

“God’s Love is Deep and Broad”

Numbers 21:4-9, Ephesians 2: 1-10, John 3:14-21

**Part V of X in the Sermon Series
“The Journey Back to Love”**

The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr.
Senior Minister

March 14, 2021

From the Pulpit

The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ
444 East Broad Street, Columbus, OH 43215

Phone: 614.228.1741 Fax: 614.461.1741

Email: home@first-church.org

Website: <http://www.first-church.org>

A sermon delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Lent 4, March 14, 2021, dedicated to Graham Michael Bukach who born to Caitlin Graham and Michael Bukach this past Tuesday, to my grandson Rylan Antonio Ahrens who turns 4 on March 18th, to John Bachman and Thomas Kuhn and all our members who have not been to worship for the past year, for all our members and friends who have joined us virtually for the past 52 weeks and always to the glory of God!

“God’s Love is Deep and Broad”

Numbers 21:4-9, Ephesians 2: 1-10, John 3:14-21

Today is the fourth Sunday of Lent. It is the day that the penitential mourning of the season gives way to God’s love and joy. This Sunday has a name in the Christian tradition. Its name, *Laetare* (pronounced – La-tar-a) Sunday, derives from the opening words of the text for the Catholic Mass, “Laetare Jerusalem” (“Rejoice, O Jerusalem”).

This theme of joy came to be celebrated in the ancient church in various ways, for example, a rose on the altar, connects the beauty of spring and the thorns of suffering. As early as the 11th Century, this custom of flowers symbolized a celebration of reaching the midpoint of Lent. Today, we continue our sermon series, “*The Journey Back to Love*” as we rejoice in the beauty of Spring and the halfway point of Lent.

+++++

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

+++++

We are all on a journey back to love. Who would have imagined our love for one another would most fully be demonstrated by wearing masks, gloves and gowns and washing our hands? Who would have thought 366 days ago that expressions of true love would be all about isolating, staying apart, not embracing and then getting a shot in our shoulder when our number came up? And would have thought that we, the United States of America, would lead the world in unnecessary and untimely deaths largely because we politicized a battle with a virus – actually a viral hitchhiker who hitched a ride on our love and good intentions and wreaked havoc when it arrived at its destination?

Yesterday, as the first anniversary of COVID-19 in our world came around First Congregational Church, UCC, Columbus, Ohio was in the news again. Because of Mr. Mark Williams’ and our teenagers’ vision and courage, this church has become a beacon of light on Broad Street and a silent witness to our year-long vigil in the pandemic battle against SARS- CoV-2 mostly commonly known as COVID-19.

On our behalf and on behalf of every person in our nation and the world, they planted white flags on our west lawn in late November 2020 to symbolize the horrible loss of life we have all witnessed from COVID-19. Each flag represents 1,000 souls. In Ohio,

we have lost 17,871 lives to COVID-19. In our church and our extended family of faith alone, we have lost close to 30 of our loved ones.

These flags and our lawn have become a place where people come to pray. It has become a place where news stations do live shots at all hours of the day and night to speak about loss, about grief and pain. These tiny white flags have become a symbolic gathering place for our collective grief and loss.

One year ago, today, March 14, 2020, 10 Americans had died of COVID-19. One year later, more than 29 million Americans have tested positive with COVID-19 and more than 527,000 have died. As of this morning, the world has lost 2,634,370 souls – and we know there are unreported or misreported deaths as well.

Last Wednesday night, we held a service of Remembrance and Hope. About 45 people were there in simultaneous viewing. As of this morning, 110 people have viewed the service. It was a service of Word and Music, of prayers and candlelight and Spirit. It was a service of love. At the end, masked and here with Emily, Mark, Kevin, Melissa and Peter, I lost it. I broke down. I began sobbing uncontrollably. I just kept whispering, *“I am so sorry you are gone. I am so sorry you all died too soon. I wish you were all here.”*

Today, as we reach the midpoint of Lent and on our way to the cross, there is a respite from the rigors of penitence. In the midst of the often-trivial moralizing which happens in this season, the Gospel of John opens to the third chapter and refreshes us with the essence of our faith:

“God so loved the world that he gave his only Son . . . for God sent the son into the world not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him” (John 3:16,17).

*“Rejoice, O people! God loves you! God gave God’s son for you! Christ came into **the world** (not the church, not Columbus, not America, but **the entire world**). He came not to condemn the world, but to save the world!”*

Right in the middle of Lent and right at the one-year mark of our physical separation from one another, this day gives us pause. Somewhere, between the beginning of Lent and its midpoint; somewhere between the beginning of each of our lives and this point, somewhere between the outbreak of this horrific pandemic and this moment, we have forgotten or too often lost track of what an absolutely amazing gift we have in the love of God for us through our savior, Jesus Christ.

It’s good to be reminded of this, today. It is also good to remember and rejoice in the truth that God is not in the business of condemning us, or the rest of the world. While others may want to play God and manipulate the words of God for judgment, not grace, God is about the business of loving and saving us and the rest of the world!

But, what does God’s loving and saving business look like?

John 3:14-15 tells us that life in God’s love – through Christ – is uplifting and eternal. Like Moses’ serpent in the wilderness, Jesus is lifted up – both on the cross and in the ascension into glory – and in this lifting, belief in God’s sacrifice and glory are given shape and form and eternal life is offered.

