

Unifying Love

I invite you to join me in a spirit of prayer, closing your eyes if it helps you ground you in this moment. Holy Spirit, we breathe in deeply – grateful for freedom to gather – by live stream and on this land loved by First Nations and others across time and where we are now weaving our way of community. Holy, loving Spirit – we come to meet with you in this hour, each of us wondering: what loving impact can my voice and my hands have in our community even as forces of cruelty attempt to crush my spirit? Holy, loving Spirit, we trust that – through you – we can bravely speak truth and embody love. Unify us in your love today. Help us to recognize the next right step that each of us can take. We pray this as students of our great teacher, Jesus. Amen.

Friends, a chorus of a well-known hymn of our Christian tradition has burrowed into my head in recent days: “And they’ll know we are Christians by our love, by our love, yes they’ll know we are Christians by our love.” I have often internally responded to those lyrics with a sense of unconvinced curiosity. “They’ll know we are Christians” (meaning, followers of Jesus) – is that right? Will they know?

As I’ve traveled through these first 43 years of experience with local churches in various flavors of Christian (from very conservative Lutheran to progressive Lutheran, with brief stints in charismatic Catholicism when living in the Dominican Republic and the Evangelical Free Church while a college student in Beloit, to finally finding home in the congregational way of the United Church of Christ), I’ve been carrying this question with me: **What are we saying and doing that we hope will be recognized and experienced by others as love?**

I invite us to each and together consider answering these questions today and in the coming days:

- What do you (as a unique individual) say and do that you hope will be recognized and experienced by others as love?
- And what do we (as St. Croix United Church) say and do that we hope will be recognized and experienced by others as love?

I've been inspired in the last hours and day in many ways. In particular, I've remembered that, in 2023, I experienced the gift of meeting and learning from Noel Paul Stookey, singer songwriter from the band Peter, Paul and Mary. In 2007, he wrote a song entitled "In These Times." In this moment, I invite you to close your eyes if you're comfortable doing so and welcome this anthem to wash over you. This was Noel Paul singing at the age of 81. He was 84 when I got to meet him.

*"There's a warning in the wind that comes wailing through the trees
A depression in the shoreline left by the pounding seas
There is a lesson in the drought that brings a country to its knees
In these times...*

*We are dancing with disaster when we live beyond our needs
And pretend our hungry souls are not related to our greed...
Life's a journey. but it's not about the speed
In these times...*

*In these times...we must be mindful of the gift
In these times...use our hands and hearts to lift
The fallen spirit in this land
Planting flowers in the sand
Reaching out a helping hand
In...these...times*

*As the perfect storm approaches and the gale around us roars
No longer can we close our eyes and hide behind our doors:
Our choices fewer now by what we've chosen to ignore
In these times...*

*The ship of state is drifting; it's getting hard to steer
It's a complicated issue but the direction's pretty clear
and 'each of us' is who we need to get to there from here
In these times...*

*In these times...we must be mindful of the gift
In these times...use our hands and hearts to lift
The fallen spirit in this land
Bringing water to the sand
Reaching out a helping hand
In...these...times*

*In everything that's living there's a promise of a Love
Planted in the seeds below and in the stars above
We must listen to its message; become faithful stewards of
These times...*

*In these times...we must be mindful of the gift
In these times...use our hands and hearts to lift
The fallen spirit in this land
Growing gardens in the sand
Reaching out a helping hand...
In...these...times*

*We must be mindful of the gift
in these times...use our hands and hearts to lift
The fallen spirit in this land
Planting flowers in the sand
Reaching out a helping hand
In...these...times”*

As we open our eyes, I ask us this: **In what ways have you witnessed people using their hands or heart to lift the fallen spirit in this land in these times – in recent days or weeks?** There will be a moment to share in few moments.

We are currently inundated and surrounded by brazen evil. We need to persist in naming aloud the closed-mindedness and closed-heartedness in which we know that we have been complicit at times – both in our personal and public lives. And we need to name the corporate evil as well – the federally sanctioned cruelty, violence, gaslighting, and attempts to subjugate our fellow humans. AND we are also beginning to inundate and surround ourselves with brave, tenacious, persistent love that is reaching out a helping hand in this time.

In a moment I will share with you what I notice in our readings for today in regard to how we might follow Jesus in the way of recognizable, viscerally experienced love. Yet first I want to turn the microphone over to you, the gathered people, because we need to hear from one another about the ways we are each witnessing people using their hands and hearts to lift the fallen spirit in this land.

Before speaking, I invite you to tap into your deep courage and faith that something strong and beautiful that you've noticed in these times will come out of you in a way that it encourages the strength and beauty within each of us.

And so I invite you to really center yourself in what you have been hearing and experiencing washing over you in recent days as you watch for the helpers among us. And we all process differently and connect with the spirit differently.

So I invite you to place your hands on your temples, because we experience things through our intellect. We are reading, we are listening to the voices we consider smartest or most loving. And we hear their words.

And they land and they change the ways that we can think.

And I invite you to place your hands on your belly – on your gut, because that’s where we process with our deepest intuition what’s right and what’s wrong in what’s happening to those around us and how our body is responding to realities. We’re processing in our gut intuition as well.

And then I invite you to place your hands so tenderly on your heart or if it’s on your pulse – where you feel the aliveness of your emotion. Sometimes our heart races. Sometimes it’s calm in the most loving spaces. And we’re processing with our heart emotion as well.

Do you believe that *“each of us is who we need to get to there from here in these times?”*

In what way have you witnessed people using their hands or heart to lift the fallen spirit in this land in recent days or weeks? This is your preaching moment. So I have the microphone and would love for us to hear some of the strength and beauty you wish to share with one another.

