

“Pursued by Grace”

August 11, 2019

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First reading

Letter to Philemon our beloved fellow worker and Apphia our sister and Archippus our fellow soldier and the church in your house: Grace to you and peace from God and Jesus Christ. I thank God always when I remember you in my prayers, because I hear of your love and of the faith which you have.

1 Corinthians 13:4-8

Love is patient and kind; love is not jealous or boastful, it is not arrogant or rude. Love does not insist on its own way: it is not irritable or resentful, it does not rejoice at wrong, but rejoices in the right. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends.

Second reading

from *The Soul of America* by Jon Meacham
pages 10-11, Introduction

To know what has come before is to be armed against despair. If the men and women of the past, with all their flaws and limitations and ambitions and appetites, could press on through ignorance and superstition, racism and sexism, selfishness and greed, to create a freer, stronger nation, then perhaps we, too, can right wrongs and take another step toward that most enchanting and elusive of destinations: a more perfect Union. To do so requires innumerable acts of citizenship and of private grace.

After David asked for a substitute for this Sunday service, I began to ponder, especially since I no longer preach very often, what I wanted to convey. In the 40 years, this October, since I became a minister, I have learned to trust my intuition when sermon ideas seem to immediately surface and don't go away. It seemed also that the public events of the last few weeks especially cry out for Spiritual attention. So, acting on intuition, the first idea that came to mind was that I needed to write a letter, as an attempt to open conversations, to the generations that seem to be lost to religion today. That includes many of our own children and grandchildren that I never seem to have the right opportunity to have this kind of conversation with, face to face. So, here goes that part.

Dear Millenials, Generation X, Younger Beings ...

I am writing this letter as an imagery conversation I wish I could have. I want to be clear it's a letter not meant to be judgmental, bitchy, a lament of losses as I age, nor a recruitment pitch, but rather my attempt to understand your choices as you too live with the disturbingly horrific, daily

encounters the world filled with acts of hatred and evil seems to be throwing at us. I also want to include in this communication maybe a little bit of wisdom, how and why I and others find strength in the practice of Faith, retain a confidence in a particular religious belief system, and share the hope for a better world. To do this, I will briefly talk about my second sermon idea, trying to simplistically identify what constitutes the religious belief system to which I and others have committed ourselves, that being primarily:

- the belief in a God of love that includes love of neighbor and self*
- the choice and value of making and living into covenants*
- participation in caring communities*
- the experience of grace.*

There are a lot of things I do understand about the new world we live in today. It is not hard for me to understand why our family and others have such negative sentiments about organized religion and shun away from local congregations. It's not hard to see how much of religion today is seen as antiquated, out of touch with reality, highly hypocritical and alienating. I know church feels "old and dying" to you young people today, not finding anyone your own age here or there you can possibly relate to, nor can you easily find religious activities within your reach that speak to a deep practice of loving the other. I know how in the name of God and religion, wars have been started, people have been killed, hurt, shunned and dehumanized. I understand your need to reject and distance yourselves from religion.

I do want to acknowledge that some of you and many you know do have deeply held individual spiritual connections and do practice loving kindness and caring in your own individual ways. What saddens me is that I believe God, Jesus, and the life of love they offer have been thrown out by you and your generations, along with the surrounding church waters. With such knowledge and nourishment going down the drain, I believe humanity will not long exist. The Bible also has been tossed aside as totally irrelevant, full of confusing materials. It is seen as a written tower of Babel, quite unnecessary to anything going on today. Its history and contents are unrecognizable and meaningless to you and the majority of our society.

