

First Congregational UCC, Asheville
Verses from Micah 6:6-8 plus New Testament passages on LOVE

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GOD IS LOVE!

The older I get, the simpler my theology gets: God is Love... period.

When Lance asked me to preach while he would be away, I first said, “No, thank you; I’ve been retired for six years, and I no longer have any of my old sermons from so many years ago and I have given away all my big thick biblical and theological books that I started collecting during my days at Yale Divinity School 50 years ago. No, no more preaching for me.” (And besides, I don’t have any closed toed shoes up here!”

Until.... I thought of something I kinda want to say to us in this wonderful church, something which comes straight from my heart, perhaps even straight from a seed planted by God in my heart while I was participating in our wonderful ***Sacred Pause*** group here at church on a Monday night this summer. (The group now meets on the first and third Monday evenings each month - we invite you to join us on Oct. 2.) I love that group which I think of as “Art As Meditation”. And there are some real artists in the group, but since art is not my talent or training, I’m most likely to be found coloring in a coloring book or using a stencil on those Monday evenings. Other people even crochet or write in a journal during our quiet time together. It’s a wonderful, centering, refreshing experience. People take turns sharing parts of the leadership of the group, and on that particular evening, Mandy had selected readings from the Franciscan priest, Richard Rohr, (whom Lance likes to quote as much as I do and whom many of you probably already read daily - if not and if you are interested, see the bulletin insert today for how you can subscribe for free to his daily or weekly emails). Richard Rohr leads the “Center for Action and Contemplation” in Albuquerque, New Mexico, and part of our conversation time that night in

the group was about our appreciation of both action and contemplation here at First Congregational and in our own lives. My heart sang “AMEN”!!

So, I got back in touch with Lance and said that I would be willing to preach today because I thought of a subject dear to my heart which I believe it is very important for us here at First Congregational UCC in Asheville.

When I was first called to be the pastor of Community UCC in Raleigh in late 1977, we had a church retreat to articulate what we felt was our church’s mission. Out of that retreat came a mission statement, or actually it was really more of a “motto” (we didn’t know much about mission statements back then) - our motto: “Community UCC, nurturing personal faith and working for social justice.”..... Some years later, we up-dated it to “Nurturing spiritual growth and working for social justice”.

Not so different from Richard Rohr’s Center for ACTION and CONTEMPLATION. And not so different from what we love about our church First Congregational UCC in Asheville!

Over the years it became clearer to us in Raleigh that the most important part of this motto was not EITHER action OR contemplation, not either “working for social justice” OR “nurturing spiritual growth”. The most important part is the simple word AND. Both are equally important, and both are at their best when joined together. AND.

Now of course there were people in that local church, just as there are people here at First Congregational UCC Asheville, who were much more interested in one part or the other of that statement. There were wonderful people who organized our prayer chain or led a meditation group but who never stood downtown in Raleigh protesting some injustice or another. And then there were other people who articulated that their form of prayer was

precisely, for example, to spend time working side by side with two predominantly black UCC churches in Raleigh to improve race relations in that city, and those folks might never show up at a prayer retreat. Action for justice was prayer for them. And naturally there were folks who did both, or neither.

In that church we really tried hard to remember that while our own preference or our own personal “calling” or giftedness might lead us to be more involved in one side of our motto than the other, what is truly important for the church as a whole (and for the world, I would say) is the AND in the phrase: Action AND contemplation; spiritual deepening AND working for social justice. I think I remember several sermons with a title something like “Picket AND Pray”!

Today, perhaps some of us here find ourselves much more drawn to one side of that wholeness; therefore, we want to remember that the people who are more involved in the other part, are doing what they are doing, just as we are doing what we are doing, on behalf of ALL of us as a WHOLE church community. And we hope that our church life will nurture both sides of this beautiful “AND”.

Personally, my own energy and passion has always flowed more naturally to the work for social justice (whether that be advocating on behalf of the environment, seeking peaceful solutions to global problems, or taking part in Moral Monday gatherings in recent years, or raising money for feeding hungry people here and around the world or working for sustainable development, or standing up for LGBTQ rights. “Action” is where I have the most passion. (It was such a deep and holy privilege for me to get to join some of you in officiating in several of the weddings that took place here in Asheville on the steps of the Registrar of Deeds on the day of the court decision came down allowing same-sex marriages). AND, while my own

passion flourishes in such actions, I actually have found that I NEED, and more and more deeply appreciate, times of contemplation as well.

