

“A Theology of Mutuality”

John 15:9-17

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From the Pulpit

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Let us pray: O Ever-present and Ever-Near God, center our spirits and still our busy minds, that we would hear Your Word for us this day.

And, O Dear God, may the words that I have to offer, here, this morning, please You and honor You and glorify Your holy name.

In Jesus' name, we pray, Amen!

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I'd like to begin, this morning, by expressing my appreciation for the Rev. Amanda Conley and the Rev. Ron Botts, who co-led worship last Sunday while both Rev. Tim and I were away.

I think you'd agree that Rev. Amanda and Rev. Ron truly blessed our congregation through their inspiring and engaging and thoughtful and prayerful leadership!

And, once again, I have been reminded of the rich blessing that it is to have so many retired pastors and chaplains and other authorized ministers, here, in our midst, at First Church – so many of whom are ready and willing to step in and serve the congregation as needed, including Rev. Bill Nirote this morning!

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As you may already know, many of us were at Templed Hills (up near Mansfield) last weekend for the annual intergenerational **First Church Spring Retreat**. The weather, as you may recall, was *absolutely* glorious and even perfect for kite-flying on Saturday afternoon! And the retreat was

especially well-attended by all ages including many families with their little ones and big kids and teens and some young adults, as well!

Our time together was **truly** a time of connecting and re-connecting for all of us there – last weekend at Templed Hills.

It was *also* a time of nurturing and strengthening relationships **and** forming *new* friendships as well.

It was a time of strolling down memory lane – and storytelling and laughter – *and* a lot of joking around with one another!

I was especially touched by the honesty and the depth of sharing in a group conversation that was facilitated by Jan Hamilton on Saturday afternoon – as we all reflected on what it means to “**be the change**” in the world around us – *and even* within our congregation, too.

And then, during our Sunday morning worship, outdoors, at the campfire pit, there were also tears of nostalgia that were shed as many among us shared their cherished church camp and retreat memories – as we all expressed our deep gratitude for the gift that Templed Hills has been in our lives – and in *our life together* as First Church throughout the years.

As many of you know by now, Templed Hills will close its doors – *for the last time* – at the end of this coming summer.

And so, it turned out, that last weekend, at Templed Hills, *also* became a time for us to **BLESS** – that which has deeply touched so many of us – and nurtured us in our faith – throughout the years ...

... and, it was also a time, a **very holy** time – of *RELEASING and LETTING GO and saying good-bye.*

“Blessing and releasing” is a significant spiritual practice.

It is hard work – and not always easy to do – but it is **necessary** work that **all** of us must do – from time to time in our personal lives – as well as in the

church – in the various seasons and stages of our life together in community as the people of God.

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Our text this morning from the Gospel of John **ALSO** invites us to reflect on *our life together* – today – as followers of Jesus Christ.

And, *this* passage, in particular, inspires us to examine our relationships *with* one another – within the context and the love – the agape love – of the Christian community.

Our reading from John 15 this morning may be familiar to you. *And* it follows Jesus’ words to his disciples in our Gospel reading from last week.

Do you remember what he said?

Jesus said:

Abide in me as I abide in you.

Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me.

I so appreciate Rev. Amanda’s message from last week in which she reminded us – and challenged us – to allow God to prune us and shape us – that we would then become bearers of God’s love and light in the world around us.

And what *I* hear – in these words of our Gospel reading from John for *today* – is Jesus’ response to that truth of *God’s abiding love* for each one of us ...

Jesus is clear when he says to his disciples:

This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.

And later on, in this same text, Jesus emphasizes that **again** when he states,

I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.

It is through this unconditional love of God that we are **all** interconnected – and that we **all** become one – whether we like it or not!

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In our Christian tradition, we have this way of separating ourselves one from another in terms of:

- theology,
- denominational identity,
- polity,
- doctrine,
- the number of sacraments that we have,
- or our understanding of what **community outreach** means and looks like.

But Jesus, in our Gospel lesson this morning, **does not** sort *us* out in that way.

Jesus **does not** divide us according to our human-made and church-made categories.

Instead, Jesus is very clear and straightforward when he says to his disciples – and to all of us today:

Love one another as I have loved you!

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In my recent reflections on this text from John for today, I have come to understand Jesus' commandment to love one another – as the *theology of mutuality*.

It is certain that – **God gives us one to another through the gift of community:**

- in our neighborhoods,
- and our workplaces,
- in our extended families,
- and in our congregations, too!

And despite the differences and the disagreements that may exist among us in the various settings of our lives, we are not only called to live in that tension –

but to grow and even thrive because of that tension that exists in our commitment to live together as one in community.

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I was recently inspired by an article on this topic of mutuality in which Gordon College professor of theology and author, Sharon Galgay Ketcham, writes:

So often, we reduce important topics to false binaries that resist nuance. This results in digging in our heels and losing our capacity to listen.

But to listen to one another and find strength in diversity and mutuality – and live the church’s witness through reconciliation – is one way to rebuild a Christian community.

In our Gospel reading this morning, Jesus describes an unconditional love for others – that is characterized by discipline, discomfort, and mutuality.

When we abide in Christ’s love, as we are commanded, we are changed – and we are re-oriented toward others – and become deeply committed to their well-being.

God’s love transforms us so that that we might participate in the transformation of the world around us – through our example – and as the prophet Micah teaches us – through our witness of DOING justice and loving kindness and walking humbly with God.

Again, Jesus said: *Love one another just as I have loved you.*

It’s about love.

It’s about mutuality.

It’s about living together in community.

I’d like to close this morning with this well-known quote – about “the ministry of mutuality.”

No one describes it better than the late Rev Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

He wrote these often-quoted words in his “Letter from a Birmingham Jail,” on April 16, 1963.

“Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.
We are caught in an inescapable network of **mutuality**,
tied in a single garment of destiny.
Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.”

Thanks be to God, amen!