

Love One Another
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May 6, 2018 Pilgrim Church UCC Rev. Karen E. Gale

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John 15:9-16

You know, some people are difficult to get along with...

In my very first pastor profile I wrote down that “people are bumpy.” And that conflict and misunderstanding happen when we bump into each other.

This is true for me. I’m bumpy.

I get passionate about issues and sometimes that gets in the way. My mother used to say, “you are too strident” as I railed about some injustice as a teenager. I then had to go look up what “strident” meant.

We are bumpy, imperfect, graceless, at times. And we hurt each other and ourselves as we struggle on this human journey.

This is true in the church, too. At Pilgrim we often call each other a family. Well, I don’t know about you, but my family is not a picture-perfect/no arguments/all on the same page/very loving all the time kind of experience

My family is bumpy, too. I have divorce, depression, and defeatism in my family. There are addiction issues. There are long held grudges. We are bumpy. So why would it be any different in our church family?

We come here as flawed human beings. Some of us arrive really broken. Here we have place to connect with God, to find healing, direction, help, and hope. But we also find others who willing to gaze at us with love. Sometimes tough love if we are acting out. But love that accepts us with flaws, with problems, with eccentricities.

At church we have some folks who do not have great people skills, but we are called to see their hearts, to recognize them as beloved of God. To love the socially awkward person and the perfectionist person and the easily hurt person.

We gather around a table every month to commit again to being in covenant with one another. What does that mean?

In our Old Testament/Hebrew Bible there are many examples of covenants, both with God and between people. To make a covenant the parties set up an altar of two piles of stone with a walkway between. They then took a sacrificial animal--a dove or a goat--and cut it in two. The parties then walked between the stones making their covenant with the implication that if they failed in their promise, the fate of being torn in two would fall upon them. A bit graphic.

In the church a covenant is an agreement to love each other through good times and bad. It means we don’t always have to agree, but we will walk together in love respecting our differences.

All the churches in the UCC are held together by covenant not by legal regulations. If a church wants to leave the UCC it can call the members together and vote itself out, leaving the covenant. That is very different than many other ways churches organize.

To be in covenant means:

We don't have to be here.

We choose to be here.

We don't have to have relationship with God

We choose it.

We follow a different way than society tells us.

We lay down desire to be first, best, most powerful, most in charge.

Instead we come together as one believing the first will be last.

Jesus is really clear to the disciples about what covenant means. The whole ending to the gospel of John is called Jesus' "farewell address." We read a piece of that today. He talks to the disciples, people that he loves, (and has been incredibly frustrated with from time to time,) and he tells them, "I love you. And I need you to keep this going. I need you to love each other, even when it is hard, especially when it is hard."

This is what covenant looks like. Love each other like I loved you. Tell each other you love each other. More importantly act with love toward each other. And speak the truth in love to each other as I have done with you. I need you, Jesus says. I need you to be the community of love now that I am leaving.

Jesus says that to them. And Jesus says that to us, Pilgrim church. Jesus needs you to love one another as he loved his disciples. And to serve one another. And to lay down your lives for one another.

I've studied a little bit about Islam. And I have learned that Islam means "submission." Faithful Muslims submit to God and commit to learning the teachings of Mohammed, God's last prophet.

We don't like that word submission. It rings too much of domestic violence or being a doormat. But that is not really what the word means, especially in a faith context. Submission means a willingness to be low, to be just one of many, to consider the needs of the group. .To submit to being in a community of faith means engaging in covenant which means not being primary or the most important.

It chafes against our US fierce independence and self determination. In church we do not self determine. God has set out the path of love and sacrifice. Jesus has demonstrated giving and loving beyond boundaries and challenging injustice. We don't determine that. We have to figure it out in our own time and context. But I don't figure it out, not just me. We figure it out. Together. And I submit to that process--sometimes longer and more painful than we'd like. I lay down my life, meaning I set aside my life, myself, my ideas, my desires that contradict the acts of love, and lay it down from the whole.

You see at church you are always riding third class.

Yes, that's right. Third class. Did you know you all have third class tickets?

The ticketing system for stagecoaches in the old west worked like this. There were three classes of tickets—first, second, and third. These did not refer to the seat selection, but to the passenger's responsibilities. A first class ticket entitled the holder to remain in the coach, no

matter what happened. Second class meant that the passenger had to get out of the coach and walk whenever the driver had a problem—like a steep grade.

And if you had a third class ticket then you had to get out and help the driver whenever there was trouble. Thus, if the stagecoach was stuck in a mudhole, the first class passenger remained seated, the second class rider got out and watched, and the third class passenger had to get down into the muck and help push the coach.

Yes, that's what being in the church is about. Third class. Being in covenant, being part of a community of love, means getting down in the mud and helping to push. If you were looking to sit back and relax, you have the wrong institution.

Love one another. Take care of one another. Lay down your lives (in the mud if need be) to help one another.

Remember this mirror. I showed it to you when I first arrived. And I told you that my role was to have you, Pilgrim church, look in the mirror and take note of what you see. Since then I have asked you question after question of why you do this, and what does this mean, and how does your history shape you, and where do you fit in the community. We have been looking in the mirror. We have been trying to see the shape of this community of love in all its grace and imperfection.

As we soon move ahead into the next phase of the Interim process two things are happening.

One, you will be asked to fill out a survey about your thoughts on Pilgrim and the new pastor Pilgrim is seeking.

As a member of this community of faith, as a part of this body trying to live faithfully into your call to serve each other, this community, and beyond, the goal of the survey is not to figure out what you want. The goal is to figure out what Pilgrim needs, what kind of pastor with what kind of skills will be able to help this community, this family, grow and flourish.

What pastoral skills do you need to be the loving community Jesus calls you to be, to love one another as Jesus loves us, to lay down our lives for each other, to sacrifice, to look upon our flawed selves with love? To seek justice here and beyond.

You are part of the covenant here at Pilgrim. A covenant that calls you to community not just for yourself, but for the whole. Who do you, O third class passengers, see as a leader who will come and continue to make love a priority and Jesus our guide?

The second task you are asked to complete is to nominate members to the Search Team. There is a letter and nomination form in your bulletin. It will also go out in electronic form this week and in the mail. It talks about the search process so you will all be familiar with it.

It talks about what kind of person makes a good Search team member. Someone who can see the whole picture. Someone who loves the church. Someone who is not carrying a grudge or seeking to right a past wrong. Someone who is thoughtful and patient and persistent. Someone who will ask for God's guidance for the road ahead. Someone who is comfortable being third class.

A Search team needs members who understand the meaning of covenant, of the needs of the whole, of the future of the community. Your Church Council and I ask you to pray about who you think fits this role. Pray for God to be with you as you think about the members of this church. Pray for God to inspire you to look beyond the people you know well and to think

about all those who gather here. Pray for God to be with you as you make nominations to this important role.

We are held together in covenant. A choice about how to be with one another and what is most important. Love. Love one another. Love Jesus. Love the people Jesus loved. Love the poor. Love the misunderstood. Love.

And pray. Pray for Pilgrim church. Pray for God's guidance in discerning a search committee. Pray for the UCC that we are a part of. And pray in thanksgiving for Jesus' life of love that continues to inspire and move us forward.

Amen.