

“Built on Love”

Last Sunday and today our theme is **“Building the Church”**. Now, we aren’t talking about the actual physical construction of facilities. Instead, the theme is about the way members of the Body of Christ – the Church relate and act together as the Church and in the world. Last Sunday, we considered how we are **“Built on Peace”** – the Peace of Jesus Christ. That peace enables Unity and Reconciliation within the Church and in the wider community. Today, as the Sermon Title reveals, our focus is on how we are **“Built on Love”**. As we examine how those of us in the Body of Christ are “Built on Love”, it is important for us to recognize good and bad examples of how some people in the Church either manifest Agape Love or think and act against it. So, I have some Bad News and some Good News.

We will look first at the Bad News – an example of a pervasive problem, which has grown among many of the members of the more legalistic or evangelical expressions of the Body of Christ. In an article by Stephanie McCrummen of the Washington Post, which was titled, “Judgment days: In a small Alabama town, an evangelical congregation reckons with God, President Trump and the meaning of morality”, she interviewed Pastor Clay Crum and a number of the members of First Baptist Church of Luverne, Alabama. He had been preaching a series on a different commandment from the Ten Commandments during each of the preceding six Sundays. The sermon around which the news story was developed was on the seventh of the Ten Commandments – **“Thou shall not commit adultery.”** The article reported how the pastor struggled over whether or not to address the President’s history with adultery as part of the sermon. The vast majority of the members of the congregation had voted for the President and continued to support him, so the pastor felt that pressure while he developed his thoughts for his message. “Spoiler alert” – if you want to read the article and don’t want to know what the pastor says in advance, then cover your ears. Pastor Crum never said anything about the President’s history with that commandment during his sermon.

That is not the Bad News. The Bad News was revealed when the author of the article interviewed a significant number of the members of First Baptist Church and unfortunately, their responses, especially of two church ladies provide an example of the Bad News – of how some members of the Church have turned away from Jesus’ Way of Agape Love. The author began her description of those two women, writing “And there was Sheila Butler, who sat on the sixth pew on the right side, who said ‘we’re moving toward the annihilation of Christians.’” The report continued, “She was 67, a Sunday school teacher who said this was the only way to understand how Christians like her supported Trump. ‘Obama was acting at the behest of the Islamic nation,’ she began one afternoon when she was getting her nails done with her friend Linda. She was referring to allegations that President Barack Obama is a Muslim, not a Christian — allegations that are false.” **In fact, the Obamas were longtime members of Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago.** Sheila continued, “‘He carried a Koran and it was not for literary purposes. If you look at it, the number of Christians is decreasing, the number of Muslims has grown. We allowed them to come in.’ ‘Obama woke a sleeping nation,’ said Linda. ‘He woke a sleeping Christian nation,’ Sheila corrected.” Sheila is the second church lady in the discussion – interview. **President Obama did not carry a Koran.**

The article continued, “Linda nodded. ‘It wasn’t just Muslims that posed a threat’, she said, ‘but all kinds of immigrants coming into the country.’” **“Unpapered people,’ Sheila said, adding that she had seen them in the county emergency room and they got treated before her.”** “‘And then the Americans are not served.’ Love thy neighbor, she said, meant ‘love thy American neighbor.’ Welcome the stranger, she said, meant the ‘legal immigrant stranger.’” Can anyone find the word “American” in the Ten Commandments or anywhere else in the Bible?

“‘The Bible says, ‘If you do this to the least of these, you do it to me,’” Sheila said, quoting Jesus. ‘But the least of these are Americans, not the ones crossing the border.’ To her, this was a moral threat far greater than any character flaw Trump might have, as was what she called ‘the racial divide,’ which she believed was getting worse. The evidence was all the black people protesting about the police, and all the talk about the legacy of slavery, which Sheila never believed was as bad as people said it was.” **“‘Slaves were valued,’ she said. ‘They got housing. They got fed. They got medical care.’”** Given Sheila’s belief, there should have been literally thousands of poor whites begging to become slaves! But none did.

The author continued, “She was suspicious of what she saw as the constant agitation of blacks against whites, the taking down of Confederate memorials and the raising of others, such as the new memorial to the victims of lynching, just up the highway in Montgomery. ‘I think they are promoting violence,’ Sheila said, thinking about the 800 weathered, steel monoliths hanging from a roof to evoke the lynchings, one for each American county where the violence was carried out, including Crenshaw County, where a man named Jesse Thornton was lynched in 1940 in downtown Luverne. ‘How do you think a young black man would feel looking at that?’ Linda asked. ‘Wouldn’t you feel a sickness in your stomach?’ ‘I think it would only make you have more violent feelings — feelings of revenge,’ said Sheila. It reminded her of a time when she was a girl in Montgomery, when the now famous civil rights march from Selma was heading to town and her parents, fearing violence, had sent her to the country to stay with relatives.” **“‘It’s almost like we’re going to live that Rosa Parks time again,’ she said, referring to the civil rights activist. ‘It was just a scary time, having lived through it.’”** “She thought an all-out race war was now in the realm of possibility. And that was where she had feared things were heading, right up until election night, when she and Linda and everyone they knew were praying for God to save them. And God sent them Donald Trump.” (“Judgment days: In a small Alabama town, an evangelical congregation reckons with God, President Trump and the meaning of morality” by Stephanie McCrummen in the Washington Post)

The hatred of and fear of other races and foreigners is clear in what Sheila and Linda told the author of the article. **That is not the Way of Jesus, who welcomed all people, including the representatives of the Roman oppressors, the foreigners, and the other outcasts of Jewish Society.** So, it is Bad News that such hate, instead of Agape Love is alive among some self-professed members of the Church.