*What causes me much sorrow is that I believe **not all** religion and all churches, synagogues and temples that exist are irrelevant and ineffective. From my side of this imaginary conversation, I am trying to convey why I think it is crucial in this day and the ages to come, for the religious belief system to which many of us still subscribe to be carefully explored by you for its possible meaning and value. I am inviting you to consider its merits and to be open to the possibility of discovering that it might even become an answer to many of your longings, and maybe even part of your own emerging practice of faith.*

*The particulars are pretty simple: **to learn to understand the religious belief in an invisible, all-present God, as the ultimate source of love and creation. To see Jesus as just one of the followers of a belief system who incorporated and enacted a deep understanding of love of God, neighbor and self. We also believe as humans through our life on earth that we are given multiple opportunities to learn about the different dimensions and qualities of love, as well as a variety of ways to practice it.***

I did not originally go to Seminary to become a minister. I went to study and explore whether there was anything in the Bible or about organized religion I could believe in or possibly learn from. I was particularly interested in what I saw as the limited roles of women, blatant examples of racism, injustice, hurtful practices full of conflicting so-called religious messages. (Women, obey your husband, be silent, thou shall not kill, yet go for an eye for an eye, etc.) I explored utopian communities such as the Shakers, the Kibbutz Movement, and the Amish.

To sum up my three-plus years of study, I came away with a new appreciation for the Bible as a source of ancient letters, essays, and ideas that came through interpreters of multiple languages, oral traditions, and community practices that identified people trying to learn lessons from life on how to practice living God's love. I learned how difficult it is through the various ages of communication to get to the "contemporary meaning" of things being conveyed from history and life experiences. Just look at our own major means of technological communication these days: newspapers, the computer, cell phones, the internet, Facebook, Twitter, and how we all attempt to distinguish between fact and fiction, and whether there is anything we can do about what we perceive as really going on.

Being a person of faith means to be one who makes a covenant between God and self to try to live a life of love. Being a person of faith is being open to explore what all that means, to discover new ways to practice it, to participate when possible with other love believers to help create a healthier, happier world for all. For Christians, that means trying out some of the lessons Jesus taught as he made his way in the world of his day, that are still called for now—lessons of inclusivity, tending to the vulnerable, welcoming the stranger, healing the afflicted, gathering community, feeding the hungry, caring for the children, just to name a few.

Covenants are promises made between two or more parties. Marriage vows are covenants made between two people; pregnancy is a covenant between a mother and life-producing cells that she allows to grow within her, and this covenant can also include the promises of the father. Our CCC covenant is a promise of believers to respect and care for one another and actively engage in the practice of exploring Spiritual questions. Like ours, all covenants call for action. In our covenant, we agree to support the fragile, protect the wounded, celebrate moments of balance; study, pray, work together, sharing a living awareness that faith, hope and love are as necessary as the air we breathe.

Becoming a community together is not like having 150+ best friends, or even multiple Facebook connections; it's more about individuals learning to care for each other in spite of our differences, to find ways to act, both individually and together; to practice loving kindness, deep devotion, promise-keeping. It's groups of believers working to find loving ways to resolve problems, prevent and stop conflicts, promote cooperation, equality, compromise; to serve others, and become peace-makers. As a community we are reminded to look for and pay attention to spontaneous, positive, healing responses from a God of Love.

It is precisely as a result of the action of both individuals and loving communities that things like the Selma, Anti-war and Women's marches have occurred; that racist, sexist, behavior was and continues to be challenged, that people making their own choices of marriage partners was made legal, that dictators have been removed from office, that immigrants fleeing genocide and death have been welcomed and supported, and responders to disasters continue to assist those

immediately affected and threatened. Action, not disengagement, apathy, judgement and alienation, is what makes a difference. Action, not fear or a sense of disempowerment is what gets us started taking the little steps toward finding different answers, taking healing measures, applying energy toward peace-making efforts.

Last week I heard an interview with Amy Klobuchar, Democratic candidate for President (who like Barack Obama identifies herself as belonging to the United Church of Christ) in which she responded to a question about the epidemic of opioid addiction throughout the nation. She said that her father had successfully struggled through alcohol addiction, and she quoted him as saying “We are always pursued by grace.” In fact he wrote a book about it. I was intrigued with that concept—grace pursues us—and I began looking up the dictionary and religious definitions of the word “grace” as good will, and also asked Bill for his understanding of what grace is. He replied, “It is Spirit-energy, gravity.” I thought about my own understanding of it as an unexpected happy outcome, as good luck. Whatever it is, “by the grace of God” is a comment often heard, usually meaning “whew, I got through something I didn’t think was going very well.” I’ve said it myself recently as I’ve been dealing with a life-threatening incident and as a three-time cancer survivor. By the grace of God, whew, I am still here.

