

“Love Makes All Things New”

Pastor Laura Miller-Purrenhage

Sunday, May 19, 2019 (Candidate Sunday)

Please pray with me: Holy God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts, be faithful and pleasing unto you, for you are our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Our New Testament reading this morning from the book of Revelation offers us a profound hope: God will make all things new. Sometimes, this can be a difficult message to believe, especially in the midst of all the struggles we face. Some of us are trying to cope with loss of friends and family, or the loss of a job or a home. Some struggle with mental and physical illnesses, including addictions. Some of us are constantly dealing with forms of systematic oppression and violence—racism, gender discrimination, homophobia. Current statistics demonstrate that more people living in the United States are facing financial insecurity, and that an alarming number of our young people and children are struggling with anxiety and depression. In the midst of all of this, it can be difficult to believe that God will make all things new. But that is God’s promise:

See, the home of God is among mortals.
God will dwell with them;
they will be God’s peoples,
and God Godself will be with them;
God will wipe every tear from their eyes.
Death will be no more;
mourning and crying and pain will be no more,
for the first things have passed away.

Mourning, and crying and pain will be no more—these words are trustworthy, says the prophet. We can trust that our current problems and pains are temporary, that even the seemingly insurmountable problems the world faces will be healed because God loves us all so much that God Godself will live among us, healing and supporting us. This time is what theologians refer to as the Reign of God or, as suggested by this scripture reading, the City of God.

We know these words are trustworthy, not just because the prophet says so, but because of the witness of faithful people throughout time. This physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual healing is exactly what Jesus brought to people. In living among us, Jesus healed mental illnesses and physical diseases, provided love and comfort to the grieving, and even brought Lazarus back from the dead. He reached out to the marginalized and outcasts, bringing them back into the community and teaching others to love and support them. He embodied love--absolute, extravagant, outrageous love, thus teaching us how we should be with each other. These stories of Jesus help us imagine what it will be like in the City of God.

Now, theologians do disagree about the exact meaning of this passage from Revelation. Will there literally be an end of times when God comes down from the heavens and lives with humanity, or is this passage symbolic? To some extent, these are important questions to ask. However, on another level, they can obscure the main message of this passage, and that is that we truly can live in hope because, one way or another, love will reign.

More importantly, when we combine this passage from Revelation with our Gospel message, we learn that, in the here and now, we have a certain responsibility as Jesus’ disciples. Following Jesus’ example, we are to love one another as Jesus has loved us, with that same extravagant, outrageous love. In other words, we need to live our lives as if that Reign of God were

already here. The result of this kind of living, of this kind of love, is that all things are made new now, because love changes everything. It changes our outlook by giving us hope; it changes our feelings about ourselves by helping us feel worthwhile; it changes our feelings about others and the world, making them and their well-being essential to us. Ultimately, when we love the way Jesus has loved us, we just act and feel differently.

Let me give you an example: When I was in elementary school, I had a rough time. Although I had a wonderful family, I was teased a lot at school by the other kids for all sorts of things—I was a short tom-boy who didn't quite fit in. More damaging, though, was the emotional abuse I suffered from my second and fourth grade teachers who chose out a few students, myself included, to constantly mock in front of the entire class. This abuse had a profound effect on me. As you can imagine, my self-worth plummeted.

In the midst of all of this, a little girl my age, Leslie, and her family moved in down the road. When she found out that my family were not practicing Christians, she convinced me that we needed to convert. Although I was only 9, my parents were willing to listen to my request. My brother's best friend's dad was the associate pastor at the joint UCC and Presbyterian church in our town, so my parents took us there. That church just scooped me up and loved me. They had an after-school program on Wednesdays where they provided a range of classes (like Bible Study, Christian clowning, liturgical dance, choir, and hand-bells), snacks and dinner, as well as the mentorship by older adults that it turned out I desperately needed. Right at the moment in my life when I was hearing from teachers that I was worthless, I was told by the church that I was entirely worthwhile, loved, and very much worth their time. Right at the moment that teachers were abusing their authority, other adults showed me that authority could be used to provide support and care. So even though I was being bullied and abused at school, I had hope that the rest of the world was better than that. Combined with the love I received from my family and the professional counseling that they found for me, this church entirely changed my outlook on myself, other people, and the world in general. I'm sure you can see that one of the main effects of the church's love for me was to plant the seeds for my current vocation. Most importantly, what I learned during that time was that, at the worst moments of my life, God and the church would show up, love me and care for me.

Love, the love of God and the love of others, gives us hope and joy, even in the midst of our struggles. In so doing, it makes all things new. This kind of love is exactly what First Congregational expresses. You love and welcome all people, providing a safe haven for those that society targets. Your theology is that all people are loved by God, and all people are image-bearers of God. So this church has become home to young and old, and everyone in between; healthy and ill, and everyone in between; women and men, and everyone in between; gay and straight, and everyone in between; well-off and not so well-off, and everyone in between. Importantly, you express that love outside of the sanctuary by offering a safe space for multiple support groups, thus making it possible for people in the church and in the community to heal and find care. You have encouraged and supported those in financial need through multiple outreach programs to foodbanks, schools, and soup kitchens. You have provided training and support for those seeking racial justice and justice for the LGBTQ+ community and for immigrants. You care for members of our community with luncheons and visits. The list goes on and on. Truly, you are living into Jesus' commandment to love extravagantly, providing hope to those who are struggling; you are living into the Reign of God.

If First Congregational UCC calls me today, I will find it a great privilege to serve with you. Amen.