

Sermons from Parma Greece United Church of Christ

THE WAY OF LOVE

Easter-5

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John 13:31-35

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The New Commandment

When he had gone out, Jesus said, 'Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him. If God has been glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself and will glorify him at once. Little children, I am with you only a little longer. You will look for me; and as I said to the Jews so now I say to you, "Where I am going, you cannot come." I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.'

John 13:31-35

"I give you a new commandment, that you love one another."

With these eleven words, Jesus turns the world order upside-down—in first-century Palestine and here, today.

"I give you a new commandment, that you love one another."

Jesus tells us that everyone will know we are his disciples if we have love for one another. And it sounds quite simple, doesn't it? Just love!

Love your neighbor. Love yourself. Love your enemy. Love your spouse.

Love your friend. Love your bus driver, your mailman, your pharmacist.

Love everybody.

Just love!

Now, some of that may be harder than other parts, right?

Like, "Love your enemy."

But the overall gist: love—that's something we can affirm. Love is the answer.

As St. Paul tells us, love "bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things". If love can do all that, it really is the answer. So, if love is the answer, what is the question?

One of my favorite speakers at the Festival over the years is Michael Curry, the Presiding Episcopal Bishop, in NC. Yep, the same guy who made quite a splash both positive and negative in his sermon at the royal wedding, just over a year ago today.

I remember a few years ago Bishop Curry in speaking about the church and his denomination, he has a wonderful way of branding it as "the Episcopal branch of the Jesus Movement."

He described the movement as loving, liberating, and lifegiving. He went on to say... being part of it is much, much more than simply having our name written in a record book or supporting the church financially. It is a way of life, a practice for spiritual growth.

Just as an aside, what adjectives would we use to describe the UCC as a branch of the Jesus movement.

At any rate, he calls this spiritual discipline "the Way of Love." In this way, we seek love. We seek freedom. We seek abundant life. We seek Jesus.

So, for a moment, let's consider these, one by one, in reverse order. First, we seek Jesus. Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life—and by choosing to follow him, we join forces with the power to change lives and to change the world for good. And it is a choice, made not just once in a lifetime, but over and over again. By seeking Jesus, we are seeking abundant life. Not riches, or power, or status—but a life overflowing with joy, peace, generosity, and delight. A life of meaning, given back to God and lived for others.

Second, to make this possible, we are seeking freedom. Not just the freedoms guaranteed us by a constitution, but true freedom—from the powers of fear, sin, oppression, and division. These “powers that be” pull us from living as God created us to be: dignified, whole, and free.

And third, free from those powers, we are seeking love. To know God's love, to love and be loved by others, and to love ourselves. But in case you are not convinced by Jesus, Michael Curry, and this sermon, here's a bit of evidence from the scientific world.

Not long ago I read about an episode aired on NPR from The TED Radio Hour. The episode was called “How Things Spread,” and it started by noting how laughter spreads, but I think could also be said about love. Laughter is contagious. Someone laughs, and we start to laugh, too—sometimes without even knowing what is so funny!

And laughter spreads because we are connected to each other, part of social networks, in relationship. We humans fare better—and sometimes worse—because we are all connected to others. But the benefits of living a connected life outweigh the costs.

If someone was always violent toward you, or gave you misinformation, or made you sad, or infected you with deadly germs—you would cut the ties to that person, and your network would disintegrate.

So, the spread of good and valuable things is necessary to sustain and nourish social networks, our system of relationships. Social networks are fundamentally related to goodness. And they are necessary for spreading ideas, kindness, altruism, happiness, and love. And a network that's arranged one way can be healthy, innovative, cooperative, and kind. But, arranged another way—well, you get the idea.

So, let's think about this idea as it relates to the church as the Body of Christ choosing the Way of Love—as that which brings us together a Christian community. And in our choosing to imagine a future in which all of God's beloved children have enough food to eat, a shelter in which to sleep, and sufficient clothes to wear.

Imagining a future in which health care is a God-given right for every individual, not a scheme to make some people very, very rich at the expense of those who are very, very sick. A future in which everyone receives a quality education, not a system of disparity that grows ever greater. A future in which all people are allowed and nurtured to become all who God created them to be—women, men, people of color, LGBT folks, people whose ancestors came from other lands, you name it.

And all of this based on the Way of Love, that powerful, convincing, and benign mythological structure. Oh, not myth, as in “untruth.” But myth as in a powerful story that speaks an essential truth. Like the creation story, which communicates an essential truth of faith: God created. In fact, God created out of the dust, from nothing. And the most powerful lesson from the creation story may not be about how many 24-hour days it took, but about having “dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth”.

We used to think that meant we could despoil the earth, we could plunder whatever we wanted, we could squander our precious resources—but we are coming to see it as a command to be better stewards of our island home.

Because that is what the Way of Love has shown us.

And we used to think slavery was a God-given institution, and we could kidnap people, rip them from their families and their homeland, and oppress them all the days of their lives—but we have come to see that we need or should have respect for all human beings.

Because the Way of Love has shown us what is right.

We used to think that our privilege and our success were signs of God's favor, allowing us to condemn others less fortunate for not pulling themselves up by their own bootstraps—but we have to see that same privilege and success as a means of empowering us to lift up the lowly.

Because the Way of Love has shown us what is good.

We used to think that women were to keep silent and cover their heads in church, and this led to their treatment as second-class citizens, inferior to men—but we have to see that God has created us all in the divine image, of equal and immeasurable value.

Because the Way of Love has shown us what is just.

We used to believe a lot of things, things that caused us to oppress others, to disparage those different from ourselves, to ignore the refugee and stranger, to be fearful of the unknown—but we have turned from those sinful ways.

Because the Way of Love has shown us what is true.

And we do all this, walking in the Way of Love, knowing, deep in our heart, that we are doing the will of God. Jesus said, "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another." So, another part of the question is...are we doing our best or can we be doing more to follow the way of love? Because in this Way of Love, we come to know God's love, to love and be loved by others, and even to love ourselves. Amen.