

**Sermon – February 14, 2021 (Transfiguration Sunday/Valentine’s Day)
First Congregational UCC, Eagle River
L. Gail Irwin, Interim Pastor; Joy Turpin, Scripture Reader**

Prelude: “Alleluia”

CCLI #16811

Announcements: Hello and welcome to worship at First Congregational UCC in Eagle River. This is the service for Sunday, February 14th, Transfiguration Sunday and Valentine’s Day.

This week, Lent begins on Ash Wednesday, the 17th. I will be posting an on-line service for Ash Wednesday early that day, on our YouTube channel and on Facebook. If the weather permits, those who wish will gather outdoors for a brief, standing up service across the street in the vacant lot. We will be asking people not to come in the building during that time and there will be no seating, so dress accordingly. If the weather is iffy, check our Facebook page or call me on my cell phone.

We will not be observing the ritual of ash on the forehead this year, but we will have some alternative Lent activities in Lent kits for adults. These will be handed out **Wednesday the 17th from 4:00 PM until the service (if we have it) at 6:00 PM. You can call or email me to reserve a Lent kit, or show up Wednesday for first-come-first-serve.** There will be a print devotional to go along with our Lenten adult study, and some other items to use for Lenten reflection. If we still have some left after Wednesday and you want one, call me and we will arrange for you to pick one up.

Faith Formation families, watch for information coming from Miss Sharon about Lenten activities she’s preparing for you.

The Book Lover’s group is meeting **Thursday the 18th at 7:00 PM** to discuss the book “Three Things About Elsie”. Contact Donna DePape if you have questions.

Now, let’s prepare our hearts for worship with an opening prayer.

Opening Prayer:

O Holy One, we live in a world where dark clouds overshadow us; the past haunts us and the future frightens us. Everything seems transient and fleeting and we don’t know what or who to trust. But sometimes, out of the confusion, clarity comes. We hear the voices of familiar loved ones; we recall the truths shared with us through our lives; we hear your voice reminding us we are beloved to you, and the world shines again. As we worship you today, teach us to listen to you; give us visions that lead us closer to you and your realm, and help us work together in love for the building of your reign on earth. Amen.

Children’s Sermon:

- Happy Valentine’s Day! Different people show love to each other in different ways on Valentine’s:
 - school kids make a Valentine for everyone in the class so no one feels left out;
 - Older kids may send a flower or valentine to a sweetheart
 - Moms and dads give each other chocolates or flowers or go out to dinner

- How do you think church people should show love to each other on Valentine’s Day? Especially in quarantine!
 - You can’t go up to someone after church for a hug
 - You can’t bring heart cookies for coffee hour
 - But you CAN reach out to people and show your love:
 - Think of someone at church you haven’t seen who you miss and write them a Valentine or note;
 - A Faith formation teacher, someone you sit near in pews; another kid you like to hang with at church)
 - Put your valentine in an envelope and send to them at home

- What’s different about showing love for people at church?
 - It’s good to say you love them, if you do
 - But it’s even more important for them to hear GOD loves them!
 - This will help everyone feel connected to each other when we’re apart;
 - God can be everywhere, hugging everyone in their hearts, even when we can’t be together
 - In the bible, God said to Jesus: “*You are my beloved child.*”
 - Everyone needs to hear that sometimes!
 - You could write on your Valentine: “*You are God’s beloved child!*” And then add a personal note or make a picture or decorate with stickers.
 - It could be today or this week;
 - And this activity isn’t just for kids!! You grown ups can send a note to someone in the church who needs to hear they are beloved of God!

Dear God, help us show love for each other in our families, at school, and with our church family, on this Valentine’s Day. Thank you for calling us your beloved children! It makes us feel loved. Amen.

Anthem: “Climbin’ Up the Mountain” (Traditional; Arr. Linda Spevacek)
 (Bernie Hupperts and Mary Ann Hansen, Vocals; Norma Yeager, piano)

Gospel Reading: Mark 9:2-10 (NRSV)

² Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, ³ and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one^[b] on earth could bleach them. ⁴ And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus. ⁵ Then Peter said to Jesus, “Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” ⁶ He did not know what to say, for they were terrified. ⁷ Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, “This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!” ⁸ Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them anymore, but only Jesus. ⁹ As they were coming down the mountain, he ordered them to tell no one about what they had seen, until after the Son of Man

had risen from the dead. ¹⁰ So they kept the matter to themselves, questioning what this rising from the dead could mean.