“Our youngest daughter is a high school teacher. They have seen ICE activity. They’ve had an arrest take place in front of two school busses filled with kids as they were leaving – traumatizing all those who were in the vicinity. Many of the teachers are responding by going the extra mile – both in terms of when the kids arrive and when they leave (trying to protect them getting to and from the busses and their rides). They’ve posted teachers on the roof of the building in order to have a better view of ICE activity. And they’re armed with their whistles and walkie-talkies to alert each other and the kids (if they have to rush them back inside). This has been going on for them in their location for at least the last several weeks. She and the other teachers are doing a lot of triage for the emotions and the fears of the students who they teach – or are trying to teach now. I applaud their courage.

My spouse and I have been asked if we couldn't provide rides home for some of the students, so we'll be doing that this next week."

"My daughter is a preschool teacher. Most of her little ones are Latino. She's been not only taking them home. She's been taking food to the family. She's been sitting with the parents who are terrified to go out. She's exhausted, but she's exhilarated that she's been able to do that. Most of my stepchildren who live in and around Portland Avenue are witness to this and are (like so many in this wonderful state) rallying, marching, and holding candles despite the weather. I applaud all of them. I'm inspired by them."

"A school liaison contacted us and let us know that a young person who is half-way through senior year and is Spanish-speaking – the father was abducted by ICE. So this young person has lost their housing and father, and desperately wants to complete senior year in high school. The young person now has a safe space to hide with a family. He has some financial needs that we'll need to figure out a way to meet. So if any of you would like to talk to us after church about what we can do to help this young person know that they are loved and supported, we'll do our best to help them get through this."

"Valley Outreach has had a group of people that has come together (and it's a fairly large group) to go out and deliver food to anywhere between Forest Lake and Cottage Grove to people who are afraid to come out of their homes and they need things. And I know there are more communities out there that are doing that same thing."

"We see people doing things very publicly to help. But one thing I've seen is a lot of lawyer friends are getting involved in groups that helping people write habeas petitions to try to find where people are in the immigration system and to try to get them released. So I'm very appreciative of that movement of lawyers when it's not an area of law a lot of them are experienced in."

So they are stepping out of their comfort zones to do something different because that's the need of the moment."

Meeting needs from where we are already skilled and gifted... and stretching ourselves into new spaces and new relationships, trusting that those gifts will go with us.

"Our daughter is a teacher with high school students. They do volunteer work and one of the places where they volunteer is a food shelf. Two weeks ago, one of the workers at the food shelf was abducted by ICE right before the students go there. So now they've said they don't want students to be there because of the ICE activity. So the administration in their building has now allowed teachers to go in after students leave and spend their prep hour working at the food shelf. I'm so happy to see that the administration is working with those selfless teachers."

What gifts have just been offered! And the reason I invited this is because I do believe at my core that we are strengthened in our beauty and our capacity to embody love when we hear these examples and can consider them for ourselves.

"You said that people are stretching themselves outside their comfort zones. My spouse and I live in an HOA and we wrote a personal letter to 160 of those houses, signed it, hand addressed and mailed it to them before the most recent incident. It's a little uncomfortable to reach out to 160 people (I don't know all of them). But we are all compelled to reach out to everyone during these dark times."

Let's spend just a few minutes, then, considering these people we heard about in today's readings who didn't seem to give a whit about being comfortable (it didn't seem) in their work of love.

We heard in the gospel reading one of the versions of Jesus finding his first, closest disciples.

And I want you to hear the opening thought from this gospel writer: *“Now when Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee. He left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the sea...”* This is referring to Jesus’ cousin John, who was a valiant preacher before him – trying to help the people see the reality they were living in under an occupying Roman army and invite them to turn around, to repent and get baptized in the water – refreshed and ready for a life of love and work toward justice. And when Jesus heard that John had been arrested (silenced, stopped in the work he had been doing), he left his own town where he was used to living with his family and made his home in Capernaum, by the sea – saying, we will still be loud for truth, love and justice along this river. Sounds like something we can model ourselves after – because Jesus had things to say as well. And he did it. And we need to follow him when we hear others silenced in their messages of love, we need to find ways to elicit and invite their voices back out and use our own.

Now the Apostle Paul, writing to this early fledgling church in Corinth, opened his writing in this way in the portion we heard today: *“Now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you but that you be knit together in the same mind and the same purpose.”* Hear that he didn’t ask the followers of Jesus to have no differences among them. I shared earlier that I came through so many forms of the Christian church. We come with different, beautiful, rich stories of how we arrive to community. And yet Paul encourages us to find agreement. It’s not easy to do the work of finding agreement and not let the divisions be overwhelming among us – to find common ground – to be *“in the same mind and the same purpose.”* And why? Well, he said at the end, *“For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.”* I feel that Noel Paul Stookey’s song is about resistance to perishing – planting and renewing love and justice in this land.

And that's the message of the cross, too – that Jesus was willing to go to the extremes to show that love is for all – meant for everyone to share. It's not foolish. It's the way that we work with God to save ourselves.

And we need to go to many sources of wisdom for our lives. And Justin Farley, as mentioned by Kathy, is an advocate in matters of mental health and addiction, which touch all of our lives. And I love that he wrote, of love, *"It is the power that lasts, The one fuel that replenishes itself With each selfless expression of affection."* That is one articulation of mutuality. Many of our neighbors are engaged in mutual aid with one another right now. Love is something that we give and of which we empty ourselves only to find it replenished again through relationship.

Let's go forward from this moment, continuing to challenge ourselves, will they know we are Christians by our love? That Love of Christ is counting on us. Amen.

Rev. Clare Gromoll
St. Croix United Church (Bayport, MN)
January 25, 2026 | 3rd Sunday after Epiphany
Matthew 4:12-23, 1 Corinthians 1:10-18, "The Great Unifier: A Poem About Love"