

## **Will They Know We Are Christians By Our Love?**

The collaborative, gritty, unifying Love of God has permeated our movements as two separate neighboring congregations on a shared journey toward the threshold of today, when we become one church. As we locate ourselves on this eighteenth of twenty-five Sundays in the long green growing season of Ordinary Time and on land that has lived in relationship with people groups for millennia before us, let's enter into a time of wondering together: will they know we are Christians by our love?

Let's begin with prayer: O God grant to each of us and to this community of faith: serenity to accept the things that are not within our power to change, courage to change the things we can, and wisdom to know the difference. Amen.

Friends in faith as fellow disciples of Jesus, love is challenging work. We know this from our experiences of longing to be loved (that is: fully known, accepted, appreciated, supported) and longing to offer love to others. We know that love is challenging work, but do we know why that is? Immersed in a capitalistic competition-based society, we absorb many individualistic messages about me, me, me and you, you, you pitted against all the other me's and you's with whom we cross paths. We need not look far for the latest tip on how to come out on top – above the rest.

Communities of faith offer ways of life that often operate against the grain of individualistic, competition-based capitalism. In Christian community, embodying love is our purpose, our method, and our goal. We seek to know, accept, appreciate and support one another within our covenanted community in ways that equip us to model the same loving work in all of our spheres of influence – be it at home, work, school, athletic teams, or our in our friendship circles.

Let's visit with the Apostle Paul's thoughts in this morning's reading from Philippians. I find it interesting that biblical scholars have broken the epistles (letters written as professional correspondence from missionaries to local churches) into chapters. As we enter what others have deemed a second chapter in Paul's letter to the Philippians, we sense him offering a thesis for anything that comes before or after this portion of the letter.

We heard: *"If, then, there is any comfort in Christ, any consolation from love, any partnership in the Spirit, any tender affection and sympathy, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind."* I love these heartfelt words of encouragement: *"comfort in Christ... consolation from love... partnership in the Spirit."* It's as though Paul is pleading with them to not get stuck in intellectual understandings about God through Jesus but to practice recognition and embodiment of God's presence in Christ through the Spirit.

Paul goes on to zero in on one of Jesus' more admirable qualities – humility. Jesus was not in the human experience for the cheap thrills of competition.

We heard: *"Do nothing from selfish ambition or empty conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,*

*who, though he existed in the form of God,  
did not regard equality with God  
as something to be grasped,  
but emptied himself,  
taking the form of a servant,  
assuming human likeness.*

*And being found in appearance as a human,  
he humbled himself  
and became obedient to the point of death—  
even death on a cross.”*

The Christ light – a divine loving essence – shone through the way Jesus lived, died, rose, and continues to rise time and again through us. The Love that is God is a self-emptying energy. The self knows it is connected to the source of love and so does not grasp and cling to some stagnant form of security. Rather, the self through which Christ light shines is free to give love away in relationships of mutuality, trusting the love will return to them. This is what we will practice together today – both through our Rite of Membership and through the sacrament of Holy Communion.

As we begin our October series of Faith Conversations (our Sunday 11am adult forum), we will be considering the places, people, and practices which have all served as avenues or bridges in our faith and spiritual journeys – avenues or bridges toward deeper connection with the Spirit of God in ourselves and in one another. When we feel ourselves following an avenue or bridge as it reveals itself as a way forward, we become more secure in our own belovedness, such that we can also empty ourselves in love and service toward others.

As we merge two faith communities this morning – St. Peter’s United Church of Christ and People’s Congregational Church into one new united church, I want to invite us to celebrate our strong roots in Congregationalism and in the Evangelical and Reformed tradition – traditions which will continue to inform us as we move forward in ministry and mission.

In this coming winter and spring, we will engage in a strategic visioning process in which we flesh out our soon-to-be-discerned name by distilling core value from all that we love about our way of life. And we'll let those core values guide the creation of an image or logo, a vision statement, and several key strategic initiatives to pursue in the first few years of our new church's life. I could be off base on this, but I think that a purpose statement tells "why" we purposefully behave in particular ways, a vision statement tells "what" we envision to be possible, and a mission statement tells "how" we plan to participate in our "what" becoming reality.