For me, and perhaps for some of you, classic contemplative or centering prayer or traditional Buddhist-type meditation, is very difficult. I have a hard time training my mind to be still and focus on my breathing or, better still, on simply “knowing that God is”. Thankfully, there are other contemplative practices. I have always found that the practice of journaling is very helpful for me. Some people find helpful the kind of meditation of repeating in our mind a certain phrase over and over, or of coloring a mandala like I do in the Sacred Pause group, or doing “meditative walking”, or even bird watching (maybe especially bird watching - it is so very present-centered!). Those are certainly my more usual contemplative practices. AND, I have also been very deeply moved to be in community with others in a very contemplative WORSHIP experience; for example, my favorite is worship with lots of simple chanting from the religious community of Taizé, France, interspersed with times of scripture and silence. I would love to engage in that kind of contemplative worship at least once a week.

Richard Rohr writes that “The practice of prayer and the practice of compassionate action are both necessary and complementary spiritual practices. . . . We are called to be both activists *and* mystics, missionaries of love *and* contemplatives, great lovers *and* deep thinkers”.

Rohr is, as I said, a Franciscan friar and priest. The Franciscan Way closely follows Jesus’ path of... simplicity... justice... and inclusivity.... It’s a counter-cultural movement, an “alternative orthodoxy;” it values vulnerability and union over power and independence. Significantly our wonderful current Pope (extremely well educated by the Jesuits, not by the Franciscans who obviously influenced him greatly) was the first pope to ever choose the name Francis, and he clearly did it very intentionally.

My hope and prayer for us at First Congregational UCC is to find a new pastor who resonates with that “AND” - - and who will help us go deeper into both action and contemplation.

In the meantime, I invite you to subscribe to Rohr’s email meditations. As with most anything, some mornings, most mornings, the emailed meditation absolutely hits the spot for me, and other times, he kind of loses me. (Just skim over the ones that lose you.) Simple is now best for me: GOD IS LOVE!

God is love! It IS as simple as that; AND it can be very difficult to LIVE as if that were true. Contemplation can help with difficulty. And loving action can bring us closer to others and to God.

We are all connected; we are all part of God’s love. The Hebrew prophets already knew that truth centuries ago - that’s why for them it was so important to help the rulers and the people seek to create a just society where widows and orphaned children were taken care of, where total strangers were welcomed into one’s home or community with tremendous hospitality, where the people were urged by the prophets to create SOCIETIES that are just for all. Not just “personal good deeds” but “just societies”! That is every bit as important for us today. The Hebrew prophets taught that it’s not enough just for individuals to help other individuals who are in trouble. The most important work is creating a just society - establishing the kinds of traditions and systems that lead to justice and peace and wholeness and “enough for all”. The prophet Micah proclaimed that God is not interested in our rituals, our offerings, or our sacrifices - what God wants from us is for us to “do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with our God”. And “justice” for those Hebrew prophets, and for Jesus, was not our 21st century secular American “criminal - or civil

- justice system.” Two scales equally balanced was not the symbol for Biblical justice; a completed puzzle might be a better symbol because justice in Biblical times meant “making things right for all”. So the metaphor could be “fitting the broken pieces back together again”, making things whole.

God is love. You heard just a very few of the huge number of passages in the New Testament this morning in which the word LOVE appears. Jesus understood that God is love - Jesus invited us into that love and taught us to share that love; and Jesus lived that love - feeding hungry people, spiritually AND physically, healing people of their inner demons AND their physical ailments. GOD’S LOVE in action.

Jesus never said, “Pull yourselves up by your own bootstraps” or “Let the unbridled free market solve hunger and homelessness”. Jesus said, “Feed my sheep”. Jesus said, “In as much as you have fed the hungry, clothed the naked, housed the homeless, visited the sick or those in prison.... you have done that for me.”

One of Richard Rohr’s recent meditations taught that the correct way of translating something that we have often translated as “faith in Christ” is actually best stated as “the faith OF Christ” - - not a “belief” and certainly not a “belief system”, but a way of being, a way of living in love, like Jesus. Jesus’ notion of faith is much better translated as “foundational confidence and trust that God cares about what is happening right now”.

