

## “SEEING GOD, SHARING LOVE”

### Scripture Reading: 1 John 4:7-12

When our oldest daughter was about to be confirmed in the church I served way back then, she announced that she had doubts, that she no longer was certain that she believed in God. *“Welcome to the club,”* is what I was thinking. It takes some maturity in the faith to know that doubt is a permanent part of our faith life. Our spiritual lives are like a wave washing against the shore, faith and doubt, faith and doubt. I tried to articulate that to her, but I think it takes a while to really understand and be patient with the ebb and flow of faith.

She talked further about what she DIDN'T believe in – (almost all of which I don't believe in either) - like God is vengeful, God is violent, people who don't say the right religious words will be damned for eternity. But when she talked about what she DID believe in, she landed right in 1 John Chapter 4: *“God is Love.”* And when she talked about what made for a Christian life, she spoke the words of this year's Stewardship theme: *“... let us love one another, because love is from God...”* And that was the real stuff of the faith statement from my doubting daughter who joined all of us doubting UCC folks in the body of Christ.

Near the end of the service, you're going to hear from our Stewardship Team – Rick Detienne, Janice Schmitz, and Bill Dalton – who will tell you more about this year's stewardship campaign. But I want to talk about love.

In his 2016 Tony Award acceptance speech for *Hamilton*, Lin-Manuel Miranda said, *“love, is love, is love, is love, is love, is love, is love, is love, is love.”* Leo Tolstoy said, *“All, everything that I understand, I only understand because...I love.”* In the movie *Moulin Rouge!* Christian says, *“Love is like oxygen - love is a many splendored thing - love lifts us up where we belong! All you need is love!”* He was reciting a kind of greatest hits of axioms about love, echoing songs from Sammy Fain and the Beatles and others.

Despite the lofty way we can talk about love, it also can be a difficult and shifty topic. It's not all rainbows and butterflies and long walks in the park. Orson Welles, when speaking of love, said, *“We're born alone, we live alone, we die alone. Only through our love and friendship can we create the illusion...for the moment...that we're not alone.”* How's that for a happy guy? Tina Turner sang, *“What's love got to do with it? What's love but a secondhand emotion?”* Many believe she was talking about her abusive marriage when she sang that.

Yes, love is one of those shifty topics, even in the church. What is love? How can we prove love? In a world where we bury our friends and neighbors and parents and grandparents because of Covid-19, in a country deeply divided politically and riddled with bullet holes from unending gun violence, in a world plagued by poverty, famine, natural disasters, deadly civil wars, not to mention joblessness, homelessness, and food insecurities, right here on our own sidewalks... to claim and proclaim love goes against so much human experience right now. Tina Turner's words sound rather on point. *"What's love got to do with it? What's love but a secondhand emotion?"*

But, the fact is, the words of 1 John 4:7-12 are exactly what our world needs to hear today, what we as the Church, we as the people of God and body of Christ, need to embody today. God IS love!

And this love is our hope. This love is our calling. And this love is our mission.

I am privileged to watch our staff work incredibly hard through this crazy, uncertain time and bend their creativity to the task of being church in the time of Covid:

- Colleen Berry, inventing and resourcing an At-Home Sunday School;
- Jonathan Steffen being called upon to increase his hours and greatly expand his role in coordinating our on-line worship;
- John Albrecht working so creatively at nurturing and reinventing our music ministry to children, youth, adults, and our LU Music Scholars;
- Pastor Nick laboring at renewing our Confirmation and Youth Programs for these very different times;
- Pastor Laurie, whose boundless energy, marvelous spirit, and sharp intellect are helping us refine and expand our mission programs;
- Bart Forseth, our Custodial Supervisor and his staff who have kept us safely sanitized and been invaluable in our keeping our building safe;
- Carolyn Frederick and Holly Volkmann who have kept us in touch with one another in a time when we can't touch one another;
- Siri Witt who helps bring order out of these chaotic times;
- And Jane Malin and Jennifer DeWitt who work with our lay ministry teams to support all the mission, education, devotional, and worship activities of this church. And these activities are multiplying as we let go of feeling sorry for ourselves that we can't do it the same old way, and instead try to understand the new possibilities that are presented to us in on-line ministry.

Forgive me for gushing about our staff, but they work for all of us to project God's love to our congregation and our community. And their love for us calls for us to love in return.

To proclaim "*God is love*" is a bold confession that demands of us a bold faith and bold faithful action. For how will anyone believe this unless they see this in us? John writes, "*No one has ever seen God*" (sounds like my teenage daughter), but then adds, "*... if we love one another, God lives in us, and God's love is perfected in us.*" How will anyone know that God is real unless we give love? How will anyone know unless ***we live*** love?

I see you living love every week:

I saw it in the many folks who drove up to church to pick up and drop off their E2F pans to feed the homeless and the recovery communities;

I see it in Bill Ritcey, our church's Moderator and all the members of the Church Council who have had a series of long, hard meetings because they had to make thoughtful, hard decisions;

I see it in the faithful attendance of all of you at our on-line worship, whether you can join us live or hours or days later; in the faithful group gathering for daily Noon Prayer Chapel, in the many who are taking part in our Anti-Racism Workshop and the many other on-line offerings of the church;

I see it in the families who tune in to on-line Sunday School and use the packets the church has prepared to help teach their children about the love of Jesus and the love we need to share;

I am humbled by your on-going financial support of your church, loving your fellow members and loving your community through the mission and ministry of First Congo. On this Stewardship Sunday, we ask for that support again, understanding that some are going through hard times and will give what they can, while others of us have been blessed enough so that we can increase our giving out of gratitude to God and a generous spirit towards our fellow members.

I saw God's love this past week in the flood of cards from so many of you and the beautiful outdoor display Shelley Aaholm prepared for Esther Gehrt celebrating our 100<sup>th</sup> birthday.

I see it every week as our Stephen Ministers and Friends in Christ continue to stay in touch with those folks under their care despite the barriers put up for safety's sake.

I witnessed it in the loving and faithful way you journeyed with Pastor Kathryn through these past 20 months as she struggled anew with cancer; in the staff who worked so patiently with her, in the HR Team and Church Council who shepherded Kathryn through the Short Term and Long Term Disability process, and the countless members who shared notes and cards and meals and prayers and messages of love and caring.

I am so proud of you. God, I love this church.

A famous German religion professor was walking on the moors on a misty, gray day, when he came upon a boy flying a kite. The kite was so high that it couldn't be seen; it was out of sight in the mist, in a low cloud. The professor said to the boy, *"How do you know it is there?"* And the boy replied, *"Because I can feel the pull of it."* Not long afterwards, someone asked the professor, *"Why do you believe in God?"* and he answered in the words of the little kite flyer: *"I believe because I feel the pull of it."*

*"No one has ever seen God; if you love one another, God lives in us, and God's love is perfected in us."*

Amen.

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Sermon preached by Reverend Dr. Stephen Savides at First Congregational United Church of Christ, Appleton, Wisconsin  
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