

*God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them. Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness on the day of judgement, because as he is, so are we in this world. There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love. We love because he first loved us. Those who say, 'I love God', and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also. -1 John 4:16b-21*

Greetings members and friends of Bainbridge Community UCC,

I pray this message finds you well.

I had a very different message planned to send out today. But then things changed. Our local area is on the news again because of an act of gun violence, this time in Chagrin Falls. When you consider our extended community, beyond simply our county or the Chagrin Valley, this has become a far too common occurrence. I remember February 27, 2012, the evening of the shooting at Chardon High School, I opened the church to anyone who needed to come for a time of prayer and an opportunity to light a candle and simply be in God's presence as they wrestled with the difficult questions of faith and life.

Tonight our church is already planning to be open. It is Maundy Thursday. People will be gathering to share food and fellowship and remember the night that Jesus shared his last meal with his disciples before one of them betrayed him and he was executed. The rest of the disciples had no idea of the significance of that meal in the moment but that is how life works sometimes. Loss and change are suddenly thrust upon us.

It is in these kind of moments that we discover and decide where we truly place our faith. We can take the news of acts of violence as an opportunity to withdraw, or to defend ourselves. We can decide to live swallowed up by the fear of what *might* happen until that fear turns to anger directed toward those we are convinced "force us" to live in our fear. Eventually that anger becomes hate and at that point our fear succeeds in perpetuating the cycle of violence it sought to avoid by either allowing us to justify lashing out at those we see as threats, causing us to destroy our own lives, or both. That is what the path looks like when we put our faith in the things, the promises, and the methods of this world.

Or, we can take this opportunity as a reminder of our need for a God that *is* love. We can open our hearts and open our lives to reach out to those who are feeling isolated and recognize that when any person, anywhere suffers, we all suffer. There is nothing we can do to isolate ourselves or hide from the fact that we are all in this together as God's children. We can use that love to move toward greater understanding. We can show we love God by becoming active and vocal agents for peace, compassion, and acceptance in God's world. We can walk the path Christ laid out for us to walk.

The choice sounds strange to "earthly" ears. But we confess we are Easter people. We know our strength and peace comes from having a relationship with God. We know that fear tries to take over our lives, diminishing us and leaving little room for the God who walks with us, calling us to something greater. And we know that there is more to life than what this world tells us there is. On Easter Sunday we hear Christ's message loud and clear that the powers of this world are not in control so we should not act as if they are. God is love and, even in our fear, even in those moments of sudden loss and change, even as we walk through the valley of the shadow of death, we know that love wins.

May God's grace and peace be with you all,



Pastor Shaun