

“A Workshop of Love”

Rev. David Gregory

August 12, 2018

Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost



Scripture reading

1 Corinthians 13:1-8 (Common English Bible)

If I speak in tongues of human beings and of angels but I don't have love, I'm a clanging gong or a clashing cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and I know all the mysteries and everything else, and if I have such complete faith that I can move mountains but I don't have love, I'm nothing. If I give away everything that I have and hand over my own body to feel good about what I've done but I don't have love, I receive no benefit whatsoever.

Love is patient, love is kind, it isn't jealous, it doesn't brag, it isn't arrogant, it isn't rude, it doesn't seek its own advantage, it isn't irritable, it doesn't keep a record of complaints, it isn't happy with injustice, but it is happy with the truth. Love puts up with all things, trusts in all things, hopes for all things, endures all things. Love never fails.

As for prophecies, they will be brought to an end. As for tongues, they will stop. As for knowledge, it will be brought to an end.

Second reading

from The Great Spiritual Migration

by Brian McLaren

In my travels, people repeatedly ask me what I think the church of the future will look like What I believe can and should happen is that tens of thousands of congregations will become what I call "schools" or "studios" of love I'm not concerned about a congregation's denomination, musical style, or liturgical tastes; I don't care if they meet weekly in a cathedral, monthly in a bar, annually at a retreat center, or daily online. I don't care whether they're big or small, formal or casual, hip or unhip, or whether their style of worship is traditional or contemporary or whatever. What I care about is whether they are teaching people to live a life of love, from the heart, for God, for all people (no exceptions), and for all creation.

Last week I began by asking the simple question, “What do you think of Jesus?” And after that message, somewhere early in the past week I looked in the mirror and asked myself that same question. What do you, David Gregory, think of Jesus? For someone like me who has devoted a lifetime to the study of one single ancient person, you would think I’d have asked myself that question any number of times, but I can’t really say that I have. I could tell you what a myriad of other people think of Jesus, draw timelines of what we think we know about him, dissect the theologies that have grown up around him, or speak to the history of the last two millennia where Christianity is concerned, but doing those things still wouldn’t answer the question of what I think of Jesus. As a minister in the United Church of Christ, I think it’s high time I came up with an answer, don’t you?

What I gleaned from my rather Quaker childhood was that Jesus was a sweet-tempered peacemaker who wanted everyone to get along. He went around healing and taking care of people, and for that he was wrongfully and inexplicably crucified by cruel and inhuman people who were very, very bad indeed. But we all know that the Jesus emerging from the pages of the Gospels is a far more complex character than that. He was indeed a compassionate healer, but the fact cannot be ignored that he was also one of a long line of incendiary insurgents, a rabble-rousing reformer, who not only spoke truth to the power of empire, but also uttered scathing indictments of the religious leaders of his day. Jesus saw many of his fellow Jews as an integral part of the problem. A cursory reading of the 23rd Chapter of Matthew with its blistering list of curses upon many of the scribes and Pharisees who saw themselves as the guardians of their religious system makes this clear. Just listen to one of the sugar-coated, PG-rated ones:

Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which on the outside look beautiful, but inside they are full of the bones of the dead and of all kinds of filth. So you also on the outside look righteous to others, but inside you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.

Today, what I think of Jesus is that he was first and foremost a reformer. From a very grounded, enlightened, prayerful place, and from a very higher-focused spiritual energy, he basically showed up on the scene to turn governments—be they empirical or religious—on their proverbial ears.

More people seemed to hate him than love him, at least more of the powerful people, and this coupled with a betrayal by one of his closest confidants is what did him in. But the reformation he started did not end at the crucifixion. In many ways it began there, as people started clustering together in Jerusalem, in Antioch, and eventually across the Roman Empire, into what I would term “communities of practice” where they met together in houses, or synagogues or anywhere they could find to live out the simple words, “love God and love your neighbor as yourself.” These gatherings were led by men and women alike, in places that made no distinction between Jews or Greeks or males or females. And this great reformation came to a screeching halt a few centuries later when the Roman government took it over and made its own system out of it, requiring other reformers to come along every few centuries to turn things upside down again.

Five hundred years ago, a number of reformers in Europe, including a German monk by the name of Martin Luther, using a highly sophisticated new technology called the printing press, turned the religious establishment on its ear, sparking a series of wars large and small, out of which grew an enlightened western civilization from which we've all been born. And a reformed Protestantism, of which the United Church of Christ is solidly a part, once again became something that bore no resemblance to Jesus or to his early followers, morphing into well-established systems of belief unrecognizable from the practices of Jesus of Nazareth and his followers. It's as though every few generations a new group of money-changers sets up shop in the courts of the temple, and somebody has to come along and turn them upside down; otherwise it all becomes meaningless.

One of the voices of our 21st Century Reformation is Brian McLaren, springing from an evangelical background and growing far past it to become one of the great rabble rousers of my generation. He's been denounced as a heretic and labeled an apostate, and many a conservative Christian has been warned to avoid his books at all costs. Of course, any book that's banned becomes a must-read on my list, and so recently I picked up a copy of *The Great Spiritual Migration: How the World's Largest Religion is Seeking a Better Way to Be Christian*. It was published a couple of years ago, and I cannot for the life of me figure out why it took so long for it to find me.

McLaren's simple premise is that this thing we call "church" always gets off track when it becomes centered in a system of belief. If we listen to the words of Jesus, they're not about belief or doctrine; they're about practice ... the practice of love. If love is the practice, there is no need for systematic control. McLaren says that we hear Jesus say "follow me" 87 times in the gospels. How many times does he say "worship me"? Zero. "Name a religion after me"? Zero. "Recite a creed about me"? Zero. The word "disciple" appears in the New Testament more than 250 times. "Christian" appears three times. "Christianity" zero times.

Today it's time for another Jesus Movement, a convergence of "just and generous communities" for which the way of Jesus is the primary aim. These communities may be traditional congregations, but they may also take other forms: urban abbeys, neo-monastic communities, home groups, prayer groups, mission groups, online groups, classes, alternative schools (like the Living School launched by the Center for Action and Contemplation), learning networks, or campus groups. Whatever their form, they serve as studios, dojos, or schools of love.

One such community could take the form of a pilgrimage or retreat destination by the name of, say, Rock Hill Center for Spiritual Renewal, or simply the Top of the Rock, which becomes a place to learn and practice love—love for each other, love for God—the kind of love taught by Jesus, the Jesus whose love led him into all kinds of other things, the very things we say we are about.

Amen.