to **love one another**. The disciples have moved from mere servants to close friends or loved ones of Jesus. Jesus reminds them that he chose them, has shared everything that the Father had given him, and now, he wants them to remain in his love and commands them to love one another, because in that way they **will** remain in him and he in them.

The Gospel of John, indeed the New Testament has many passages that reflect this command to love one another, a directive to care for the little ones, to support those in need. You will find similar instructions to love one another, provide food for the hungry, visit the prisoner, care for widows and orphans, etc. throughout Jesus' teachings, and in many of the writings of Paul to the churches. See cf Matthew 25.

Recognizing the imperative of this constant thread of care and love among Christ disciples, reminded me of one of my favorite Christian History books from seminary – a book entitled The Rise of Christianity, by Rodney Stark. Stark examines how the “Obscure, Marginal Jesus Movement Became the Dominant Religious Force in the Western World in a Few Centuries.” He admits that there is no one factor that explains the incredible growth of Christianity over a few centuries, but highlights some interesting points. One of which arises out of two epidemics, a small pox epidemic in 165 and a measles epidemic in 251. Stark argues these two devastating epidemics, that killed enormous numbers, created crises to which the then current religious systems could not adequately respond. Both small pox and measles could produce massive mortality rates when they strike previously unexposed populations. Stark argued that had the catastrophes not occurred, Christianity might not ever have become so dominant. He argues that in contrast to paganism, Christianity offered a more satisfactory account of why these epidemics occurred, and projected a hopeful, portrait of the future.

Even more so though, Christian values of love and charity, established and exercised from the very beginning in the early church, translated into norms of social service and community solidarity. When disaster struck, Stark argues, the Christians were better able to cope, and this resulted in substantially and noticeably higher survival rates. So, each epidemic resulted in Christian population seeing an increase in percentage of the overall population. This was seen as a miracle by Christians and pagans alike. Increased survival rates were attractive to those who then joined the Christians.

One of the major reasons for the increased survival was the Christian ethic of caring for one another. You see, it seems that palliative care was enough to provide a survival advantage to Christians. In other words, bringing food and water and tending to the sick helped many more Christians survive these epidemics than those who lacked such care. And here's the thing, the Christians did it with hope and love, without the fear that drove the wealthy rulers and priests out of town. Christians looked at getting sick themselves not as a calamity to be avoided at all costs, but as a burden gladly borne, a gift that would be repaid in the life to come. There was a sense of sharing the suffering of their Christ involved. And charity went outside of the Christian group itself, so some of the increased membership was found in those who survived and joined the Christians out of gratitude.

The love expressed, the care provided within the Christian group led more than one early writer to proclaim the statement often attributed to Tertullian: "See how they love one another!"

Although it was of course not the only thing that propelled Christianity to the forefront of religion, love and care played a role in boosting Christian growth even outside of epidemics. For example, women and children were more highly regarded in the Christian community than they were in pagan society. Early Christians did not sanction abortion, while pagans were more likely to rid a woman of an unwanted fetus. The refusal to kill an unborn fetus in all probability saved many lives of the women of the day since abortion methods were far from safe for women. Infanticide was also not permitted for Christians, thus there were several items that increased Christian population over the pagan population. There were in fact, many other factors, and I recommend Stark's book as an interesting and enlightening read if you have an interest in history. But **love and care** played a central role in the history of growth in the Christian Church. As we watch numbers of churches participant numbers drop and churches closing, buildings being sold off, congregations disassembled, perhaps it is one of the answers for how the church now can move forward and blossom into a new form, a relevant, vibrant form of the church.

The command to care, to love one another remains, I think, one of the things that we most need to remember, practice, and make clear is still viable among the Christian community. We need to freely share examples of love and care we have received from our brothers and sisters in Christ, with those who may be curious about what it is like to be a part of a Christian community.

Too often, it seems, when faith communities are spoken of in the news, it is for some example or another of a failure of love and care. As a result, the Christian community as a whole, has been painted with colors of negative traits like envy, judgementalism, sexism, racism, hetero-normativism, all the isms really, homophobia, xenophobia, etc. Then there are the scandals around misappropriation of money, inappropriate relationships, emotional, physical, and sexual abuse of those under religious authority. All of which reflect a failure to live in the love that is commanded by Jesus. The bad news, causes us to gag a bit and sometimes is enough to make a person who **is** religious just want to duck and cover, to slink away or to remain silent in the face of critical analysis of current religious systems, or just feel tongue tied in such discussions – or maybe to give up altogether and walk away.

I think that Daniel would suggest that we not duck and cover, yet she also does not recommend apologizing for the sins of others. We can and should be compassionate with those who have been wounded by church authorities, personnel, or rules and regulations that fail to provide love and care. We can and should stand for justice, seek reconciliation, challenge laws and rules that do not promote the beloved community that was originally envisioned by God.

So, the final thread that comes into play for me when we get to what then can we do? How then can we approach? Takes me to the recognition of Martin Luther King, Jr., and his concept of the call to work towards building The Beloved Community through nonviolence.

Teaching and using nonviolent means, King sought to create the Beloved Community in which the “Triple Evils” of Poverty, Racism, and Militarism would no longer hold sway. He saw these evils as forms of violence that exist in a vicious cycle, and serve to impede the creation or development of the Beloved Community. The King Center explains:

“The Beloved Community” is a term that was first coined in the early days of the 20th Century by the philosopher-theologian Josiah Royce, who founded the Fellowship of Reconciliation. However, it was Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., also a member of the Fellowship of Reconciliation, who

popularized the term and invested it with a deeper meaning which has captured the imagination of people of goodwill all over the world.

For Dr. King, The Beloved Community was not a lofty utopian goal to be confused with the rapturous image of the Peaceable Kingdom, in which lions and lambs coexist in idyllic harmony. Rather, The Beloved Community was for him a realistic, achievable goal that could be attained by a critical mass of people committed to and trained in the philosophy and methods of nonviolence.

Dr. King's Beloved Community is a global vision, in which all people can share in the wealth of the earth. In the Beloved Community, poverty, hunger and homelessness will not be tolerated because international standards of human decency will not allow it. Racism and all forms of discrimination, bigotry and prejudice will be replaced by an all-inclusive spirit of sisterhood and brotherhood. In the Beloved Community, international disputes will be resolved by peaceful conflict-resolution and reconciliation of adversaries, instead of military power. Love and trust will triumph over fear and hatred. Peace with justice will prevail over war and military conflict.

We may consider that love and care here among ourselves is sometimes challenging enough. We actually do it pretty well here, I think. But then, I generally think you all are pretty easy to love and desire care for. Don't get me wrong, we need to continue what we are doing well, but we also need to recognize there is a great deal to be done yet outside these walls, outside this small rather congenial faith community. To build the Beloved Community IS the work of the Loving Church.

Nonviolence is a demanding and challenging way. It requires dedication and courage to engage Evil, without hating those who do evil things. Dedication, courage, and a belly full of God's love to share, as we accept the call to resist evil in whatever form we find it. Resist evil, without hating the evil doer. Seeing the evil doer as a victim of evil too. It requires willingness to endure suffering without offering violence in return. As I read through the principles of nonviolence, I found myself very challenged to accept that I could hope to do it. But I believe nonviolent resistance can lead to the reality of the Beloved Community. Let us take up the call to love, as Christ has loved us and instructed us to love. Let us begin with the church. Let us choose

love instead of hate. Let us BE the Loving Church, ready to do what is needed to further build the Beloved Community! May God abide with us and help us to do so! Amen.

