

Sermon: Living Love
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Olivet Congregational Church, UCC
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1 John 4.16-21

So we have known and believe the love that God has for us.

God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them. Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness on the day of judgement, because as he is, so are we in this world. There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love. We love because he first loved us. Those who say, 'I love God', and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.

Luke 6: 20-31

Then he looked up at his disciples and said:

'Blessed are you who are poor,
for yours is the kingdom of God.

'Blessed are you who are hungry now,
for you will be filled.

'Blessed are you who weep now,
for you will laugh.

'Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man. Rejoice on that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven; for that is what their ancestors did to the prophets.

'But woe to you who are rich,
for you have received your consolation.

'Woe to you who are full now,
for you will be hungry.

‘Woe to you who are laughing now,
for you will mourn and weep.

‘Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets.

‘But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. Do to others as you would have them do to you.

Sermon: Living Love

I needed last weekend. From Saturday morning to Sunday evening there was a lot of joy. And I don't know about you, but I can use joy. I am grateful for joy.

It started with my coming to Veteran's Park for the Halloween Hullaboo organized by Bridgeport Youth Lacrosse. Now truth be told, I spent most of my morning in the library, filling goodie bags with candy, coloring pages, a pencil, an announcement about an upcoming library reading hour, and a strip of paper with a joke on it. You heard a few of those jokes – the corny Halloween ones I shared with you on Sunday. The ones that made you realize that I should not start our announcements with jokes.

But in filling goodie bags in the library, I had the opportunity to meet the librarians and learn all that they did to prepare for this Halloween children's event and all that they were doing to encourage the children's interest in books. I watched as they directed kids to the story area for their spooky story time before they received their goodie bags. I don't know how many bags one young mom and I filled that day, compared to all the bags filled by the librarians, but in the end there were between 450 and 500 goodie bags. There was a lot of candy. A lot of effort by the librarians. And a lot of smiles from the children who came for a story and also left with a book and candy.

Outside, there were more children than I could count – running around and having fun. Young children were playing soccer on multiple soccer fields. High school aged boys were playing lacrosse and congratulating one another at the end of their game. Kids of all ages were in and out of the bouncy huts. Adults were supervising activities or escorting their kids to activities. It was loud. It was busy. It was happy. It was wonderful. I was grateful to have been a small part of it.

And from Veteran's Park, I went home to change from my jeans and "Love Anyway" sweatshirt to a dress for the Executive Conference Minister's wedding in Hartford. Now, I don't know Rev. Darrell Goodwin well. I had never met his now spouse, Kentavis Brice. But I have seen on-line posts of conversations that Rev. Goodwin has had with SNEUCC pastors. I received a prayer shawl from him, representing the conference, when I started as a pastor here. And I did meet him at a recent meeting. He is consistently full of energy, enthusiasm, love for his faith and his God, and pride in the UCC. And at the meeting where I met him and on line, he invited everyone to his wedding. He reiterated his pride in the UCC, that he was chosen to be the Executive Conference minister – a young, black, openly gay man.

It was a beautiful wedding. It began with a string quartet from the Hartford Symphony Orchestra playing classical pieces and some show tunes. The grandmother and the mothers of the men were escorted down the center aisle, ahead of the couple, to begin the service. The officiating bishop engaged those in attendance as the grooms exchanged their vows. And she asked us if we would support this couple in their marriage by saying "We will, with the help of God" when called upon. Which we did. There was a "Tasting of the Four Elements" ritual. Each man tasted vinegar, lemon, cayenne pepper and honey. The bishop explained the symbolism, saying that the men would be, there for each other in times that are bitter, sour, spicy and sweet. Now her explanation was more detailed than mine but you get the idea. There was a laying on of hands. And the organist played the Hallelujah chorus as the Goodwin's processed, well almost danced, out of the church. It was wonderful.

When I returned home that evening, I reflected on the day and the experiences that I had the privilege to be a part of. Children from Bridgeport, who lack opportunities that kids from suburbs have; children of all ages, ethnicities and

colors, came together to enjoy a party put on by those who simply wanted them to have a wonderful time. The wedding of a same-sex couple, with its blending of some traditional and contemporary elements, united the couple in love and engaged all present in offering them support in love during good times and challenging times. I was grateful.

Then, on Sunday morning after worship, we had our apple and pumpkin themed brunch. The food was delicious. But more importantly, we gathered together in joy and laughter – those who have been members for many years, Nick and his young family and some individuals who are new to Olivet. It was a beautiful thing. It was fun. There was love. I was grateful.

I ended my weekend by having dinner with my daughter, son-in-law and two grandchildren. We shared a simple meal and lots of laughs as my grandchildren and I made cookies. But we did not bake cookies. Rather we played a computer game where the computer gave us the recipe which we adapted, told us how the cookies turned out, and gave the cookies silly names. It was fun. It was joyful. There was love. I was grateful.

