

## **You Are a Christian – Now What?**

Acton Congregational Church (UCC)

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Texts: John 8:31-32

James 2:14-17

*“What good is it, my brothers and sisters,  
if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you?”*  
~ James 2:14`

### **Prayer**

**God who still speaks,  
May the meditation of our hearts  
Make us not only hearers,  
But more importantly doers of your holy word. Amen.**

Two weeks ago, I spent 4 days at the Montreat Conference Center in North Carolina, which our Presbyterian siblings claim as “Presbyterian heaven on earth,” and 2 days in Minneapolis attending two very different seminars. And let me say from the pulpit how grateful I am that our congregation understands the value of lifelong learning and is committed to supporting the spiritual, intellectual, and personal growth as well as the leadership development of your ministers. Research after research shows that continuing education is vital to effective pastoral ministry and is an important ingredient in the life of thriving congregations. So, thank you for investing so generously and faithfully in your pastor’s engagement in ministerial and personal growth and in our church’s vitality.

At a time of powerful tectonic movement under the foundation of the churches in America, Korean American Professor of Evangelism at Fuller Seminary Soong-Chan Rah pointed out at the conference in Montreat that the default position of mainline, historic churches like ours has been “***We can’t.***” We have become hyper-focused on the deficiencies and challenges COVID has exposed in and imposed on the church, and we have forgotten that we are people of faith and conviction. Jesus did not leave us orphaned in an ever-changing world. He asked God to send the Holy Spirit so we would know deep in our bones that we are never alone in the dark valleys, in the arid deserts or in places impregnated with fear and devoid of hope. And it is the same Spirit of God that gives us courage to face the changes the Church is going through today with bold and robust resurrection hope.

One surprising topic that came up time and again at the two conferences is how congregations are beating innovation, creativity and passion out of their pastors. Scott Thuma, the Director of the Hartford Institute for Religious Research, has been tracking, analyzing, and measuring the impact of the pandemic on the Church in America and his

recommendation to local churches is to adapt and innovate while there is opportunity for growth instead of putting money, time and energy into restoring and replicating old patterns, past programs, and outdated strategies for revitalization. The difficulty churches are having in this post-COVID world is that we are suffering from a “tornado watch syndrome.” In 2020, we all hunkered down in the basement to stay safe and now it is time to come back up, re-group, survey the damage, face reality and decide how to rebuild, but too many of us are hesitant to deal with the disruption left in the wake of the pandemic. Too many of us are still lamenting the losses we suffered: people who moved away, members who have not returned, decline in attendance, transitions in staff; and we have not stopped yet to give thanks for those who are still showing up, who are still giving, who are still volunteering, who are still singing in the choir, who are still engaged and present and who are willing to do church differently. The thought of innovation or reinvention can be intimidating and even irritating when we are convinced that we can only do things the way we have always done things in the church, especially when those old patterns and programs and strategies appear to be still working for us. But at Montreat and in Minneapolis the message was loud and clear: this is not the time to resist and resent the changes that will happen sooner or later but to embrace them wholeheartedly and with a deep sense of joy. Yes! With joy because we are still here and alive when millions of people did not survive COVID and would love to be in the church pews today. Yes! With joy! Because in 2020 and for most of 2021, we said “**Yes! We can**” to new and creative ways of worshipping and doing ministry and, yes, we know that we can adapt and adjust very quickly if we put our hearts and minds to it. Yes! We should embrace changes with a deep sense of hope and joy because as Paul wrote to young Timothy, “**God hath not given us the spirit of fear; but of power, and of love, and of a sound mind.**”<sup>1</sup>

The ancient Greeks had a very sophisticated and precise vocabulary that allowed them to define the word “love” with laser-sharp focus. Most of us are familiar with at least some of those Greek words. We know that “*Eros*” refers to romantic, passionate, sexual and erotic love. We don’t talk about this kind of love in church. “*Philia*” is the strong and unbreakable love between friends, which the Greeks valued far more than romantic love. In the Church, we are well versed in the definition of “*agape*” – the universal, self-giving, life-affirming, saving and unselfish love that Paul borrowed from the Greek language to speak about God’s own love.<sup>2</sup> The writer of the First Epistle of John also chose “*agape*” to describe the very nature of God. “**God is agape love.**”<sup>3</sup> C.S. Lewis called “*agape*,” “**Gift-love**” that is “**boundless and unwearied in giving.**”<sup>4</sup> For Lewis “*agape*” is the highest form of Christian love.

