

March 10, 2024
Leverett Congregational Church, Leverett, MA
Lee Barstow

Matthew 22:34-40

... the Pharisees ... gathered together, and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. “Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?” He said to him, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”

John 3:19-21, 13:34-35

[Two excerpts from Jesus' teachings during the Last Supper:]

“And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.

... “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”

A week ago Friday, I was meeting with a few folks—including Sister Clare of the Peace Pagoda—to begin planning for an interfaith service in celebration of our 250th birthday.

As some of you heard at our annual meeting last week, Sister Clare said something that I believe holds much meaning for us. She said, “Our world is desperately in need of the principles of Christianity.”

As I said to her, I couldn’t agree more.

I was deeply moved by her words, and so I set my sights on talking about this idea today: our world is desperately in need of the principles we work to embody right here in our sacred circle.

I began by searching for scripture readings that would define these principles, and I came up with the ones we just heard: love God and love your neighbor as yourself. To do that, seek the light. Love one another.

I believe our guiding principles are this pure and simple. Not the doctrine of original sin or the separation of God from nature or the creeds written over the centuries. Love God and love your neighbor as yourself. Seek the light. Love one another.

Simple, yes, but sure as heck not easy, as we all know. And yet, how wonderful that we keep working at it. How wonderful that after 250 years of trying to embody the teachings of Jesus in this place, we keep working at it.

Because it makes a difference, you know? It makes a difference just to be willing to come here and name the pursuit of love as essential. It makes a difference whenever we *act* with loving kindness. It makes a difference whenever we pray or meditate or do whatever helps us cultivate love within us... whatever helps us see the light of truth Jesus talks about.

I believe our devotions and our loving actions send ripples of light and love out into the world, even beyond those we might serve directly, and they make a difference.

You are the light of the world, said Jesus. It's up to us to find the light within us and to manifest it. No one is going to do it for us. And the world has never needed us more than it does today.

Can we do more to seek the light together? I have wondered this a lot lately. I don't mean by launching new activities that drain us. Quite the opposite... I mean finding new activities that *feed* us... that *enlighten* us... activities that are more energy *in* than energy *out*.

I think potlucks can be an example of this. Have you ever had the experience of feeling obliged to attend some social occasion and wishing you hadn't accepted? And then you make connections there that make you glad you went? This has happened to me at potlucks... energy *in*.

Potlucks can be a terrific way to spread love, and many thanks to Tracey for encouraging more of them lately. Let's schedule more!

How about sharing about our spiritual paths? Goodness knows I share a lot about *mine*, but I wonder if others of you might find energy in doing this.

One way is to sign up to share during sermon time. You don't have to call it a sermon. Just sharing some of your journey is enough. Nick Grabbe has done this, as has John Kealy, and both have reported gaining much from the experience. Mary Ryan has signed up for a Sunday in April.

Sharing in conversation about our spiritual journey can be powerful too, because it helps us see common ground and also new perspectives. Some of my pastor colleagues make time right after sermons for folks to share what struck them during it, and apparently people love.

Other ways to share the light could be a book group or a meditation group or a prayer circle.

I would love to know if you would like to engage in some new activity for seeking the light. If so, please let me know, and after Easter, we'll try something.

The great good news about trying to meet Sister Clare's hope for spreading the principles of our tradition is that we humans are *made* to cultivate love.

As in cultivating a garden... our role is simply to cooperate with the miracle of life that is already there, waiting to grow. Jesus speaks to this when he says, "I am the vine, you are the branches; abide in me as I in you." (John 15:4). We need only open ourselves to the flow of the divine deep within us.

An image that has been helpful to me in this regard is the miracle of making compost.

If you've ever made compost, you know that it begins as slimy, gross garbage, but that after some time and some turning, and maybe the addition of some dry leaves or straw, that garbage turns into fertile soil.

I love this as a metaphor for cultivating love, because it reminds me that the miraculous life-giving action of renewal is *always* present. Everything that is needed to produce transformation is supplied.

This composting image also reminds me we're not in charge of the process. We are not *causing* the creation of compost. It is not all up to us. We simply need to cooperate in a process that is a natural function of life.

If this seems like pie in the sky when you consider the state of the world, or perhaps the state of your personal life, you are not alone. Our tendency can be to look at the suffering within us and around us and conclude that faith in the power of love to make positive change is coming up pretty short.

But there is a ton of evidence that love is the most powerful force we have. Just ask the parents who have found help from the activities of Gillian Budine's Community Network for Children, including the Children's Closet which is open each Thursday morning in the Dixon House. Just ask the elderly man I heard about in an online meditation group Thursday. He pushed his grocery cart to checkout with only one item in it—a gallon of milk—and the person in front of him told the cashier she wanted to pay for it.

Our efforts do not need to be big. What's most important is simply to remember what we come here to learn: that the Holy Spirit is alive in us and ready in every moment to help us tap into the love that is our source and our substance.

May we remember this. May we re-learn it when we need to. May we love God and love our neighbor as ourselves. Because, as Sister Clare said, the world needs us. Amen.