In John's letter this morning we hear, "So we have known and believe the love that God has for us. God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them... We love because he first loved us."

Those words were read at the wedding. They affirm God's love for us; that God lives in us as we live in God through love. I find them so comforting. And I find them necessary for us today. You see, while Saturday and Sunday were wonderful, recently I have been hearing a lot that I find distressing, words or actions that do not reflect love.

At the most recent Fairfield East Association meeting, the speaker was Rev. Jake Joseph, Regional Director of the CT Region of the Anti-Defamation League. He shared that anti semetic incidents – acts of harassment, vandalism, and assault against Jewish people- have been steadily increasing over the past 10 years. In fact, they increased significantly in the past year, from 2026 in 2020 to 2717 in 2021 incidents - in just one year. And those are just the incidents that were reported.

This past week saw an increase in the use of the N word on Twitter. Within a 12 hour period, the use of the N word increased by 500%.

And, recently “The Stop the Sexualization of Children Act of 2022” was introduced in the United States congress. The background for this legislation on the website of one of the congressmen that sponsored the bill forbids any federal dollars from going to any federal, state, or local government agencies, or private organizations that “intentionally expose children under 10 years of age to sexually explicit material.” Included in that is a prohibition of any discussion related to “sexual orientation, gender identity, gender dysphoria, or related subjects.”

My grandson’s best friend has two moms - not because his dad remarried. He has two moms because the two women are married. My grandson simply accepts this without any question. Why wouldn’t he? They are good moms. They are good people. But if that legislation goes into effect, what happens if my grandson’s friend gets harassed at school? His teacher would not be able to address sexual orientation and encourage other students to be tolerant or accepting of this boy’s mothers. Or what about the young child who expressed to his teacher that she no longer wanted to be called Charlotte but wanted to be called Charlie? My hair dresser recently shared with me that her young daughter’s friend was transitioning. My hairdresser was pleased that this courageous child could express himself. And she was proud of her daughter, who took this in stride, for accepting him. But what if that now young boy gets harassed? That teacher could not support and encourage acceptance of that child or any child who is transitioning by encouraging acceptance of those who deep down inside feel they are a boy even though they are in a girl’s body or vice versa.

The librarians who I met would not be able to have any books for young children about these topics on the library shelves. Not if they receive money from the federal government.

And what about the doctors and nurses in clinics that receive federal dollars? What do health care providers do if parents or children come to them with questions about their child’s sexual orientation or gender identity? If any of these professionals discussed any of these subjects, they would lose federal funding – dollars that are essential to their providing care, and those who work in clinics that accept federal funding typically provide care to underserved communities.

Today, incidents of hate are on the rise. People can be victims of hate based upon their faith, their color or their ethnicity, or their sexual orientation or gender identity. But we are called to love. In our scripture reading this morning, John tells us, *“Those who say, ‘I love God’, and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.”*

As a minister I am called to share God’s message of love. I am also called to condemn hate.

As a minister in the United Church of Christ, I feel blessed. I experienced gratitude and felt blessed at Rev. Goodwin’s wedding last week. The UCC is one of a number of denominations that marries and ordains gay or lesbian individuals and accepts and affirms all persons whatever their sexual orientation or gender identity. I too am proud of that.

Now, I need to be personally open and honest here. The United Church of Christ’s acceptance of Lesbian, Gay, Transgender, Questioning persons is one of the reasons I joined this denomination. You see, when I came out as lesbian, it had not been an easy journey. It was one of the most difficult times in my life. But I felt accepted in the United Church of Christ, just as I was. And I was welcomed to the communion table. And as my journey progressed in ways I had not anticipated, I was able to be ordained as a minister in the United Church of Christ.

We are called to love one another. We are all called to live in ways of love – whether it’s gathering with family or in church at a wedding or at worship or at the potluck meal afterward; whether it’s participating in events with people who may or may not look like us or who believe differently than we do; or this week, when we vote. For when we vote, we can live our faith. We can put our faith in action by following the example of Jesus; sharing in the inclusivity, justice, and radical love that Jesus had for all people.

Jesus tells us, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” (Matthew 22:39) And at the conclusion of today’s reading, what is known as his sermon on the plain, Jesus put it this way. “Do to others as you would have them do to you.” Jesus’ message is a positive message guiding us toward positive actions. Simple instructions.

Treat others the way you want to be treated. Love others. Love. Love brings people together. Love builds bridges. Love is inclusive. Love is joyful. And at the end of the day, when see or feel love in action, we are grateful.

May we build God's kin-dom of love.