In our gospel reading for this morning, Jesus articulated his why, what and how within his prayer. We heard: *"I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because they do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one. They do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. And for their sakes I sanctify myself, so **that they also may be sanctified in truth.** I ask not only on behalf of these but also on behalf of those who believe in me through their word, **that they may all be one.**"*

Jesus' mission (his how) was: *"I have given them your word."* We witness Jesus doing that him doing at every opportunity he encountered – giving the word through love-based justice and grace.

Jesus' purpose (his why) was *"**that they may all be one.**"* He longed for and pursued with every fiber of this being a world in which we would all be unified through love. That was his why.

Jesus' vision (his what – his goal, if you will) was: ***“that they also may be sanctified in truth.”*** He cast a vision and modeled for others a way of generously sharing the word of love (of collaborative, gritty, unifying love) in ways people could feel enough to become part of making it happen.

As we step into a time as A United Church (our next chapter), we do draw on our strong ancestors. I would like to share with you, from the website of our National Association of Congregational Christian Churches synopsis of “The Congregational Way” (a cultural way of life). It goes like this: *“This is a tradition that has deep convictions based upon the Word of God as each person interprets that Word according to the dictates of conscience, under the enlightenment of the Holy Spirit.... Since every Congregationalist possesses full liberty of conscience in interpreting the Gospel, we are a diverse group of people united under Christ. We believe there is strength in diversity and by it, there are unending opportunities to learn from each other and to grow in faith.”*

That, friends, is The Congregational way. Did you hear it? Unity amidst diversity. In the coming time, we will harmonize by continuing to incorporate various perspectives and various gifts in our body.

We also stand on the shoulders of our strong ancestors in the Evangelical and Reformed tradition, which was the portion of the United Church of Christ that are the ancestors of our St. Peter's United Church of Christ. In short, from one way of viewing it, our Evangelical and Reformed ancestors placed emphasis on spiritual practice and service – embodiment of faith through action in local and wider circles of community.

And I'd like to share with you a bit about the United Church of Christ as well, which came from these two strong traditions. And now I go back to the why of purpose, the what of vision, and the how of mission.

The United Church of Christ is known for a strong conviction that God is still speaking – the continuing testament, the revealing of God’s word over and over again in new ways. The anecdote that comes behind the UCC’s saying that God is still speaking comes from the story of when Gracie Allen had died and her widower husband George Burns waited a while to go into her office to look at her things that she had left behind. And when he finally did, things were fairly well organized in stacks. And what he found on top of a stack was an envelope with his name on it. So he opened it, and inside was a one-sentence love note that said, “George, never place a period where God has placed a comma. Love, Gracie.” And our tradition of which we are all a part heard that story of long, long love and said that is what it is about. God is continuing to speak. Let’s not place periods where God’s love can continue to unfold.

And the purpose statement (based on the Gospel of Matthew) - the why for the United Church of Christ is, *“To love God with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength and our neighbor as ourselves.”*

The what, the goal or the vision statement is, *“United in Christ’s love, a just world for all.”*

And the how to go about this – the mission statement is, *“United in Spirit and inspired by God’s grace, we welcome all, love all, and seek justice for all.”*

As a dually affiliated congregation, we will stand on the shoulders of faithful ancestors - our Evangelical and Reformed ancestors who embodied self-emptying love in ways they were known for in their community. As Congregationalists following The Congregational Way, honoring and truly hearing differing individual perspectives that come through our conscience and harmonizing those together.

So that people will know we are Christians by this love, let us pursue this unifying, gritty, collaborative love because that Love is counting on us.  
Amen.

Rev. Clare Gromoll  
A United Church (Bayport, MN)  
October 1, 2023 (18<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time, Launch Sunday)  
Philippians 2:1-13, John 17:14-23