Now, let’s look at some examples of the Good News of “Building the Church” – “Built on Love” – of people sharing Agape Love toward others. First, there was a story on CBS about how “Gregory R. Johnson saw an elderly man at the supermarket with red roses and a birthday

cake in his cart. Thinking he was celebrating a happy occasion, Johnson struck up a conversation, but soon discovered the birthday girl died five years ago.”

“‘He had a dozen roses and a big birthday cake in his cart,’ Johnson said, ‘I made the comment, ‘it looks like you’ve got a big night planned.’ He glanced up at me with the saddest eyes I believe I’ve ever seen and told me his story.’ The man was celebrating a birthday, but he was doing it alone. Johnson said the man, referred to as ‘Jim,’ lost his wife five years earlier and still stuck to a birthday tradition every year. ‘He would put the roses on the table when he got home and cut them both a piece of birthday cake,’ Johnson recounted on Facebook.”

“My heart just broke. I was just devastated and he looked completely broken. And I knew that I wanted to do whatever I could in that moment to take his mind off of his heartbreak,” Johnson told CBS News, ‘So I started asking him questions about their life together and I believe his reminiscing made him feel better.’”

“Johnson spoke with the man for over 90 minutes and learned all about the life he had shared with his wife, Gloria, of 53 years. As the conversation began to wind down, Jim asked Johnson if he would come back to his home, share the cake and put the flowers on display. ‘I simply looked at him and told him I’d be honored to sit at his table and have a piece of cake with him in remembrance of his wife,’ recounted Johnson.

So, the two men celebrated Jim’s beloved wife together at his home, looking at old photos and enjoying each other’s company. Johnson told his new friend that they will get together again soon for lunch or dinner and Jim ‘seemed to like hearing that.’” (“Stranger joins elderly widower to celebrate birthday of his late wife” by Danielle Garrand on CBS)

Johnson’s interaction with Jim is a demonstration of Agape Love – self-giving and sacrificial love. I don’t know if Johnson is a Christian but he was clearly living much more like Jesus than Sheila and Linda, the church ladies from Alabama. I would expect the Apostle Paul would make the same determination. Agape Love is the Way of Christ, instead of hate and racism. Remember, the Apostle wrote in verses 17b-19, **“I pray that you may have your roots and foundation in [agape] love, so that you, together with all God’s people, may have the power to understand how broad and long, how high and deep, is Christ’s [agape] love. Yes, may you come to know his [agape] love — although it can never be fully known — and so be completely filled with the very nature of God.”** Yes, all who belong to Jesus Christ are called to be part of “Building the Church” with our “roots and foundation in [agape] love”. Living out Agape Love is an important part of our identity as a congregation of the Body of Christ – the Church. Our “God Is Still Speaking” emphasis demonstrates this Agape Love by inviting and welcoming all people – just as Jesus did during his Life, Public Ministry, and Death. It is not too difficult to do that in welcoming all of our guests but it takes much more effort practicing that Agape Love in our everyday lives.

Our final Good News Example is about the way one of our sister churches in the United Church of Christ is practicing Agape Love in the lives of everyday people – especially the type of people Sheila and Linda of First Baptist Church in Luverne, Alabama, would want to exclude. “The Shadow Rock UCC Sanctuary Action Team and the Rev. Ken Heintzelman, in an extension of the spirit and intent of their ministry of sanctuary in Phoenix, are in the process of establishing Hope Station Nogales, in Sonora, Mexico. ‘If Dreamers are going to be deported, their experience, their trauma and their grief will be most intense,’ Heintzelman said. ‘They’ve lived most of their lives in this country. They are going to want to be reunited with their families and they may take risks to cross the border. If they get caught, they will be going to prison.’”

“Rev. Bill Lyons, Southwest Conference Minister” said, “Hope Station gives deportees a chance at new life near the border so they can stay as connected to their families as possible, mitigating the overwhelming temptation of crossing the border illegally because the only life they know is on the other side of the wall.”

“The thought is Hope Station can be a place of transition, a place where people who are deported but have family in the U.S. can find a meal, safe lodging and assistance.” “Priority will be given to individuals who have an attorney and an administrative remedy in process, and no criminal record. Hope Station will be a community in formation for people who share the goals of reuniting with their families and working, rebuilding their lives.” (“Hope Station Nogales to provide reverse sanctuary to deportees in Mexico” written by Connie Larkman posted July 24, 2018 on United Church of Christ News)

Round Grove United Church, United Church of Christ, also has opportunities for “Building the Church” – “Built on Agape Love”. We support Christian Community Action with our funds and our volunteers to aid the needy in our community. We will be participating in this year’s CROP Walk on Saturday, October 13th, to help the hungry throughout the world. We will be collecting food supplies for Thanksgiving and Christmas Baskets for the needy. We will be donating Christmas presents for children in need.

Let’s follow the Good News Examples of Mr. Johnson with Jim and the Shadow Rock UCC Hope House project, instead of the hate, anger, and racism of Sheila and Linda at First Baptist Church in Luverne, Alabama. Yes, let’s follow Jesus’ Example and Way of Agape Loving All People. Watch for ways to help others, especially those in distress and act. **Let’s continue “Building the Church” – “Built on Love”!** Amen.