

Love one another**John 13:31-35 MSG**

³¹⁻³² When he had left, Jesus said, "Now the Son of Man is seen for who he is, and God seen for who God is in Jesus. The moment God is seen in him, God's glory will be on display. In glorifying him, he himself is glorified—glory all around!" ³³ "Children, I am with you for only a short time longer. You are going to look high and low for me. But just as I told the Jews, I'm telling you: 'Where I go, you are not able to come.' ³⁴⁻³⁵ "Let me give you a new command: Love one another. In the same way I loved you, you love one another. This is how everyone will recognize that you are my disciples—when they see the love you have for each other."

Sermon

"Love one another." It sounds great, doesn't it? And in our culture that loves love, we have so many songs about it: "All You Need is Love," "I Want to Know What Love Is," "Crazy in Love," "Endless Love," "I Will Always Love You," "Can't Help Falling in Love," "Best of My Love," "Crazy Little Thing Called Love," "Your Love Keeps Lifting Me Higher," "Love Story," you get the idea. You'd think, from how much pop culture sings about it alone, that we'd have love covered.

But I don't have to remind you that wars still rage, that violence wreaks havoc, that corporations still seek power and money over climate solutions, that billionaires still go to space instead of eradicating poverty, that discrimination and hate are buzzing, that relationships still struggle, that trauma happens. Given these things, some might say, "Love is clearly *not* all we need." In the midst of all of the hard things, today, I don't know Jesus, "love one another?" That's it?

Well, let's be honest, loving one another isn't actually that easy. Preacher Barbara Brown Taylor says about her own sense of loving one another is a bit of a challenge. She says, "I have an easier time loving humankind in general than I do loving particular human beings." It's that for all of us sometimes, isn't it? But loving one another is what Jesus calls his followers to do.

So, I don't love telling deep or personal stories about myself to large groups, but I think it's time to tell you about my call to First UCC. I'm not talking about contracts or calls; the logistics side. I'm talking about my sense of call, as in, the spiritual part of it.

As a pastor you wouldn't think I'm averse to God-talk. You wouldn't think that I am especially suspicious of people saying what "God told them" something. But to be honest, I have to be. Because that's one way the church has been so incredibly hurtful to others through its 2 millennia. It's how some churches are today, believing that God tells them things or at least saying God tells them things in order to uphold hateful, discriminatory, traumatic theology. That's not okay. Believing that we know the mind of God is not something that I aspire to do. At the same time, I have seen miraculous things that don't always line up with my theology. So I will tell you two things: I will believe you if you tell me your God story because I believe that God works in ways we don't always understand. And, please, be skeptical of my own story here today. That's why we're here in community, to check things out with each other.

Back to my experience of call to First UCC. Of knowing whether or not to leave a different church that I loved, a whole other community of people that I loved, to come here. Pastors know that there will be a time to come and a time to go, it's part of the job. But love is part of it too, which is why those decisions need to be made carefully and thoughtfully. I knew,

nearly 4 years ago, that it was my time to leave that congregation. But I will also say that I agonized over this decision. I overthought it and worried about it.

In the end, I knew it was time, to go from there to here, not just because I was commuting to and from that church and my family was living life and going to school, becoming more and more connected in Northfield. It wasn't just that it was a great fit for where my family was in life. It wasn't just that it was exciting to think of working at a vibrant, justice-seeking, active, and passionate UCC congregation with a great mix of people young and older in my own town. It wasn't just that I was ready for something new and exciting after 5 years somewhere else as an Associate Pastor.

In the agony of decision-making, I prayed to God for a sign. And I will also tell you that I don't really believe in signs. While I totally think that God does surprising and wonderful things, I'm not into that kind of theology. Except when I am agonizing. So I prayed for a sign. And at one point I just knew. It was maybe one of the few rare times in my life that I felt like God spoke to me clearly. One night I was doing my overthinking, and as I was wondering about First UCC—all of you strangers I didn't know yet—this is what I heard: "LOVE them. Don't worry about *anything* else. Just LOVE them." I'm a visual person, and as I heard it, those words appeared in my head and looked like text, except that the word love was as if it was in capital, bubble letters, bolded. I could feel the emphasis. *LOVE*. And I knew. There are very few other times in my life that I was as certain as I was about what my call was, and it was to you. To love you.

Now—to be clear—it wasn't that I didn't love people in my previous congregation. My call in my last church was certainly to love people, but also to instigate and enliven. I felt called to challenge them and invite them to move the needle on justice in their small town. To be a bit of a button pusher, to go after the issues, to help and ask why and how we are helping. To challenge people to change the systems.

But to *just love* people was a new and different call.

And so, a few months later, I walked into this church that was doing this generous experiment, this resilient and passionate congregation that loved deeply and well, but was also experiencing ambiguous loss. "Love them," God said. "Don't worry about anything else." And who knew how right God was. Who knew what was headed our way. More grief, then pandemic, transition, plus all of the other things that happen in people's lives—joys, losses, disappointments, grief, laughter.

Today we read that Jesus said "love one another." Love one another. But first he says, as the Message translation Barb read, says, "Now the Son of Man [Jesus] is seen for who he is, and God seen for who [God] is in [Jesus]. The moment God is seen in him, God's glory will be on display." So we have: "Jesus is seen for who he is and God is seen for who God is in Jesus." And then: "Love one another. Just as I have loved you." You see, that's a convoluted way of saying that God is love. And that love, *love* is how God is seen and felt in the world. In loving acts, in loving tone, in loving kindness. In making meals, in welcoming someone in, in care and conversation, in all the ways we seek to make a difference for others outside ourselves.

At the beginning of this sermon, I challenged Jesus' words, love one another, because of the state of the world, saying, "really, just love one another Jesus? After all that the world is facing, after all that has gone on this week, we're just supposed to *love*?" I might have said that to God if I'd known what was coming our way when I first started here!

But let's consider what was going on in Jesus' world. Our world and his are so different, but it's when we look backward on the scripture, on Jesus' life, that we see he was saying, "love one another" in the *midst* of hardship, of being betrayed by his close friends, in the midst of an oppressive empire, in the midst of complete loss of control, and ultimately death at the hands of the government. It is in the middle of that hardship that Jesus says, "hear me. Love one another." Disrupt it all with your love. Love into the betrayal and the oppression and the loss of control and even the death. Love into the grief, love through the pandemic, love through the transitions, plus all of the other things that happen in one another's lives—joys, losses, disappointments, grief, laughter. Love into the rhetoric today, the division, the supremacy, the discrimination, the violence. Love into it or disrupt it with your love and your compassion and your grace. But always, just love one another.

Jesus says, "You'll look for me and not find me," but assuredly others "will know you're my friends, they'll know you're my people by your love." Let that be our calling as we go forth.

God's love was already here, when I came to First UCC. And, I was called to love you. And no one does it perfectly. But love is also what Jesus is about, and what he calls us to do and be. Love is how the world can see and feel God. Jesus knew that even in the midst of hard times that that was his calling. It is all of our calling. Love, so that God, in whom we live, and move and in whom have our being. Love in the midst of wherever we are. Let us love one another. Amen.

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Benediction

Go in peace, people of God,
loved beyond measure,
knowing that to love one another is no small thing,
but rather the calling of all of our lives.
May the abundant love of God surround you,
may the grace of Christ sustain you,
and may the presence of the Spirit
encourage you always. Amen.