

Welcome

*We are one in the Spirit, we are one in the Lord
We are one in the Spirit, we are one in the Lord
And we pray that all unity may someday be restored
And they'll know we are Christians by our love, by our love
Yes they'll know we are Christians by our love.¹*

St. Paul's United Church of Christ, we need to talk about extremism.

We need to talk about the forces at work in our nation that have divided us so deeply that it seems like no side can even see the other anymore.

We need to talk about hate crimes, and insurrection. The violence that has happened already, and the violence planned for later this week..

We need to talk about what it means to be a church of extravagant welcome when not everyone who might come through these doors looks like us, or thinks like us, or lives and loves and worships and prays like us.

St. Paul's United Church of Christ, we need to talk about love.

Tomorrow is the day our nation celebrates the life, work and legacy of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King. Our opening prayers are all adapted from his book of collected sermons called, "Strength to Love." In this book, in the very first chapter, Dr. King calls us, adopting the words of Jesus, to be "wise as serpents, and harmless as doves,"² to carry a "tough mind and a tender heart."³ This is the formula Doctor King prescribes for just living, and this is the path Pastor King offers to a just and loving world.

No matter who you are, or where you are on life's journey, you are welcome to join us on that path here.

Please rise as you are able for the Call to Worship.

¹ "We Are One in the Spirit," Peter Scholte (1966).

² Matthew 10:16

³ Martin Luther King, Jr., "A Tough Mind and a Tender Heart," in *Strength to Love* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), 1-9.

Sermon

“Can anything good come out of Nazareth?”⁴

How often have we heard and said similar words ourselves? Can anything good come out of that other political party? Can anything good come out of that neighboring town? Can anything good come out of immigrant caravans, or prison populations, or protestors on the other side of an issue we hold dear? Can anything good come from people who are not like us?

Last week, we talked about the Gospel of John and the Last Supper. We talked about how Jesus promised his disciples that if they just followed his commandments--essentially “love one another”⁵--that they would receive the Spirit of truth, which would be both with them and in them.⁶ This week, I’d like to talk about what that Spirit brings.

In a 1956 sermon titled, “Paul’s Letter to American Christians,” Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. challenged our church forebears to “face the tragic fact” that “you stand in the most segregated hour of Christian America.”⁷ I’m here to tell you, having reviewed the research, that not much has changed. We still come to worship in segregated, homogenous churches week after week, almost seventy years later. We still divide ourselves by race and color and creed and politics and place of origin. We still fail to live up to the Christian vision of bringing all God’s children together in love.

One response to this is to look at the wider national church and judge *them* for their lack of diversity. After all, in a 98.6% white town,⁸ what else can we do? We’re off the hook, right? But I think we all know we can do better.

May 2 is Immigrant Rights Sunday in the United Church of Christ. What can we do to reach out to the immigrants both among us and beyond our town’s borders, so that

⁴ from this week’s lectionary, John 1:43-46

⁵ e.g. John 13:34-35

⁶ John 14:15-17

⁷ Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., “Paul’s Letter to American Christians,” Sermon delivered 4 November, 1956 at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, Montgomery, Alabama.

⁸ World Population Review, “Madrid, Iowa Population 2020,” retrieved January 14, 2021, <https://worldpopulationreview.com/us-cities/madrid-ia-population>.

we have good work to report when that Sunday comes? The United Church of Christ has a national Minister for Racial Justice, Velda Love, who has gathered dozens of resources and suggestions for how to make a positive impact on the world around us. How can we approach and engage some of these ideas? Our own Iowa Conference has called all member congregations to discern how we welcome LGBTQ+ members. For me, working in the behavioral health field and seeing the trauma and the suicide rates some young people face, this has become literally a matter of life and death. What are we doing to protect our own most vulnerable children and youth? What are we doing to welcome and hold all of God's human creation?

When I think of diversity in the church, I think of Pentecost, the Book of Acts, and the description of the crowd that gathered when the followers of Peter became filled with the Holy Spirit:

Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. And at this sound [speaking in tongues] the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one of them heard them speaking in the native language of each.⁹

Too often when we hear this passage, we go straight to the miracle of the Galileans speaking in tongues, and we forget the miracle of just how large and diverse a crowd came to listen. So many nations, creeds and cultures. So many different kinds of people called by the Spirit into the early church. How can *we* gather a crowd like *that*?

Those of you who heard last week's sermon might remember that my favorite part of the entire Bible is the promise of the Holy Spirit. That force of discernment and Truth that God has sent to abide both *with* us and *in* us. That guiding light that became the new covenant after Christ ascended to Heaven.

But the Holy Spirit does not speak to us from a burning bush anymore. The clouds don't part and reveal God's voice. We are like Samuel in the temple, sleeping. God calls to us. We don't understand. God calls to us again. We still don't understand. It may take two or three times, or two or three hundred times--but eventually we do hear.

⁹ Acts 2:5-6 (NRSV)

And the proper response when God is on the line is always going to be, “Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening.”¹⁰

So how do we know when it really is the voice of God speaking to us through the Holy Spirit? Of all the voices and impulses and intuitions that pass through us all on a daily basis, how do we know which are truly holy and worth hanging on to?

There is an answer I’d like to suggest. And it’s simpler than you might think.

In the fifth chapter of Galatians, Paul tells the Church what fruit the Holy Spirit brings: “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.”¹¹ Does the path we’re on lead toward these things? We are probably on a Godly path. Does the path we are on lead in the other direction? Well, we might want to examine where we and the Spirit parted ways.

Last week, we learned that the path to the Holy Spirit leads through love. Jesus said, “*if you love me*, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you a new advocate, to be with you forever.”¹² And Jesus’ main commandments, as we know, are to love God, and love your neighbor. This week, I’d like to suggest, as did Paul, that not only does the Holy Spirit come from love, it also leads to love. It’s a cycle. A process in which love leads to love leads to love leads to more love still. And that love is an integral part of the *justice* that Martin Luther King, Jr. preached. In his words:

Love is the most durable power in the world. This creative force, so beautifully exemplified in the life of our Christ, is the most potent instrument available in mankind’s quest for peace and security [...]. The great military leaders of the past have gone, and their empires have crumbled and burned to ashes. But the empire of Jesus, built solidly and majestically on the foundation of love, is still growing.¹³

He goes on to quote that old hymn:

¹⁰ from today’s lectionary, 1 Samuel 3:1-10

¹¹ Galatians 5:22-23.

¹² John 14:15

¹³ Martin Luther King, Jr., “Loving Your Enemies,” in *Strength to Love* (Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 2010): 51.

In Christ there is no East or West,
In him no South or North
But one great Fellowship of Love
Throughout the whole wide earth.¹⁴

Today after church, there is a meeting of your elected Board. I plan to attend. When we come to “new business,” I plan to ask what we can do as a Christian community to extend our loving welcome to ALL of God’s children, no matter what their race, creed, color, sex, gender, orientation, national origin, immigration status, or any other shibboleth that divides. Especially in the time of COVID, when we are all so isolated and cut off from each other, I believe this work matters. And I’m asking for your hopes and prayers for love and justice to guide us there.

*And they’ll know we are Christians by our love, by our love
Yes they’ll know we are Christians by our love.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.* p. 52.