

## **FRIENDLY PERSUASION FINAL**

**A Sermon by the Rev. Janet L. Abel  
Preached on Sunday, September 7, 2014**

### **“We Are All One”**

It was a statement by Mary Cuddeback, one of our own members, quoted by Art at the end of his sermon last week. Mary and Carolyn Blake had happened to attend a meeting of the Buddhist group that meets upstairs in our classroom building on the same day that the press were invited there, so they were included in a nice article last week. We enjoyed excellent coverage of our Buddhist group, and Mary’s observation was in the paper at the end of the reporter’s article and at the end of Art’s sermon as he discussed the many spiritual groups that meet here at First Congregational Church.

I agree completely with Mary’s statement. “We are all one.” But I have a question for you, as well. In the reading of the New Testament lesson from Matthew 18 this morning, and based on Art’s sermon of last week, why is it that we don’t all get along? It’s a fundamental question; you’ve heard it many times. We’re all one. Then why don’t we all get along? In the passage Jesus gives some interesting advice. I don’t know about you, but it’s a little daunting, all this confrontation that’s going on. You’re living in a community, and if a member sins against you, well right there, we’d have to figure out what the sin was, and that could be its own sermon. But then we’d have to discuss what sin actually is and what that might mean.

### **An “Intervention Sheet” for a Congregational Church? No Way!**

I’m teaching Genesis with the residents of the home where I work, and we were just discussing sin in general. That word means, “missing the mark, not hitting the target.” We could go on about that. But if a member sins against you, the advice of Jesus in Matthew 18: 15-20 is that you should go to that person and, if he or she still doesn’t listen to you, then you take two or three other members of the congregation, and you have an intervention.

Who wants to sign up for that? Can you imagine having a sign-up sheet out in the hallway? Our Intervention Sheet. Well, somebody sinned against me so I need two or three people to come with me on Tuesday – gotta let ‘em know – and then the intervenors will listen and the whole church. . . . We could do this on Sundays. That could be part of our Sunday morning service. Well, I don’t think so, right? Probably not.

### **The Great Verse Divide**

Art mentioned in his sermon last week that the great verse divide in the Christian community was one of the fundamental questions that arose in the days after the death of Christ. You've got the disciples, the originals, and James, Jesus' brother, in Jerusalem doing their thing, converting people but also going to the temple and keeping kosher, and that's what you had to do. And then there's Paul, traveling around the known world, going to places like Greece, and he was converting what they called Gentiles, people who aren't Jewish, so the big question started to come up, over and over. It started to go like this: James and Paul, Jewish Christian, Gentile Christian. What do we do? Ultimately Paul won that particular argument. But to be honest, we've been arguing it and other disagreements ever since.

### **“Getting Along” Doesn't Get Along Well in Some Church or Denominational Disputes**

The Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem is for me a visual example of how we might get along but don't. According to some historians, this church was built on what might have been the location of Jesus' grave after his crucifixion. A big, ostentatious church was built on this site, and there's a fancy slab where the Jews may have laid Jesus' body after the Romans took it down from the cross, and then Jesus' followers laid it in the tomb. Needless to say, the slab became very holy, as is the entire site. The site is the very place where the Romans are thought to have crucified people.

Above the slab are three or four ornate lamps – kind of “churchy” lamps, not just ordinary light-bulb lamps but lamps that require oil and attendants to maintain them and fill them with fuel. The Roman Catholics have a lamp, the Eastern Orthodox have a lamp, the Protestants have a lamp, and some other group does. When you go and fill the oil in your particular denominational lamp, you are not allowed to touch the other three lamps, even if they've gone out. Each denomination must go and fill its own lamp. Is that ridiculous or what? Why couldn't the different groups employ one person as lamp-tender, I wondered?

### **The Great Carpet Debate**

Why don't we always get along? I am reminded of the great carpet debate at First Presbyterian Church of Cape May, of which I was a part way back when I was still a member there. It's a beautiful church in a beautiful town. Right down from the mall is this Presbyterian church on the corner of Decatur and Hughes.

At one point, our carpet was getting worn, and we had to replace it. In favor of a new color, we had a blue faction, but at the time Cape May had green, so we had a green faction. I was one of those in favor of keeping the carpet the same color, a very pretty green. Then there was the blue faction because there was some blue in the stained-glass windows, and the colors would match. And there was the red faction, who wanted the blood of Christ to be represented in the carpet. The rest of us found that idea to be a little off-putting, that we had to have a bloody carpet. It just didn't seem appropriate, to be honest with you.

There was quite a debate, and it turned into quite a church meeting about the color of the carpet. It was one of the longest debates we ever had.

### **In Literature, not Getting Along Benefits Plot**

“Little Women” is one of my favorite childhood books, along with “Black Beauty.” I loved both of them. “Jane Eyre” was a third, but it was a little dour. “Little Women,” as you know, is about four sisters growing up in the time of the Civil War with their mother Marmee. It’s been made into a movie many times, the latest being quite a good one. Poor Beth is the one who gets scarlet fever; it leaves her weak, and she dies before she turns 20. At one point in the story, Beth says, “Birds in their little nest agree.” But that’s not always true, is it? The sisters do argue a lot among themselves.

If they didn’t argue, we wouldn’t have much of a story, would we? I mean if it was just all sweetness and light between the sisters. “I have an idea,” Jo would say, and Amy would answer, “Great, let’s do it.” Not very entertaining. Stories need action and tension. Movies and books and plays often recount problems with people who don’t completely get along, this being essential to strong plot development.