Epistle Reading: 1 John 4:7-12 (The Message)

⁷⁻¹⁰ *My beloved friends, let us continue to love each other since love comes from God. Everyone who loves is born of God and experiences a relationship with God. The person who refuses to love doesn't know the first thing about God, because God is love—so you can't know him if you don't love. This is how God showed his love for us: God sent his only Son into the world so we might live through him. This is the kind of love we are talking about—not that we once upon a time loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as a sacrifice to clear away our sins and the damage they've done to our relationship with God.*

¹¹⁻¹² *My dear, dear friends, if God loved us like this, we certainly ought to love each other. No one has seen God, ever. But if we love one another, God dwells deeply within us, and his love becomes complete in us—perfect love!*

Sermon

- I. So, Jesus and three of his close friends decide to take a hike up a nearby peak on a beautiful afternoon.
 - a. “close friends” – he did have an inner circle of disciples he sometimes pulled away for quiet prayer or more intimate conversation: Peter, James and John.
 - b. One of those friends is called, at the last supper “*the one whom Jesus loved*”, as if to point out that Jesus did love individuals as friends, just like all of us do; people who were bound to him not by family ties, but simply by love. Remember how he cried when his friend Lazarus died?
 - c. Jesus had the capacity for different kinds of love: the big, *agape* love for humankind; compassionate love for strangers he met along the way; and the capacity for personal love of family and friends;
 - d. So, it's humanizing to think of Jesus just going on a picnic with his friends; maybe he needed a day off like everyone!

- II. But then, at the top of the mountain, something strange and mystical occurs:
 - a. Jesus separates himself from the others and steps into what seems like another world; a mystical place; *a thin place*;
 - b. There, Jesus meets some other friends: Elijah and Moses; they represent the justice teachings of the prophets and the Law of love, but they were also human beings, like Jesus.
 - i. even though they each lived hundreds of years apart, they talk to each other like old friends;
 - ii. All three are linked to each other across generations by a legacy of love;
 - iii. In Hebrew tradition, the ancestors are not just people from earlier times we never met; they are our direct descendants-- our grandmothers and grandfathers; aunts and uncles, no matter how many generations back;
 - iv. So this is how Jesus was linked mystically with his grandfathers, teachers, mentors;

- c. And then, something else happens: a voice is heard from a cloud: *This is my Son, my Beloved; listen to him!*” It’s the voice of God; and another mystical connection is drawn between Jesus and God.
 - i. Here is the relationship of Parent and Child. God affirms that Jesus belongs to him, and should be listened to, because he and God are related! God claims Jesus as “kin”, and as *beloved*.
- d. In all these encounters between human friends, between ancestors, between divine and human, we see our God as a God of relationships, of loving connections;
 - i. Not a God who sits up in heaven alone and remote; but one who bends down to feed her children; one who weeps for them when they suffer; one who actively intervenes to live in relationship with humanity, so much that God sends His Child to earth to get even closer to us.
 - ii. And that closeness of relationship also means there is a *likeness* between those who are beloved to each other:
 - 1. the disciples are being shaped and steeped in Christ’s character;
 - 2. Christ has been shaped by his ancestors,
 - 3. But most of all, he is made in the likeness of God
 - iii. *“Christ...gives us the best picture of God we’ll ever get.”*

III. The Church (called the *ecclesia*, the gathered people, in Greek) inherited this quality of living together in a beloved community, mystically tied to one another across distance and even across history; and shaping each other in the loving likeness of Christ;

- a. One of our jobs in the Church is to continually strengthen these ties of love with one another.
- b. And through history the Church has built incredible communities of love that transcend family and culture and race, aiming for a higher love that binds us together. This is what we love and are proud of about our churches: this is why we’re here;
- c. But of course, we’re not God or Jesus; we’re human. So, we never get that likeness just right; we make mistakes in our prophecies, and we disobey the law of love.
 - i. Church people can hurt each other, exploit, abuse, neglect, exclude;
 - ii. we can become just like other human communities, instead of rising to that higher calling to be God’s gathered people.

IV. Maybe we’re trying to exercise the wrong kind of love.

- i. We try to make *human* love the glue of the church;
 - 1. We try to like each other; gather with people who believe like we do; we use our social skills in making friends in the church and do projects together and use Robert’s Rules to make decisions. We try to behave like a “family” and we celebrate the ways we get along, accomplish things and have fun together.
 - 2. The human friendship and family model of what it means to be the Church is a good start; but it’s not enough!

