

“...And The Greatest of These is Love”

*Gleanings from participants at the 68th Annual Meeting and Conference
of the National Association of Congregational Christian Churches (NACCC)*

Sharon Binger, Pastor Clare

Friends in faith, fellow humans – strong in our bravery and our vulnerability, we have gathered on this fifth Sunday in the long, green, growing season of ordinary time to worship a God who is ever-expanding love. We have gathered for many reasons: to sing and to be silent; to share through smiles and nods that we see one another; to participate in the sacrament of Holy Communion, which reminds us that we are each welcome and needed within the body of Christ; to boldly reach out during fellowship time to someone we don't know very well in order to move a step further along the road toward companionship; to be comforted with reminders that we are each beloved and challenged to take next steps in more effectively embodying our own belovedness and honoring it in all others.

The focus of our time together this morning centers around the Apostle Paul's well-known words to the fledgling church in Corinth: “... *and the greatest of these is love.*” Sharon Binger and I recently attended the 68th Annual Meeting and Conference of our National Association of Congregational Christian Churches. Sharon participated in-person in Wichita, Kansas with approximately 150 other individual clergy and lay leaders from around the nation. I participated in plenary and workshop experiences virtually (along with approximately forty others). That phrase from First Corinthians 13 (“... *and the greatest of these is love*”) thematically anchored the Meeting and Conference. During the opening plenary session, three renowned authors spoke to us about various forms of love – love of God, love of neighbor, and love of self.

As People's Congregational Church, we are a congregation in covenant development with the Minnesota Conference of the United Church of Christ, exploring how that added affiliation will strengthen and enhance our ministries as a local church. We've made the strategic decision to also maintain our historic Congregationalist affiliation within the NACCC. One foundational principle of Congregationalism is freedom expressed as local autonomy. As the association's Executive Director Rev. Dr. Ashley Cleere stated when visiting our congregation in April, *"If you've met one Congregationalist church, you've met one Congregationalist church."* Yet 280 congregations across the United States are connected through the association, whose vision is one of *"Supporting ministry and nurturing fellowship among Congregational Christian Churches in the name of Christ."* Our participation in the Annual Meeting and Conference provides one excellent avenue for mutual support and fellowship.

In a moment, Sharon will share several of her gleanings from her time in Wichita. Then I will share my gleanings. As you listen to each of us, I invite you to wonder this: **how does what she has just shared call me or call us as a congregation to access and embody love more fully and more truly in our own space and time?** Sharon, please share with us now a few highlights from your experience at the Annual Meeting and Conference. *[Sharon's words]*

Well, amen to being a place of spiritual rest for people of all ages and particularly for young people. So thank you for what you've shared, Sharon! This was my second experience of the NACCC Annual Meeting and Conference, having also attended virtually in 2021. Let's return for a moment to today's scripture reading from Deuteronomy. The writer articulates the covenant between God and people, which is all about embodying love.

It seems to refer back to a statement by one of Deuteronomy's four authors earlier in the book (words commonly known in Jewish and Christian traditions as the greatest commandment): *"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might"* (Deut. 6:5).

I feel both seen and encouraged by the writer's straightforward language in today's passage. I invite you to close your eyes (if comfortable doing so) for an extended moment to welcome the words of this brief excerpt I'll offer to speak to your soul as you long for God to work in and through your life. We heard, *"God will once again delight in you and make you prosperous... if you obey your God... For this Law that I give to you today is not too difficult for you, nor is it beyond your reach... No, the word of God is very near to you; it is in your mouth, and in your heart, so that you can keep it."* You're welcome to open your eyes again. I take heart in this reminder that we each have direct access God's powerful love because it is imprinted on each of us and on every person with whom we cross paths.

This morning, I will share with you my gleanings from one workshop from among the handful I attended. I'll also share highlights from Rev. Dr. Cleere's key address (called a "Congregational Talk") and highlights for the portion of the conference I found most enriching – keynote "Love Talks" by three guest authors who spoke on love of God, of neighbor, and of self. As I share, I again invite you to wonder, **how is her sharing calling me or calling us as a congregation to access and embody love more fully and more truly in our own space and time?**

I attended five workshops across the span of the conference. The four I will not specifically highlight were a panel sharing by NACCC missionaries, a duo who spoke about how to be a reconciler, a youth resources conversation (which Sharon highlighted), and a panel sharing on the topic of preparing a congregation for a sabbatical (the next of which will occur 4 years from now for our congregation).