The Greeks also had other less well-known words to talk about love. There is “*ludus*,” that defines the playful affection between children or the light-hearted and fun flirtatious love that happens in the early stages of romance. “*Storge*” is the unconditional love that binds a parent to a child. “*Philautia*” means deep self-love, which philosophers like Aristotle praised as the necessary healthy love for oneself that allows humans to have the right amount of self-esteem so to be able to give and receive love from others. Aristotle said, “**All friendly feelings for others are an extension of a man’s feelings for**

*himself.*<sup>5</sup> And the same philosophers who celebrated “*philautia*” also cautioned against the human tendency to become self-involved, narcissistic, intolerant and arrogant. Too much self-love can devolve into an inflated ego that is incapable of showing genuine affection, friendship and even compassion for other people and creatures. And finally, there is the Greek word “*pragma*” which defines the kind of love we rarely talk about in the Church. The best translation of “*pragma*” is committed, enduring love. This is the love that is grounded in the profound understanding that loving is not always easy or comfortable. “*Pragma*” is the very opposite of “falling in love.” It requires a conscious decision to remain in love. “*Pragma*” demands an ongoing commitment to making an effort and mustering up all the power in our body and mind to keep loving even those parts of our lives, our work, our church, of the people around us and of our world that we do not like. This is the pragmatic love of people of sound and clear mind who are determined to practice this mature and realistic love with unwavering dedication to their beloved.

There is no question that Christians are called to give witness to “*agape*” love in the way we live. The late William Sloane Coffin, who served as the senior minister at the Riverside Church in New York City for a decade, said that at the heart of the Christian life is the living faith that does not allow us to forget that at Christmas God came closer to us and became one of us in Christ so that we might become more like Jesus.<sup>6</sup> And Jesus was the very embodiment of not only “*agape*” love, but of all sacred and beautiful expressions of human love. He lived his life fully and found the perfect balance between “*philautia*” or self-love and “*agape*” - selfless love. And I believe that when Jesus gave his first disciples the new commandment to love one another,<sup>7</sup> even though he had the universal, self-emptying, and life-saving holy love in mind, Jesus knew that the disciples would have to practice pragmatic love – the love of real-life commitment, determination, willpower and sound mind – until they could be completely grasped by the joyful all-embracing love of God at the heart of the Christian faith.

This is what the Christian life is all about, that is – making a lifelong commitment to loving God and loving the world so much that you are willing to say to humanity again and again: “**We can.**” “**Yes! We can**” do better than bombing and killing each other. “**Yes! We can**” reach across the divide of politics, religion, ethnic identity and history to surprise one another with our love for our children and with our shared and very human desire that they grow up in a more peaceful and just world. “**We can**” love ourselves and each other enough to work together to eliminate human trafficking, end hunger on earth, share the earth’s resources more equally among the peoples, tribes and nations on our planet, and imagine a future without nuclear warheads and weapons of mass destruction. “**Yes! We can**” let our love guide our imagination and creativity so rather than using our intelligence in the service of the madness of war, nationalism, religious intolerance, terrorism, and the mass slaughter of innocent people we choose to strengthen human solidarity and the commitment to live in a global community of equals. “**Yes! We can**” practice pragmatic love and find the right equilibrium between self and unselfish love so that our faith is not limited to a creed, a confession of beliefs, a set of doctrines, a few Bible verses, religious rituals, a favorite hymn, or to an hour in church on Sunday morning, but is a fully embodied

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Sermons are meant to be preached and, therefore, all sermons are prepared with the emphasis on verbal presentation rather than on proper grammar and punctuation required of written documents.

experience of being loved by God and daring to love our neighbors and the world. In the Lord's Prayer, we pray every single Sunday that God's will may be done on earth, and if there is one thing we can say with a degree of certainty about God's will for us is that we love one another to the point that we are willing to let our faith in this God of "*agape*" love that became enfleshed in Jesus Christ affect, set free and transform our whole lives, especially our behavior toward one another.

The short reading from the Letter of James leaves no room for doubt: the Christian faith is something we do. In fact, James goes as far as to say that faith that has no works, no practical implications for the way we live is pointless, dead. In the Message, which is a more contemporary version of the Bible, Eugene Peterson put the elegant original Greek of James into the rhythm of conversational English and asks, "***Isn't it obvious that God-talk without God-acts is outrageous nonsense?***"<sup>8</sup>

Yes! It is true, if the "*agape*" love at the core of our faith does not somehow change our behavior, how we relate to our neighbors and how we live daily, hourly, minute to minute, then our faith is hollow and meaningless. The authenticity of the Christian life depends on how you and I act out what we claim to believe about God, Christ, the Holy Spirit, the cross and our salvation.

