

“Loved & Loving”

“Some years ago the London Daily Telegraph carried a letter written by an eleven-year-old boy to his mother while he was on vacation in Switzerland. He wrote this: ‘Dear Mom, yesterday the instructor took eight of us to the slopes to teach us to ski. I was not very good at it, so I broke a leg. Thank goodness, it wasn’t mine! Love, Billy.’” Donald Strobe commented, “Now, that mother had only a limited insight into what actually happened on the ski slopes of Switzerland that day.” Strobe then related that mother’s experience with our understanding of the dynamics of today’s Scripture. He continued, “And you and I have only a limited insight into what happened on the shore of the Sea of Galilee that day. But one thing we know. Jesus asked Simon Peter ‘Do you love me?’ three times. Why did he badger him so?” Strobe began to answer that question by asking, “Was it because Peter had denied his Lord three times and (Jesus) wanted to give him three opportunities to affirm his love and thus wipe the slate clean?” Strobe concluded, “I think that is so.” (Donald B. Strobe, Collected Words, www.Sermons.com)

I agree that the Risen Jesus was helping Peter work through his very guilty feelings of guilt related to the eldest disciple denying three times that he was a follower of Jesus after the Teacher became a prisoner. However, their conversation also provides Christians from the time of the original disciples through to the present with the important realization our relationship with Jesus Christ is one of being **Loved & Loving**. Yes, ours is a Love Story – the agape love story Jesus was sent into the world to embody, reveal, and demonstrate!

Jesus’ purpose and our New Life and Relationship through him are crucial to our identity – both as followers of Jesus Christ and as participants of Round Grove United Church, United Church of Christ. So, as we celebrate the 115th Anniversary of the founding of Round Grove United Church, UCC, it is valuable for us to compare the experience of our Founders with our own lives, as well as, the experience Peter went through with the Risen Jesus Christ in our Gospel Lectionary Reading.

The Founders of this congregation started it on Epiphany, January 6th, 1901. Epiphany is the last day of the Christmas Celebration – it is the day when the arrival of the Wisemen or Star Studiers is recalled. Yes, this congregation was founded during the time when its original members were recalling the reason Jesus was sent into the world! What was Jesus’ purpose?

One way to answer that question is for us to recall Jesus’ conversation with Nicodemus, a member of the Sanhedrin, the Jerusalem Council. He was afraid the other members of the religious elite might learn of his interest in Jesus, so he sought him out in the darkness of night and, perhaps, they spoke in Greek, to assist keeping their discussion secret. Jesus explained his purpose to Nicodemus in **John 3:16-17**, *“For God agape loved the world so much that He gave His Only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not die but have eternal life. For God did not send His Son into the world to be its Judge, but to be its Savior.”* Yes, God loves us – that is why God’s Son – Jesus was sent – to demonstrate our Divine Parent’s Agape Love in him for us! The Founders of Round Grove United Church UCC were celebrating God’s Agape Love for them and us when they started this church!

During Jesus’ last discussion with his original disciples – just before he was betrayed by Judas and arrested, our Savior put the welfare of his followers, including us, ahead of his own best interest. An important section of that conversation was included in this Worship Celebration as the Call To Worship. **In John 15:9-10, 12-14, Jesus told his 11 remaining disciples, “I agape love you just as the Father Agape Loves me; remain in my agape love. If you obey my commands, you will remain**

in my agape love, just as I have obeyed my Father's Commands and remain in His Agape Love. My commandment is this: agape love one another, just as I agape love you. The greatest agape love a person can have for his friends is to give his life for them. And you are my friends if you do what I command you." Jesus also agape loves us! Indeed, he gave his life for us. His commandment is for us to agape love one another as he has agape loved us. Yes, we are loved by God and Jesus Christ. Further, we are called by Jesus to be loving! The founding of this church was in response to Jesus Christ being God's Love for us in the Flesh and their need, as people of faith, to gather together as the Church – the Faith Community. The Founders of this congregation were committed to God's Agape Love being experienced in this community, so within 7 months of the founding of the church, they built across the highway the core of the Original Sanctuary.

Returning to today's Scripture Reading, each of the three times – in verses 15, 16, and 17, the Risen Jesus asked Peter the same basic question, "Simon son of John, do you agape love me?" The Founders of Round Grove demonstrated they agape loved the Risen Jesus through their speedy fulfillment of their commitment to build the Original Sanctuary. The same question Jesus asked Peter is also a crucial one for us to answer. Do you and I agape love Jesus and our Divine Parent? How many times have we denied Jesus our agape love?

Each time the Risen Lord asked Peter responded with an affirmative declaration of his agape love for Jesus Christ. **Then, in verses 15, 16, and 17, Jesus followed up Peter's response by giving him the same basic call or command, "Take care of my lambs."** For some reason, Jesus slightly changed that call during the second and third exchange, for he called Peter to take care of his sheep, instead of lambs. Look around – yes, those are some of the lambs or sheep the Risen Jesus called Peter to "take care of" – we are his flock and we are to take care of – agape love one another. The synoptic Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke also report Jesus calling us to agape love our neighbors – not just fellow believers. When Jesus was asked the identity or definition of our neighbors, his answer made it clear everyone, especially those rejected by society are our neighbors! So, we are to "take care of" – agape love our sisters and brothers in Christ and all people. We are loved and called to be loving!

Today's Scripture Reading includes **verse 19b, "Then Jesus said to him, 'Follow me!'"** Following Jesus includes practicing the agape love he showed toward all people, including the outcasts of Jewish society. In addition to seeking to manifest Christian Unity in Diversity, Round Grove United Church, United Church of Christ, welcomes all who seek to follow our Lord Jesus Christ. Everyone, including persons, who have been rejected by the self-righteous, are welcomed and invited to receive God's healing "agape" love through this congregation.

Today we celebrate 115 years as a congregation! During all those years, this church has been receiving God's Self-Giving and Sacrificial Agape Love shown in Jesus Christ and responding to his call to agape love one another and all people! The Founders were German Immigrants – strangers in this land, yet, they knew God loved them through the Son, Jesus Christ. So also, we, as heirs of that unconditional love and welcome, share it with all who seek our Savior!

We are loved and loving! Now is the time to celebrate God's Agape Love for us shown in Jesus! **Now is the time for us to move into the future agape loving – living the New Life in Christ – the life of self-giving love and extravagant welcome! Amen.**