Rev. Ian MacDonald led a workshop entitled “The Post-Covid Church.” He drew an analogy between Jesus’ suffering, death, and resurrection and the Covid pandemic, emphasizing how courage and hope can bring new life after pain, suffering and death. He offered three steps for a congregation to consider when developing new ways of engaging in ministry as we emerge from pandemic. Step 1: Assess and Celebrate – What’s currently ineffective? What have we learned? What do we like and not like? What can we get rid of and what can we build upon? Assess and Celebrate. Step 2: Dream Big – The strategic move in this step is to root out and keep at bay any limiting beliefs a congregation may have about itself. Dream Big. Step 3: Commit to It! Faithfully pursue new and continued life, inviting the wider community to participate with the congregation. Commit to It! I found that this workshop affirmed the strategic decision-making and experimenting we have been doing with courage and hope across the past year and currently at People’s Church.

In her “Congregational Talk,” Executive Director Ashley Cleere asked us to wonder: “does our Pilgrim heritage accurately depict congregationalism today?” She invited us to potentially reclaim our heritage by focusing on spiritual pilgrimage toward greater love of God, neighbor, and self. She asked us, “how do we hold fast to what is dear to us when the framework that holds it is being rearranged?”

She also stated this: “our interior journey is affected by the specific people with whom we go to church” and concluded by naming this: “our understanding of neighbor is broader than it was in 1621 and our understanding of self-love is deeper.” I am grateful for Ashley Cleere’s thoughtful leadership. I invite you to lift her in prayer often.

Before concluding by sharing briefly about the three keynote authors who shared about love of God, neighbor and self; let’s hear again an excerpt from the Apostle Paul’s letter to the Corinthians. Again, I invite you to close your eyes again (if comfortable doing so) and to welcome the words in this brief excerpt to speak to your soul as you long for God (which is affirming, empowering Love) to work in and through your life. We heard, *“There is no limit to love’s forbearance, to its trust, its hope, its power to endure. Love never fails... Now we see indistinctly, as in a mirror; then we will see face to face. My knowledge is imperfect now; then I will know even as I am known. There are, in the end, three things that last: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.”* I welcome you to open your eyes again.

This week, I was most struck by the limitlessness of Love’s power to forebear, trust, hope and endure.

When author Diana Butler Bass spoke to the NACCC gathering about the love of God, she spoke of the evolutionary love of God. With full-hearted clarity, she articulated her experience that God does not change in God’s essence as Love but that Love evolves in our own lives. I commend to you her most recent book, *Freeing Jesus: Rediscovering Jesus as Friend, Teacher, Savior, Lord, Way, and Presence.*” In it she shares how her own experience of Jesus has evolved across her lifetime thus far and encourages us to embrace such evolution in our love of God.

Our People's Book Club read this book by Sikh author and activist, Valarie Kaur in fall of 2021. It is entitled, *See No Stranger: A Memoir and Manifesto of Revolutionary Love*. She writes eloquently about love of other, opponent, and self. She has created a tool she calls the revolutionary love compass. In order to love the other (perhaps in this room); she finds that we need to first wonder in order to be able to grieve for and fight with the other. In order to love the opponent (language she prefers to enemy); she finds that we need to first experience our own rage, then listen, reimagine, and tend our wounds.

Finally, we heard about love of self from Presbyterian minister and author Mihee Kim-Kort. In her book, *Outside the Lines: How Embracing Queerness Will Transform Your Faith*, she encourages readers and listeners to enact self-compassion, to pay attention to our desires, to say out loud what is true. In the work of loving ourselves (which is intertwined with love of neighbor and of God), Kim-Kort invites us to breathe deeply in this way. Inhaling, we remind ourselves, "my practice is love." Exhaling, we remind ourselves, "we get free together."

So as we each move toward taking next steps in embodiment of love, let us give ourselves a gift. Right now, I invite you to breathe three times with her. So again, you may wish to close your eyes to focus on your body and in your heart. And as we breathe deeply three times, I will lead us in her words. Inhaling, "my practice is love." Exhaling, "we get free together." Inhaling, "my practice is love." Exhaling, "we get free together." Inhaling, "my practice is love." Exhaling, "we get free together." Let's practice love and get free together because love is counting on us. Amen.

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People's Congregational Church (Bayport, MN)
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Deut. 30: 9-14, 1 Cor. 13: 1-13