Jo and Amy in particular are very different from each other. Jo’s the writer, and she’s kind of eccentric. She goes up to the attic and puts on a cap. She’s the one based on Louisa May Alcott herself. Amy’s a little vain, and she likes to paint. She gets to go to Europe with Aunt March and so on. The sisters are constantly at odds.

At another point in the story, Amy gets mad at Jo for not letting her go skating with Jo and Laurie, so Amy burns a book of Jo’s personal essays, and she is furious when she discovers this. These disagreements not only make for a more interesting story, but they make for a more believable one. As sweet as “Little Women” is, it is believable and relatable. We can relate to it because the characters are not perfect.

My title for today’s sermon comes from a movie, “Friendly Persuasion,” about the Quakers. Have any of you seen it? It’s a good oldie, but a goodie, right? Gary Cooper plays a man named Jess Birdwell. The Quakers, as you know, are very peaceful, loving people, basing their lives on the gospel. “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” They take that Golden Rule, and they really believe it. But the story itself is not completely peaceful. The Civil War erupts, their daughter falls in love with a soldier, and so it goes. Life isn’t perfect, even in “Friendly Persuasion.”

I have a similar problem with a book I was given. Now I don’t want to offend anyone, but I always realize that, when you’re going to say something negative about a book, somebody out there loves it.

Anyway, I have a friend in Lancaster who sent me a book by a woman named Jan Karon, who wrote the Mitford series. She said I would like the book because it's all about an Episcopalian rector in a small town in North Carolina – perfect for me. So she sent it to me, and I felt compelled to read it. I liked it; I didn't love it. I didn't find it very relatable. It's too perfect. Everything works together for good. The characters are constantly quoting the Bible. Nothing wrong with that, but you know, Philippians 4: 13? I had to look up that citation because I didn't know offhand what it means.

I had read an article about Jan Karon and felt that her depiction of small-town life, wasn't necessarily accurate. Karon based her books on the work of a British author named Miss Read, a schoolteacher who in the 50's wrote a series of books. So I decided to get one from the library. Read's book seemed to me qualitatively better than Karon's, although both are a little sweet. But Read's book is real and funny, while in my opinion Karon needs a better sense of humor, among other things, but her people are interesting because of their foibles and disagreements.

### **The “Clash of Civilizations” In the Face of Humanity and Divinity**

But the characters are undergirded by something. “We are all one.” What does being “one” really mean? “The Clash of Civilizations,” a famous text that I had to read in seminary, is a very small book, but I recommend it to you. When you watch and listen to the news, it's kind of tough, isn't it? Groups like ISIS are everywhere. And we know full well that they could infiltrate our lives here and in England and elsewhere. The First World could certainly have members of ISIS among their own populations.

Samuel Huntington, a political scientist at Harvard, wrote the book, the full title of which is “The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order.” Although published quite a while ago, the book was republished in 2011. His thesis is still current – that this clash of civilizations is yet to come. The East and the West are like two fists butted up against each other. They're fundamentally different from each other.

Yes, we're all children of God, but we've got sharp differences in history, language, culture, religion, and the like. The world is becoming a smaller place and therefore our interactions with each other are increasing. The West is at its peak of power, bringing with it much resentment from the East. And the gap between the rich and the poor is growing around the world. We've got these fundamental differences, and they're not going away anytime soon.

### **The Definition of Oneness Is All-Encompassing Love**

Underlying all this tradition and culture, language and religion – and we know all that is real – is our humanity and our divinity. We are all creatures of God, and therefore there is an essential oneness that undergirds all our differences. It's what is under the pews here. It's what brings us here. It's what makes us all one – all of us, as different as we are.

And what is that oneness? What does it really look like? What's the word being used? Love. The Golden Rule. Paul gives it to us again in Romans. Jesus certainly repeats it. You take those commandments, and they matter. If you treat each other as you would be treated yourself, then you are obeying what's called the Ten Commandments. And that's love. In simple, short form, love each other as you love yourself. And if you love yourself, you should love each other.

And then we're reminded in the passage from Mathew, which is, as you know, a little alarming, where it deals with how to handle a confrontation. But then Jesus ends it with, "Where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them." It kind of reminds us what's here with us always. Where there's even a small group, two or three, we admit that would be a very small congregation, but where they are, there is God. And you can take that word "God" and put love in it. Where two or three are, there is love.

### **The Importance of Love Undergirding Our Community**

That's what undergirds our community here at First Congregational Church. It's Jesus Christ and the love of God. Even if we can't always see it or feel it, you know that it's always there. I know some of your history, I know your history since I've been with you, since Art's been here. But we don't always completely agree, do we? We're different people, and we have different ideas. Maybe at one point we too shall discuss our carpet situation. We too will also survive that trial because it's love. Love is always there, but people sometimes forget that, and the results can be tragic.

Rob Bell is a good example of remembering the importance of love. He's a former evangelical minister, who was pastor at a big-steeple, very conservative church. He once put up on the bulletin board an article about Mahatma Gandhi, a great leader in India who used peaceful methods to achieve independence from the United Kingdom, and of course Martin Luther King, Jr., based his nonviolent resistance heavily on the examples of Jesus and Gandhi.

Bell happened to be walking by the bulletin board in the corridor one day and saw scrawled underneath the picture of Ghandi a startling legend: "Gandhi's in hell! Reality check." That's what a member of the church had written underneath the picture of Gandhi. This desecration stopped Bell in his tracks. It made him realize something about what he was preaching and the kind of theology his church was giving out. Gandhi's in hell? How could that be? Love. Love is the only thing that matters.

And so Bell wrote a book called "Love Wins." The most important thing is love. If love doesn't win, then we all lose.

*Amen.*