The German Reformer Martin Luther had such an aversion to the Letter of James that he suggested it should not be included in the New Testament. In Luther's eyes, James contradicts Paul and the central message of the Gospels that humanity is saved by faith alone through the free gift of God's love revealed in Jesus Christ. James' emphasis on the Christian life as having more to do with how we live and practice our faith than with what we say we believe created an irreconcilable conflict in Luther's theology. But Biblical scholars agree that Luther missed the point James was making entirely. The Letter of James speaks of a truth that cannot be denied. Our faith is only as authentic as it can affect the way we live in tangible and unmistakable ways. James never claims that we are saved by our own effort to do what is right, but the writer does say very emphatically that we are saved to love our neighbor through our actions, our works, our priorities, our behavior and our willingness to see someone else's needs and do something about it. This is the conviction that keeps the Church of Jesus Christ alive and willing to gather every Sunday: the salvific faith that is lived through acts of kindness, solidarity, generosity, and deep love. It is this faith that affirms "***Yes, we can***" see the needs of the church and the needs of the world, and "***Yes! We will***" do whatever it is within our abilities and reach to meet those needs with "*agape*" love if we are able, but if we are not quite there yet; if we are not able to love freely and selflessly, we will practice "*pragma*" love and we will use our best judgment, our commitment to being a loving presence to each other and we will get involved, be inconvenienced, use our intelligence, give our money and will work together to make the saving "*agape*" love of God real and visible.

Krista Tippett, the host of "*On Being*" – one of my favorite podcasts, said at the Evolving Faith gathering in Minneapolis that there are some things that only religion can

offer. Do you believe it? Do you believe there are some things only the Church can offer to humankind? Krista Tippett spoke about the wisdom of religious traditions and how these traditions give humankind experiences of awe, life-changing practices of forgiveness, repentance, lamentation and transformation, and a language of love that has real consequences for human life on earth. Krista Tippett recognized that we are living in a moment when congregations are struggling to connect with people who have walked away from the institutional Church, but rather than saying there is nothing we can do. This is it. Our only option is to stay the course, age in place, and accept that there is no hope for the future, Krista Tippett encouraged Christians to carry the love of our faith and its depth, and find in this love, in our tradition, in our religion, in the God of love, the energy to be creative, to take risks, and dare to live the Christian faith authentically, pragmatically and with a deep desire to meet the human longing for healing, for meaning, for friendship, for affection, for playful and flirtatious love, for life-affirming self-love, for companionship, for life and for the saving and self-giving love of God.

Jesus said, “**You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.**” And the truth is that the Church cannot survive or flourish only on God-talk, we have to be willing to put our money, our actions, and our works where our mouths are. Today is stewardship Sunday and the Church Council, the Trustees, David Laster, and Karen Pierce are asking all of us to see the needs of our church and give generously and lovingly. This is a very important moment in the life of our congregation. We have big dreams. We would like to hire a full-time youth director to keep our youth ministry energized and vibrant. We would like to invest in outreach efforts to share God’s “*agape*” love with our neighbors and invite them to join our congregation in our collective commitment to see the needs of the world and do something about it. We would like to have a more robust music program, host concerts and recitals that could bring the wider community into our sanctuary. We would like to invite writers, biblical scholars, theologians and community leaders to provide adult education opportunities that can enrich our lives and deepen our faith. There is so much we hope to do, but we know that we can only turn our dreams into reality as a church that is committed to loving each other.

Friends, we have a lot of reasons to say “**No! We can’t.**” Speaking of “*agape*” love when the landscape of the Church in America has changed so dramatically since 2020 sounds absurd. Love, even God’s love certainly does not seem enough in a world that is convulsing with violence and the suffering of millions of people in Gaza and Ukraine. And yet, The Christian Scripture boldly declares, “**God is love... [and] where God’s love is there is no fear because God’s perfect love drives out fear.**”<sup>9</sup> And, as followers of Christ, you and I - WE are called to witness to this holy love of God that saves lives and drives fear away.

I agree with Krista Tippett. There is something unique and life-saving that Christianity offers when you and I live out what we believe bravely, faithfully, daily and without fear. I hope that you too can feel how important and meaningful this church is for our lives, our faith, and for the world. I don’t know if you are at a place on your faith journey

where you can say that you have been joyfully grasped by God's saving love to the point that you want to give your time and energy and skills and money to empower ACC to reinvent itself, which really means that we will reinvent ourselves since you and I are the church together. If you are not there yet, I invite you to practice pragmatic love today. Give, participate, volunteer, and attend worship out of a resolute and untiring commitment to God and to the people who gather in this church. Stand in love with us. Make an effort with the rest of us to support this community where we seek to live God's "*agape*" love and refuse to be blind to our church's need to continue to adapt, adjust and change as well as to the needs and sufferings of our world.

What a beautiful place ACC is! What a gift it is to be called to love one another and support our church!

May it be so. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> 2 Timothy 1:7 [King James Version].

<sup>2</sup> 1 Corinthians 13:1-13

<sup>3</sup> 1 John 4:16.

<sup>4</sup> C.S. Lewis in Four Loves, see introduction and page 9.

<sup>5</sup> Quoted by Roman Krznaric in Empathy: Why It Matters, and How to Get it, p. 54.

<sup>6</sup> William Sloane Coffin in Credo, p. 7.

<sup>7</sup> John 13:34.

<sup>8</sup> James 2:14-17 [The Message].

<sup>9</sup> 1 John 4:16a & 18 [New Century Version].