Isn’t it refreshing though, to think that the good outcome, God’s energy, is something pursuing us? That it’s trying to surround us, to protect us, to empower us? What might it mean to each of us to consider that we are always being pursued by love—not for anything we have earned or deserve, but just because Love is trying to find us and support us. WOW! What a concept to wake up to each day.

To finish up my letter, I want to share a bit of what I hear and see. Something I hear often from young folks not unlike you are stories of the extraordinary loneliness, the lack of real community, the inability to find like-minded and principled people, the struggle to find a purpose for life. I had a meal recently with a 38-year-old woman who stated, “If my Mom and Dad are not here, I don’t know who I could call to go with me and bring me home from a colonoscopy.” When I asked if she couldn’t call a friend, she replied, “I’ve got over 200 friends on my Facebook and phone, and no one to call.”

What I see is a massive disengagement with others who are trying to make a change in the status quo or trying to prevent quickly-evolving disasters. I see evidence from you and others of withdrawal from everyday newspaper and television reports of worldwide activities as a way of avoiding depression, anxiety and anger; and yet fear of the outcomes, much stress, and feelings of powerlessness persist. Along with you not being grounded in religious beliefs, it concerns me when I hear any of you say you don’t have confidence in democracy nor feel your vote means anything, and you have chosen not to be involved in the political process. Those decisions put the focus on self and immediate pursuits. Your primary interests then become mostly those that benefit you, resulting in the daily entrenchment with earning and acquiring money, pursuing the next career, staying afloat, handling interpersonal dynamics. No wonder there is little or no time for meditation, restoration retreats, meaningful discussions, prayer.

What I would like to be able to say to you and the rest of us as well, is **WAKE UP! WHERE ARE YOU? STEP UP! Before it is too late.** The world needs you and your intellect, your actions and energy. **Risk something else!** Search out and engage with like-minded believers in peace, love, equality, inclusiveness, service to others. Look for those working toward a common good, with a vision of a better world. I am not suggesting you must join a religious group; it could be something else, maybe like the Red Cross whose mission statement reads much like the content of ours at CCC. I'm pleading with you to **ENGAGE with this world and its agenda, but in a different manner.** Whether it's a political group, a feeding co-op, a medical response group, a nature preservation group, a neighborhood watch program, or the Humane Society, join with others to help stop the madness. Don't dismiss a primary means available to you to address what is going on. Find a cause you can support, find a candidate, support the democratic process, and **vote.**

But most of all, I plead for you to believe it's worthwhile and necessary for the future of humanity, **to work now** against the overwhelming sense of evil energy pervading the people and groups that choose to react with violence against others because they are afraid of change or they're acting out of the need to feel right and all-powerful. **Work against it, understanding that GRACE IS in pursuit of us, and we are not alone.**

Grace is the enormous energy at work through individuals acting together out of love, compassion, empathy. There is among us a loving presence that calls us to be better than this, to be our best human self. To find and join with others working to make a healthier, safer, world for everyone. GRACE, my family and friends, is in pursuit! How do you know if you don't turn around and look to see what's coming toward you? You won't recognize it unless it crashes into you, which mysteriously it sometimes does. It's then recognized in hindsight. Whew! By the grace of God. God-Love **is with us, God-love is in us, God-love makes us a better people.**

My dears, it is my hope that perhaps this letter might open up a conversation between generations, a conversation especially needed now in order to find new ways together to respond in love to the threats before us. Explore becoming a person of faith and know we can trust, even in these times, that we are being pursued by God's grace to act in love.

Peace be with you,

Ann