

## **“Love Conquers All”**

Rev. Ken McGarry at The First Church in Stoneham, Massachusetts

May 9, 2021 – Sixth Sunday of Easter

1 John 5:9-13; John 17:6-19

Last week, here in our worship service, the Korwans offered us a stewardship moment in which Meredith talked about some of the most important aspects of our church community in her life. She recounted how when she was a younger person, she played David when re-enacting the story of David and Goliath for the congregation.

The story she re-enacted is one our favorites, as it is for many other churches all across our country, as it has been for Christian churches since the time of Jesus, and as it was in Israel before the time of Jesus. We’ve always loved this story because we love stories about the little guy beating the big guy, and we love stories of good guys taking down bad guys, and we especially love stories, like the one of David and Goliath, when the little, good guy takes down the big, bad guy.

We have many examples in the writings of ancient Israel, where she considered herself to be like David--the little, good guy who was surrounded by many big, bad bullies. We have many examples in the Hebrew Bible of prayers for God to destroy these big, bad enemies. We find many such prayers in our book of Psalms, which has 150 psalms in total, and 21 of them offer prayers for God to smite Israel’s enemies.

However, the hope for God to destroy the bad buys isn’t only thing we find in the Hebrew scriptures; we also find the prophets pushing back against that wish for violence. We see throughout the writings of the prophets a desire for God to conquer people, not through the sword, but by overturning the hearts of people and overturning their nations through the enactment of justice and the embrace of love.

In our own tradition, we follow Jesus, who taught people to embrace the way of the prophets and called for us to love even the biggest and baddest of enemies. Jesus teachings, when translated into the Greek in our gospels, calls for *agapē*, that is a selfless, other-centered love. This was exemplified by Jesus, who was the incarnation of the God who is *agapē* love. And Jesus exemplified this, demonstrating love in its fullness by giving his life for us on the cross, by giving his life for his friends.

Before he did so, he gave this commandment to his disciples, ancient and modern: Abide, or dwell, in this selfless love of Christ, that is, have the love of Jesus be the constant source of your life and the constant way of your life. Dutch Catholic priest Henri Nouwen says it this way: “Love Jesus, and love the way Jesus loved.” Love Jesus, and love the way Jesus loved.

Last week, we sang a song, “They'll Know We Are Christians by Our Love,” written by American Catholic priest Peter Scholtes, that perfectly captures our calling. For the first 300 years of Christianity, many of our communities were, in fact, well known because of their love. While they, like all communities, failed at times, they were known for demonstrating a love for one another that was so authentic and inspiring, that even in the face of persecution, which at times was intense and wide-spread, our faith tradition grew greatly. In spite of terrible violence against Christians, our faith flourished in the Roman Empire. By the beginning of the fourth century, likely five percent of all people living in the Roman Empire were Christians. Our faith grew because these people loved each other, and love is inspiring, love is contagious.

But then something funny happened on the way to the Forum when Emperor Constantine, in the year 312 CE, became a Christian. One year

later, he issued the Edict of Milan, which no longer made it a criminal activity to practice Christianity. Several decades later, in the year 380, Christianity became the official state religion of the Roman Empire. What happened when this took place is that those who had been persecuted, those who had been powerless, suddenly became powerful. Unfortunately, we have too many examples of them using their power to persecute others. Our history is full of stories of crusading Christians causing harm and destruction and not spreading our message of selfless, *agapē* love.

As time went on, and some desired to reform the Church, reclaiming the Church's earlier practices and returning to them, they, too, struggled with being peaceful and proclaiming a message of love. One of the forefathers of our tradition, the Reformed tradition of Protestantism, was Pastor Ulrich Zwingli of Zürich in Switzerland. He died in battle along with 21 other pastors while fighting against a Catholic army. There's a fitting statue of Zwingli in Zürich today of him holding a Bible with one hand and a sword in the other.

Violent struggles between Christians of all types was all too common during the Protestant Reformation. There were struggles between Protestants and Catholics and Protestants and each other, which continued in Europe for generations, causing terrible destruction. And when warring Europeans came to this continent, they brought with them these violent ways. We know well the stories of the Spanish Conquistadores subduing the people of the Americas south and west of us and the stories of the English Puritans, right here in New England, our spiritual ancestors, who conquered the indigenous people with the sword and by imposing their culture and religion upon them.

Fortunately, in the centuries that have followed, Christians of all types, Catholics and Protestants, have had their own hearts conquered in

many ways by Christ. Many of us have returned to a way of love and have rejected the way of violence. Many of us pay attention to God's calling for us to love, and yet so many other churches in the U.S. are still concerned more with gaining power over others than they are over loving people as they are.

Recent studies have demonstrated that there's a growing number of young people in the United States who are turning away from the Church and turning away from all organized religion in general. One reason for this that they find our religious institutions to be filled with judgment and hate rather than mercy and love. Hatred and hypocrisy repel people, which is perhaps why we are seeing rapid growth of the "nones," as in those who say "none" when asked about what their religious affiliation is. Studies have come out in just the last couple of weeks showing that for the first time in our history, more Americans claim to be "nones" than claim to be members of a church or a synagogue or a mosque. I believe that more and more people are turning away from our churches because they do not find enough love in them.

Hatred is not attractive, fear is not attractive, and intolerance and destruction are not attractive and will not inspire people to be among us. What is attractive, and what will bring people to us, is love--selfless, *agapē* love. Author Madeleine L'Engle says it this way: "We do not draw people to Christ by loudly discrediting what they believe, by telling them how wrong they are and how right we are, but by showing them a light that is so lovely, they want with all their hearts to know the source of it." And, friends, the loveliest of all lights, the loveliest of all, is love. A community abiding in love is lovely, a community sharing love is lovely. And that is what we are called to be--a lovely beacon of hope for a dark, bewildered, loveless world.

So, friends, this day, let us be conquerors. Let us conquer the darkness with our love, let us fight against the brokenness that is within us and the division that is among us. Let us strive to expand God's realm of love, right where we live and around the world. And let us strive to be the first in love. Let's follow the teaching of Martin Luther King, who taught us, "Keep feeling the need for being first, but I want you to be the first in love. I want you to be the first in moral excellence. I want you to be the first in generosity." Be the first in love, moral excellence, and generosity. Now, that's a good way to be. Let it be this way for us today and always. Amen.