3. I wonder if Churches would function better if we modelled our communities on *Christ's* love instead of our own human love;
 4. Instead of trying to “like each other and get along”, maybe we should try to model our relationships with each other on the way Christ loved people;
 - a. not because he liked them or agreed with them or could go on picnics with them, but because he saw God’s love and likeness in them;
- V. Early in my ministry, I was in a small church with an active women’s fellowship run by a domineering matriarch of the church. I didn’t like her. She was a Queen Bee. I think the other women were afraid of her.
- a. But then she died, and I observed how everyone rallied to make the funeral as beautiful and orderly as it could be.
 - b. I myself felt like she was watching from heaven to be sure I didn’t mess up!
 - c. Over those few days of pulling together her funeral, I saw all the women bring out their best china and best jello salads; and *their best selves*; they bickered a little, but they made up and moved on.
 - d. The funeral wasn’t perfect: but we got each other through it.
 - e. I discovered even I was grieving; not just for the woman who died, who I didn’t like very much. But for the Body of Christ she was a piece of, changed forever by her loss. We loved her, not because she led the women’s group, but because she was God’s child.
 - f. I started to learn that the Church isn’t just a group of people who like each other, or even love each other; WE do not make each other into a happy little family. GOD has already made us *God’s* family, and then introduced us to each other.
 - g. Like fellow travelers on a train, we just have to get along until we get where we’re going.
- VI. The love we embody in the Church isn’t just human love for each other; it’s Christ’s love for us and for the world;
- a. It’s *agape* love that sees everyone as directly related to each other by our love for Christ and our yearning to love the way he loves us.
- VII. As I listened to your wonderful, sad and happy stories of your church last week in the History Zooms, I heard of different kinds of love:
- a. the people who have formed friendships and camaraderie in choir
 - b. accomplishing goals and having fun together with Relay for Life
 - c. AND times of feeling separated by factions or isolated and alone;
 - d. I heard you speak of a deeper love that makes sacrifices for others in your church family,
 - e. The effort to accommodate differences and disabilities,
 - f. The yearning to mend hearts after disagreements
 - g. I heard from some of you a yearning for a deeper love in your church;
 - i. The emptiness you feel in not being together:
 - ii. last week’s Zoom was a closer connection; people need to see each other!

- iii. I also heard in the history zooms a desire to reach out to others *outside your church* more
- iv. To take opportunities to rise to more challenging forms of love, even for those people we may not like or agree with;

VIII. Today is Valentine’s Day; a good day to hear the words of God sent through the clouds to Christ, God’s Child, and to us, God’s children: “*You are my beloved ones.*”

- a. In the transfiguration, when Christ shone with the light of love of his ancestors and his Creator and friends, we see a picture of what the Church aspires to:
 - i. A deep connection with God and Christ
 - ii. A deep connection with the teachings of our ancestors
 - iii. A deep connection and *agape* love for others in the world

IX. If we can work toward that in our churches; model it for the world, we will have a witness and message worth listening to.

Pastoral Prayer and The Lord’s Prayer:

Holy God of Love, we are trying to love each other.
 Help us to see more deeply into the hearts of our families and neighbors,
 of those we see in the news who are suffering, of world leaders, of enemies;
 To recognize their full humanity, and turn our hearts to *agape* love.
 We yearn for love lost, remembering those who came before us and are gone;
 Give us vision to see the ways they still permeate our world with love
 from the heavenly place.
 We are thankful for love: The love of family and friends;
 the *agape* love we find in our Church; the ways our community
 pulls together in times of challenge and celebrates together in times of joy;
 And especially for your love, O God, that never lets us go,
 and binds all things together.
 Hear our prayers of gratitude and concern...
 For Trista’s family as her brother in law died this week;
 For the families and friends of those who have died, in our church and beyond,
 who are still in grief;
 Let us be vessels of comfort and hope for them.
 For those who are sick, or healing...hear our prayers for your healing power...
 For those who are hungry or cold or lonely today,
 let us find ways to offer sustenance...
 Hear now all our prayers in silence...
 These things we pray in the name of Christ, who taught us saying
The Lord’s Prayer

Invitation to Offering: Many have said you miss your church! On the videos, the church looks backward; but it's still here, still the same church. Sharon and Nan and I are still here; Ed comes to clean; the SAG group has decorated for the seasons. YOU are missing and we miss you!!

Your ancestors in the faith built this place for our generation; and it's for us to pass on to the next generation. Your financial gifts can help us keep this sacred space inviting and ready for the day we come back to worship God together.

Please remember to send your offerings to the church to keep this space ready and programs going! We have offering envelopes in the office you can pick up, if that helps you remember your gifts. Thank you for your generosity!

Benediction/Blessing: *And now, in the words of I John, My beloved friends, let us continue to love each other since love comes from God... if we love one another, God dwells deeply within us, and God's love becomes complete in us. Go in peace.*

Closing Song: Let There Be Peace on Earth (Sy Miller & Jill Jackson, CCLI #1562668)