



The New England Church Pulpit

New England Congregational Church UCC
Aurora Illinois

THE BIOLOGY OF CHURCH

January 31, 2016

Christianity

1 Corinthians 13

If I speak in the language of mortal humans and even of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries of the universe and have all knowledge, and if I have all faith so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give away all my possessions and if I give myself over to honorable things so that I may boast, but have not love, it amounts to nothing.

Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing but rejoices in the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends. Faith, hope and love abide, but the greatest of these is love.

Hinduism

Bhagavad-Gita 6.28-32

The infinite joy of touching God is easily attained by those who are free from the burden of evil and established within themselves. They see the God Self in every creature and all creation is in the God Self. With consciousness unified through meditation, they see everything with an equal eye. God is ever present in those who have realized God in every creature, for, seeing all life as God's manifestation, they are never separated from God. When a person responds to the joys and sorrows of others as if they were their own, they have attained the highest state of spiritual union with God.

There is a poignant video on YouTube that features a Special Olympics race where, at the starting lineup, the participants are eagerly anticipating the competition. Soon after the race begins, however, one of the contestants trips and falls on the track. The other runners, realizing that one of their own has fallen, stop running. Instead of using this opportunity to win, the runners return to their fallen teammate where they lend her a hand to help her up and back into the race. Then, linking arms across the lanes, they all run together to the finish line. "True Victory" flashes across the screen as they break through the ribbon. True love, might flash across our minds as we watch it, recalling the words of Paul that love is kind, is not envious, is not boastful, does not rejoice in others' failures.

The newest research in the future of the church reveals a world full of people who want fewer rules about winning and more arms to hold onto as they try to find their way to the finish line. This group of people, labeled the “dones” (d-o-n-e-s), are people who are done with church as an institution seeking to uphold a belief system that makes no sense in today’s world and imposes it on others. These people aren’t actually done with church, for they express the desire to be part of some group of people that offers them three things: a place to explore faith, a community/family where they can belong, and a venue where they can get involved in making the world a better place to run the race of life. Many of them have given up on finding such a church without the additional imposition of an archaic belief system that makes them out to be sinners who need to appease an angry god.

Church in general IS an archaic system because we’re still operating on the platform of Newton’s science. Newton’s world is a world in which the atom is the basic building block of the cosmos. Big things are made of smaller things, and the whole of anything can be broken down into the smaller things that count. To understand the whole, all you have to do is understand the parts. In this way of thinking, society is nothing more than individuals who form its structure. To understand the whole, you just need to understand each of the parts. Nations, families, churches are all reducible to the individuals in them. If a child acts out, take the child to a counselor. Fix the child, without ever inquiring into the health of the family. If a poor woman sells crack to feed her children, send the poor woman to jail without ever asking about the social system that forced her to such desperate activity.

Systems that follow this thinking are systems where power is directed from the top down, where a chain of command is the way decisions are made, where cause and effect play out in the belief that sin deserves retributive punishment in an everlasting hell, where being good is rewarded with heaven, and Jesus provides the only racetrack to God. Those who don’t believe in Jesus are left lying on their face on the track.

The new science describes a quantum world, where, rather than the whole being made up of small parts, the whole is IN every single part. The parts don’t function independently of one another but in relationship with one another. When a toe is stubbed, the whole body hurts, not just the toe. When the head is aching, the whole body is aching. When a member of the church is in pain, the whole church is in pain. When one religion of the world suffers, all religions suffer. In a quantum world, we run, not to win the race alone, but linked arm in arm, for the good of everyone. And above it all and in it all and underneath it all is a God who is so besotted with creation she can’t help but love us with a love that rejoices only in truth; a love that is patient and kind; a love that endures all things; a love that permeates all life. The Dali Lama reminds us that “the whole universe is in a single atom.” And in the same way, the whole church is in each one of us.

We stand on the brink of a new year at New England Church, as we have done for 158 years. We come together to continue this great quest, this race, arm in arm with one another, arm in arm with the community we live in, arm in arm with the world we inhabit and the world beyond us. And I’m excited about the new prospects that engage us now and will continue to engage us in the year ahead. If the whole of God is in each one of us; if the whole of love is in each of our beings; if the whole of truth is inside our skin and our mind and our heart, we are compelled to run in lock-step with those who are on the same journey.

Many of us are here precisely because this church that offers a loving community where we can be completely ourselves while at the same time creating something that is greater than any one of us. Many of us are here precisely because we have the opportunity through this church to mentor kids in local schools, and feed the hungry through the food pantry, and care for people who have been relegated to the sidelines or beaten up by archaic religious systems that leaves them lying on the racetrack. And I think so many times of the privilege that is ours to be part of a caring church for thinking people; to be part of a community that encourages us to use our heart and our mind for good purpose in this human race we call life.

A congregational system such as ours works well in a quantum world, where the whole is more than the sum of our parts, where the whole is in each one of us. Ours is not a hierarchy of power but a system of overlapping circles that intersect and empower one another to be the body of Christ. Here everyone gets a vote, everyone's opinion is respected, even if we think it's wrong; everyone's faith journey is validated and everyone has a voice in what happens here. Here the whole influences the parts so we can live arm in arm along the course of a day, a year or a lifetime. We strive to embrace a love that does not insist on being right, or first, or best; a love that doesn't condemn but seeks truth, even if it's a truth different from our own; a love that isn't boastful that we're ahead of the others or resentful of the fact that others are ahead of us on the racetrack. What matters is that we're all on the racetrack together, enjoying the race. Sometimes we get it right; and sometimes we don't. But I'm grateful that we try our best for Christ's sake.

These words of Paul to the church at Corinth are a reminder of who we are and whose we are, a reminder of the wonderful privilege and responsibility we enjoy in this community of faith. They remind us of the core belief that informs our decisions, and the incentive that compels us to act in accordance with that love that obliges us to be a place where people from all walks of life feel loved, included, valued and cared for. For when a church "responds to the joys and sorrows of others as if they were their own, they have attained the highest state of spiritual union with God." So be it. Amen.

--Gary L. McCann

PASTORAL PRAYER

God of love, midwife who attends to the continuing evolution of the world, mother of all that is beautiful, father of all that has its being contained within the vast timelessness of your care, we come today to center our lives in you. We come to focus our attention on that which fosters life and love even while we let go of those things that bring angst and worry.

We come to this day of our 158th annual meeting to give thanks for the community of this church and to carry forward to ministry into our future. That this church is open and inclusive, accepting and affirming, extravagantly welcoming and generously nurturing is not lost on those of us who have found our way here. So we come again to offer our support to keeping these doors as well as our arms and our hearts open to others who will find your love here.

Organized religion is in a mess these days. Adherents of one religion are behaving abominably toward those of other religions, and even toward those of their own religion when there are differences. Politicians manically appropriate religion for their own personal gain, while speaking for a God of whom they know very little. We do not believe that this is what you intended. We acknowledge the need for many different expressions of faith, and myriad paths that humanity might travel to know you. And for Christ's sake we recommit to being a caring church for thinking people that we might be part of the solution and not part of the problem.

To that end, be present with us this day that we may be the church we believe you have called us to be. May all our actions, all our decisions, all our conversations be edifying for the good not only within this congregation but for all those with whom we have contact. We pray to be agents of love not violence; advocates of the marginalized rather than part of oppressive systems; caretakers of our earth and all its inhabitants, and followers of Jesus who taught us to love our enemies, to do good to everyone, and value others as much as we do ourselves. Guide our endeavors, we pray in the name of the One who calls us to life, Amen.