Contemplation - whether that’s traditional meditation, or praying the Sunday bulletin during the week, or doing yoga, or taking a mindful walk in nature, which was called “God’s other Scripture,” by some of the very earliest theologians many centuries ago - Contemplation helps direct our actions, our work for justice, so that we react to the challenges of the world with

more love ourselves. We define “neighbor” more and more broadly. Maybe we even get closer to loving our enemies!

Recently, Richard Rohr wrote in a daily meditation: “One of the reasons I founded the Center for Action and Contemplation thirty years ago was to give activists some grounding in spirituality so they could continue working for social change, but from a stance much different than vengeance, ideology, or willpower pressing against willpower. Most activists I knew loved Gandhi’s and Martin Luther King, Jr.’s teachings on nonviolence. But it became clear to me that many of them had only an intellectual appreciation rather than a participation in the much deeper mystery.”

As I close, I invite you to listen to just a few of the meditative quotes Richard Rohr has used in recent weeks in daily email meditations. (Mandy’s reading of some of these to our Sacred Pause group was what encouraged me to speak with you today):

If you’d like, you might even close your eyes right now and let this be a brief “contemplative exercise” for you as you take a deep breath and settle your feet comfortably on the floor: Listen:

— “The job of religion is to help people ACT effectively and compassionately from an inner centeredness and a connection with God.
(repeat) (8 seconds of silence after each reading)

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— “If your spiritual practice doesn’t lead you to some acts of concrete caring or service, then you have every reason not to trust it.”

— “As compassion and sympathy flow out of us to any marginalized person for whatever reason, wounds are bandaged—both their wounds and ours.”

— “God can only be loved and known in the act of love; God can only be experienced in communion.”

And finally,

— “The true spiritual quest is not that I become whole. Instead, informed by the belief that the world is birthed and loved by God and that the world is precious and sacred and one, the true spiritual quest is that the WORLD become whole—and WE along with it.”

GOD IS LOVE and God reminds us that LOVE is who WE truly are also!

Amen.

SCRIPTURES FOR 9-24-17

MICAH 6: 6-8

From the New Revised Standard Version

(verse 6) "With what shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before God with burnt offerings, with calves a year old?"

(7) Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?"

(8) The Lord has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?"

Same verses Micah 6: 6-8, from “The Message” contemporary translation/paraphrase:

“How can I stand before God and show proper respect to the high God? Shall I bring an armload of offerings topped off with yearling calves?

Would God be impressed with thousands of rams, with buckets and barrels of olive oil?

Would God be moved if I sacrificed my firstborn child, my precious baby, to cancel my sin?

But God has already made it plain how to live, what to do, what God is looking for in men and women.

It is quite simple: do what is fair and just to your neighbor, be compassionate and loyal in your love, and don't take yourself too seriously, take God seriously!"

Selected readings from Jesus' numerous teachings about LOVE:

Matthew 22:37 and 39:

"Jesus said to him, 'You shall LOVE the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.'

And a second is like it: 'You shall LOVE your neighbor as yourself'."

Luke 16:13 and Matthew 6:24:

"No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and LOVE the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and wealth."

John 13:34 and 35:

"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 21:17:

"He said to Simon Peter the third time, 'Simon, son of John, do you LOVE me?' Peter felt hurt because he said to him the third time, 'Do you LOVE me?' And he said to him, 'Lord, you know everything, you know that I LOVE you.' Jesus said to him, 'Feed my sheep'."

And, a few of the many verses from early church leaders about LOVE:

Second Corinthians:13:11:

"Finally, brothers and sisters, farewell. Put things in order, listen to my appeal, agree with one another, live in peace; and the God of LOVE and peace will be with you."

Galatians 5:14:

"For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, 'You shall LOVE your neighbor as yourself'."

Hebrews 10:24:

"Let us consider how to provoke one another to LOVE and good deeds."

First John 3:17:

“How does God’s LOVE abide in anyone who has the world’s goods and sees a brother and sister in need and yet refuses to help’?”

And, finally and most importantly for today:

First John 4:8:

“Whoever does not LOVE does not know God, for GOD IS LOVE.”