Uplifting and eternal – are central elements of God’s saving love.

I have seen the uplifting and eternal nature of God’s love so often become manifest in the love, through suffering and pain, that people share in difficult and tumultuous times. While I sometimes wish that I could wave a magic wand over the pain I see embodied in suffering love, I am also aware that so much of the immensity of love would be diminished and even unrecognizable without it. To suffer in love for the one whom you love, in the midst of their suffering, is to live life to its holiest. You have told me this. You have shown me this.

I believe we actually come to see eternal life in the face of such suffering. We see grace, twisted by pain, but embraced by love. We see a peace which passes human understanding, growing forth from the depth of suffering.

I think of love coming from pain in the paintings of Vincent Van Gogh. To imagine that one man could see such beauty and color in this world of ours while feeling such pain and inmost torture is almost inconceivable. While he suffered emotionally and mentally, Vincent Van Gogh portrayed such vivid beauty outside himself.

One painting named “The Disposition,” has always moved me deeply. The Disposition depicts the scene at the foot of the cross following the death of Jesus. His body has been disposed from the cross to the earth below. As the dead body of Jesus lies at the foot of the cross, John, the author of today’s Gospel text is beside him, having just washed his body of blood. Jesus’ mother, Mary is looking on, but close at hand. Her face is terribly twisted in pain. Her body is turned half way toward him, half way from him. In

the distance, you see several people including the shadowy figure of Peter, who had denied and abandoned Jesus in his time of crucifying death.

For those who have stood by the cross – stood by him in his suffering – there is intense pain, but their pain is holy pain. For those who have tortured him or abandoned him, the pain is different. It is the pain of guilt. It is the pain of dispossession.

Uplifting and eternal are elements of God’s saving love.

Such love is often experienced in the pain of dispossession. And honestly, it is what we do in the face of the cross and at the foot of the cross which matters most. To experience God’s uplifting and eternal love, we must go there.

We must abide there.

The ones who teach us about the saving love of God, are the ones in our lives who show us in their suffering how to love God, how to praise God and how to be of service to others.

Stephen Shoemaker tells the story of such a woman in *GodStories*. Jean Stout was a woman who had been disabled all her life. As a young person, Jean had been too embarrassed about how she looked to be baptized. So, later in life, Stephen baptized her in her nursing home bed. When she was close to death, taking massive doses of medicine to reduce her pain, Stephen was visiting with Jean. She smiled at Stephen and said, *“The only thing that helps me in my pain is liquid morphine. This may sound silly to you pastor, but that morphine is the most beautiful color of blue I have ever seen.”*

Her improbable praise brought tears to Stephen.

Jean, like so many I have come to know in my ministry, reached a point in her battle for life, in which they have said something like this:

“God you’ve been in my actions, you’ve guided my life, and walked with me through all I have encountered. Now be in my dying, lift me up and carry me in your arms into the heavenly dwelling place that you call home. I can no longer care for my family, Lord. I hate that worse than anything. So, I leave them in your hands in the hands of those whom you send as angels of mercy and love. Help them accept your presence in their lives, however you choose to make your love manifest.”

Sadly, in this past year, many of our loved ones and those whose names we do not even know, have died alone – except for the love of God and the care and love of doctors, nurses and nursing aids by their sides.

When such words as those spoken by our loved ones and neighbors come into the hearts and minds of people – a healing happens. It is a healing deeper and broader than the body which is destined for death, a healing that is a final union with God. From such as these, I have learned not only how to die, but how to live. I have learned to offer my passion to God as well as my well-intended actions.

At the heart of today’s gospel is GOD’S LOVE.

Mother Teresa of Calcutta once wrote of John 3:16 - *“The Good News is that God **still loves the world** through you. You are God’s Good News. You are God’s love in action. Each time anyone comes in contact with us, they must become different and better people because of having met us. We must radiate God’s love.”*

God is still loving the world and by many accounts, it is not a world that is easy to love. Terror, war, hunger, ecological devastation, political divides, hate crimes and crazy online conspiratorial groups, poverty beyond imagination, racial and economic injustice are among those elements of the inhumanity of humans to other humans that make this world hard to love. **Nevertheless**, (and remember – our God is always found in the Nevertheless), God continues to love the world.

God loves the unlovable and the unlovely. God loves the lonely who have no one else to love them. God loves the man who never thinks of God. God loves the woman who lives in God's presence continually. God loves the graceless and the graceful. God loves the one who has never given a thought to God and has no clue how to lift a prayer and the one who seeks God and prays without ceasing. God loves the one who is angry at God and God loves the one who is content in God. God loves the one who spits at God and the one who smiles at God. God loves you just the same as God loves me.

As St. Augustine has written, *“God loves each of us as if there was only one of us to love.”*

As we head into the last half of Lent, having been filled with the grace of Laetare Sunday, may we remember that there will always be misunderstandings. Words will be always be spoken that do not reflect the love of God. There will always be someone to spread tales about you to others. There will always be unkindness and there will always viruses and there be wars and rumors of wars.

But remember this even more – God's deep and broad love is uplifting and eternal and will always be with us. And Jesus – will also – will always be with us to show us how to love. Amen.

